

Parsons and meritocracy

Distinguish particularistic and universalistic standards and examine role allocation.

Core learning

- Parsons argued that schools move children from family-based particularistic standards to universalistic achievement standards.
- Meritocracy claims that rewards are allocated by talent and effort rather than birth.
- Evaluation asks whether schools actually measure merit or reproduce class, gender and ethnic advantage.

Perspectives and studies

- Functionalism: Education selects and allocates people to roles in ways claimed to benefit society.
- Marxism: Meritocracy can work ideologically by blaming individuals for structural inequality.
- Feminism: School success may still be shaped by gendered expectations and subject hierarchies.
- Interactionism: Teacher expectations can affect how “merit” is recognised and rewarded.
- Parsons: School is a bridge between family and wider society, using universalistic criteria.
- Meritocracy: Role allocation appears fair only if all learners have equal chances to demonstrate ability.
- Davis and Moore link: Selection may be justified as allocating talent, but this can naturalise inequality.

Before the lesson

- Define the title concept in your own words.
- Bring one example from school, work, family or media.
- Write one question you want Sociology to answer.