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# The role of education in shaping meritocratic beliefs in Italy: understanding the interplay between perceptions and preferences over time

Giulia Ciancimino\*

## Author information

\* Department of Education Science, University of Roma Tre, Rome, Italy and Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies, National Research Council of Italy, Rome, Italy

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# The role of education in shaping meritocratic beliefs in Italy: understanding the interplay between perceptions and preferences over time

*Giulia Ciancimino\**

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Abstract: Despite extensive empirical evidence underscoring the influence of socio-economic background and structural barriers on educational outcomes, there remains widespread support for education-based meritocracy as a fair and just societal model. Using data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) on social inequalities, this study examines trends in meritocratic beliefs of the Italian population over recent decades. By distinguishing between descriptive meritocracy (how people perceive its realization) and prescriptive meritocracy (how they desire its implementation), the research explores the individual and contextual factors influencing these beliefs, with a particular focus on educational attainment. The findings indicate that education is considered the most important factor for achieving success in Italy and is increasingly viewed as a key criterion for determining individual earnings. At the same time, the results indicate an increasing awareness of non-meritocratic factors, such as family background and social discrimination, which can act as barriers to individual achievement. Ordinal logistic regression analysis identifies educational attainment as a significant predictor of meritocratic beliefs, while also demonstrating how preferences for an education-based meritocracy influence perceptions of its actual realization. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of individual adherence to meritocratic ideals in Italy.

Keywords: Education-based Meritocracy, Meritocratic Beliefs, Social Inequality, Education

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## Introduction

The widespread consensus surrounding meritocratic ideology has evolved significantly over the past few decades, shifting its original meaning (Littler, 2017). Initially conceived as a critique, the term meritocracy was coined by sociologist Alan Fox in 1956 and gained popularity through Michael Young's dystopian satire *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958), where the realization of meritocracy deepened social divisions, leading to a populist uprising. The semantic shift into a positive concept was significantly influenced by American functionalist sociology of the 1970s, which viewed education as the primary driver of social mobility, allowing individuals to transcend ascribed statuses through individual achievement (Bell, 1972; Parsons, 1970). However, the idea of a society increasingly resembling an education-based meritocracy has been widely challenged by numerous empirical studies, which have highlighted the decisive role of social origin and environmental variables in determining individuals' educational outcomes and social status (Giancola & Salmieri, 2023; Argentin & Pavolini, 2020; Barone & Ruggera, 2018, 2015; Barone & Argentin, 2016; Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016; Marzadro & Schizzerotto, 2014; Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2008). In Italy, recent data highlight stark disparities: in families with at least one university-educated parent, 67.1% of individuals aged 25–34 attain a tertiary degree, compared to 40.3% with a parent holding a high school diploma and only 12.8% if parents have a lower secondary education at most (Istat, 2024).

Despite this empirical evidence, the prevailing belief in equal opportunity in education persists, with academic success often being seen as a marker of deservingness for high social status (Boarelli, 2019; Darnon et al., 2018; Kuppens et al., 2018; Brigati, 2015; Barone, 2012). As Sandel (2020) notes in *The Tyranny of Merit*, this uncritical adherence to meritocratic ideals risks fostering frustration and social fragmentation when systemic conditions fail to align with meritocratic principles. In this way, meritocracy functions as an ideological discourse that legitimizes social privilege while obscuring the collective and political roots of inequality (Littler, 2017; McNamee, 2018; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964).

To better understand the dynamics underpinning adherence to meritocratic ideology, a consistent body of social science research in the last decade has explored the subjective dimensions of meritocracy, distinguishing between its descriptive aspect—how individuals perceive meritocracy as being realized in practice—and its normative aspect, reflecting preferences for meritocracy as an ideal social principle (Castillo et al., 2019). Drawing on data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) on social inequalities (ISSP Research Group, 2024), numerous studies have

