

Meritocracy and Ability Tracking in Chinese High Schools: Students' Learning Motivational Dispositions across School-to-university Transitions

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine the impacts of ability tracking in Chinese high schools on students' motivational processes and sustainability during higher education. Using semi-structured interviews of twelve students from the Shanxi province, it examines how different factors, including various resources, teachers' evaluations, and peer relationships built around ranking contribute to their lives. As it is revealed by analysis, through a meritocratic lens, whereby academic performance is considered equal to personal worth, students' motivation becomes highly dependent on the perception of success, so even minor failures lead to a strong sense of self-deprecation. Thus, academic achievements do not only demonstrate the extent to which students succeed but also create an identity framework. At any level, due to such dependence, students face numerous limitations, as the focus on external recognition hinders their future aspirations. When students transition to higher education, being freed from constant evaluations, many lack intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm.

Keywords: Ability tracking; Academic motivation; Meritocracy; Educational inequality

1. Introduction

In China, ability tracking refers to the practice of assigning students to various groups according to their academic performance levels. Such an approach enables schools to customize their pedagogical strategies and resource allocation [1]. Ability tracking is closely associated with the Gaokao, which serves as a nationwide examination system to enter colleges. Even though the Gaokao is regarded as an objective route towards joining the elite class and social mobility [2], it places too much emphasis on success standardization. For that reason, it highly prioritizes the grades in evaluating individual value and potentialities within a meritocratic framework [3]. Higher numbers of individuals enroll in colleges; however, job opportunities are unpredictable. For this reason, academic achievements are highly valued [4-6]. As a result, students who perform effectively in the Gaokao stand better chances of gaining admission to reputable colleges and obtaining satisfactory employment in the future. That is why some high schools practice ability tracking to ensure students' success at examinations and university admissions [7].

The issue of ability tracking in high schools has generated much debate regarding issues surrounding its impact on fairness, effectiveness, and wellbeing of the learners [8-9]. Its proponents argue that ability tracking allows for better learning opportunities since it ensures better utilization of resources and eventually improves performance [10-11]. However, research suggests that the implementation of such a model of education may widen achievement gaps and foster inequality, especially for students belonging to disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds [12-13]. Instead of being provided with excellent teaching resources, those placed in lower groups are subjected to an unfavorable environment where they are labeled as less intelligent [14-15].



In China, the argument of ability tracking is focused on the dominance of the Gaokao in the educational sphere. Even though tracking by ability cannot occur in compulsory schools, it takes place in high schools because of the great pressure for improvement in examination results and university acceptance rates [16-17]. The situation in Shanxi Province can be viewed as an example of this issue. Because of the underdevelopment of the educational system and scarce educational opportunities there, the students are forced to fight hard at the Gaokao entrance examination. In the midst of this, the private schools need to rely on tracking their students in order to raise enrollment numbers and reputation.

The Chinese research concentrates on investigating the influence of ability tracking on academic success and educational equity with an emphasis placed on lower-stream pupils [15-16; 18]. This provides us with a solid foundation for examining the possible inequities that may occur within tracking. Nonetheless, there is limited information available regarding the influence of tracking on motivation. Also, most studies stick to just high school – what tracking does to affect college entry after high school is not studied enough.

To address this gap, this study examines ability tracking through the lens of meritocratic discourse. Discourse refers to systems of language and meaning that shape how knowledge and social reality are understood [19]. In education, discourse helps define legitimate knowledge, valued student qualities and acceptable forms of selection. Meritocracy can be understood as a dominant discourse of this kind. It frames the allocation of opportunities according to effort and ability as neutral and fair [20-21]. However, “ability” is not simply a natural or individual attribute. It is often constructed through institutional evaluation systems that privilege specific forms of cultural and social capital [22]. From this perspective, ability tracking can be understood as a school-level mechanism through which Gaokao-centred meritocratic discourse is institutionalized in everyday educational practice. Through this mechanism, students may come to interpret academic success or failure as evidence of personal worth rather than as an outcome shaped by structural conditions.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining how ability tracking shapes students’ learning motivation in high school and how these motivational dispositions may persist into higher education. Based on interviews with twelve students from a private high school in Shanxi Province that implements an ability tracking system, this study analyzes the interaction between meritocratic discourse and tracking practices in the construction of students’ motivational orientations. By focusing on students across different track levels, including high-achieving, lower-track and mobile students, the study contributes to a socio-psychological understanding of ability tracking in China’s exam-oriented education system and offers implications for educational practice.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Setting

