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Review article

The Myth of Meritocracy in Education: A Philosophical Inquiry into Desert, Success, and Moral Legitimation

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Abstract

This article examines the myth of meritocracy in education by focusing on three closely connected concepts: desert, success, and moral legitimation. Its main aim is to analyze how meritocratic discourse transforms educational achievement and failure into moralized categories of deservingness, and how this transformation contributes to the legitimation of educational and social inequalities. The article challenges the modern school's self-description as a neutral and fair selector by showing that meritocratic language often operates not merely as a technical principle of selection and placement, but as a moral narrative. Within this narrative, educational success is commonly interpreted as the natural and deserved result of individual talent and effort, while failure is framed as evidence of personal deficiency. The study argues that this framing is not politically innocent, since it tends to obscure the structural conditions that shape educational trajectories, including class-based inequalities, unequal starting points, differential access to cultural and social capital, and the hidden curriculum. Drawing on desert theories and contemporary debates in political philosophy, the article emphasizes that deservingness is a normative claim with moral weight rather than a simple description of outcomes. When combined with exam-based sorting and performance regimes, desert discourse can turn grades, test scores, and credentials into markers of moral worth. This moralization has tangible consequences for students' self-understanding, intensifying experiences of shame, guilt, and diminished self-esteem, especially where error is treated as a failure of character rather than as part of learning. At the institutional level, belief in school meritocracy can also legitimize wider social hierarchies by making unequal outcomes appear fair and inevitable. The study concludes that a post-meritocratic ethics of education should expand justice beyond formal equal opportunity toward a more inclusive horizon that combines distributive and relational justice with recognition and care ethics. Such a horizon reframes assessment around dignity, participation, and growth, and repositions teachers as ethical carers who support students' flourishing rather than merely as sorting agents. Methodologically, the study is designed as a theoretical and philosophical inquiry in the field of philosophy of education, supported by document-based analysis of selected theoretical and philosophical texts on meritocracy, justice, and education.

Keywords: Meritocracy, Educational Justice, Desert Discourse, Document Analysis, Ethics of Education

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INTRODUCTION

Modern education systems often present themselves as mechanisms that promise equal opportunity and distribute educational outcomes according to individual merit and deservingness. Achievement hierarchies built around exams, grades, and diplomas appear to represent an order assumed to be fair and legitimate—one in which students are positioned according to their abilities and effort. As Young (1958) shows in his dystopian satire of meritocracy, however, merit—defined as the sum of IQ and effort—can, over time, become the ideological foundation of a new class order and an exclusionary elitism. Winners come to read their positions as "deserved" superiority, while losers are led to interpret their lower status as deserved (Young, 1958). As Sandel (2020) emphasizes, this meritocratic mindset nourishes arrogance among winners and feelings of shame and humiliation among those who fall behind, generating a profound moral tension that damages the social fabric. In this context, the discourse of deservingness in education should be examined not merely as a technical language of selection, but as a powerful regime of moral legitimation.

Framing the Problem: Deservingness in Education

The discourse of deservingness in education reveals itself in everyday language through phrases that attribute educational outcomes to individual effort, hard work, and deserved success. While this discourse draws on the ideal of fair competition, it also risks obscuring structural inequalities by attributing differences between success and failure largely to individuals' abilities and effort. As depicted in Young's (1958) dystopian critique of meritocracy, a "meritocratic elite" selected through the education system and occupying the highest statuses tends to legitimate its position not only through statistical tests and certificates but also through claims of moral superiority. Sandel (2020) argues that meritocratic thinking encourages those at the top to attribute their success entirely to talent and hard work, while those left behind are perceived as receiving outcomes they personally deserve, thereby producing an intense "winner–loser" politics.

As an illustrative context rather than a country-specific case study, Türkiye also shows how meritocratic discourse may become visible in debates on *merit* (*liyakat*), equal opportunity, and educational or administrative justice. Çamurcuoğlu (2022) notes that, although meritocracy theoretically rests on *merit* (*liyakat*), impartial selection mechanisms, and equal opportunity, in practice it can turn into an ideology that legitimates existing privileges. Gök's (2019) discussion of merit-based school leadership in the Turkish education system highlights the distance between claims of meritocracy and on-the-ground practices in administrator training and appointment processes, showing how the language of deservingness is often reduced to a procedural veneer. These references to Türkiye are used only to illustrate how meritocratic discourse may operate in a modern educational and administrative context; they do not turn the article into a Türkiye-specific case study. At the center of the problem, then, lies the

question of to what extent the discourse of deservingness used to explain educational success and failure expresses a genuine ideal of justice, and to what extent it functions as an implicit myth of legitimation.

Aim, Core Questions, Significance, and Limitations

The main aim of this article is to systematically examine—through the lens of contemporary theories of justice and the philosophy of education—the relationship between deservingness, achievement, and moral legitimation as woven around the myth of meritocracy in education. Drawing on distributive justice, luck egalitarianism, recognition justice, and care ethics, the study seeks to clarify in what respects the meritocratic claim in education aligns with justice and in what respects it stands in tension with justice. As Demirer (2020) suggests through the distinction between distributive and social inequality, reducing equality to the distribution of resources or opportunities may overlook relational status and forms of humiliation, thereby rendering invisible the symbolic hierarchies produced by educational meritocracy. E. S. Anderson's (1999) relational egalitarian perspective, developed around the question of equality, likewise brings into view not only students' access to resources and opportunities but also whether they are treated as equals within the school environment.