explored the interrelationship between meritocratic perceptions and preferences, examining how these vary according to individual factors, such as socio-economic status, and contextual elements, including economic inequality, yielding diverse theoretical perspectives (Mijs, 2016, 2021; Castillo et al., 2019, 2021; García-Sánchez et al., 2019; Madeira et al., 2019; Reynolds & Xian, 2014; Tenret, 2014; Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2012; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). In many of these studies, educational attainment emerges as a critical factor in shaping meritocratic beliefs, although the findings remain mixed: some research identifies a positive association between higher educational levels and support for meritocratic ideals (Lampert, 2013; Reynolds & Xian, 2014; Xian & Reynolds, 2017), while other studies suggest that individuals with higher educational levels are more likely to hold critical views of meritocracy (Castillo et al., 2019, 2021; Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2012). In this regard, a study conducted on the 2009 ISSP data highlighted that in Italy, individuals with higher educational attainment tend to show greater support for the meritocratic model and are more convinced of the fairness of the Italian educational system compared to those with lower levels of education (Tenret, 2014). These results seem to confirm Baer and Lambert's (1982) hypothesis of the socializing effect of education, confirming that the educational system plays a significant role in shaping individuals' beliefs about meritocracy.

To deepen the understanding of meritocratic beliefs in Italy, the present study examines trends in both meritocratic perceptions and preferences over the past few decades. Using data from the International Social Survey Programme on social inequalities collected in 2009 and 2019 (ISSP Research Group, 2024), the study aims to identify key individual and contextual factors associated with the perception of and support for an education-based meritocracy, with particular focus on the role of educational attainment.

To address these objectives, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H1: Perceptions of and support for education-based meritocracy have become increasingly widespread within the Italian population.
- H2: The perceptions of education-based meritocracy among the population are influenced by individual preferences.
- H3: A higher level of education is associated with a greater perception of education-based meritocracy and stronger support for it.

## **Materials and methods**

This study draws on data from two editions of the International Social Survey Programme on social inequalities, covering the years 2009 and 2019 (ISSP Research Group, 2024). The respective sizes of the Italian sam-

ple for each edition were 1,084 individuals in 2009, and 1,215 in 2019. A three-stage random sampling technique was applied to ensure a representative sample of the adult population aged 18 and over. Data collection was conducted through face-to-face interviews using the Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) method, which enhances the reliability and consistency of the responses.

### **Measures**

The primary variables on which this study is based were derived from two sets of survey questions: “reasons to get ahead,” which gauges perceived meritocracy, and “reasons for pay,” which measures preferences related to earnings. In the first set of questions on perceptions, respondents rated the importance of various factors for achieving success in life on a 5-point scale, ranging from “essential” to “not important at all”. These factors included elements such as hard work and education, alongside elements related to family background, social capital, and social discrimination. The second set of questions, aimed to assess preferences by asking respondents to indicate the importance of specific factors in determining how much a person should earn. This battery also employed a 5-point scale, from “essential” to “not important at all”, and the elements included job responsibility, skills, years of education, and having dependents.

To estimate perceptions of education-based meritocracy, a variable was constructed based on the importance attributed to educational attainment for achieving success in life, recoded into an ordinal scale ranging from 0 (not important at all) to 4 (essential). Similarly, a variable assessing support for education-based meritocracy was constructed based on the importance attributed to years of education in determining earnings, coded from 0 (not important at all) to 4 (essential). For the latter variable, to simplify the analysis and use it as an independent variable in the regression models, a dummy version was also created, where 1 represents respondents who consider years of education as “essential” or “very important” and 0 represents all other respondents. This dichotomisation was introduced to facilitate interpretation, particularly when including the variable as an independent predictor in the regression models. Although this approach entails some loss of information compared to the full ordinal scale, it enables a clearer distinction between strong endorsement of education-based meritocracy and all other positions.

The upward social mobility indicator was constructed based on two variables in which respondents were asked to rate their socio-economic position on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high), first in reference to their current condition and then in relation to their family of origin. The social mobility trajectory for each respondent was calculated by subtracting their

social position score at the time of their family origin from their current social position score. Based on this difference, respondents were classified into three categories: upward mobility (positive scores), downward mobility (negative scores), and static mobility (scores equal to zero). To examine the effect of upward social mobility, a dummy variable was created: respondents with positive scores (indicating upward mobility) were assigned a value of 1, while all other respondents were assigned a value of 0.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software (version 28, IBM, Chicago, IL, USA) and involved two main stages. In the first stage, univariate and bivariate analyses were performed to assess perceptions and preferences regarding meritocracy within the Italian population, as well as variations between 2009 and 2019, with a specific focus on the importance attributed to education. In the second stage, to gain deeper insight into the individual factors influencing prescriptive and descriptive beliefs about the education-based meritocracy (EBM), four ordinal logistic regression models were developed - two for 2009 and two for 2019. Specifically, in the first two models, the dependent variable represented the preference for education-based meritocracy, while in the other two models, it represented the perception of the actual importance of education for success (Figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Ordinal Logistic Regression Model for Prescriptive Beliefs about Meritocracy