This study took place in a private high school in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province, known as School A. Because educational resources are not evenly distributed and there are lots of students, the area has stiff competition for those resources. So, School A uses ability tracking system to boost Gaokao scores and university acceptance rates. Under the pressure of competition, a similar system is commonly adopted by local private high schools. At the beginning of each school year, the school ranks students based on their previous test scores. The top 100 ranked students are admitted to Class A (a key class source), which receives the most teaching resources. Students ranked 101st and below are placed in Class B (the second most important class source), and the 100 lowest ranked students are placed in Class C (the regular class source), which has limited resources. Academic rankings are adjusted quarterly, which formally allows for student mobility.

2.2. Sample and Sampling Techniques

This study recruited 12 undergraduate students (6 males and 6 females) all of whom also graduated from School A and experienced at least three consecutive years of ability tracking instruction in high school. All participants were currently enrolled in Chinese higher education institutions, including three students from 985-project universities, three students from 211-project universities, one student from a first-tier university, two students from second-tier universities, and three students from third-tier universities. The study sample encompassed all three ability tracking tracks as well as students with cross-class mobility experiences, and was designed to capture differences in academic motivation between tracking levels as well as unique motivational changes among mobile students. All participants were anonymized to protect privacy. Participants’ basic information is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic Information of Participants (N=12)

Participant	Gender	Class Experience (High School)	Class Mobility Time	University Tier
1	Female	Class A (stable)	None	211 Project
2	Female	Class A (stable)	None	985 Project
3	Female	Class B (stable)	None	Second-tier
4	Male	Class A → Class B	Senior 1, 2nd term	First-tier
5	Male	Class B → Class A	Senior 1, 1st term	211 Project
6	Male	Class A → Class B	Senior 2, 1st term	985 Project
7	Male	Class B → Class A	Senior 1, 2nd term	985 Project
8	Female	Class C (stable)	None	Third-tier
9	Female	Class B → Class C	Senior 2, 2nd term	Third-tier
10	Male	Class C (stable)	None	Third-tier
11	Female	Class C (stable)	None	Second-tier
12	Male	Class B (stable)	None	211 Project

2.3. Data Collection

The study conducted online one-to-one semi-structured interviews through Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded after informed consent was obtained. The interview protocol consisted of four core modules. In the first step, participants were asked to share about their experiences concerning the ability tracking at School A, including how they accessed information and their interactions with teachers. They were then asked about the effects that ability tracking had on their motivation and self-concept throughout high school life. They further analyzed the perception of the fairness and rationale of the streaming system. Finally, they explored the persistence of their previous learning approaches in college through such factors as their academic engagements, academic anxiety, and ability to learn autonomously.

The researcher monitored the emotional state of the interviewees and stopped or interrupted the discussion when the participant expressed too strong negative feelings. All participants were informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any point in time. The interviews were conducted in Chinese language to make participants feel comfortable. It should be noted that appropriate ethical approval was obtained prior to conducting the research.

2.4. Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews, the transcripts were made in Chinese, and also including the non-verbal gestures of the interviewees. The transcripts were then verified by listening to the recording again in case there were any mistakes. Afterward, the transcripts were returned to the interviewees to ensure that the exact meaning of their words was captured [23].

