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Meritocracy is a Myth

Is hard work alone enough for every student to succeed in school?

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LONGITUDINAL EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS: REDUCING INEQUALITIES
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In education, many people believe that all students have the same chances to succeed if they work hard and are talented. However, research shows that this belief—known as meritocracy—can actually hide unfairness. It ignores the many other factors that influence how students do in school, such as family background, school resources, social interactions, and lived experiences.

The idea of meritocracy is reinforced by institutional policies, cultural values, and stereotypes that emphasize personal responsibility and innate ability. This way of thinking makes success seem like an individual achievement. However, it hides the wider social and economic conditions that also shape who gets ahead and who struggles.

In psychology, the myth of meritocracy is closely linked to achievement inequalities. Even when students have the same ability levels, those from less advantaged families often achieve lower results. There are multiple reasons for this. For example, the way students are placed into school tracks (Terrin & Triventi, 2022) and how teachers view and treat them (Brummelman and Sedikides, 2023) illustrate how selection practices and social agents can unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities.

Mijs (2015, p. 18) argues that school systems often "distort the meritocratic process." When student selection and placement depend on grades and test scores, tracking can increase inequality. Students from educated families are more likely to enter academic tracks and attend prestigious schools, which shapes their future opportunities (Triventi et al., 2020). Findings from the LEARN project confirm this pattern. A study of Romanian students found that track placement predicted performance on the Baccalaureate exam, both directly and indirectly through students' achievement patterns during high school (Dodan et al., 2025). Being placed in lower tracks and following patterns characterized by lower achievement were related to decreases in performance on the Baccalaureate exam.

Teachers' beliefs can also reinforce these inequalities. Legette (2020) shows that teachers often see students in academic tracks as more capable. Brummelman and Sedikides (2023) also highlight that interactions with teachers can influence how students think about themselves. Especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, this can sometimes undermine their confidence. When teachers hold negative stereotypes about students' abilities, children may start to see themselves as less intelligent or less capable, even when their actual skills are the same as those of their peers. Over time, these negative self-views can reduce motivation and lead to lower academic achievement, reinforcing existing inequalities.

While effort and motivation do matter, students from disadvantaged families are often seen through a "deficit lens", with low performance attributed to low ability or lack of effort (McKay & Devlin, 2016). In reality, many of these students show great strength and flexibility when facing challenges. Hernandez et al. (2021) found that when teachers focus on students' strengths, their motivation and persistence improve. Addressing inequality requires shifting from focusing on what students "lack" to what they can do— a strengths-based approach that values potential and resilience.

Creating a more equitable education system requires moving beyond the meritocracy myth and tackling structural barriers. Fairer resource distribution, teacher training that challenges stereotypes, and flexible educational pathways are essential for giving every student a chance to thrive.

NOTE
Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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