

# The Socialization of Meritocracy: The role of the Family and the School

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## Introduction

Meritocracy is an ideal that aspires to distribute resources in a society according to personal effort and talent (Young, 2006). This ideal is widely found in modern societies, where it is raised as a legitimate way to progress individually based on personal achievements. It, therefore, contrasts with using family privileges and personal contacts to get ahead (Hadjar, 2008).

Recently, interest in studying meritocracy in the social sciences has increased. From the field of sociology, a research agenda has been developed that highlights the subjective aspects of meritocracy (Mijls, 2018), where a central distinction is the one between meritocratic perceptions (how is) and meritocratic preferences (how should be) (Castillo et al., 2019; Reynolds & Xian, 2014). However, until now, research in this area has focused on the adult population, neglecting the role that different socialisation agents could have in forming perceptions, attitudes and beliefs during the school-age period (Gidengil et al., 2016; Torney-Purta, 2002).

This paper aims to study how parental and school socialisation is associated with meritocratic perceptions of secondary school students. Using data from the School Citizenship Panel Survey (PACES), applied to second-year high school Chilean students (N=1635) and their parents (N=744) in 64 schools during 2019-2021. Based on research about justice perceptions in schools and family political socialisation, we seek to answer two main questions: Is there an association between the meritocratic perceptions of parents with those of their offspring? To what extent is school experience in distributive justice (concerning grades) linked to the meritocratic perceptions of students?

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# Conceptual and empirical background

## Perception of meritocracy

Much of the research on meritocratic perceptions has focused on how social inequality affects how people perceive meritocracy. In general, these investigations show that subjects have biased estimates of both the levels of inequality and the actual functioning of meritocracy (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018). Adherence to meritocratic beliefs is often interpreted from a rational interest perspective, considering that those with greater economic resources and status have better reasons to perceive and prefer meritocracy (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). On the one hand, the conflict theory assumes that higher levels of inequality generate less perception of meritocracy and less tolerance of inequality. At the same time, there is greater dissent on these issues between different social strata (Newman et al., 2015). On the other hand, the theory of relative power (Solt et al., 2016) maintains that greater economic inequality brings with it a greater concentration of wealth and power, which has the consequence that the visions of the most advantaged groups permeate the ideas of those most disadvantaged, in which case with greater inequality there is also greater consensus among social groups on the perception of meritocracy.

Another relevant socioeconomic characteristic is education. On the one hand, there is the *reproductionist* approach (Bernstein, 1988; Bourdieu et al., 1998), from which it is argued that the role of the school contributes to reinforcing the meritocratic principles of individuals; therefore, greater educational achievement translates into greater attachment to meritocracy as a distributive principle (Xian & Reynolds, 2017). But, on the other hand, there is the hypothesis of *instruction* maintains that more educated individuals have greater critical views about the factor that generates inequality, which translates into a weakening of the meritocratic ideal (Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2012).

## Meritocracy in the school-age period

Research on meritocracy in younger populations has yet to be addressed, but some studies can be linked to this topic. Regarding attitudes towards inequality, research shows that children can form notions about justice and inequality at a young age (Imhoff & Brussino, 2015). Although children have trouble understanding the terms “rich” and “poor” (Danziger, 1957). Nonetheless, according to some authors, these results are consistent with the theory of cognitive development (Leahy, 1981) and social constructionism (Emler & Dickinson, 1985), suggesting greater cognitive development allows a higher understanding of inequality.

In the adolescent population, Hjort (2014) has found evidence of young people’s widespread adherence to the discourses of individualism and meritocracy. Along these lines, Irwin (2009) has demonstrated the importance that young people place on individual factors to “get ahead,” although they also suggest the importance of emotional support that the family can provide. Additionally, research on youth in the United States indicates that adolescents’ visions of rewards for effort find greater support in second-generation migrant students with higher expectations of upward social mobility (Peguero & Bondy, 2015, p. 33). Finally, Sun & Wang (2010) demonstrate that young people tend to be more individualistic in their ways of life. These studies show that, from an early age, children and young people form judgments and opinions about inequality, which probably also apply to their views on meritocracy.

## **The present study: The socialisation of meritocracy by the family and the school**

The family is the first agent of socialisation that provides values, expectations and rules (Martinez & Cumsille, 2015). However, the focus on adults in political socialisation studies has been criticised for focusing on the study of value transfer (Andersson, 2015). However, strong evidence suggests the importance of family socialisation in influencing children's attitudes and behaviours (Bandura et al., 2001; Olivos, 2021). Moreover, parents raise their children based on class cultures, transmitting stratified beliefs and attitudes (Calarco, 2014). Consistently, it has been shown that parents transmit civic behaviour and attitudes to their children (Muddiman et al., 2019; Nesbit, 2013). The evidence around the socialisation of different subjective characteristics allows us to assume that intergenerational transmission would also be expressed around meritocratic perceptions. In such a way, we expect a positive association between the level of perception of meritocracy of parents and their children (H1).

A second agent of socialisation is school. It contributes to shaping the behaviour and worldviews of young students (Nishiyama, 2019). In this context, the student's experience of justice or fairness plays a fundamental role (Resh, 2018) as it encourages the inference of ideas regarding inequality (Mijs, 2018). Among the different types of justice in the school experience (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016), the feeling of fairness in student grades stands out. Grades reflect students' experiences of fairness or unfairness, affecting self-image formation, classroom hierarchy building, and their worldview on various topics (Jasso & Resh, 2002). Studies in this area have shown that the sense of justice in grades promotes liberal-democratic orientations (Resh & Sabbagh, 2014), builds trust in institutions (Resh, 2018), and contributes to stronger student support for the meritocratic assignment of grades (Resh, 2009). Given the above, this research proposes that the sense of justice in terms of student grading also encourages a greater perception of meritocracy on the part of the students. Therefore, we expect that students with a greater sense of fairness in their grades will perceive greater meritocracy (H2).

Family and school socialisation of meritocratic perception occur together and probably affect each other. Therefore, the association of the meritocratic perception of parents with that of their children will be enhanced if the student feels that their grades are fair. Consequently, we expect the relationship between meritocratic perception of parents and children will be more positive for those who experience a greater sense of justice in school (H3).

Evidence around meritocratic beliefs highlights the role of socioeconomic status. Reynolds & Xian (2014) points out that people with higher social status in the United States have a higher perception of meritocracy than those with lower social status. In the same vein, Kunovich & Slomczynski (2007) provide evidence consistent with a rational interest approach such that the higher the income and education of subjects, the greater the preference for meritocratic payment they will have, in line with previous research (Newman et al., 2015; Solt et al., 2016). Therefore it is possible to argue that students with higher socioeconomic parents will manifest a higher level of meritocratic beliefs (H4). In the same vein, we propose that students from schools with a higher socioeconomic level will likely perceive greater meritocracy. (H5)

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