To identify the common themes within the data set, a three-phase coding process was conducted [24]. The first phase, referred to as open coding, involved line-by-line review of the transcripts, leading to the creation of 26 initial codes that included the differences between attention paid by teachers and motivating factors of competitiveness. Next, through axial coding, similar codes were grouped together to form more general categories. For example, codes on motivation and learning environment were clustered into "Influence on Learning Motivation". In total, there were seven major categories identified after the process of sorting.

Next, the analysis provided an overview of the overall situation regarding the influence of the ability tracking program on students' motivation and explained why such influence persists because of the process of tracking. Through selective coding, three crucial aspects related to the findings of the research were emphasized – Resource Allocation and Attitudinal Bias, Polarized Learning Environment, and Transitions to Higher Education.

3. Findings

3.1. Tracking-Based Treatment: Resource Allocation and Attitudinal Bias

At school, ability tracking affects how resources go to different classes. Norms and teaching styles play a big role here. Teachers prioritize order and high scores, shaping their views on students too. By setting standards for excellence and cementing class identities, these same rules keep the whole system rolling.

They are the center of the school's educational resources

Nine participants said that Class A got more resources and better chances, which helped them do well on the Gaokao. According to Participant 4, this is what they noticed:

“Students in Class A are freer. In the third year of high school, the school permitted only them to remain in the teaching area during lunch breaks, providing them a few more hours of study time than others... To be honest, they are the focal point of the school’s educational resources.”

Class A students were privy to the Strengthening Basic Disciplines Program as well as university enrollment programs, increasing their probability of joining prestigious universities. According to Participant 5, “I was not aware of this when I was in Class B.” These occurrences took place since the school ensured that all the best facilities went to Class A, making the class stand out academically.

However, some students defended ability tracking system by arguing that this practice was aimed at personalized learning and responding to individual needs. Participant 11 from Class C regarded such arguments as mere justifications of a predetermined strategy, noting that:

“The Gaokao prioritizes academic performance. To enhance students’ results, categorization is essential. Ability tracking focuses learning resources accordingly. For example, students with strong abilities require more challenging materials, while those with weaker foundations need basic content.”

Some respondents believed that the process was not entirely fair. For example, Participant 7 started off in class B but later went to class A. They argued that despite the occasional adjustments made by the school on their classes, class A comprised all the talented individuals with the most advanced learning materials. “How can they ever beat Class B or Class C?” asked one of them. Such remarks confirm that switching from one class to another did not actually equalize students’ access to recourse and opportunities.

However, the best content was allocated in the high tiers leaving behind students in lower tiers. There was no assistance provided for struggling students. According to Participant 8, more than fifty percent of the students in class C quit school in their final year at the senior secondary level because they did not have sufficient learning assistance which led them to feel hopeless regarding Gaokao exam preparation.

At the same time, just because one was assigned to class A did not mean that everything would go smoothly for him or her, because the allocation of students was based solely on test scores. Again, Participant 7 emphasized that his grades for English courses were especially poor. “English in Class A is so difficult for me, that I get really nervous and there is nothing I can do about it,” he explained.

You will only get into third-tier universities if you don’t study hard

Teachers as institutional actors make significant contributions to promoting such an education system that tends to overemphasize exam success. In their classrooms, some teachers tend to favor better-performing students. This is illustrated by Participant 6 who noticed this while shifting from class A to class B:

“I was the least performing student in Class A, and consequently, the teacher showed less favoritism toward me. However, after transferring to Class B, I received more favorable treatment and additional academic support from the teacher, which enhanced my confidence and willingness to learn.”

Participant 2 highlighted the disparity in how teachers treat students based on their academic performance:

“When both a high-performing and a low-performing student commit the same error, the punishment for the low-performing student is typically more severe.”

Although high teacher expectations may motivate highly talented students, evaluating success on academic performance alone does not take into consideration other equally important aspects such as well-being and personal development. This also perpetuates the stereotype that academic performance is everything in education. It gets even more complicated when there is differentiation between the abilities of learners within the same school.

