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The Paradoxical Role of Meritocratic Selection  
in the Perpetuation of Social Inequalities at School

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### Abstract

The school system is intended to offer all students the same opportunities, but most international surveys reveal an overall lower achievement for students from disadvantaged groups compared with more advantaged students. Recent experimental research in social psychology has demonstrated that schools as institutions contribute with their implicit cultural norms and structure to the production of inequalities. This chapter examines the role that a structural feature of school, namely meritocratic selection, plays in this reproduction of inequalities at school. First, we describe how meritocracy in the educational system can hold paradoxical effects by masking the virtuous/vicious cycles of opportunities created by educational institutions. Second, we present recent research suggesting that selection practices relying on a meritocratic principle--more than other practices--can lead to biased academic decisions hindering disadvantaged students. We propose that inequalities in school might not just result from isolated failures in an otherwise functional meritocratic system, but rather that merit-based selection itself contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities at school.

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*Keywords:* meritocracy, selection, social class, school practices, discrimination

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The term “Meritocracy” might have only appeared in 1959 in a dystopian novel, but the concept of merit itself had already been a central feature of 18<sup>th</sup> century intellectual movements which sought to replace power structures in society based on ascribed social positions with democratic governments (Falcon, 2013). Providing equal rights to all citizens was believed to increase the chances that individual destinies in a democracy depend on one’s effort and abilities instead of the luck of being well-born. This idea was later extended to educational institutions in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culminating with the Universal Declaration of Human rights, which officially proclaimed that “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (...)” (UN General Assembly, 1948, art. 26). Educational institutions were since then gradually given the societal responsibility to: (1) provide equal access to all children in the first stages of education and (2) assess student’s merit to determine which students can pursue higher education. Nowadays, these two tasks assigned to educational institutions form the cornerstone of a meritocratic society. Given the importance in terms of outcomes for individuals (i.e., high levels of education are associated to higher income, better health and well-being; Easterbrook, Kuppens, & Manstead, 2016; see also Easterbrook, Hadden, & Nieuwenhuis, [Chapter XX](#)), it seems essential to evaluate whether educational institutions actually fulfill their societal tasks to ensure a meritocratic society.

The results of several international surveys question whether this is the case. When looking at educational outcomes (i.e., performance and educational attainment) across social groups, it appears that disadvantaged group members tend to perform worse at school

compared to students from more advantaged social backgrounds, and achieve lower levels of educational attainment (OECD, 2013a). This fact in itself does not necessarily contradict the argument that educational institutions follow the meritocratic principle. In theory, at least, it could be that merit (i.e., abilities and/or effort) is not equally distributed at birth among social groups and that schools fairly reward the best students.

In the present chapter, however, we argue that differences in educational outcomes can be partly attributed to schools themselves (Adams, Biernat, Branscombe, Crandall, & Wrightsman, 2008). We present a series of studies that investigate how the interaction between educational institutions and students' social class can produce inequalities. This work moves beyond the static description of social class differences (e.g., culture, language, school readiness) by examining institutional factors that transform initial status differences into educational inequalities. Such a social psychology of social class inequalities in education offers new insights by providing evidence of the causal effect of some institutional factors in the maintenance of social class inequalities. Specifically, we review evidence that (1a) the prevalent discourse and practices in educational institutions generate differential psychological experiences for (dis)advantaged students, thereby affecting their performance; (1b) the origins of these non-meritocratic outcomes are concealed by the meritocratic construal of educational settings; and (2) the selective practices in education encourage a non-meritocratic distribution of academic opportunities and rewards (i.e., evaluators produce biased assessments). In sum, inequalities in school may not just reflect individual failures in an otherwise functional meritocratic system. Instead, we propose that they are perpetuated by educational institutions through their use of the meritocracy concept.

### **What is Meritocracy?**

The merit principle--or equity principle, as it is also commonly referred to--is a distributive justice principle that regulates the allocation of resources based on individual

input or ability, as opposed to the principles of equality, proportionality or need (Deutsch, 1979). A society is considered meritocratic when it puts into place a system that rewards a person's competence and effort, rather than status, worth or supposed merit of this person's group (Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002). Inequalities can still occur in a fair meritocratic society if the unequal allocation of resources reflects differences in individual efforts and abilities (i.e., merit; Deutsch, 1979). In other words, a society based on the merit principle guarantees equality of access to resources for all groups and persons, rather than equality of outcomes, which is determined by each person's merit.

