"You Need to Be More Responsible": The Myth of Meritocracy and Teachers' Accounts of Homework Inequalities

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How do teachers account for homework-related inequalities? Our longitudinal ethnographic study reveals that, despite awareness of structural inequalities in their students' lives, elementary- and middle-school teachers' practices centered the myth of meritocracy. They treat struggles with math homework as products of students' and (particularly in elementary grades) parents' insufficient responsibility, effort, and motivation. These interpretations then justify homework practices that reinforce inequalities, including assigning homework that exceeds what students can complete independently and rewarding/punishing students based on homework. We discuss implications for debates about homework and the dangers of meritocracy myths and offer recommendations for more equitable alternatives.

Keywords: ethnography; equity; in-depth interviewing; learning environments; parents and families; social stratification; sociology; observational research; qualitative research

Introduction

Many taken-for-granted aspects of schooling—such as testing and ability grouping—are practiced in ways that reproduce and normalize inequalities (Grodsky et al., 2008; Horn, 2018; Knoester & Au, 2017; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Oakes, 2005; Ochoa, 2013; Tyson, 2011). They stratify students' opportunities for learning (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Domina et al., 2017; Tilly, 1999) and bolster the "meritocratic" narrative that higher-status groups succeed in school because of individual competence, effort, and responsibility (McKenzie & Phillips, 2016; Oakes & Rogers, 2007; Sandel, 2020; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014).

Yet *status-reinforcing practices* remain part of the "grammar" of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1997). These practices remain entrenched in part because of external pressures, including pressure from privileged parents whose children benefit from their maintenance (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Additionally, as research on testing and tracking has shown, these practices persist because educators develop accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968) of these practices that justify the inequalities they create (Horn, 2018; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). These accounts, in turn, often rely on stereotypes of lower-socioeconomic-status (SES) students and students of color—treating inequalities in students' performance as a function of differences in students' motivation, effort, and ability rather than as the product of structural inequalities in students' lives.

We extend this line of research to consider how educators account for another status-reinforcing practice: homework—and specifically, math homework. Research has highlighted inequalities in students' homework production (Bowd et al., 2016; Daw, 2012; Kohn, 2006) and linked those inequalities to differences in students' home lives (Xu, 2010) and in the support students' families can provide (Byun & Park, 2012; Calarco, 2020; Domina, 2005; Else-Quest et al., 2008; Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016; Lanuza, 2017; Ramirez, 2003; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019). Less clear, however, is how educators account for homework inequalities and how those accounts shape their practice.

Our longitudinal ethnographic study of elementary- and middle-school math classrooms reveals that teachers do not always interpret homework through a structural inequalities frame, despite their awareness of those structural inequalities. We find that at least some educators account for homework

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Educational Researcher, Vol. 51 No. 8, pp. 515–523
DOI: 10.3102/0013189X221111337

inequalities by using the myth of meritocracy—the idea that people who are responsible, motivated, and hard-working will be successful, regardless of the challenges they face (Ferguson, 2003; McKenzie & Phillips, 2016; Mijs, 2016; Tilly, 1999; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014). Drawing on this myth, teachers treat inequalities in students' homework as the product of students' (and, particularly in earlier grade levels, parents') responsibility, effort, and motivation. In doing so, they also justify practicing homework in status-reinforcing ways.

Homework as a Status-Reinforcing Practice

Homework has not always been part of schooling, but its history is long (Gill & Schlossman, 2003). Educators use homework for many purposes, including reinforcing students' academic and noncognitive skills; involving parents and informing them about the curriculum; and performing a form of rigor theater for parents and administrators concerned with their schools' reputations (Cooper et al., 2006; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Gill & Schlossman, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Despite that history, however, and despite some evidence of homework's benefits for student learning (Bempechat, 2004; Cooper et al., 2006; Fan et al., 2017), many scholars and educators have raised concerns about homework and inequalities it may reproduce (Calarco, 2020; Cooper et al., 2006; Daw, 2012; Kohn, 2006; Rønning, 2011). Those concerns reflect, in part, the fact that students from higher-SES families have advantages with homework over their lower-SES peers. Compared to higher-SES students, lower-SES students face a higher likelihood of distraction when doing homework (Xu, 2010) and are less likely to have parents or other adults available to provide high levels of hands-on homework support (Byun & Park, 2012; Calarco, 2020; Domina, 2005; Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016; Lanuza, 2017; Li & Hamlin, 2019; Ramirez, 2003; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019).

