Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Education Innovation and Philosophical Insights
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.37520

From Academic Disillusionment to Generalized Anxiety: A Cognitive-Behavioral Perspective

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Abstract. Belief in school meritocracy (BSM)—the belief that students' academic success is primarily determined by their effort and ability—may provide pupils with a sense of control and psychological stability. However, such a sense can be undermined if what students experience does not match their meritocratic expectations, which could contribute to poorer psychological outcomes. The study investigated the association between BSM and generalized anxiety among Chinese high school students and specifically examined if loneliness and depression mediated this association. A cross-sectional correlational study was conducted with 324 students from 2 secondary schools in Chongqing, China, who completed questionnaires on BSM, loneliness, depression and generalized anxiety. Analyzes were: Pearson correlations, linear regression and bootstrap tests of mediation. Students with higher BSM levels reported lower loneliness, depression, and generalized anxiety. BSM was a significant negative predictor of depression and anxiety after adjusting for gender and only-child status. Mediation analysis revealed that the relationship between BSM and generalized anxiety was fully mediated by loneliness and depression. Three significant indirect pathways were identified: BSM via loneliness to anxiety, BSM via depression to anxiety, and a sequential pathway from BSM to loneliness to depression to anxiety. It implies that school meritocratic beliefs may be linked to students' psychological well-being through both social and emotional pathways. Specifically, loneliness and depression may be important mediators between students' beliefs about academic success and their anxiety. Findings demonstrate the significance of social support and disconnecting academic achievement from students' sense of self-worth.

Keywords: Belief in School Meritocracy, Loneliness, Depression, Generalized Anxiety, Chinese High School Students

1. Introduction

In their original usage, Young [1] defined "meritocracy" as a system that distributes resources on the basis of merit, rather than on the basis of family background. In recent years many societies have expressed belief in meritocracy, but in different guises. In Finland, more than 80% of the population believes that ambition and hard work are important to success, compared to around 40% in America. But in China, most people believe in meritocracy and also believe in the importance of family background [2]. Schools have also focused attention on meritocracy. Belief in school meritocracy

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(BSM) is similarly defined as the belief that schools reward students according to their effort and ability [3].

Meritocracy, however, can be deeply harmful to mental health. The belief in meritocracy, while providing a placebo sense of control and reducing anxiety when students do not experience dissonance [3], fosters a false impression of equal opportunity and merit-based success, when in fact nonmeritocratic factors strongly influence outcomes. Most people initially believe that if they work hard, they will succeed because of the belief in a just world. But in the end they may discover that reality has belied that belief. Some then interpret their experiences in terms of internal causes. They find that they are responsible for their failures. This may cause embarrassment, self-doubt and learned helplessness, followed by social alienation and avoidance [4].

Current studies mainly examine university students and the old. Most also address general meritocracy beliefs rather than specific forms of such belief. The research thus concentrates on the gap of high school students in China, and investigates the specific meritocratic belief of BSM. Meritocracy belief can function as a placebo only while it remains consistent with reality. And that belief begins to crumble when reality contradicts it, and people might be led into a vicious cycle. Thus, if the belief in meritocracy is challenged, it no longer relieves anxiety and might even contribute to problems like learned helplessness. Hence, this research hypothesizes that a decrease in belief in school meritocracy can predict higher levels of anxiety and depression due to learned helplessness.

This association could be explained by loneliness. Social alienation has been strongly connected to anxiety and depression [5]. Loneliness is social alienation so it could be an independent predictor of anxiety and the collapse of belief in meritocracy predicts social alienation. Taken together, these studies hypothesize that a decline of meritocracy beliefs predicts anxiety through a mediating role of loneliness.

Recent studies have also shown that depression develops into worthlessness and anxiety [6]. Meanwhile, the disintegration of belief in meritocracy can lead to social alienation associated with depression. Meritocratic beliefs can also directly lead to depression, and depression alone can result in anxiety [7]. Based on this, the study hypothesizes that depression mediates between loneliness and depression.