In Western countries, meritocracy is a norm with wide support from both individuals and institutions (even though individuals vary in the extent of their endorsement, Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2012; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Son Hing et al., 2011). One possible reason for the preeminence of meritocracy is that it is seen to serve as a justice principle (providing rules to determine how resources should be distributed). Additionally, from a functionalist perspective, meritocracy is seen as a means of encouraging effort and maximizing individual output in society more generally (Mijs, 2016a). In such a society, the rewards of merit should incentivize individuals to demonstrate their ability and/or invest more effort. In theory at least, meritocracy leads to fair - in the sense of equitable - resource allocations and more productive societies.

### **Paradoxical Effects of Meritocracy**

Yet, social psychology has provided evidence that the application of the principle of meritocracy is associated with beliefs, behaviors and practices that could perpetuate inequalities that are not based on merit. If a meritocratic society ensures that the most deserving individuals are rewarded, the corollary is that individuals who are rewarded are the most deserving and those who fail have themselves to blame. This assumption has a number of psychological implications that can lead to the further justification and legitimation of

social inequalities by masking initial privileges and disadvantages of social groups (Day & Fiske, Chapter XX). For instance, experiments conducted by McCoy and Major (2007) showed that priming meritocracy was associated with increased levels of justification of status inequalities for disadvantaged group members. Relatedly, Knowles and Lowery (2012) found that meritocracy reduced perceptions of racial privilege among highly-identified white individuals. In sum, the concept of meritocracy appears to be related to perceptions and beliefs minimizing or justifying the existence of social inequalities.

Additionally, the concept of meritocracy can also provide moral and intellectual justifications that support the resistance of the implementation of practices that could reduce current intergroup inequalities. Believing that a society is meritocratic (i.e., descriptive meritocracy) is associated with opposition to organizational selection practices challenging the status quo in favor of disadvantaged group members (e.g., affirmative action), regardless of the extent to which individuals endorse merit as a justice principle (i.e., prescriptive meritocracy; Son Hing et al., 2011). Endorsement of meritocracy among highly educated individuals also predicts opposition to affirmative action policies (Faniko, Lorenzi-Cioldi, Buschini, & Chatard, 2012). In the field of education, beliefs in school meritocracy were found to be negatively associated with interest in implementing an equalizing pedagogical method, or an intention to do so (Darnon, Smeding, & Redersdorff, 2017). Interestingly, the pursuit of meritocracy can even lead managers to enact *non-meritocratic* behavior. Castilla and Benard (2010) demonstrated that managers favored men over equally competent women for institutional rewards when meritocracy was explicitly promoted in an organization. In sum, meritocracy is supposed to promote equal opportunity. However, by representing the current system as fair, it may actually lead individuals to endorse beliefs and practices that could reproduce and legitimize initial intergroup inequalities based on social status and not merit.

### **Meritocracy in education**

In schools, meritocracy manifests as the belief that academic success reflects the hard work and ability of students. Despite evidence that seemingly unrelated factors such as students' group membership can also influence students' performance (e.g., OECD, 2014), meritocratic norms are not only prevalent in schools but also encouraged by educational institutions (Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2009). Indeed, research in sociocultural psychology points out that schools are cultural environments where students are both taught academic content as well as valued norms that define how academic success is to be interpreted (Mijs, 2016a; Plaut & Markus, 2005). Supporting this proposition, a large body of research has revealed that students who are seen to attribute their academic success or failure to factors that are congruent with the meritocratic principle (i.e., providing internal explanations for their behavior rather than external explanations such as the difficulty of the task or the help/hindrane of others) are given better scholastic judgements by teachers (Dompnier, Pansu, & Bressoux, 2006; Tyler, Boykin, & Walton, 2006). Indeed, when asked to present themselves positively to teachers, students prefer to attribute success and failure to internal rather than external attributions (Pansu, Dubois, & Dompnier, 2008). These results suggest that students clearly understand that a meritocratic interpretation of their performance (i.e., in terms of effort and ability) is more valued in the classroom context.