These inequalities at home translate to inequalities in the production and benefits of homework. Lower-SES students report spending less time on homework and are less likely to report completing their homework on time (Bowd et al., 2016; Gershenson & Holt, 2015). As a result, lower-SES students receive harsher and more frequent homework-related penalties (Calarco, 2020; Golann, 2015; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Meanwhile, higher-SES students derive larger benefits from homework, and teachers' assignment of homework exacerbates inequalities in students' achievement scores (Daw, 2012; Rønning, 2011).

Less clear, however, is how teachers account for homework inequalities. Understanding those accounts is important, as teachers may use them to justify practicing homework in status-reinforcing ways. Although prior research has not explicitly investigated these dynamics, we do know that teachers are subject to biases and that those biases shape how teachers treat and evaluate students (Farkas, 2003; Gilliam et al., 2016; Horn, 2018). We also know that teachers' treatment and evaluation of students have significant consequences for students' academic and social/behavioral learning (Jennings & DiPrete, 2010) as well as for their opportunities in school (Tilly, 1999).

Consequently, scholars have theorized that educators may interpret homework inequalities by using racialized and/or classed stereotypes about students' responsibility, competence, or effort (Ferguson, 2003; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). If so, then teachers may justify rewarding students who meet homework expectations and punishing those who struggle, even if doing so reinforces inequalities. Thus, we ask:

1. How do teachers account for inequalities in students' homework production?
2. How do those interpretations shape teachers' practice?

In answering these questions, we focus on the case of math homework. We do so, first, because cultural mythologies treat mathematical ability as "naturally" distributed, something teachers often take for granted (Horn, 2007). Second, inequalities in math preparation and confidence make supporting students with math homework stressful, particularly for lower-SES parents (Calarco, 2020; Else-Quest et al., 2008). Third, research has long linked school mathematics to inequities in student experiences and outcomes (Horn, 2008, 2018; Martin, 2012; Oakes, 2005; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019).

Data and Methods

Research Site and Participants

We use evidence from a longitudinal, ethnographic study of one suburban, public school district serving approximately 4,000 students. We followed a cohort of about 100 students from Grade 3 at Maplewood Elementary to Grade 7 at Fair Hills Middle School (all names are pseudonyms; for more details, see Calarco, 2020). During the study (2008–2012), Maplewood's students were roughly 80% White, and 15% were eligible for free/reduced lunch. Fair Hills's demographics were similar.

Our focal cohort included higher- and lower-SES students as well as students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds (see Table 1). Eighty students' parents provided information, via surveys, regarding students' backgrounds. Higher-SES students were those whose parents had completed at least a bachelor's degree, worked in professional or managerial occupations, and had average annual household incomes of approximately $70,000. Lower-SES students were those whose parents completed, at most, some college, but not bachelor's degrees. These parents generally worked in retail, service, or manufacturing jobs and had average annual incomes of approximately $35,000. Sixty-one students' parents also provided permission to gather data from students' elementary-school records, including teachers' ratings of students' effort with homework in ability-grouped math classes.

The project involved two waves of observations. Wave 1 followed the cohort from Grades 3 to 5 at Maplewood. Students and their teachers were observed regularly in school, for approximately 6 hours each week, with observations spanning four classrooms in each grade. Wave 2 followed the cohort to Fair Hills, where 65 of the 80 students who provided background information in elementary school were enrolled in Grade 7. Each of the 10 participating teachers was observed for 6 hours. All observations were documented in field notes.