Within this framework, the article is organized around four core questions: (1) How does the myth of meritocracy in education construct the discourse of deservingness, and on which philosophical assumptions does this discourse rest? (2) What normative critiques can modern theories of justice—especially distributive justice, luck egalitarianism, recognition justice, and care ethics—develop against meritocracy in education? (3) How do educational institutions' exams, grades, performance indicators, and selection mechanisms shape students' self-respect, perceived self-efficacy, and moral self-assessments? (4) What does designing a post-meritocratic educational ethics require in terms of rethinking the concepts of achievement and merit? These questions will be pursued in the following sections at both theoretical and conceptual levels, so that the debate on meritocracy in education is removed from the realm of a purely technical management issue and treated instead as a deep philosophical problem of justice.

This study is significant because it shifts the discussion of meritocracy in education from a narrow concern with fair competition and equal opportunity to a broader philosophical problem of moral legitimation. By bringing together the concepts of desert, success, and moral worth, the article shows how meritocratic discourse can transform educational outcomes into judgments about students' value, dignity, and social standing. In doing so, it contributes to educational philosophy by revealing that exams, grades, and credentials do not merely classify performance; under meritocratic assumptions, they may also function as moral markers that make success appear deserved and failure appear personally justified. The article develops this argument primarily through Young's critique of meritocracy and Sandel's analysis of the tyranny of merit, while drawing on additional perspectives only where they clarify specific dimensions of educational justice, recognition, and care.

In Turkish-language scholarship, meritocracy is often discussed in relation to merit (liyakat), equal opportunity, and administrative justice. However, the moral and political consequences of meritocratic discourse in education—particularly its role in transforming success and failure into judgments of deservingness—remain relatively underexamined. This gap is important because meritocratic language does not only organize debates about fair selection or institutional appointment; it also shapes how educational inequalities are morally interpreted and socially justified. Çamurcuoğlu (2022) shows that meritocracy is frequently associated with merit (liyakat) and equal opportunity, while Gök (2019) demonstrates how meritocratic discourse becomes visible in debates on educational administration. In this article, these references are treated as contextual and illustrative rather than as the empirical basis of a national case analysis. The article differs from such discussions by treating meritocracy not primarily as an administrative principle, but as a philosophical problem concerning desert, success, and moral legitimation. In this sense, its contribution lies in showing how meritocratic discourse can convert educational outcomes into moral narratives through which success appears deserved, failure appears personally justified, and structural inequalities become less visible.

The scope of the study is deliberately limited to a conceptual and normative analysis of meritocracy in formal schooling. Rather than aiming at empirical generalization, the article develops a philosophical argument based on selected philosophical, sociological, and educational texts that illuminate the relationship between desert, success, and moral legitimation. Its primary focus is formal schooling; therefore, lifelong learning, vocational education, and informal learning contexts are addressed only indirectly. In addition, although the broader literature on justice includes many perspectives, the article narrows its theoretical focus in line with its central argument. Young's critique of meritocracy and Sandel's analysis of the tyranny of merit constitute the main argumentative basis of the study (Young, 1958; Sandel, 2020). E. S. Anderson's relational egalitarianism, Fraser's recognition framework, and Noddings's care ethics are used to deepen selected aspects of the discussion on educational justice, especially with regard to equality, recognition, vulnerability, and care (E. S. Anderson, 1999; Fraser, 2003; Noddings, 1984).

Method and Philosophical Approach

This study is designed as a theoretical and philosophical inquiry in the field of philosophy of education, supported by document-based analysis. Document analysis involves the systematic reading, examination, evaluation, and interpretation of documents as meaningful sources for qualitative inquiry (Bowen, 2009). In this study, the analyzed documents consist of selected philosophical, sociological, and educational texts concerning meritocracy, desert, success, and educational justice. Because documents may include both primary theoretical works and secondary academic materials collected, published, or archived by others, they offer an appropriate basis for examining the moral assumptions embedded in meritocratic discourse (Schensul, 2008). The analysis focuses on how these texts construct the relationship between educational achievement, deservingness, and moral legitimation. The inquiry

proceeds through conceptual clarification, comparison of relevant theoretical positions, and normative interpretation, with the aim of developing a critical argument about the moral and political consequences of meritocracy in education.

The documents analyzed in the study include foundational philosophical works on meritocracy and justice, particularly Young's (1958) critique of meritocracy and Sandel's (2020) analysis of the tyranny of merit. These works constitute the main theoretical axis of the article. Supporting sources are used for clearly defined analytical purposes. E. S. Anderson's (1999) relational egalitarianism helps explain why justice cannot be reduced to the distribution of resources alone; Fraser's recognition framework contributes to the discussion of status, respect, and symbolic hierarchy; and Noddings's (1984) care ethics supports the discussion of vulnerability, responsibility, and the teacher–student relationship.

The process of document analysis involved three main steps. First, the relevant texts were reviewed in relation to the concepts of meritocracy, *merit* (*liyakat*), deservingness, justice, recognition, and care. Second, recurring conceptual patterns were identified, especially those linking educational success with moral worth and educational failure with personal deficiency. Third, these patterns were critically interpreted in order to show how meritocratic discourse may function as a mechanism of moral legitimation in education. To strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, the study follows a transparent selection of theoretical documents, maintains conceptual consistency across the analysis, and relates each major claim to the relevant philosophical or educational literature. Through this approach, the study develops a focused philosophical argument rather than a broad survey of all theories of justice.

The article proceeds in four steps. First, it clarifies the conceptual relationship between meritocracy, desert, and moral legitimation. Second, it examines how exams, grades, and performance indicators may moralize educational achievement. Third, it discusses the consequences of meritocratic discourse for failure, shame, self-respect, and the teacher's role. Finally, it develops a post-meritocratic educational ethics through distributive justice, recognition, and care ethics.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MERITOCRACY, DESERT, AND EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

Meritocracy, Desert, and Moral Legitimation in Education

The concept of meritocracy has become one of the most powerful ideological frameworks in modern societies for defining the relationship among achievement, deservingness, and legitimate privilege. On the surface, it expresses a highly plausible claim: social positions should be allocated not on the basis of ascribed status, wealth, or lineage, but according to individuals' ability and effort. Yet, particularly in education, this claim generates serious controversies at both normative and empirical levels, because questions such as "ability according to what criteria?", "who gets to measure success?",

and "what does it mean to deserve under unequal starting conditions?" determine the moral and political substance of the meritocratic ideal. For this reason, meritocracy is not merely a technical principle of selection and placement; it is also a normative vision of the world with the capacity either to justify inequalities or to call them into question.

