

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.

Suggested sequence

- Connect and diagnose prior knowledge
- Explicitly reteach the relevant perspective
- Model the study as idea, mechanism and limitation
- Use route task for supported/core/stretch application
- Conclude with exam and retrieval review

Likely misconceptions

- Listing names without mechanism
- Treating a pattern as a cause
- Writing generic evaluation not linked to judgement
- Assuming school effects are the same for all learners