The project also involved two waves of interviews with 69 participants. Wave 1 interviews included 14 teachers/

Table 1
Parent and Student Participants by Participation, Socioeconomic Status, Race, and Ethnicity

	Surveys and observations	School records	Student interviews	Parent interviews
Higher-SES, White, non-Hispanic/Latinx	46	38	12	15
Lower-SES, White, non-Hispanic/Latinx	17	14	9	9
Higher-SES, Asian American	7	3		
Higher-SES, Latinx (any race)	1			
Lower-SES, Latinx (any race)	7	4		
Higher-SES, mixed-race (Black/White)	1	1		
Lower-SES, mixed-race (Black/White)	1	1		
Total	80	61	21	24

Note. The total observation sample included more than 100 students. This table includes students whose parents also completed background surveys, which were used to determine socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. SES = socioeconomic status.

administrators at Maplewood and 21 White families from varied class backgrounds. Table 1 includes background information for interviewed parents and children. Parents (usually mothers) and children were interviewed separately. All students who participated in Wave 1 interviews were invited for follow-up interviews; 13 completed Wave 2 interviews. Wave 2 interviews also included 10 seventh-grade teachers at Fair Hills. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes each and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Observing these students in the same classrooms and following them over time allowed us to examine how the same teachers perceived and responded to homework produced by students from different backgrounds. That said, we also acknowledge that, given the demographics of the district, the schools in our study may practice homework differently than others, and we hope that future research will investigate how teachers' perceptions of and responses to homework inequalities vary across contexts.

Data Analysis

We began by reviewing field notes and interview transcripts and writing analytic memos describing themes related to students' experiences with homework, teachers' homework practices, and teachers' accounts of homework-related inequalities. We used the memos to develop formal codes, which we applied to field notes and transcripts. We coded evidence of students' struggles with homework, teachers' homework practices (e.g., whether they rewarded or punished students for their homework), and teachers' accounts of the homework-related inequalities produced by these practices (e.g., whether teachers were aware of inequalities in students' home lives or whether they treated students' success/struggles with homework as a reflection of merit).

Findings

Our observations and interviews revealed that despite the challenges many students faced with homework (Calarco, 2020; Domina, 2005; Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016; Lanuza, 2017; Li & Hamlin, 2019; Ramirez, 2003; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019; Xu, 2010), and despite teachers having at least a passing awareness of structural inequalities, teachers did not always interpret homework through a structural inequalities frame. Instead, the educators at Maplewood and Fair Hills Middle School accounted for homework inequalities by using the myth of meritocracy, and they used that myth to justify practicing homework in status-reinforcing ways.

Acknowledging Inequalities in Theory

Teachers were aware of inequalities in their students' home lives. Some teachers (especially at the elementary level) had more detailed knowledge of students' family situations, while others had a vaguer sense. Yet at some point during interviews or observations, all teachers mentioned a link between inequalities in support at home and inequalities in students' homework or success in school. One such observer was fifth-grade teacher Ms. Hudson, who said, "The home piece is really critical. I see with my superstars, they're the ones who have the support at home, the parents who work with them on homework, are in the PTA."

Middle-school teachers tended to have less contact with parents than elementary-school teachers did, but they also acknowledged links between support at home and performance at school. Seventh-grade teacher Ms. Isles said, "The parents that are taking interest in their child's learning, you see that goes hand in hand with how well they do." Extending this narrative, seventh-grade teacher Mr. Ferris said:

> My [lowest-level] math students get zero support at home. There's a big socioeconomic divide there, and it affects their performance in school. Those are the parents we reach out to at conferences, and they never come. The kids [in the mid-level math class], their parents will show up. The parents [of kids in the highest math level] are reaching out to me. They're the helicopter parents. Some of them even do the work for [their kids].

Both teachers acknowledged that families vary in the level of academic support they provide, linking that support to students' success in math. Going further, Mr. Ferris also connected math level and parent support to students' SES.

Accounting for Inequalities With Meritocracy

Building on these findings, we ask: How do educators account for SES inequalities in students' homework resources and homework production? Given the challenges many students face with homework (Calarco, 2020; Domina, 2005; Haley-Lock &

Posey-Maddox, 2016; Lanuza, 2017; Li & Hamlin, 2019; Ramirez, 2003; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019; Xu, 2010), and given teachers' awareness of these challenges' links to SES, we might expect teachers to perceive homework inequalities through a structural inequalities frame. Instead, however, our interviews revealed that teachers at Maplewood and Fair Hills typically interpreted homework through a meritocratic frame, perceiving inequalities in students' homework resources and production as a function of differences in students' and parents' effort, responsibility, and motivation.