Meritocracy's emergence in its modern sense is commonly associated with Young's (1958) classic work, *The rise of the meritocracy 1870–2033: An essay on education and equality*. In his dystopian narrative centered on the British education system, Young constructs *merit* as a numerical score composed of IQ and effort and depicts a future in which this score determines individuals' life chances in their entirety. In this account, education becomes the dominant mechanism that reproduces class hierarchies through ostensibly fair examinations and objective measurements. Young's satirical approach indicates that meritocracy, from the outset, should not be understood as a neutral regime of merit but as an ideology capable of rendering class inequalities invisible. Thus, to discuss the myth of meritocracy in education today is also to return to the critical line of inquiry opened by Young.

In political philosophy and the philosophy of education, *merit* (*liyakat*) and *deservingness* (*hak etme*) carry a dense normative charge. Sandel (2020) argues that in modern democracies the concept of merit operates on two levels: on the one hand, as a functional principle for selecting those most capable of fulfilling social roles; on the other hand, as a moral narrative that reads achievement as an indicator of individual virtue. At this second level, the proposition that success is deserved and failure is the deserved outcome produces a potent moralism—one that interprets individuals' life trajectories as a complete reflection of their effort and virtue. In this way, merit comes to imply not merely "the most suitable person for the job," but "the more valuable person," turning into a hierarchical concept through which inequalities are deemed legitimate precisely because they are taken to be deserved.

In the liberal tradition of thought, the meritocratic ideal is most often discussed together with the principle of equal opportunity. On this view, the state's task is to minimize the effects of ascribed status differences on individuals' access to education, employment, and political participation and—through exams, competitions, and transparent criteria—to enable the upward mobility of those who are most talented and most hardworking. Sandel (2020) notes that at the core of this narrative lies the assumption that if everyone starts from the same starting line, the rest depends on individual effort and talent. In Young's dystopia, the liberal meritocratic ideal pushes precisely this assumption to an extreme: starting conditions that appear formally equal become a technical sorting mechanism that masks differences in class and cultural capital (Young, 1958). As a result, liberal meritocracy preserves the rhetoric of equal opportunity while increasingly portraying deep inequalities in outcomes as natural and deserved.

Littler (2017) argues that particularly in late-capitalist contexts—alongside the retreat of the welfare state and the intensification of marketization—the liberal meritocratic ideal has turned into a new apparatus of cultural legitimation. She shows how the language of meritocracy can mask austerity

and privatization policies through concepts such as performance, efficiency, and individual responsibility, while rendering structural inequalities of class, gender, and ethnicity less visible. At this point, education becomes both the showcase of the liberal meritocratic ideal and the arena where it faces its sharpest critiques: education systems produce the rhetoric of equal opportunity even as they reconstruct social hierarchy through selective school and university structures. In this way, liberal meritocracy is increasingly questioned by many actors not as a principle of justice, but as an ideological myth that reproduces inequality.

Meritocratic Discourse and the Construction of Educational Hierarchy

The rise of modern meritocratic discourse is directly linked to the post-war expansion of mass education and the institutionalization of standardized tests and performance metrics. Young's work offers an early and incisive diagnosis of this transformation: while state education policies are designed, on their face, to discover and develop talent, in practice they reproduce class selectivity under the guise of scientific testing and claims of neutrality (Young, 1958). Building on Young's conceptualization, Çamurcuoğlu (2022) emphasizes that over time meritocracy came to be identified in legal and political texts with *merit* (*liyakat*) and equal opportunity, yet its practical instantiation often contradicts the abstract ideal. This reference to Türkiye is used here only as an illustrative example of how meritocratic discourse can be translated into legal, administrative, and educational vocabulary; it does not turn the article into a Türkiye-specific case study.

Within the education sciences literature, the rise of meritocratic discourse is closely associated with exam-based selection systems for admission to schools and universities. International studies on educational meritocracy similarly show that meritocratic discourse can operate as an ambivalent language of justice. K. T. Anderson's (2015) study on lower-tracked students demonstrates how meritocratic ideology may position certain student groups as naturally less capable, thereby legitimizing educational hierarchy through the language of ability and effort. Batruch et al. (2023) show that belief in school meritocracy can strengthen the legitimation of social and income inequalities by making unequal outcomes appear fair and deserved. Similarly, Xiong (2023) conceptualizes the meritocracy trap as a process through which performance-oriented educational systems promise social mobility while reproducing inequality. These studies indicate that meritocratic discourse should not be treated as a neutral description of educational achievement, but as a normative language that can simultaneously articulate claims of fairness and legitimate existing inequalities.

What Sandel (2020) calls the tyranny of merit points fundamentally to the moral dimension of the myth of meritocracy. Interpreting success and failure as wholly the result of individual virtue and effort presents gains as deserved and losses as a kind of deserved fate. This mode of interpretation portrays social hierarchies as "the right people in the right places," while excluding from analysis factors such as luck, inheritance, historical inequalities, and structural discrimination. For this reason, Littler (2017)

treats the myth of meritocracy as one of neoliberal capitalism's most powerful instruments of cultural legitimation, precisely because it can convert systemic failures into narratives of individual deficiency. Familiar educational slogans such as "if you want it, you can do it" and "everyone takes the same exam" are everyday linguistic expressions of this myth.