Importantly, several lines of psychological research show that the meritocratic ideal conveyed in educational settings contributes to the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students at the same time as it conceals this contribution (see also Rubin, Evans, & McGuffog, [Chapter XX](#)). These lines of research build on Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) social reproduction theory, which contends that academic norms, values and standards are not culturally neutral, or "objective", but in fact reflect some cultural arbitrariness (i.e., the arbitrary promotion and reward of certain forms of language, knowledge, behaviors, bodily



postures and attitudes). Higher social class children are socialized at home to adopt norms, behaviors and forms of knowledge that are closer to academic norms than those adopted by lower social class children (see also, Lareau, 2003). As a consequence, higher social class children start school with a cultural and symbolic advantage that is not derived from merit (Goudeau, Autin, & Croizet, 2017). This privilege allows them to feel at ease and adequate in the school environment because expected academic behaviors are congruent with the ones taught at home (Manstead, 2018; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Lower social class students, on the other hand, have to understand that their behavior is not valued in this context (e.g., Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). They will further need to recognize the specific school expectations to adapt their behavior in ways that feels natural to them and appear authentic to others (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017; Chapter XX; Lehman, 2013). However, educational institutions do not explicitly recognize the arbitrariness of their norms and standards. In doing so, perhaps inadvertently, the school system conveys that the middle-upper class culture is inherently of greater value. This leads students to believe that the differences due to familiarity and comfort with school culture are in fact reflections of students' merit (Easterbrook et al., Chapter XX).

Darnon and collaborators (2018) presented a recent illustration of how schools' meritocratic discourse contributes to patterns of achievement that perpetuate social inequalities, while concealing these inequalities by leading students to attribute these patterns of achievement internally. In their experiment, fifth-grade students were reminded that schools are meritocratic and reward ability and motivation (Darnon, Wiederkehr, Dompnier, & Martinot, 2018). Compared to the control condition, the merit condition increased the SES performance gap in a French language and a mathematical task. Moreover, belief in school meritocracy was a mediator of the effect, suggesting that this ideology plays a role in the reproduction of inequalities. Finally, the authors observed that higher SES students displayed

higher self-efficacy than lower SES students. This finding can be interpreted as an internalization process through which students misattribute their unequal familiarity with the school culture to differences of academic ability (see also, Wiederkehr, Darnon, Chazal, Guimond, & Martinot, 2015). Other psychological work also highlights the paradoxical effects of meritocracy in educational settings. These research lines examine how meritocratic construal embedded in the structure of educational institutions differently impact the academic experience and performance of disadvantaged students.

**Social comparison in the classroom.** By organizing classrooms around common features (same students' age and similar learning content), educational systems communicate that offering students the same resources are sufficient conditions to render performance and abilities directly comparable (Croizet, Goudeau, Marot, & Millet, 2017). Goudeau and Croizet (2017; Chapter XX) investigated the effects of social comparison practices and challenged the idea that educational contexts are neutral settings that allow for true potential and ability to shine through.

Because of the unequal familiarity with school culture, classroom practices that increase the visibility of performance can contribute to the emergence of social comparison processes that disrupt lower social class students' performance. As lower social class students may not realize that higher social class students benefit from cultural privileges, they are likely to infer that they do not possess the same level of competence. Paradoxically, it could be the appearance of fairness of the merit principle that encourages students and teachers to engage in such inferences (Croizet, 2008; Croizet, & Dutrévis, 2004; Croizet & Millet, 2012). The differences in competence and performance are interpreted as differences in ability instead of differences in cultural (dis)advantage, which threaten lower social class students' self- image and amplifies the social class performance gap.

Goudeau and Croizet (2017; Chapter XX) supported these theoretical assertions with a series of experimental studies in which the visibility of the performance in classrooms was manipulated by having children raise their hands upon test completion, as it often happens in classrooms. The results showed that such comparative settings contribute to the social class achievement gap by undermining the performance of lower social class students. The researchers went one step further in another experiment and created an arbitrary academic disadvantage by making students more or less familiar with a coding task depending on the experimental condition. The experimentally disadvantaged students underperformed but the disadvantage was enhanced when performance was visible. However, making students aware of the disadvantages eliminated their underperformance. This work demonstrates that settings allowing the inference that the advantages some students possess are due to merit rather than social class magnify social inequalities.