At the early elementary level, teachers treated homework inequalities primarily as a function of inequalities in parents' efforts with students at home. Consider, for example, how third-grade teacher Ms. Patterson talked about homework inequalities:

> [The public school where I used to teach] was almost like a private school in that, for the most part, it's families that typically have a good amount of money. So with that, it seemed to me like there was a real push for education. It was parents who were really into it, really supported the teachers, welcomed homework, studied for tests with the kids. So, I was dealing with kids who clearly got a lot of interaction at home with reading and doing homework, so they came to me very academically prepared. . . . [At Maplewood] we're dealing with some really struggling kids. . . . There are parents that I've never even met. They don't come to conferences. There's been no communication whatsoever. That's new [for me]. And there are parents who . . . I'll write notes home or emails. They never respond. There are kids who never do their homework. And clearly, the parents are OK with that! When you don't have that support from home, what can you do? They can't study by themselves. So, if they don't have parents that are going to help them out with that, then that's tough on them, and it shows.

Ms. Patterson could have interpreted lower-SES parents' lack of support with homework as a product of structural forces, such as long work hours, caregiving obligations, or limited math knowledge due to unequal educational access. Instead, and invoking the myth of meritocracy, Ms. Patterson implied that if students were not completing their homework, their parents must just not care enough to help them get it done ("There are kids who never do their homework. And clearly, the parents are OK with that!").

By Grades 4 and 5, teachers expected greater involvement from students and assumed that if parents and students were sufficiently motivated, homework would get done. Consider, for example, how fourth-grade teacher Mr. Cherlin talked about social-class differences in students' homework completion: "I feel like there's a pocket here—a lower-income pocket. And that trickles down to less support at home, homework not being done, stuff not being returned and signed." Rather than see that lack of support as a product of the challenges families faced, however, Mr. Cherlin instead suggested that lower-income parents just needed to try harder, and that if those lower-income parents did not do enough to help their children, those children would just have to try harder themselves. He noted: "It should be almost fifty-fifty between home and school. If they don't have the support at home, there's only so far I can take them. If they're not gonna go home and do their homework, there's just not much I can do." As we see here, Mr. Cherlin not only treated homework inequalities as the product of students' and parents' insufficient responsibility, effort, and motivation but also suggested that students were only deserving of his time and energy if they (and their parents) were willing to put in the work.

In middle school, teachers put even more emphasis on students' responsibility, effort, and motivation for homework. Seventh-grade teacher Ms. Nichols, for example, recognized that Gabe—a lower-SES Latino student—could not get homework help from his parents, who had limited English proficiency, but she also criticized him for copying the homework from his classmates rather than asking her for help:

> During flex period, I notice certain kids who work with a group on their math homework and just kind of write down what their peers are writing. I try to catch that and stop that and talk to them about the fact that that doesn't help them understand it. Kids like that, I'll pull them aside. They'll explain that they're trying to get their homework done. They just want to get their homework done so that they won't have anything to do when they get home. I'll say that they can do their homework at home, but they can't get my help at home. Here I am right now, and I'd like to help you. . . . Like, today, I was working with Gabe during flex period. I asked him if he wanted to do some extra practice problems, so I put some up, and he did them. He's had trouble in math all year. English is not the language at home, so there's difficulty supporting him language-wise, so I feel like all the support he can get here is helpful, so I like to use flex period for him to help him when I can.

Ms. Nichols acknowledged that Gabe's parents could not help him with homework, but she also judged Gabe for copying homework from his peers—assuming that he must just not want to do the work at home—and for not asking her for help. Gabe's copying may be seen by some as inherently deserving of critique. However, research has revealed that up to two-thirds of parents provide unproductive homework help, including giving their children correct answers and completing work for them (Cooper et al., 2000). Going a step further, research has also highlighted cases of teachers looking the other way when higher-SES White parents completed homework for their children (Calarco, 2020). Thus, although Gabe's strategy for completing homework may have been ineffectual in some ways, it is not clear that he was more deserving of censure than his higher-SES White peers, some of whom may have been receiving answers from (or even having their work completed by) their parents. Judging students like Gabe, in turn, creates a higher expectation of personal responsibility, effort, and motivation for these students than for their more privileged peers.