Turkish-language studies may also be read as illustrative examples of this broader moral framing rather than as the empirical foundation of the article. In Gök's (2019) study, teachers and administrators emphasize the importance of merit and justice at the level of principle, while also noting that appointment and promotion processes often conflict with these ideals in practice. Discussing the feasibility of meritocracy in educational administration, Akkaya and Karaman Kepenekci (2020) underline that for merit-based discourse to be compatible with social justice, equal opportunity must be secured in a substantive sense, and structural disadvantages must be balanced through compensatory policies. In this framework, the myth of meritocracy in education emerges not merely as a theoretical conceptual debate, but as a contested terrain in which the moral meaning of success and failure is renegotiated.

Exams, Grades, and the Moralization of Achievement

The modern education system frequently presents itself as a neutral, objective, and fair mechanism of selection and placement. Within this narrative, the school is framed as a meritocratic stage where students from different socioeconomic backgrounds are subject to the same rules, and where the path to success is reduced to preparing for exams, earning high grades, and standing out in performance indicators. In what Aktan (2021) calls pathological meritocracy, education—especially an exam-centered school order—hardens into a rigid ideology that explains all inequalities through the discourse of *merit* (*liyakat*). Xiong's (2023) conceptualization of the meritocracy trap points to the dual role of performance-oriented schools: precisely through this discourse, they promise equal opportunity while simultaneously reproducing inequality. In such a context, the myth of meritocracy in education becomes not only an institutional belief but also a powerful language of legitimation that renders social privileges invisible.

The construction of the school as a neutral and fair selector rests largely on the institution's self-presentation as a domain of expertise, insulated from political and social struggles. Discussing the role of school habitus in reproducing cultural-social inequalities and privileges, Göktürk and Ağın (2020) show how the school's legitimate authority grants natural, scientific, and objective status to the judgments it issues about students. In this framework, the school functions as a symbolic space that reinforces judgments suggesting that students are by nature more hardworking, more disciplined, or less capable—while making invisible the class-based and cultural conditions behind those judgments. K. T. Anderson's (2015) qualitative study on low-track students in Singapore reveals how meritocratic ideology, in the discourse of administrators and teachers, is used to position certain student groups as

naturally low-level. In this way, the school operates less as a neutral mechanism of selection than as a regime of differentiation that rewards certain social attributes while penalizing others.

Within this ideological framing, the school is represented not as the area of social inequalities but as the stage of individual deficiencies. While failure is often attributed to students' insufficient effort, lack of motivation, or possession of wrong values, spatial deprivation, families' limited economic and cultural capital, or the school's own institutional practices are pushed into the background as secondary factors (Göktürk & Ağın, 2020). As K. T. Anderson's (2015) study illustrates, the more low-track students are coded as less capable and as having limited futures, the more the school's sorting practices come to be seen as fair and inevitable. By masking the school's historically class- and culture-shaped structure, this discourse strengthens the claim of neutrality and constitutes the institutional foundation of the myth of meritocracy in education.

The most visible face of meritocratic ideology in education is the narrative of *merit* (*liyakat*) built through exams, grades, and various performance indicators. As Xiong (2023) emphasizes, while performance-oriented schools are presented as vehicles of social mobility, the diplomas and exam scores students obtain are interpreted as direct indicators of individual effort and ability. Şahin's (2019) findings in the Turkish case are used here only as a contextual illustration of this broader pattern: centralized exam scores and school choices are closely related to families' economic, cultural, and social capital; therefore, success is a product not only of individual effort but also of initial conditions. Despite this, official discourse often continues to present the exam system as a powerful meritocratic filter by insisting that everyone takes the same exams and that the process is therefore fair.

Grading practices, in-school performance evaluations, and behavioral scores serve a similar function. Students' classroom participation, assignments, and exam grades are often treated as markers of a fixed ability or work ethic; yet, as Göktürk and Ağın (2020) note, the school's linguistic codes, pedagogical expectations, and hidden curriculum systematically position students with certain forms of habitus as advantaged. Aktan's (2021) critique shows that a classification of merit based solely on cognitive performance excludes other forms of value—such as artistic talent, emotional labor, or care—from the system, thereby producing a pathological regime of meritocracy. Exam and grading systems thus become both ostensibly neutral tools of measurement and symbolic mechanisms that generate a broader moral hierarchy.

One of the strongest pillars of the myth of meritocracy in education is the discourse of equal opportunity. In official policy texts and public rhetoric, expanding access to education, scholarships and support programs, and the uniformity and standardization of exams are presented as key indicators of equal opportunity. Şahin's (2019) doctoral study on equality and inequality of opportunity in education in Türkiye again serves as an illustrative contextual example rather than the empirical basis of the article; it demonstrates that this discourse may stand in sharp tension with field data, since school choices shaped

through centralized exams are closely tied to families' socioeconomic and cultural capital. In such a context, the claim that everyone takes the same exam becomes not evidence of equal opportunity, but an expression of a meritocratic outlook that treats unequal outcomes as deserved.

Empirical findings by Batruch et al. (2023) indicate that belief in school meritocracy increases the tendency to view income and class inequalities as less unjust and weakens support for policies aimed at reducing inequality. This suggests that the belief that schools are fair and neutral is not merely an attitude toward the education system but a mechanism that legitimates a broader social hierarchy. In K. T. Anderson's (2015) study, negative discourses about low-track students can persist without openly contradicting the rhetoric of equal opportunity, because these students' failure is explained through personal deficiency and lack of motivation. The language of equal opportunity can thus function less as a tool for resolving structural inequalities than as an ideological veil that renders them invisible within individualized narratives.

