

Lesson 7: What Is Meritocracy?

A system that rewards merit sounds fair — until you check the starting line.

The Beginner's Investigation · Lesson 7 of 10

The Big Idea

Merit means ability or achievement. A **meritocracy** is a system where people are supposedly rewarded according to their ability and effort. The idea sounds fair: *whoever works hardest and performs best should get ahead*.

But what if people don't start from the same place?

Two Students, One Test

Student A Has	Student B Has
Private tutoring	No private tutor
Stable housing	Unstable housing
A quiet room to study	Responsibilities outside school
Expensive test prep	Limited internet access
Time to study	A family working multiple jobs

If Student A scores higher, can we automatically say Student A worked harder? Maybe. But we don't actually know. The environment matters.

The 100-Meter Head Start

Imagine a race where one runner starts 100 meters behind. You tell that runner, "*Everyone had the same opportunity. Just run harder.*" That runner may really need to run harder — but the starting position still matters.

Individual responsibility and structural conditions can exist at the same time.

"Work hard" is good advice. It becomes a problem only when it's used as the *whole* explanation for who wins and who loses.

Try It

Think of someone who "made it." List what they did themselves — and what they had going for them before they started.

Don't take our word for it. Investigate.

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