Middle-school math teachers invoked a similar meritocratic frame to suggest that students in lower-level math classes could overcome their math struggles by being more responsible or more motivated with homework. Consider, for example, how seventh-grade teacher Ms. Scheffler talked about the students in her lower-level math class:

> There are kids who don't know what they're doing, and they don't do their homework as an avoidance mechanism, and they come in and fall further and further behind. It pains me because

> that's the hardest student for me to work with—the one who won't do the work or doesn't do the work, because if you do the work and you get it wrong, I at least know where to start to help you. I've had a few students this year who have been reluctant to do homework. It's been mainly the [lower-level students]. Probably math isn't their favorite subject, so they wouldn't want to do their math homework, even when it's easy. And when it's not easy, they especially don't want to do it.

Essentially, the myth of meritocracy allowed Ms. Scheffler to suggest that if students in lower-level math classes just put in more time and effort, they could get their homework done and even make her job easier as well.

Obscuring Inequalities in Practice

Finally, we ask: How do meritocratic accounts of homework inequalities shape teachers' homework practice? Our observations and interviews revealed that perceiving homework through the frame of meritocracy obscured the unequal contexts of homework production and allowed educators to justify practicing homework in status-reinforcing ways. Essentially, and despite their awareness of inequalities in students' resources, teachers often practiced homework as if parents and students could overcome those inequalities by being more motivated, responsible, and hard-working. They did so in multiple ways, including (a) assigning homework students could not complete independently, (b) punishing students who frequently failed to meet homework expectations, and (c) rewarding students who consistently met those expectations.

Of course, teachers varied in their homework practices, with some teachers taking a more unequal approach to homework than others did (e.g., by more frequently assigning homework that was too difficult for students to complete independently or by attaching bigger rewards and punishments to homework completion). However, evidence of these status-reinforcing homework practices could be seen in all the classrooms we observed.

Assigning Homework Students Could Not Complete Independently. During observations, students often complained about the difficulty of their math homework. Consider an example from Ms. Phillips's fourth-grade math class:

> The students shuffle into the room, carrying math books and three-ring binders. Brian (higher-SES, mixed-race) and Ethan (higher-SES, White) call out to complain about how "hard" the homework was. Hearing this, Ms. Phillips smiles and reassures them, "This is a 2-day concept, so we'll go back over it. No worries today. No stressing! We'll get this tonight." Hearing this, Jamie (higher-SES, White) calls out, "My mom had to sit with me for a while, but I got it eventually." Tory (lower-SES, White) says softly, "My mom doesn't do that." Julie (higher-SES, White) then flings her arms dramatically and calls out in a pained voice, "My mom tried to help, but she doesn't remember!" The other students laugh, and a few nod understandingly.

As this field note excerpt illustrates, teachers sometimes assigned math homework that was too challenging for at least some students to complete independently. They did so by assigning problems involving skills and concepts that students were still in the process of mastering, problems that required students to use familiar skills and concepts in new or more complex formulations (e.g., word problems), and problems involving skills and concepts not yet taught. As one of us has described elsewhere (Calarco, 2020), higher-SES families generally had more time, formal education, and resources to support students through these struggles compared to lower-SES families (see also Byun & Park, 2012; Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016). A few higher-SES families, particularly those in which parents worked long hours and did not hire outside help, found it more difficult to provide support with homework. Yet overall, higher-SES students more often came to school with their homework correct and complete (Calarco, 2020).

In middle school, teachers also expected homework to be too difficult for some students to complete independently, and they expected families to provide hands-on support at home. As seventh-grade teacher Mr. Charles explained:

> I [post] the answers to the homework for every course [online]. The kids do the homework, and they're supposed to check it and figure out if they need extra help. The kids who do that, there is an amazing correlation between that and positive grades. The kids who don't do that are bombing. I need to drill that to parents, that they need to check homework with their student, get it checked to see if it's right or wrong, and then ask me questions. I don't want to use class time to go over homework.