At School A, teachers expect more from students in advanced classes. When Participant 4 switched from Class A to Class B, they noticed this change:

“The teachers of Class A and Class B held different expectations. The Class A teacher would assert, ‘If you study diligently, you will gain admission to top Project 985 universities; otherwise, you will end up at Project 211 universities.’ Conversely, in Class B, the teacher would state, ‘If you study diligently, you can enter Project 211 universities; otherwise, you will be limited to third-tier universities.’”

In Class C, Participant 11 said their teacher just wanted them “to get into third-tier universities.” The different expectations clearly connect each class to certain goals: Class A students are seen as top prospects for elite schools, while Classes B and C are viewed as less capable with smaller aims. So, teachers have modest hopes set for students from Class B and C, unlike the higher expectations for Class A.

3.2. Polarized Learning Environment: Enemy or Friend?

The schools emphasize the talent of the upper-tier students within the ability tracking system. In turn,

the emphasis makes students believe that their value is in their grades and ranking in class. Therefore, students are trying to find external motivation rather than intrinsic motivation.

I have to study even harder to stay in this class

The availability of resources along with the high expectations set by teachers has resulted in making the students in class A appear as gifted in academics to everyone around them including their peers, parents, and teachers themselves. The bright future that lies ahead of this particular class makes the students strive to uphold the good reputation that they enjoy:

“Students from other classes admire us for our strong academic performance. My parents also believe that being in Class A is tantamount to securing a place at Project 985 universities. I do not want to disappoint them, hence my need to study even harder to maintain my position in this class.”

This notion that one's membership in Class A ensures entrance into the best institutions of higher education has defined students' self-conceptions through their academic achievements. Consequently, there is pressure for maintaining high scores and behaving like others in one's class. Students compare themselves to peers and follow their study schedules in order to thrive academically. As noted by Participant 2, classmates play a big part in influencing every individual:

“The students around me worked extremely hard, and I felt compelled not to lag behind. This mindset made me more demanding of myself.”

The high-achieving nature of the classmates, coupled with the belief that academic success is a reflection of one's capabilities, causes the top class students to have high aspirations.

However, relating success to self-respect means that failure becomes highly unpleasant and causes division among the students. It greatly affected Participant 4 upon their shift from Class A to Class B after performing poorly in an examination:

“When I was in Class A, I felt very confident and believed that I was among the elite. However, after being reassigned to Class B, I realized that my academic abilities might not be as robust as I previously thought. This was a significant blow to my confidence and diminished my motivation for studying.”

Those students who are not placed in upper-tier classes tend to feel disappointed in themselves and lack confidence. Thus, they may begin to question their academic capabilities, which reflects the limitation of ability tracking. As a result, their enthusiasm for learning may disappear rapidly.

They will get a higher grade and surpass me

With the increase in ability tracking, students became extremely concerned about outdoing each other due to the incessant pressure put by the schools on class segregation. The excessive fixation with grades makes students think about success in terms of academic success only, considering everyone else around them as their rival rather than a friend. Consequently, students become untrustworthy and tend to isolate themselves from each other. Students in Class A, in particular, fostered a competitive spirit among students, as Participant 1 reflected:

“People view others with suspicion and competitiveness, hesitant to share learning methods or insights for fear that others may achieve higher grades and surpass them.”

Students are under high pressure not to look like less competent individuals due to stiff competition that prevails in the contemporary world. This explains why they seldom help each other and even do not develop a keen interest in studying anymore. Nevertheless, once students join Class B after Class A, they change their approach towards peers. They become to realize that competition was not limited to their classmates but also against border competitors. Considering other individuals makes it easy for them to cooperate because of friendship and cooperation goals which become their common aim. As Participant 6 said:

“After entering Class B, the supportive academic environment and teachers' tolerance for errors allowed for occasional relaxation. Competition extended to all Gaokao candidates, fostering a collaborative journey.”