For this reason, the myth of meritocracy in education should be treated not as a purely technical debate about exams or grading, but as a moral regime in which conceptions of social justice, responsibility, and deservingness are redefined. Aktan's (2021) pathological meritocracy and Xiong's (2023) meritocracy trap show that constructing the school as a neutral selector can, in practice, turn into a narrative that ignores unequal starting conditions and morally justifies existing privileges. Once this myth is dismantled, the debate on justice in education emerges as a broader question—one that requires new normative frameworks sensitive not only to students' individual performance but also to their social context and structural barriers.

The myth of meritocracy in education depends not only on institutional functioning but also on the entrenchment of a deep moral language. Concepts such as deserving, achieving, and being worthy are used almost intuitively when evaluating students' performance in school, yet their philosophical background is rarely scrutinized. Feinberg (1970) notes that to say someone deserves something is not a purely descriptive statement; it is a normative claim that a particular action, trait, or condition carries moral value. Sher (1979) shows that this normative claim is often understood in relation to effort and ability; nevertheless, modern theories of justice, especially the Rawlsian approach, accept this relationship only in a highly limited way. Educational narratives of success, by contrast, expand claims of deservingness and turn a wide range of outputs—from exam scores to degree classification—into indicators of moral status. Achievement thus becomes not merely a technical measurement but is increasingly interpreted as proof of being a good citizen, a hardworking individual, and a person of merit.

DESERVINGNESS, FAILURE, AND THE EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF MERITOCRACY

Desert, Achievement, and the Moralization of Success

Desert theories can be defined, in their most basic form, as approaches holding that certain persons deserve certain goods such as rewards, income, and status, or certain harms such as punishment and deprivation, for specific reasons. Within this framework, Feinberg (1970) analyzes personal desert as a concept closely connected to justice and constructed through a basis of desert tied to who a person is, what they have done, or what kind of character they possess. Sher (1979) argues that although Rawls weakens desert theories by emphasizing the role of luck behind natural talents and effort, it is not possible to abandon the human tendency to establish a meaningful moral link between labor expended and outcomes achieved. Altuntaş's (2018) review of contemporary debates on justice shows how principles of equality, need, and desert are prioritized differently across theories, and how desert-centered narratives are often criticized for producing elitist or authoritarian outcomes. These debates indicate that while the concept of desert draws on a powerful intuition about justice, it can generate problematic consequences when it is made the sole or primary principle of distributive justice.

Alkan's (2018) analysis of Rawls's theory of economic justice further concretizes the Rawlsian limitation placed on desert through the thesis that innate talents and social starting conditions are morally arbitrary. For Rawls, because a person's attainment of high income or a prestigious position often depends on factors beyond their control, the claim that such outcomes are deserved is weak. Accordingly, principles of distribution should rest not on personal desert claims but on institutional design that improves the situation of the least advantaged (Alkan, 2018). Applied to education, this approach requires that students' exam success be understood not only through individual effort and ability but also together with factors such as family capital, school quality, and spatial opportunities. In this way, while preserving the classic intuitions behind desert theories, the question of who deserves what in education should not be answered in a manner that ignores structural inequalities.

Modern meritocratic discourse often codes individual success as a marker of moral worth. In describing the tyranny of merit, Sandel (2020) draws attention to the tendency of those who rise to attribute their success to their own talent and effort, while those who fall behind internalize their failure as a personal flaw. In this framework, a university diploma, a prestigious profession, or high grades become not merely technical indicators of performance but carriers of a narrative of virtue, self-discipline, and deservedness. Atakişi's (2025) analysis—what he calls the meritocracy illusion—shows precisely how the language of merit can form a labyrinth: individual stories of success obscure underlying class, cultural, and institutional advantages, thereby presenting attained positions as morally legitimate and natural. In education, phrases such as "they made it through their own effort" and "they

earned it by deserving it" often reduce this complex terrain to a one-dimensional account of achievement.

This moral loading also shapes students' processes of self-evaluation. As successful students construct their stories within a narrative of just reward, those who fail are pressured to interpret their position through a sense of being less valuable. Sher's (1979) emphasis on effort and ability takes this intuition seriously at the theoretical level, while also acknowledging that outcomes associated with effort and ability are significantly shaped by luck and context. In the Rawlsian approach discussed by Altuntaş (2018), by contrast, the language of desert is largely confined to legitimate expectations within institutions: that is, winning a position or reward within well-designed rules is seen not as pre-political moral superiority but as a form of institutional entitlement. When adopted in education, this perspective leads individual success narratives to be read as outcomes of specific institutional processes rather than as final judgments about students' character worth.

Failure, Shame, and the Hidden Curriculum

In meritocratic societies, failure is often explained through moral terms such as laziness, inadequacy, and lack of merit. According to Sandel's (2020) analysis, this language shapes not only how individuals view themselves but also how social hierarchy is perceived: the belief spreads that those at the top are there because they deserve it, while those at the bottom remain there because they did not try hard enough. As Atakişi (2025) shows, the meritocracy illusion reduces failure to individual weakness through the discourse of merit, while pushing structural elements—such as education policies, the distribution of economic capital, and differences in cultural capital—into the background. Thus, students who receive low exam scores or cannot access higher education opportunities are portrayed as people who did not realize their potential or do not possess merit, and unequal outcomes are morally normalized.

The Rawlsian effort to limit the relationship between desert and achievement offers an important objection to this moralization process. In Alkan's (2018) analysis, Rawls's view that natural talents and social starting points are morally arbitrary challenges, at a theoretical level, the identification of failure with personal defect. In contemporary justice literature discussed by Altuntaş (2018), it is likewise emphasized that desert-based explanations often tend to present the position of disadvantaged groups as deserved failure and therefore must be balanced with principles of equality and need. In the educational context, this warning serves as a reminder that labels such as lazy or without merit are moralizing stigmas that ignore students' social and institutional conditions. A critical desert reading developed against the moralization of failure matters both for protecting individual self-respect and for relocating debates on justice in education onto a more inclusive ground.