Like Mr. Charles, teachers recognized that students had unequal access to homework help. Yet they still assigned homework too challenging for some students and expected families to support them through those challenges. Unlike Mr. Charles, some middle-school teachers were willing to use class time to go over homework, but none spent more than 10 minutes per period doing so, placing the burden on students to ask for additional support outside class.

Punishing Students for Homework. Another way teachers obscured inequalities in homework production contexts was by punishing students who experienced frequent homework difficulties. Elementary- and middle-school teachers began almost every math period by asking students to take out their homework and show that it was complete. Teachers then used homework checks to determine students' grades for "homework effort." We witnessed these dynamics in how fourth-grade teacher Ms. Russo treated Kara and Lucy, both lower-SES White students, one of whom had their homework, and one of whom did not:

> Ms. Russo stops next to Kara. Seeing Kara's empty desk, Ms. Russo queries sharply, "What are you supposed to be doing right now?" Kara gives a slight shrug. Ms. Russo continues, "Do you have your homework?" Almost imperceptibly, Kara shakes her head "no." Ms. Russo huffs disapprovingly, makes a sharp mark on her clipboard, and states matter-of-factly, "Then you're in for recess. And you need to be more responsible." Ms. Russo then moves on to the next student, stopping next to Lucy. Seeing that Lucy has her homework out and complete, Ms. Russo praises her warmly, saying, "Good girl, Lucy! For doing your homework and having it ready for me."

Ms. Russo had limited contact with Kara's family, but she suspected, based on that lack of contact, Kara's free-lunch status, and the fact that Kara regularly wore the same clothes multiple days in a row, that "something [wa]s going on at home." Despite that recognition, however, Ms. Russo still chastised and punished Kara for not being more "responsible" when she came in without her homework. As one of us has described elsewhere (see Calarco, 2020), because higher-SES parents were highly involved in homework, higher-SES students typically completed homework correctly and on time and thus tended to be granted reprieves on the rare occasions when they came to school without homework. That said, a few higher-SES students regularly came to school without their homework and faced such punishments as reprimands, missed recesses, and docked points.

Similar responsibility-related punishments could be seen in middle school. Consider, for example, Mr. Ferris, who used gruff lessons about responsibility to command respect from students:

> As the first bell rings, Mr. Ferris glances toward the door, smiles wryly, and quips, "Time to go yell at some kids!" Mr. Ferris moves to the hallway and begins yelling at passing students, saying, "Chop chop! Let's go! Get to class!" As his own students begin to arrive, Mr. Ferris turns a similar energy on them. That includes Jesse, a working-class White student. As Jesse shuffles through the door, Mr. Ferris points at him and says sharply, "Jesse! When are you gonna give me your homework? We've still gotta talk about why that was a bad decision." Jesse says nothing. He just nods and slumps into his seat.

Unlike many of his classmates, Jesse could not rely on his parents for help with homework. Jesse's mother, a low-income single mother with a GED, struggled to help Jesse with homework, particularly in math. As she explained in an interview after Jesse's fifth-grade year:

> I had many difficulties in school. I had behavior issues, attention deficit. And so after seventh grade, they sent me to an alternative high school, which I thought was the worst thing in the world. We literally did, like, first- and second-grade work. So my education was horrible. . . . When I went to take the GED, they do a pretest to see where you're at, and I was second-grade math, fourth-grade reading. So, it was a surprise to me that I passed my GED. But it's still frustrating, especially with the math factor. I still can't really figure out division. . . . [Jesse will] ask me a question, and I'll go look at it, and it's like algebra, in fifth grade. And I'm like, "What's this?" So, it's really hard. Sometimes you just feel stupid because he's in fifth grade, and I'm like—I should be able to help my son with his homework in fifth grade.

Teachers like Mr. Ferris were aware, at least in a general sense, of the challenges Jesse faced at home. Yet they still held Jesse accountable for homework, reprimanding him and docking him points when he came to school without it complete and attributing this incompletion to a "decision" he made rather than to unequal access to resources.