**Cultural mismatch.** Another line of research, based on cultural mismatch theory, suggests that cultural norms conveyed at universities disrupt lower social class students' performance (Stephens et al., 2012). American universities display and implement norms and values of independence, which correspond to higher social class upbringing. Experiencing a cultural match between one's values and the institution's values would allow individuals to feel they belong in the institution and better focus on tasks; on the contrary, experiencing a cultural mismatch should induce feelings of threat and doubt, making tasks harder to achieve (Stephens et al., 2012; see also Easterbrook et al., Chapter XX; Rubin et al., Chapter XX). To test this hypothesis, a welcome letter was experimentally manipulated to reflect either independent or interdependent norms and presented to first-year students. After reading the letter, participants completed an anagram task. In the "independent message" condition the results replicated the classic pattern of achievement gap between first-generation students (i.e., neither parent went to university) and continuing-generation students (i.e., at least one

parent went to university). The gap was reduced when the letter presented a message based on an interdependent norm. These results are also congruent with many previous qualitative and intervention studies showing that lower social class students in higher education feel like they do not belong in the institution, causing them to question their chances of academic success (Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young, 2008; Jetten, Iyer, & Zhang, 2017; Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Jury, Smeding, Stephens, Nelson, Aelenei, & Darnon, 2017; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011).

The meritocratic construal of educational settings conceals the process of cultural mismatch and the academic consequences endured by these students. Results of an intervention study further confirmed this process. Providing information for academic success increased lower social-class students' grade when the information was presented as social class-specific advice more than when it was presented as generic academic advice. Addressing difficulties associated with one's social class provided a framework that gave meaning and understanding to the difficulties experienced. Students improved as they realize that their feelings of "being at the wrong place" were not due to their incompetence but caused by their comparative unfamiliarity with the university context (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

**Institutional attitudes toward social class diversity.** Other research has shown that students' academic motivation and self-concepts can be affected by educational institutions' creation of (un)welcoming environments toward diversity. Browman and Destin (2016) drew from principles of identity-based motivation theory (Oyserman & Destin, 2010) to propose that when situational cues suggest that a domain-relevant context is a good fit for a person, that person has a better chance of feeling confident in that domain, is more likely to develop high feelings of self-efficacy, and is more willing to pursue domain-relevant goals (i.e., greater domain-relevant motivation). Two experiments demonstrated that when exposed to

cues indicative of the institution's warmth (positive and welcoming attitudes) toward socio-economic diversity, lower social class students displayed greater academic efficacy, higher expectations and more implicit associations with high academic achievements. Warmer (more inclusive) compared to chillier institutional messages also led students to perceive more socioeconomic diversity in their institution and to feel that their background was a better match with the other students.

Taken together, these lines of research present a convincing case for the role of educational institutions in the reproduction of inequalities. Providing equality of opportunity is not sufficient to build a merit-based system: Even if opportunities (e.g., institutional rules for success and failure) are equal, taken for granted institutional practices and values confer some privileges to higher social-class students and induce daily academic and psychological difficulties for lower social-class students. As these (dis)advantages go unacknowledged in a supposedly meritocratic system, lower social class students can only assume that they are personally responsible for trailing behind.

### **Meritocracy and the Function of Selection of Educational Institutions**

Recent work further shows that the very structural practices designed to quantify students' merit (e.g., assessment) could also contribute to the SES achievement gap. As mentioned in the human declaration of human rights, to safeguard social mobility educational institutions are given two simultaneous, at times competing, tasks. The first is to provide all students with equal access, treatment and learning opportunities. The second is to assess the students to determine who deserves the opportunity of pursuing higher education at a later stage. These two tasks represent two distinct functions of the educational institution (Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, & Butera, 2009; Dornbusch, Glasgow, & Lin, 1996; Madero Cabib, & Madero Cabid, 2013). The first is referred to as the school's educational function of school (imparting all students with the same knowledge and skills) and the second as the

school's selection function (ranking and sorting of students for different academic rewards and opportunities).

**The selection function and students' performance.** Even if the function of selection officially relies on meritocratic principles—educational selection is supposed to reflect students' individual merit (Autin, Batruch, & Butera, 2015)—several studies have found that this function has detrimental effects on the performance of low-SES students. In a field study, students were told that assessment in their class was either designed to help them learn (i.e., the educational function of assessment) or that assessment was used to select the best among them (i.e., the selection function of assessment). The results showed that assessment intended to select harmed the academic achievement of low-SES students (Smeding, Darnon, Souchal, Toczek-Capelle, & Butera, 2013, Study 3). Specifically, in the selection condition, the usual social class achievement gap was replicated, whereas it was reduced when assessment was presented as a way to learn and improve. Even reminding students of the selection function of universities (i.e., to identify the best students, the few who deserve access to the highest social positions) hindered the performance of first-generation students compared to continuing-generation students (Jury, Smeding, & Darnon, 2015). These studies illustrate that presenting evaluation as a way to objectively identify those who have the greater merit contributes to the SES performance gap. The structural functioning of the institution (i.e., its selection function) appears to be a mechanism responsible for the underachievement of low-SES students.