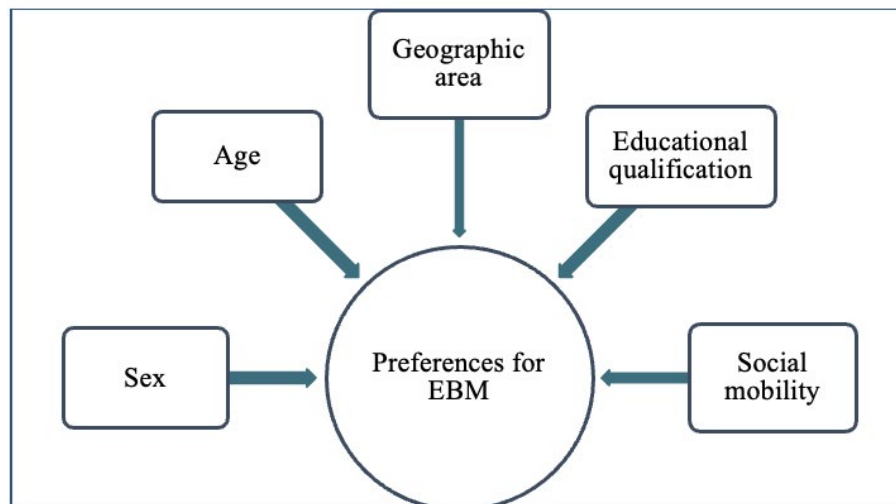
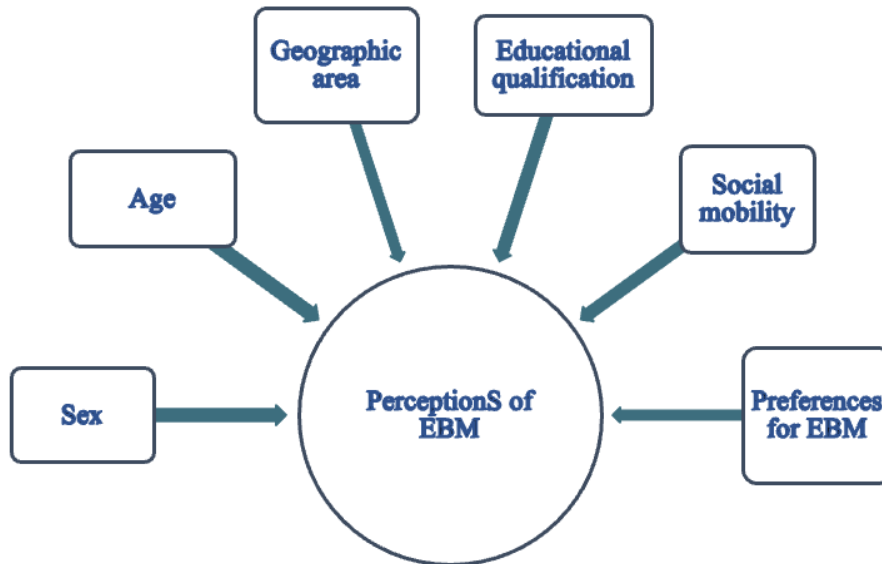


Figure 2. Ordinal Logistic Regression Model for Descriptive Beliefs about Meritocracy



Independent variables included gender, age, education level, geographical region, and perceived social mobility. Additionally, in the models concerning perceptions, the preference for education-based meritocracy was included as an independent variable to examine its potential influence on perceptions, based on findings from previous research. This methodological approach enables a comprehensive analysis of how specific individual and contextual factors shape both perceptions and support for education-based meritocracy (EBM) in Italy over time, offering valuable insights into the evolving role of education within the broader framework of meritocratic beliefs. Survey weights provided by the ISSP were not applied in the present analyses. While these weights are designed to adjust for sampling design and potential non-response bias, the findings should be interpreted with some caution regarding their representativeness of the Italian population.