In the field of education, the myth of meritocracy functions not only as a principle of selection and placement, but also as a comprehensive moral discourse that shapes both individual self-perceptions

and the ways in which social hierarchies are legitimated. The assumption that the school is neutral and fair constructs a powerful language that attributes students' successes and failures to their personal traits and effort. On the one hand, this language renders invisible the structural mechanisms through which class inequalities are reproduced via education; on the other hand, it profoundly affects students' self-respect, experiences of shame and guilt, and teachers' professional roles (Eşerler et al., 2023). In this way, the myth of meritocracy becomes an ideological framework that bridges individual psychology and social structure and permeates the everyday practices of educational institutions.

In debates on class reproduction, the myth of meritocracy becomes more visible when considered alongside Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and social reproduction. Bourdieu (1973) argues that the school legitimates the cultural capital of dominant classes under the guise of natural ability, linguistic competence, or hard work, and that habitus dispositions—distributed asymmetrically across classes—are rewarded through supposedly neutral tools of measurement and evaluation. Anyon's (1980) classic comparative study of elementary schools in different social-class neighborhoods shows that obedience and routinized tasks are encouraged in working-class schools, whereas initiative, problem-solving, and abstract thinking are promoted in middle- and upper-class schools. These findings suggest that while the school appears to offer all students the same curriculum, it in fact operates with a hidden class program that prepares them for different occupational and life positions. This mechanism—operating at the very center of meritocratic discourse—creates the conditions for inequalities to be perceived as deserved differences.

The literature on the hidden curriculum further shows that this process of class reproduction occurs not only through textbooks and official programs but also through school climate, classroom interactions, and disciplinary regimes. Tezcan (2003) emphasizes that beyond the formal curriculum, the school functions as a mechanism of social control that transmits values, attitudes, and behaviors through implicit routes. As an illustrative contextual example from Türkiye, Atmaca (2021) shows that teacher expectations and in-class positioning may be intertwined with students' socioeconomic background, and that disadvantaged students may be more frequently exposed to scolding, being ignored, and low expectations. This example is used to support the broader theoretical claim that the myth of meritocracy can function as an apparatus of legitimation that renders class privilege invisible and morally excuses unequal educational outcomes through the language of merit and deservingness.

Students' Self-Respect and the Teacher's Role

One of the most striking individual-level effects of meritocratic discourse is that experiences of failure are often lived by students alongside intense feelings of shame and guilt. In the literature on shame, it is emphasized that perceiving oneself as fundamentally flawed, deficient, or inadequate can have devastating effects on self-respect. Budiarto and Helmi's (2021) meta-analysis, combining data from multiple samples, finds a strong negative correlation between shame and self-esteem, and shows

that frequent and intense experiences of shame are associated with depression and other psychological problems. Eşerler et al.'s (2023) study of gifted students and students in project schools provides a contextual example from Türkiye: as levels of shame and guilt related to making mistakes increase, self-confidence decreases; moreover, in environments with high expectations of success, the emotional cost of making mistakes rises even further. This finding illustrates how meritocratic performance cultures may intensify the emotional consequences of failure.

Studies examining classroom practices in Türkiye provide another illustrative example of how meritocratic labels may operate in everyday school life. In her analysis of how educational inequalities are reflected in classroom practices, Atmaca (2021) reports that disadvantaged students are more frequently labeled as problematic, unsuccessful, or unwilling, and that these labels are also internalized by classmates, resulting in deep affective injuries. In this process, students who receive low grades or repeatedly fail exams come to be seen not only as cognitively lacking but also as lazy, inadequate, or without merit. When shame and guilt combine with such moralizing labels, they erode the student's capacity to view themselves as a valuable subject and transform the experience of failure into an internal narrative that blames one's character rather than questioning structural conditions. The myth of meritocracy thus produces, at the individual level, an emotional regime that constrains students' self-respect and their future-oriented sense of self-efficacy.

One of the most visible carriers of the myth of meritocracy in the field is the teacher. The hidden curriculum literature shows that the teacher is not merely a figure who transmits the formal program, but also an agent of power who interprets and rewrites that program and draws symbolic boundaries among students. Tezcan's (2003) conceptual analysis demonstrates that the teacher's classroom language, the values they emphasize, the examples they choose, and their reward–punishment practices communicate messages about who students are and what they deserve as powerfully as the formal curriculum itself. In Anyon's (1980) class-based typology of schools, teachers are shown to promote obedience more in working-class schools and to encourage critical thinking and autonomy more in middle- and upper-class schools—thereby effectively enacting a regime of differentiation that prepares students for different social roles. This picture makes clear that through practices of evaluation and guidance, the teacher occupies a central place in meritocratic ranking and elimination processes.

At the same time, teachers are not only reproducers of this ideological order; they are also ethical actors with the potential to transform it. Atmaca's (2021) field examples from Türkiye are used here as contextual illustrations of this dual role: some teachers adopt more inclusive and supportive assessment approaches by considering students' socioeconomic backgrounds and emotional states, whereas others reproduce exam-centered pressure directly, pushing students into a harsh success–failure binary. In the first case, the teacher can partially mitigate the affective damage produced by the myth of meritocracy by adding functions of guidance and empowerment to the role of measuring and selecting. In the second case, the teacher amplifies the institutional weight of labels such as lazy, inadequate, or without merit

by using a language that equates exam grades with students' moral worth. From this perspective, the teacher becomes a central nodal point both in processes of class reproduction and in the moral judgment regime that shapes students' self-respect.

