

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.

Concept	Meaning	Exam use
Mechanism	Process connecting cause and outcome	Use for AO3
Application	Link to the specific question or case	Use for AO2
Evaluation	Judgement about strength and limits	Use for AO3
Perspective	Theoretical lens for explanation	Use for AO1 and AO3