**The selection function and evaluators' behavior.** A subsequent set of experiments went one step further by demonstrating that the principle of meritocratic selection plays a role in the perpetuation of inequalities by evaluators. While previous work demonstrated educational institutions' effect on students' performance, these studies investigated how students' performance is judged and used by evaluators during the selection process. The hypothesis

was that even if students perform equally, the function of selection leads evaluators to create a SES-achievement gap.

Given that traditional grades remain a widely used criterion for making selection decision (e.g., program admission; OECD, 2013b), a first paradigm focused on assessment practices. A correlational study established that support for this assessment practice (i.e., grading) was associated with believing in the function of selection of schools, because this assessment practice is viewed as fulfilling a meritocratic principle (equitably reward students); and associated with lower support for alternative practices (e.g., comments; Autin et al., 2015). In a set of experiments, evaluators were asked to assess a test using either a selective assessment method (i.e., grading) or an educational assessment method (i.e., providing comments; Autin, Batruch, & Butera, 2018). The test was presented as produced by a low- or a high-SES student; importantly, performance was kept constant (same number of mistakes). The evaluators, however, found more mistakes if the test was attributed to a low-SES student than a high-SES student, only when participants used a selective assessment method. To further ascertain that the creation of the SES-performance gap was due to the selective component of grading, the function of assessment (selection vs. educational) was directly manipulated in two studies. The results suggested that the selective purpose of assessment, rather than the assessment tool itself, led evaluators to artificially create an achievement gap between students of advantaged vs. disadvantaged background.

Batruch, Autin, Bataillard and Butera (2018) turned to another influential and widespread practice of meritocratic selection in school, namely tracking: the grouping of students as a function of their academic achievement into classes or curricula preparing them for either a vocational or an academic path. Two studies tested whether using a selection practice such as tracking would lead teachers or students playing the role of teachers to find higher-SES students more suitable than lower-SES students for a higher academic track (and vice-versa

for a lower track), in spite of identical prior performance (Batruch et al., 2018). The studies resembled actual tracking dilemmas than can occur in the Swiss system where teachers and the principal can offer a second chance to pupils who are borderline for the higher track (i.e., slightly below official standards). The results revealed that this opportunity was more readily offered to high-SES students than to low-SES students, given the same prior performance. A third study manipulated the school's function. The Swiss school system was presented as either primarily serving a selection function (i.e., to select the best students) or an educational function (i.e., to impart knowledge and skills to all students). The results revealed the following pattern: For the higher track, the high-SES pupil was considered the most suitable in the selection condition, followed by the high-SES pupil in the educational condition, next the low-SES pupil in the educational condition, and finally the low-SES pupil in the selection condition. The order was reversed on the lower track. Together the results of the three studies were consistent with the idea that institutional selection tools such as tracking may lead evaluators to artificially create achievement inequalities in pupils of different social class.

These studies show that social class inequalities can be artificially created at school by agents of the system, even when performance is identical. Furthermore, these inequalities do not appear to only be the product of the evaluators' individual biases, but a paradoxical byproduct of institutional expectations and practices that rely on a meritocratic distribution of academic rewards that encourages evaluators to differentiate between students.

### **Educational Systems: Gate-keeping Institutions?**

To sum up, before entering school, children are already exposed to unequal types of resources that will affect their subsequent ability to demonstrate competence (or to have their competence fairly assessed; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). These initial differences are not acknowledged or challenged. Instead, educational systems, in the name of equity, structure the educational context so as to render the comparison between students relevant and assess



their comparative merit. Struggling students are encouraged by the meritocratic construal of educational settings to understand that, as they were given the same school resources, their academic difficulties are the product of their lack of ability or effort (Autin & Croizet, 2012). However, as such contexts have a threatening effect (Goudeau & Croizet, 2017; Chapter XX: Stephens et al., 2012; Browman & Destin, 2016), there are reasons to believe that their performance is not an accurate result of either effort or ability.