Since there are no studies on BSM in Chinese high school students, the present study explores the association between BSM and mental health factors including loneliness, depression, and anxiety. It assumes that loneliness and depression mediate the relationship between belief in school meritocracy and anxiety.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

This study selected two secondary schools in Chongqing, China. The managers in the two schools selected students mostly from 12th grade. We developed a questionnaire each selected student had to fill out. We received 324 valid responses, of which 156 are male (48.15%) and 168 are female (51.85%), 130 are only child (40.12%) and 194 have siblings (59.88%).

2.2. Materials

Materials of the study were a self-administered digital questionnaire and a digital informed consent form. Participants received the questionnaire on computers lent by the school or their own digital

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device and received brief instructions, followed by four standardized scales (see Measures section) and a demographic information part. All materials were written in simplified Chinese so that participants could fully understand the material. The completed questionnaires were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to facilitate data entry and analysis, and were then imported into SPSS and python for statistical analysis. The study was questionnaire based and did not involve any experimental equipment or audio-visual material.

2.3. Measures

All scales were presented in Simplified Chinese on the online survey platform. All translated items were tested for cross-cultural and linguistic equivalence following standard back-translation procedures. All items were assessed on a Likert scale unless otherwise specified, with higher scores indicating higher levels of the respective construct. Forced-choice responses on the digital platform to avoid missing data. All scale orders were fixed across participants.

2.4. Belief in School Meritocracy (BSM)

We used the Belief in School Meritocracy Scale proposed by WiederkehrEtAl with 8 items. Participants rated each item on a 6-point scale, and question 8 was reverse scored. A higher total score indicates a greater preference for the belief that success in school depends on effort and ability. The Cronbach' s α for the present study is 0.781.

2.5. Loneliness & depression

We used the UCLA Loneliness Scale(Version 3) which consists of 20 items (Russell). Higher total scores indicate higher levels of loneliness. Participants responded to each item on a 4-point scale. The Cronbach's α of this research is 0.819.

We used the Patient Health Questionnaire-9, a 9-item instrument (Kroenke). Participants rated each item on a 4-point scale, and higher total scores indicated more serious depression. Cronbach's α of this research was 0.892.

2.6. Anxiety

We used the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7 (Spitzer), which consists of 7 items. Participants rated each item on a 4-point scale, with higher total scores indicating higher anxiety levels. Cronbach's α was 0.907 in the present study.

2.7. Demographic variables

At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were asked their gender, grade level, and whether or not they were an only child; these variables were used for descriptive purposes only.

2.8. Design

The research was designed as a cross-sectional correlational study. The independant variable is BSM; The dependant variable is anxiety. Loneliness and depression are sequential mediators.

There is no experimental manipulation. To reduce bias, the scale items were worded without revealing the construct labels or the hypothesized relationships among variables, so as to minimize

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the participants' tendency to infer the research hypotheses.

2.9. Procedure

Data were collected during the regular school day in July-August 2026. After receiving institutional and school approvals, digital questionnaires were administered in classrooms. Before completing the questionnaire each participant read a standardized instruction script highlighting voluntary participation and anonymity. Students completed the survey by accessing a URL/QR code on a school or personal device. The initial page included digital informed consent. The forced-choice responses and other types of questions kept the participants' focuses engaged. After the survey, respondents were presented with a debriefing page that included counseling resources. They were cleaned for analysis using SPSS and Python. Raw responses were collected automatically and exported as Excel.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics for the core variables of the 324 high school students show a moderate level of belief in school meritocracy and variability in individual differences in loneliness, depression and generalized anxiety in the group.

Independent sample t tests revealed no significant differences in scores for gender or only-child status on core variables ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the decline in belief in school meritocracy and the related negative emotions are common to students of diverse genders and family structures.

The results of the Pearson correlation analysis showed that belief in school meritocracy was significantly negatively correlated with loneliness, depression and generalized anxiety ($p<0.01$ and 0.001, respectively). Loneliness, depression and anxiety were significantly positively correlated ($p<0.001$). This offers some preliminary support for subsequent intermediary models.

In a linear regression controlling for gender and only-child status, school meritocracy beliefs significantly negatively predicted depression ($\beta = –0.252$, $p < 0.001$) and generalized anxiety ($\beta = –0.150$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H1. The two demographic variables did not significantly predict the outcome.