## Results

### Bivariate results

Table 1 shows the percentage of respondents who considered the proposed factors as “essential” or “very important” for achieving success in life, based on the data from the 2009 and 2019 surveys. This captures how individuals assess the factors that contribute to success in society. Education is the most highly valued factor in both years, although its perceived impor-

tance decreased slightly over time. Hard work maintained a consistent level of recognition across the same period, indicating stability in the valuation of effort as a driver of individual success. The importance attributed to family background factors increased notably between 2009 and 2019. The proportion of respondents emphasizing the importance of “coming from a wealthy family” grew by approximately 10%, while the importance of “having educated parents” rose by about 15%. The significance of social capital, captured through items such as “knowing the right people” and “having political connections” remained relatively stable. Additionally, the recognition of social discrimination based on gender and ethnicity increased significantly, reflecting a heightened awareness of systemic barriers in achieving success.

Table 1. Percentage of the Italian population considering the proposed elements as “essential” or “very important” for achieving success in Italy (% for 2009 and 2019)

	2009	2019
Good educational qualifications	76.2	74.6
Hard work	62.6	62.0
Coming from a wealthy family	38.6	47.5
Having educated parents	37.1	51.0
Knowing the right people	62.0	65.7
Political connections	45.3	47.4
Ethnicity	11.8	17.6
Gender	19.2	22.7

Source: ISSP, 2009 and 2019

Table 2 summarizes respondents’ preferences regarding factors influencing earnings, based on data collected in 2009 and 2019. This reflects the normative dimension of meritocracy, capturing what individuals believe should

be considered when determining income. Responsibility and ability consistently emerged as the most highly valued determinants of income in both years, with minimal fluctuation. Educational qualifications showed a notable increase in perceived importance, increasing by approximately by 15%. Conversely, the relevance of “having dependents” declined substantially, dropping by around 10%, reflecting a diminishing perception of family-related issues as a legitimate factor in determining earnings.

Table 2: Percentage of the Italian population considering the proposed elements as “essential” or “very important” for determining earnings (% for 2009 and 2019).

	2009	2019
Educational qualifications	55.6	70.2
Responsibility	84.9	85.0
Ability	85.2	85.6
Having dependents	64.3	55.6

Source: ISSP, 2009 and 2019

### Multivariate results

The ordinal logistic regression models highlight several factors shaping both preferences and perceptions of education-based meritocracy.

Regarding preferences for education-based meritocracy (Table 3), educational qualifications consistently emerged as a critical determinant. The likelihood of supporting education as essential for determining earnings significantly increased for individuals with higher levels of education, particularly for those with a university degree. Geographic area also had a significant impact, with respondents from the North-West and North-East of Italy being less likely to prioritize education in earnings determination compared to those from the South and Islands. This territorial disparity remained stable over time, reinforcing regional differences in attitudes towards meritocracy. Additionally, gender played a significant role in 2009, with men being less likely to consider education essential for earnings. However, this effect dissipated by 2019, suggesting a convergence of gender attitudes over time.

Table 3: Results from ordinal logistic regression analyses on variables influencing preferences for the education-based meritocracy in Italy (2009 and 2019).

<b>Variable Name (ref. Category)</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Sign.</b>	<b>Exp(b)</b>	<b>CI Lower</b>	<b>CI Upper</b>
Age	-	2009	0.068	1.007	0.999	1.014
		2019	0.119	1.005	0.999	1.012
Sex (Female)	Male	2009	0.000	0.597	0.472	0.755
		2019	0.775	0.969	0.779	1.204
Geographic area (South and Islands)	North-West	2009	0.017	0.695	0.516	0.937
		2019	0.023	0.72	0.543	0.955
	North-East	2009	0.000	0.474	0.340	0.660
		2019	0.018	0.68	0.495	0.936
	Centre	2009	0.930	1.015	0.725	1.422
		2019	0.826	0.965	0.705	1.322
Educational qualification (above high school diploma)	Less than secondary (high) school diploma	2009	0.018	0.635	0.436	0.926
		2019	0.000	0.475	0.346	0.652
	Secondary (high) school diploma	2009	0.01	0.602	0.409	0.884
		2019	0.124	0.782	0.572	1.069
Social Mobility	Upward	2009	0.535	1.084	0.840	1.400
		2019	0.486	0.915	0.714	1.174
Threshold	Not very important	2009	0.000	0.002	0.001	0.006
		2019	0.000	0.003	0.001	0.009
	Not important at all	2009	0.000	0.063	0.037	0.105
		2019	0.000	0.032	0.02	0.054
	Fairly important	2009	0.001	0.449	0.276	0.730
		2019	0.000	0.288	0.185	0.449
	Very important	2009	0.000	3.525	2.15	5.780
		2019	0.000	3.078	1.979	4.786

Source: ISSP, 2009 and 2019

Table 4: Results from ordinal logistic regression analyses on variables influencing perceptions of the education-based meritocracy in Italy (2009 and 2019).