Rewarding Students for Homework. Teachers also rewarded students who consistently met homework expectations, offering praise, bonus points, and even "homework passes" allowing them to miss assignments without penalties. Fourth-grade teacher Ms. Russo, for example, gave "bonus points" to students who got their math tests signed by a parent, with the signature indicating that their parent had reviewed the test with them and discussed what they got wrong. Seventh-grade teacher Ms. Scheffler, in turn, noted that she decided to move Colin, a higher-SES White student, up to the advanced math class for Grade 8 because he "really took advantage of the enrichment homework." That enrichment homework was optional; nonetheless, it became a tool Ms. Scheffler used to determine which students took algebra in Grade 8. In that sense, these findings align with prior research showing how teachers' biased assumptions about students can influence decisions regarding tracking and ability grouping (Farkas, 2003; Oakes, 2005; Tyson, 2011).

Rewards for homework could also be seen on students' elementary-school report cards, which included marks for students' "homework effort" in math. Teachers rated each student in their ability-grouped math classes on a scale of 1 (unsatisfactory) to 4 (commendable). Figure 1 presents the mean ratings received by students whose parents granted access to their school records, summed across marking periods in Grades 3, 4, and 5. As the figure illustrates, on average, teachers gave higher-SES students higher effort ratings for homework, despite acknowledging inequalities in the support students received at home.

Discussion and Conclusions

Many students face challenges in completing homework (Calarco, 2020; Domina, 2005; Haley-Lock & Posey-Maddox, 2016; Lanuza, 2017; Li & Hamlin, 2019; Ramirez, 2003; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019; Xu, 2010). Thus, we might expect educators to interpret differences in students' homework production through a structural inequalities frame. As we show here, however, the myth of meritocracy gives teachers an alternative frame for making sense of homework inequalities, leading them to see students' struggles with homework through an individual agency frame instead. Those meritocratic accounts of homework inequalities also facilitate the unequal treatment of students, allowing teachers to justify homework practices that reinforce inequalities, including assigning homework that exceeds what students can complete independently, punishing students who regularly fail to meet expectations for homework completion, and rewarding students who regularly meet those expectations.

Building on prior research on the dangers of the meritocracy myth (Ferguson, 2003; McKenzie & Phillips, 2016; Mijs, 2016; Tilly, 1999; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014), this study reveals how that myth can lead teachers to judge lower-SES students (and their families) for the challenges they face with homework and with schooling more generally. Of course, individual responsibility, effort, and motivation likely play some role in students' academic success. Yet by focusing teachers' attention on those explanations for inequality, and by obscuring the structural inequalities that may facilitate or impede individual effort, the myth of meritocracy discourages teachers from critically interrogating taken-for-granted practices—such as homework—that, if not approached carefully, may reinforce inequalities in school.

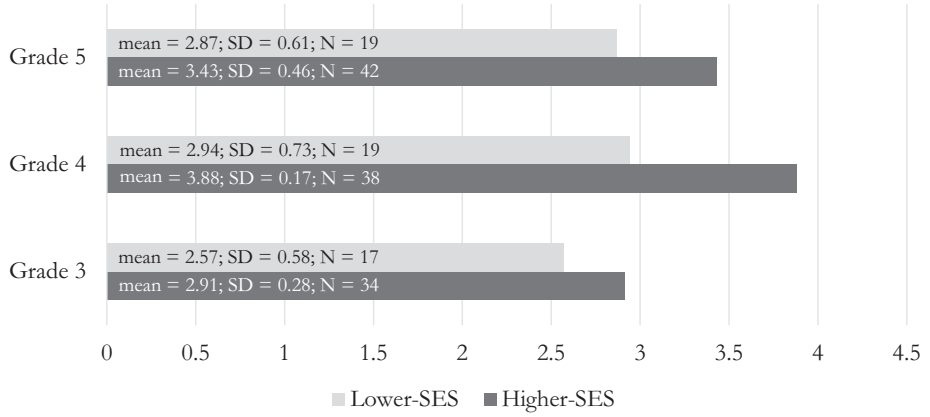

FIGURE 1. *Elementary-school report card ratings of math homework completion, means by socioeconomic status (SES) and grade level (*N = *61).*

Note. Scores for each student were summed across marking periods (within a given year) and then divided by the number of scores to produce a mean homework score for the student in that year (out of 4). Within each group, those mean scores were then summed and divided by the number of students in the group to produce a mean score for that group in that year. The number reported is the mean score for each group.