Participant 6 demonstrated just how distinct these two classes are. Class A maintains its elite reputation through resource and image selectivity. It makes students equate their personal worth with class stratification. Class B is driven by group success and fundamental accomplishments, which helps reduce student competition.

However, the messages from the administration and teacher observations tend to emphasize the notion that students in Class A have an advantageous learning environment. This leads some students in Class B to feel disappointed, believing that their setting is not as conducive for academic success. As Participant 3 noted:

“Had I been in Class A, I believe my motivation to study would have been significantly enhanced.”

This is how we see how people from different classes subscribe to the notion that proximity to elites leads to academic success. In a meritocratic society, the primary motivator for students comes from outside - competition and recognition. However, Class C suffers more due to limited resources and severe labeling.

Everyone else is very talented, but I am useless

In such a meritocratic environment whereby academics are prioritized above everything else, leisure time is frowned upon while excelling in examinations is the key factor that defines success. For this reason, Class C, a class where most learners opt for leisure, is characterized by unfavorable academic conditions. Participant 8 from Class C remarked:

“The atmosphere for studying in Class C wasn’t great. Nobody there was super keen on hitting the books, and since I didn’t have much drive to study either, I ended up playing around a lot more than learning when I was in high school.”

Given the significance attributed to accomplishments, the students in class C, which consists of students from relatively poor schools and limited opportunities, were viewed as being unable and unmotivated. The stereotype resulted in immense prejudice towards the students in class C. Over fifty percent of those surveyed described the students in class C as being unmotivated and unintelligent academically. An example of this is shown below:

“Students in Class C are predominantly engaged in playing computer games and show a complete disregard for their future prospects.”

Class C students are affected by this negative language. They come to internalize this stigma. This means they believe they are inferior to other people. As Participant 11 noted:

“Reflecting the common view that Class C students are inferior, I also feel that everyone else is very talented, but I am useless. This sentiment is shared among my classmates, leading us to give up.”

The combination of things that the school is doing or not doing, along with how their peers view them, leads to Class C students feeling isolated and indifferent towards academic work, causing them to give up. Within this noncompetitive environment, "playful behavior" seems acceptable, making the bad study environment even worse.

3.3. After Entering Higher Education: Benefits or New Challenges?

The high school ability tracking system prioritizes academic performance and closely ties students’ learning motivation to external factors such as grades and rankings through differentiated resource allocation and competition-based assessment. This section examines the long-term impacts of ability tracking on student motivation in high school and explores how the motivation patterns shaped by this disciplinary regime are sustained or transformed in higher education.

I still felt very anxious when I first started university

For students in Class A, the ability tracking system places them in a competitive environment by prioritizing examination performance and surrounding them with high-achieving peers, which mirrors the academic atmosphere of university to some extent. This environment ostensibly facilitates their adaptation to higher education. Participant 2 noted:

“Perhaps because I was surrounded by excellent peers in high school, I quickly adapted to the university environment where I was again surrounded by peers with similar Gaokao scores.”

Most participants from Class A had a tough time in university because of the intense pressure and super competitive atmosphere in high school. They came to believe that their self-worth relied on academic success, which made transitioning tricky. Since they followed an ability tracking system, many developed habits of constant competition that stuck with them at university. Participant 1, for instance, was a bundle of nerves. As she put it:

“I still felt very anxious when I first started university. Whenever I saw my roommates heading to the library, I worried they would surpass me academically, even though grades were no longer the sole criterion for ranking.”

The competitiveness, which demanded superiority over others, continued to be a source of immense stress for many students even after high school, adversely impacting their mental well-being. Freshmen, more specifically, were particularly affected by it. What was surprising about this situation was that even without the incentive of scoring good marks in examinations, most of them found it hard to get motivated.

I don’t think I’ll ever study as hard as I did in high school

By leaving behind Gaokao and its rigid system of grouping based on abilities, many students found themselves confused about how they should proceed in life. The pressure exerted from outside for high academic performance during high school cannot be sustained at the more independent college environment. Thus, it can be seen that the majority of the participants experienced lower levels of self-discipline at the college level.