Overall, the myth of meritocracy produces a multi-layered ideological structure: it institutionalizes class reproduction through the hidden curriculum, encloses students' self-perceptions within shame and guilt at the individual level, and positions the teacher as an agent who measures, selects, and eliminates. When the assumption that the school is neutral and fair remains unquestioned, this structure both presents inequalities as deserved outcomes and normalizes the sense of worthlessness among those who fail. Deepening the debate on justice in education becomes possible precisely by making the individual and societal consequences of this myth visible and by encouraging all stakeholders—including teachers—to rethink the limits of the language of deservingness.

Critiquing Meritocracy through Theories of Justice

The myth of meritocracy in education has often been equated with the concept of justice and presented as though it were the most natural and neutral expression of the principle that those who deserve it should win. Yet a careful examination of contemporary theories of justice shows that both distributive justice and relational/social equality approaches tend to foreground structural conditions and power relations rather than reducing educational achievement to individual merit (Demirer, 2020, pp. 519–522). Even the Rawlsian conception of justice, structured around equal liberty, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle, can—depending on interpretation—either reinforce meritocracy or become a critical resource for demonstrating its limits (Öztürk, 2007, pp. 57–60). For this reason, understanding and critiquing the myth of meritocracy in education requires reading multiple perspectives together—such as distributive justice, luck egalitarianism, recognition justice, and care ethics—and subjecting the moral-justifying function of discourses of deservingness and achievement to a multi-layered inquiry.

The literature on distributive justice is organized around the question of how social goods—such as income, wealth, and educational opportunities—should be allocated and according to which principles. Frequently invoked principles in this framework include egalitarianism, luck egalitarianism, merit-based approaches, and libertarian conceptions of justice. Following the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's typology, Demirer (2020) provides a detailed overview of strict egalitarianism, Rawls's difference principle, luck egalitarianism, merit- and welfare-based principles, and libertarian approaches. He emphasizes that luck egalitarianism and merit-based principles center the distinction between individuals' responsibilities and the luck factors they cannot control. This framework is critical for discussing under what conditions the meritocratic discourse—linking school success to individual traits such as diligence and effort—may be considered just or unjust. While the discourse of equal opportunity in education theoretically promises a fair playing field purged of disadvantages tied to

socioeconomic background, gender, or ethnicity, in practice these disadvantages continue to seep in through the school door, and distributive justice debates render visible the moral consequences of this seepage (Demirer, 2020, pp. 520–523).

In Rawls's theory, the difference principle—according to which social and economic inequalities can be legitimate only insofar as they improve the condition of the least advantaged—offers a powerful criterion for questioning the legitimacy of high-status schools and selective exams when applied to the distribution of educational opportunities and outcomes. Discussing dilemmas internal to Rawls's theory of justice as a formal conception of rights, Öztürk (2007) shows that when principles such as equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity are abstracted from social power relations, they can be reduced to an abstract and neutral rhetoric of rights. This opens the door for meritocratic educational institutions to reproduce the advantage of groups with high class and cultural capital, even while resting legally on a principle of formal equality. From a distributive justice perspective, attributing achievement differences entirely to individual differences in effort and talent risks both masking inequalities in starting conditions and turning gaps in educational outcomes into deserved states—thereby allowing meritocracy to become a regime of moral legitimation for inequality (Öztürk, 2007, pp. 70–75).

Luck egalitarianism, in theory, aims to compensate for brute luck outside the individual's control, while refusing to compensate disadvantages resulting from a person's conscious choices and risks. In Demirer's (2020) presentation, this approach defends correcting inequalities tied to factors such as natural talent and family background, while leaving outcomes connected to a person's work ethic and choices to individual responsibility. E. S. Anderson (1999) criticizes this as a liberal framework that understands equality only at the level of distribution and thereby overlooks hierarchies and forms of humiliation within social relations. In education, luck egalitarianism can, in principle, legitimate tools such as scholarships and affirmative action that compensate disadvantaged students' bad luck, yet in practice it can still generate a language that attributes achievement gaps to individual effort and choices. This language carries the danger of producing a moralism that blames unsuccessful students for not working hard enough or not using their opportunities, effectively rendering structural inequalities in the education system invisible (Demirer, 2020, pp. 521–524; E. S. Anderson, 1999, pp. 289–295).

Recognition, Care, and Post-Meritocratic Educational Ethics

E. S. Anderson (1999) notes that luck egalitarianism designs its recipient of aid almost as a category of people whose natural misfortunes are compensated but who remain demeaned and marginalized in social relations, thereby missing relational status among equals. For her, equality should be understood as a relational ideal in which people recognize one another as equal citizens through mutual respect, participation, and voice (E. S. Anderson, 1999, pp. 312–320). This perspective turns not only resources and opportunities but also classroom interactions, teacher–student relations, and the possibilities for respect and recognition afforded by school culture into matters of justice. Fraser's

redistribution/recognition distinction is similarly decisive here: in education systems, categories of success and failure regulate not only access to resources but also students' symbolic status and self-respect. The successful student becomes a figure granted respect, whereas the unsuccessful student is often openly or implicitly devalued (Fraser, 2003, pp. 7–15, 70–75). Meritocracy thus becomes not merely a technical system that distributes grades and diplomas, but also a status regime that produces an unequal distribution of recognition and respect.

Care ethics deepens this status dimension of recognition justice by foregrounding subjects' vulnerability and mutual dependency. Çelik (2016) argues that in the philosophy of education, care/solicitude ethics emerges as a relational ethics against performance-driven and meritocratic approaches that place competition at the center. From this perspective, the teacher–student relationship is not an interaction between an authority that measures and evaluates and an abstract learner subject, but an ethical bond between a vulnerable student with concrete needs, emotions, and a life story and an adult obligated to respond to them (Çelik, 2016, pp. 73–78). Noddings's ethics of care likewise emphasizes that the fundamental moral responsibility in education is the student's well-being and their sense of being valuable, showing that meritocratic ranking and elimination stand in tension with this responsibility (Noddings, 1984, pp. 171–189). In such a framework, justice concerns not only the question of who entered which school, but also who felt seen, heard, and valued in this school, opening an alternative ethical horizon that radically questions meritocratic arrangements in education.