To that end, these findings highlight the need to not only help educators understand the structural roots of inequalities but also disrupt their beliefs in the myth of meritocracy. As we show, awareness of structural inequalities does not necessarily lead teachers to change or abandon practices that stratify students' experiences and outcomes in school (see also Horn, 2018; Horn & Garner, 2022; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Even when teachers recognize the structural roots of homework inequalities, they still develop individualistic accounts of homework—accounts they use to justify continuing to practice homework in status-reinforcing ways.

If educators learn to question the myth of meritocracy, they may also be less inclined to practice homework in status-reinforcing ways. Specifically, that would mean avoiding (a) assigning homework that is too challenging for students to complete independently; (b) treating homework as a proxy for individual responsibility, competence, or effort; and (c) rewarding or punishing students based on the homework they produce. Such practices would invite ongoing reflection on structural realities and how students engage in school, what Weis and Fine (2012) have called *critical bifocality* (see also Chen & Horn, 2022).

Of course, educators could go—and some have gone—a step further in attempting to reduce homework's harm. Some educators, for example, have made homework optional or ungraded (Kimberly, 2013), and some rarely or never assign homework (Güven & Akçay, 2019). More research is needed to understand the consequences of these more "progressive" homework policies. Yet we suspect that although optional and ungraded homework may reduce inequalities in homework-related rewards and punishments, it may not prevent teachers from judging those students (and their parents) who do not complete the optional or ungraded work. No-homework policies have greater potential for alleviating the kinds of unequal practices we observed in the schools in our study. At the same time, because homework is such a deeply entrenched part of the grammar of schooling (Gill & Schlossman, 2003; Tyack & Cuban, 1997), and because homework can also serve other purposes—signaling school rigor or helping parents feel connected to the school—some families and educators may resist its elimination. Schools that do successfully eliminate homework may need to find other ways to signal curricular rigor and communicate with families about what students are learning (e.g., by sending home newsletters with sample materials that illustrate what students are learning and offer suggestions for parents who are interested in working with students at home).

Of course, even no-homework policies cannot eliminate the unequal advantages held by students whose families have more time and resources to work with them at home on academic tasks. Rather, higher-SES parents can still use tutors and after-school programs to supplement their children's formal instruction in ways that maintain their children's advantages in schools (Byun & Park, 2012; Calarco, 2020).

Ultimately, then, even if schools do reconfigure or eliminate homework, those steps alone are unlikely to solve inequalities in schooling. As research on the myth of meritocracy makes clear, structural inequalities require structural solutions (Ferguson, 2003; McKenzie & Phillips, 2016; Mijs, 2016; Tilly, 1999; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014). Extended school days and affordable, high-quality before/aftercare programs, for example, have been shown to alleviate pressures on employed parents (Ruppanner et al., 2019) and may also provide opportunities for struggling students to get extra support (Durlak et al., 2010; Lauer et al., 2006). Meanwhile, increased financial support for families has also been shown to promote students' success in school (Aizer et al., 2016; Milligan & Stabile, 2011). The need for structural solutions to structural inequalities, however, should not discourage educators from taking steps in the short term to reduce the harm caused by status-reinforcing practices. Schools and teachers alone may be unable to fix social inequalities, but they can avoid making them worse.

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NOTE

The research reported here was supported by the Department of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, by the Gertrude and Otto Pollack Fellowship, and by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305C050041-05 to the University of Pennsylvania. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of any supporting agencies. We are grateful to Kristen Neal and Susan Jurow for their feedback on drafts of this manuscript.

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Manuscript received April 21, 2021
Revisions received August 27, 2021, December 17, 2021, and April 18, 2022
Accepted May 5, 2022