“I felt pressured to get high scores, and high school’s strict system drained me. I don’t think I’ll ever study as hard as I did back then.”

Participant 7 shared a similar change in attitude:

“Starting my second year of university, I realized that academic performance wasn’t as critical at university. I mostly played computer games instead of striving for higher exam grades.”

Ability tracking in high school largely depends on outside pressure, which is totally unlike self-motivation that is required at the college level. It is the stark difference that leads to problems for students when in college, with them losing interest in learning.

4. Discussion

This study looks at the ability tracking system in Chinese high schools from a meritocratic viewpoint. It shows that learning motivation is not an inherent trait but is built socially through institutions, resource allocation, and interactions between teachers and students. In the ability tracking system of School A, meritocratic logic equates academic achievement with personal worth, positions external validation (grades, rankings, track placement) as the primary source of learning motivation and makes minor academic setbacks disproportionately consequential for students' self-perceived academic competence. Through prolonged exposure to differentiated resource allocation, tiered teacher expectations, and ranking-centered peer cultures, students across all track levels develop an over-reliance on external validation, a motivational disposition that persists into higher education and constrains their intrinsic learning drive and university adaptation process. This finding extends existing research on ability tracking by identifying the long-term motivational mechanism of tracking across the school-to-university transition and fills the research gap in the motivational experiences of mobile students and high-ability students.

4.1. Meritocratic Discourse and Track-specific Motivational Dispositions

Meritocratic discourse does not exert a uniform influence on students' learning motivation. Instead, it shapes track-specific motivational dispositions according to students' placement in Class A, B, C, or mobile groups.

In regard to students in Class A, abundant resources and superior status contribute to the development of a competitive trend in learning behavior. Students are motivated by maintaining positive extrinsic rewards for themselves. Falling in status is perceived as losing one's value. The competition in the academic environment is increasing, while intrinsic motivation is decreasing. For example, at university, students continue regarding their peers as competitors, experiencing academic anxiety. These findings are challenging the assumption that high-ability students are the primary beneficiaries of tracking [15; 18]. Tracking hinders their intrinsic motivation.

For students in Class B, which has average access to resources and diverse expectations, mixed emotions are predominant. Intrinsic motivation stems from the opportunity of moving ahead, yet the lack of any tangible resources in doing so contributes to their perception of an unfair system. The status decliners experience a temporary boost in self-confidence, but only because they gain the approval of others.

Class C students face neglect and stigma. Lots of them believe they're not capable and lose motivation for studying. Even in college, they struggle with self-guided learning. This fits with past studies on how being in lower tracks can make students give up study easily [14-15]. Stigma appears to reinforce and sustain this attitude over time.

4.2. Persistence of Motivational Dispositions: From Habitus to University Adaptation

High school motivations focused on getting validation are not disappearing when students start university. Instead, these attitudes become ingrained as what Bourdieu calls a "habitus" [25]. This habitus grows from how students see learning and their independence in it. Such views come from constant exposure to ideas like ability tracking and the notion that only those who show great talent or achievement really matter. As a result, many students treat learning mainly as a way to get approval, not because they love the knowledge itself.

This ongoing pattern keeps influencing students at university. Those from Class A stay super competitive but feel anxious too. All the students now find self-directed learning tough without that external pressure. The lower-track students remain disengaged and feel beaten down.

Thus, it is clear that university fails to restore the students' enthusiasm to what it used to be, as some claim. Even at university, the students continue to suffer from high school stratification. This analysis also highlights the flaws in China's test-based educational system in the manner it is designed, which results in Gaokao success but pays no attention to the development of intrinsic motivation and autonomy, qualities necessary for academic success at universities and job market [4; 26-27]. Thus, dealing with this problem has become critical.