A post-meritocratic educational ethics can neither be reduced to a flat egalitarianism that denies all differences in achievement nor to merely softening the existing regime of competition through a bit more equal opportunity. Such a project can be developed by bringing together E. S. Anderson's emphasis on relational justice in democratic equality, Fraser's dimensions of redistribution and recognition, and care ethics' perspective of intersubjective responsibility (E. S. Anderson, 1999, pp. 320–329; Fraser, 2003, pp. 15–25). As Demirer (2020) notes, the weak egalitarianism form of distributive models that focus solely on equalizing the distribution of resources is insufficient to explain experiences of humiliation and exclusion produced by meritocracy in education, insofar as it overlooks status hierarchies and the symbolic dimension of social inequality. Therefore, educational policy requires a horizon of strong egalitarianism that centers not only the distribution of resources and opportunities but also whether students experience themselves as equally valuable subjects (Demirer, 2020, pp. 175–181).

Educational ethics designed within this horizon does not aim to abolish assessment and evaluation processes altogether; rather, it seeks to transform their quality so that they do not damage students' self-respect and instead contribute to their development. From the perspectives of care ethics and recognition justice, the teacher's role shifts away from being an agent who measures, selects, and eliminates toward a guidance role: accompanying students as they discover their abilities and interests, framing mistakes as opportunities for growth, and working to prevent failure experiences from producing moral

stigmatization (Çelik, 2016, pp. 80–83; Noddings, 1984, pp. 200–210). In such a model, *merit* (*liyakat*) is redefined not narrowly as exam performance but together with the support students receive, the quality of learning environments, and collective responsibilities. In this way, the proposition that supplies meritocracy with moral legitimacy—everyone gets what they deserve—gives way to the principle that everyone has a right to learn and develop under conditions consistent with human dignity, thereby moving debates on justice in education onto a more inclusive plane.

CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed the myth of meritocracy in education through the concepts of deservingness, achievement, and moral legitimation. It has critically questioned the discourse through which the modern school presents itself as a neutral and fair selector. The discussion has shown that success and failure in education are often treated as the natural outcomes of students' individual abilities and efforts, while class-based, cultural, and institutional conditions are pushed into the background. The historical and philosophical analysis of the meritocratic ideal reveals a dual structure: meritocracy can function as an objection to inherited privilege, yet it can also enable a new elitism and an exclusionary hierarchy. In education, this duality appears both in the rhetoric of fair competition and in implicit moral judgments suggesting that winners are superior and losers are inadequate.

Desert theories show that claiming a person deserves a particular reward, status, or outcome is a strong normative assertion. When applied to education, this assertion merges with meritocratic discourse that reads students' exam scores and diplomas not merely as indicators of cognitive performance, but as evidence of personal virtue and industriousness. Yet theories of justice and studies in the sociology of education show that categories of success and failure are not independent of structural factors such as initial conditions, family capital, school quality, and the hidden curriculum. For this reason, meritocracy's proposition that everyone gets what they deserve is philosophically defensible only in a limited and conditional sense; when elevated to the foundational principle of justice, it risks functioning as a myth that morally legitimates inequality. The findings of the article indicate that the myth of meritocracy in education does not reject the demand for justice outright, but confines the very idea of justice within a narrow framework of performance and *merit* (*liyakat*).

The analysis also yields concrete implications for education policy and school practice. Justice in education cannot be reduced to everyone taking the same exam or to formal equality of opportunity alone; it must also include access to resources, school climate, relations of recognition and respect, affective well-being, and students' self-respect. From this perspective, high-stakes exam systems, performance regimes that collapse achievement into narrow indicators, and school designs that sort students into sharp hierarchies from an early age may appear meritocratic, yet stand in tension with justice in both its distributive and relational dimensions. Education policy should therefore move beyond

focusing solely on the stories of those who rise and should also take into account the experiences of those excluded, labeled as failures, and consistently positioned in lower status within the system.

At the school level, teachers should not be positioned merely as technicians who measure, select, and eliminate, but as ethical actors attentive to students' vulnerability, self-respect, and motivation to learn. This does not imply abandoning assessment and evaluation altogether; rather, it points to a transformation in which the punitive and stigmatizing aspects of assessment culture are tempered, while its formative and supportive functions are strengthened. A school climate in which students can experience mistakes as opportunities for feedback and growth, in which different abilities and interests are recognized, and in which cooperation is valued alongside competition would soften the shame, guilt, and feelings of worthlessness produced by meritocratic ranking. In this way, the language of deservingness would cease to be a narrow category referring only to individual performance and would instead be rethought together with collective responsibility and institutional arrangements.

Future research should test and enrich this normative framework empirically across different school levels, regions, and student groups. How students make sense of deservingness, *merit* (*liyakat*), achievement, and failure, and how these concepts relate to self-respect, hope, future expectations, and perceptions of social justice, remain open to deeper investigation through qualitative and quantitative studies. Likewise, teachers' perceptions of their own roles, their assessment practices, and their attitudes toward meritocracy can be examined in greater detail through analyses of classroom interaction and the hidden curriculum.

Finally, future research should examine how a post-meritocratic educational ethics can be translated into concrete principles for education policy and school practice. This requires connecting philosophical debates on justice with institutional questions concerning assessment, school financing, guidance services, teacher education, and school leadership. Such an approach would move the critique of meritocracy beyond theoretical diagnosis and toward practical transformation. From this perspective, education should not be understood merely as a competitive arena in which individual achievements are measured and ranked, but as a shared institutional space where dignity, participation, recognition, and the common good are actively supported.

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