Furthermore, the assessment methods used to impartially select students do not appear to lead to altogether fair assessments of students' merit. Instead, they lead to educational outcomes that are biased along social class lines, as revealed by research showing how focusing evaluators on selecting rather than educating students increased their tendency to distribute academic rewards unequally, even when performance was equal (Autin et al., 2018; Batruch et al., 2018). This research suggests that schools are not operating entirely meritocratically: Students are not placed in a learning environment allowing their achievement to be measured in terms of true potential (and by extension merit) as inequalities are observed at the start of school, in the process of assessing and finally in the decisions about educational trajectories.

In sum, the discourse depicting how educational institutions provide equality of opportunity conceals inequalities by presenting them as an accurate reflection of differences in individual merit. This discourse also contributes to the perpetuation of inequalities by creating differential psychological experiences for low- and high- social class students – thereby affecting their performance – and by leading evaluators to create differences in students' attainment. In doing so, educational institutions, perhaps unwillingly, become *de facto* gatekeepers of the social class status quo (see also Batruch, Autin, & Butera, 2017; Easterbrook et al., Chapter XX; Rubin et al., Chapter XX).

### **Merit, Equality of Opportunity and Equality of Results**

We propose two additional reasons why, consistent with the above-mentioned results, the use of a meritocratic discourse in educational contexts cannot fulfill its original purposes of assessing merit to distribute awards fairly.

First, for merit to be accurately detected, everyone has to start with the same opportunities. Even if equality of opportunity is a necessary pre-requisite for a meritocracy to be functional, equality of initial resources is also necessary to fairly identify individual merit. As long as initial differences of resources between social groups remain influential on performance in the school system, schools must acknowledge that they possess limited means to accurately assess inherent merit. This could mean reconsidering educational practices aimed at early detection of merit, and examine the benefits of imparting skills based on students' needs to avoid rewarding students for possessing resources acquired through their family background.

Second, it has been argued that meritocracy could fulfill a societal function of increasing individuals' effort and motivation to succeed and therefore improve their productivity. We would contend that portraying schools as meritocratic can just as easily result in the opposite for some students. If lower social class students perceive their poor performance as deserved rather than partly related to structural disadvantage, they could get discouraged by the perspective that they do not possess the ability to succeed and give up trying, particularly in highly stratified educational systems (i.e., selective educational systems). There is sociological and psychological evidence pertaining to this point (see also Day & Fiske, [Chapter XX](#)).

Mijs (2016b) found, using PISA 2012 data, that the pattern of attributions of academic success varies depending on the type of school tracks students are placed in, and the extent to which the educational systems are highly tracked: While students in mixed-ability groups tend to attribute their mathematics performance more to external factors, vocational- and

academic-track students are more likely to internalize their failure and success, respectively. This is particularly the case when educational systems are highly stratified: As high-SES students are more likely to be high-performing students in high-ability tracks, they are likely to interpret their success as due to internal qualities. Conversely, as underprivileged students tend to be disproportionally allocated to vocational tracks, they are likely to attribute their failure to themselves. Previous experiments found that interpreting academic difficulty as a sign of incompetence impedes performance (Autin & Croizet, 2012). As a result, educational stratification in supposedly meritocratic systems could discourage low-performing and lower-SES students from improving their performance. Besides hindering attributions, institutional stratification might reduce students' expectations. Buchmann and Park (2009) compared undifferentiated educational systems to more stratified systems and found a stronger impact of students' socio-economic background on expectations to complete college in the more stratified systems.

Rather than incentivizing all students to perform better, highly stratified educational systems could increase students' tendency to internalize the outcome of their performance and develop expectations that are more congruent with their family social position. Both of these processes are likely to reduce disadvantaged students' belief that they possess the ability to succeed in the educational system and ultimately lower their effort and performance.

### **Conclusion**

Schools are the primary institutions in society that could favor social mobility. They have been assigned the important responsibility of providing equal opportunities to all students so as to ensure that societies can function meritocratically. However, in practice, educational institutions are unable to compensate for initial disadvantages, and their structural practices in its current state tend to increase original inequalities. As a result, they fall short of their meritocratic claim of offering equal opportunities and measuring actual merit. The

objective of this chapter was to outline how the specific combination of meritocracy beliefs with educational selective structures tends to favor advantaged students and encourages the reproduction of social inequalities. To avoid further legitimizing of inequalities partially produced at school, we contend that schools should take into consideration the fact that they possess limited means to identify accurately students' merit and avoid implementing practices which are aimed at detecting it. This could help avoid a catch-22 effect, where to combat social inequalities in society, schools increase their use of merit-based practices which could inadvertently lead schools to produce more inequalities.

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