4.3. Regional Specificity and Generalizability: Shanxi Province as a Critical Case

This research is conducted in Taiyuan, a city of Shanxi Province, that faces problems with limited economic development, resource inequalities in education, and harsh competition for the Gaokao examination [28]. As a result, private high schools use ability tracking to achieve better results in university enrollments [28]. Thus, tracking practices become more rigid and resource inequality becomes larger when compared to the developed economic regions such as Beijing and Shanghai [28-30].

However, the findings of this research can be generalized outside the context. The study revealed that the practice of ability tracking encourages a certain orientation toward achievement through the discourse of meritocracy, which persists throughout college years. In turn, such sorting is still common in the Chinese education environment with its focus on the Gaokao exams. Since academic standings influence resource allocation in the process, different regions experience the same effect [31]. In affluent districts, for instance, opportunities are distributed depending on the performance levels. As a result, similar motivational frameworks are built.

In this regard, the case of the Shanxi Province becomes particularly relevant. Following the definition provided by Bent Flyvbjerg [32], the area helps understand the general context better and analyze the formation of motivational processes more easily.

4.4. Limitations of the Study

However, there are several weaknesses in the study design. First, the study used an extremely limited sample size by recruiting only 12 subjects from one particular private high school in Taiyuan, Shanxi. Therefore, the applicability of the findings may be questioned since they may not necessarily be valid for other types of high schools or geographic locations such as the economically advanced coastal regions of China. The second weakness is related to the fact that the study adopted a student-oriented perspective, focusing exclusively on the students' experience and subjective perceptions of ability tracking. Teachers' and parents' views have not been considered since they play a crucial role in sustaining the rhetoric of meritocracy and applying tracking policies.

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1. Conclusion

This research examines the role of ability tracking in motivating students by tying their motivation to external factors such as grades and ranking. Students eventually become more and more externally motivated with time. Ability tracking causes problems among high-ability students as they usually suffer from anxiety issues.

In all groups, lack of self-regulated learning appears when there is a lack of any kind of internal motivation, indicating that their motivation depends upon being acknowledged for what they do, rather than the inherent interest in the subject matter. Moreover, the concept of ability tracking makes matters worse because it relates students' intrinsic abilities with academic achievement and future prospects.

With time, students start believing in it due to continuous exposure to such ideas in a context where resource and competition factor in greatly. Such a process of motivating is clearly evident from regions such as Shanxi Province where, due to scarcity of resources, the impact becomes greater.

5.2. Practical Implications

The results from this research can have practical implications in terms of application in the field as well. The reliance on extrinsic motivation and validation should be reduced, while intrinsic motivation should be encouraged. Schools need to scrap their rigid sorting mechanisms and allocate their budgeting according to the educational needs of students rather than their ranking. The test scores alone should not matter so much, and assessment procedures should include broader criteria in assessing the development of students.

In any case, it is vital for schools to develop programs to improve the psychological well-being of their students by reducing the pressure they endure and increasing their self-confidence. In a broader sense, the issue requires governments to loosen up the rigidity of the tiered structure and provide more resources in disadvantaged regions to combat the rationale behind meritocratic justification for classification.

Thus, the paper focuses on the socio-psychological aspects of ability tracking and the discourse of meritocracy. Its main purpose is to shed light on the effect that tracking has on motivation at different stages of a person's development, especially when he or she is transferring from secondary education to university. Moreover, it draws attention to the motivational drive towards external validation caused by

entrenched attitudes. Along with this, the study calls for an increased awareness of structural discrimination that can occur under seemingly fair policies.

Furthermore, future studies can expand their scope beyond these two schools by researching other institutions, especially in other regions, as well. Moreover, it is necessary to include teachers, parents, and administration in such research, using longitudinal studies to find methods for increasing students' intrinsic motivation.

In summary, tracking improves test scores; however, it changes the essence of education into validation-based, which undermines the process of personal development. Thus, the current approach to tracking and grading should be adjusted to provide growth opportunities for all.

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