

Thomas Tudoux

I myself am the merit

Dialogues - EN

The student

I've always been top of my class. Some call me a "high achiever" because I'm just way ahead of everybody else. I love getting good grades, but I'm really all about being the best!

Even as a first grader, I knew that school is fundamentally about competition. Competition with others: I need to be number one and keep that spot. But also about competition with myself: getting ever higher scores is key.

This has had a big impact on my family, too. My cousins look up to me as a standard of excellence.

The teachers

So what's your game plan for school, in college and beyond?

The student

I'll be getting accolades from sixth grade right through my senior year. I will nail my entrance exam into Sciences Po, right after graduating. Two master's degrees in hand, I'll get a grant to finance my PhD. This will enable me to pursue a stellar academic career beyond the French Grandes Écoles circuit. I'll do a year's research at Cambridge and then go on to Stanford. You can't go to Cambridge without going on to Stanford!

The teachers

You describe yourself as a believer in meritocracy. Why is that?

The student

Primarily because I've had a unique life journey. If I came from a family of academic scholars or high-ranking civil servants, I might be labeled a "legacy student," assumed to be riding the coattails of my parents' success to maintain social status.

I'm a meritocrat thanks to my expected upward social mobility. The media might call this a "class defector's" career ... though I'm not particularly fond of that expression!

I come from a working-class background with migrant roots (Algerian, on my mother's side). My dad's a blue-collar worker, and my mom's a childcare provider. I'm poised to break through social barriers.

The teachers

Where are you from exactly? And where do you plan to live?

The student

Your question is all the more pertinent that soon enough I won't be defined by geography! Currently, I live in the suburbs of Marseille... which is a cliché, but I'm going to turn some heads!

I live in social housing. Despite being a REP+ student, I'm going to get into Science Po without any outreach or affirmative action programs. And then, I'll follow the career trajectory I've just outlined.

The teachers

Do you think you will keep in touch with your family, or...

The student

... Absolutely! My mom never graduated, and my dad did only middle school. Yet both believe that the French public school system can foster talent.

My mom is going to burn out, and I will lose her by the time I'm 36. As an Algerian immigrant, she will always admire my drive to rise above my milieu through dedication and hard work. She's going to be incredibly proud.

My bond with my dad will remain strong. He'll look at me as something of a wonder as my interests evolve—and I devour a book a day or take my child to the Louvre at just twenty months old.

The teachers

As you progress, do you think you'll keep your friends? Or will you gravitate towards those in your new social sphere? But this might be too personal...

The student

Down the line, I expect to drift away from my neighborhood as I advance and transition... Out of sight, out of mind... By changing my social sphere, I'll be also moving into a new circle of sociability.

My future peers will mostly be a similar path, yet mine will stand out as the most extraordinary!

My tremendous modesty might also play a role in shaping these friendships.

The teachers

Do you worry that your family and educational background might hold you back?

The student

I'm resolved to carve out my own path to success. I have an intense drive to be the best, to learn, to read... I encourage my classmates to follow my example! I'm taking charge of my destiny and I'll continue to assert myself in this way.

The teachers

What about being a young woman and eventually an adult?

The student

You're right, succeeding as a woman, especially an ambitious one, is even more challenging. As if ambition were a male prerogative. But my achievement will be all the greater.

The teachers

There is this enduring stereotype of the girl as the perennial good pupil. Does this impact you?

The student

I'm at the top. People acknowledge that I'm exceptional, but seldom see me as scholarly.

The teachers

Do you expect smooth sailing or a lot of hard work?

The student

A bit of both. I stand out for my capacity to grasp what's being taught, but also my eagerness to delve deeper. For me, hard work is a constant delight; it's a source of joy rather than pain.

To give you an example: in a few years we'll be to analyzing book excerpts for the French exams. But that just isn't enough for me. If an excerpt piques my interest, I'll read the whole book. My classmates might look at me funny, but I already know this is the norm at prestigious high schools.

The teachers

But how can you be so sure? To aim for such a path is one thing, but to speak with such confidence about your future comes across as... presumptuous.

The student

I'm merely acknowledging my academic potential. It's a pity if this is perceived as arrogance.

The teachers

As someone who's going to succeed academically and professionally, how do you define "merit"?

The student

I myself am the merit. It means earning my place on my own and passing it on to my children. Sir, perhaps you have a question?

The teachers

You seem to suggest you're always deserving, yet you describe your studies as a pastime. Can there be merit if the effort is enjoyable?

The student

That seems a bit masochistic. My merit lies in making the rigor of competitive exams fun and in excelling at them.

The teachers

But consider this: having gained a level of success — like attending Stanford post-Cambridge — won't you be an heiress to your own legacy?

The student

To some extent. But it's a legacy I will have built with my own two hands, you see?

The teachers

When you say, "I myself am the merit", doesn't that imply a sense of superiority over those who might lack your drive or ambition?

The student

True, but this sense of superiority is grounded in merit recognized institutionally through competitive exams.

The teachers

Don't you believe that your parents contribute to your achievements?

The student

They do, but not financially, as I'm on a scholarship. My mother will drive me to the Sciences Po entrance exam, and we'll stay at a cheap motel... Admittedly, my family has been very supportive.

The teachers

So, you have your environment and perhaps also an element of luck...

The student

...which can be mitigated by diligent work.

The teachers

Your children will already start high on the social ladder. What merit will they create?

The student

They'll inherit a meritocratic legacy, and if they excel academically, they might surpass my own achievements.

The teachers

Let me ask you this: do you differentiate between types of merit? Do you see yourself as more deserving than, say, your mother?

The student

Personally, I recognize various forms of merit: the merit of a mother, of a manual worker, etc. But there is an institutional and political emphasis on academic merit. This is too bad, but that's how things stand.

The teachers

So someone without a diploma would be less deserving?

The student

That's not at all what I said; I consider my mother very deserving. My point is that our society predominantly measures merit through academic achievements. And in that arena, I happen to excel.

The teachers

And you don't see any injustice in this?

The student

I'm speaking to educators, aren't I?

The teachers

Indeed.

The student

To those who embody the educational system, who assign grades and issue diplomas. Right?