A chain mediation model was examined. School meritocracy was a significant negative predictor of loneliness. When both meritocracy and loneliness were predictors of depression both were significant. For generalized anxiety, both loneliness and depression were significant positive predictors and the direct effect of meritocracy was non-significant ($\beta = 0.059$, $p > 0.05$) when all the predictors entered the model, indicating full mediation.

The bootstrap results (1,000 re-samples) indicated a significant total indirect effect (effect = –0.209, 95% CI excluding 0).

All three indirect paths were significant: (1) meritocracy→loneliness→anxiety, (2) meritocracy→depression→anxiety, and (3) the chain path meritocracy→loneliness→depression→anxiety. The effect sizes for paths involving depression (2 and 3) were larger than for path 1. The CI for the direct effect included 0, and its sign was opposite to the indirect effects, indicating a suppression effect. To summarize, the erosion of belief in school meritocracy mainly exacerbates anxiety through the loneliness→depression chain, forming a completely mediated pathological mechanism.

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4. Discussion

Correlation analysis indicated that belief in school meritocracy was negatively related to loneliness, depression, and generalized anxiety. Mediation analyzes indicated that these associations were fully mediated by loneliness and depression. There was also a statistically significant difference of 0.669 in BSM between the two schools. However, since the sample sizes were substantially different across the schools, school could not be used as a moderator.

This finding is consistent with earlier work: challenging meritocratic beliefs undermines the placebo effect of a sense of control that can contribute to peer difficulties and emotional symptoms [3]. BSM's deconstruction can make students suspicious of the school system's assessments, feel excluded and socially alienated (BistromMollwing). Most students demonstrate an inbuilt attribution bias when faced with setbacks, blaming themselves for systemic mismatches [4]. That self-blame fosters negative self-concepts, depression and anxiety [3, 6].

Controlling for covariates, belief in school meritocracy had a suppression effect on anxiety. It can give students a sense of control, buffering negative emotions [3]. But after controlling for its indirect buffering effects via loneliness and depression, the belief becomes a positive predictor of anxiety. One explanation is the dual consciousness in China: students may think effort is very important, but also realize that non-meritocratic factors are important. In a disadvantaged social context, students can become more supportive of meritocracy and interpret their own failures as a personal failure, thus conforming to system justification [8]. The process could cause mental health problems such as social alienation [4] which is highly correlated to anxiety [5].

The findings here suggest the flimsiness of the psychological defense that belief in meritocracy can provide. Schools should decouple achievement from self-esteem and establish peer-support networks that short-circuit the journey from failure to loneliness. This study has some limitations. The design is cross-sectional, the sample size did not allow testing for school-type moderation, and it is unclear whether the placebo effect persists in the students who have never encountered setbacks. Future research with intensive longitudinal designs and intersectional perspectives could address these gaps.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the association between BSM and generalized anxiety among Chinese high school students, with a focus on the mediating roles of loneliness and depression. Students with high levels of BSM tended to report low levels of loneliness, depression and generalized anxiety. The mediation analysis went one step further: the link between BSM and anxiety was fully mediated by loneliness and depression. Three major indirect pathways were identified: one through loneliness only, the second through depression only, and the third through a sequential process from loneliness to depression to anxiety. The effects of pathways with depression were relatively stronger, suggesting that emotional distress might be an important factor in the association between students' perceptions of academic success and their anxiety.

These findings imply that students' beliefs about academic merit are closely linked to their social and psychological experiences. Schools reward merit and this may give students a sense of control, but the link to mental health can be less clear when they run into difficulties or feel their academic effort has not yielded the expected results. Specifically, loneliness and depression are psychological pathways linking students' experiences and views of academic achievement to anxiety.

The study also suggests that students' psychological well-being should be viewed separate from academic performance. Schools could benefit from stronger peer support and helping students avoid

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equating academic achievement with their personal worth. However, findings should be interpreted cautiously as the study was cross-sectional and data was collected from only two secondary schools. Thus it is unable to infer the causal relations between the variables. Longitudinal work with larger and more diverse samples could investigate how beliefs about school meritocracy and psychological well-being change over time.

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