Variable Name	Category	Year	Sign.	Exp(b)	CI Lower	CI Upper
Age	-	2009	0.336	1.004	0.996	1.012
		2019	0.641	1.002	0.995	1.008
Sex (Female)	Male	2009	0.002	0.685	0.537	0.873
		2019	0.440	1.090	0.876	1.356
Geographic area (South and Islands)	North-West	2009	0.138	0.795	0.587	1.077
		2019	0.033	0.737	0.557	0.976
	North-East	2009	0.119	0.762	0.542	1.072
		2019	0.001	0.439	0.317	0.608
	Centre	2009	0.236	1.237	0.870	1.759
		2019	0.446	0.884	0.643	1.214
Educational qualification (Above (high) secondary school)	Less than high school diploma	2009	0.598	1.114	0.746	1.662
		2019	0.001	0.428	0.311	0.589
	High school diploma	2009	0.215	1.292	0.861	1.940
		2019	0.213	0.821	0.601	1.120
Social Mobility	Upward	2009	0.001	1.742	1.338	2.268
		2019	0.969	0.995	0.776	1.277
Preference for EBM	Yes	2009	0.001	2.303	1.795	2.956
		2019	0.001	2.490	1.948	3.183
Threshold	Not very important	2009	0.001	0.011	0.004	0.028
		2019	0.001	0.010	0.005	0.02
	Not important at all	2009	0.001	0.087	0.047	0.158
		2019	0.001	0.030	0.017	0.053
	Fairly important	2009	0.116	0.644	0.372	1.115
		2019	0.001	0.316	0.196	0.511
	Very important	2009	0.001	4.580	2.629	9.780
		2019	0.001	3.300	2.042	5.332

Source: ISSP, 2009 and 2019

In terms of perceptions (Table 4), educational qualifications continued to play a significant role in shaping beliefs about the importance of education for success. Individuals with lower educational levels were significantly

less likely to view education as crucial for success, compared to those with higher educational qualifications. Notably, geographic effects became more pronounced in 2019, with respondents from the North-West and North-East more likely to understate the importance of education for success compared to those from the South and Islands. The results also revealed that upward social mobility, while significant in 2009, was no longer a significant predictor of perceptions in 2019. Lastly, preferences for education-based meritocracy strongly influenced perceptions in both years: those who valued education as a determinant of earnings were significantly more likely to view education as essential for achieving personal success, with this effect remaining robust across both 2009 and 2019.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study explored the meritocratic beliefs of the Italian population by analysing both perceptions and preferences, with a particular focus on the importance attributed to education as a key factor of merit. By examining changes over time, the study investigates how the public's understanding of education's role in success has evolved, particularly in relation to its perception as a determinant of individual achievements and earnings. Through the analysis of data from 2009 and 2019, the study sheds light on trends in public opinion regarding the fairness and desirability of an education-based meritocracy. The main contribution of this study lies in jointly analysing the descriptive and prescriptive dimensions of meritocracy over time within a single national context. By explicitly examining the interplay between perceptions and preferences, it provides new empirical evidence showing that meritocratic beliefs are shaped not only by structural conditions, but also by individuals' normative orientations.

The bivariate analysis partially confirms H1, showing that education continues to be the most acknowledged factor influencing individual achievement, although perceptions of its importance have not increased over the decade. On the other hand, the results also highlight the growing recognition of ascribed factors such as family background, gender and ethnicity-related discrimination, and social capital. This suggests an increasing societal awareness of structural barriers to equal opportunity, which challenge the ideal of meritocracy.

Turning to preferences, the analysis reveals a significant increase in the importance attributed to educational qualifications as a criterion for determining earnings in 2019 compared to 2009. This growth is not observed for other factors such as responsibility and ability, which remain stable, and is accompanied by a marked decline in the importance of having dependents, suggesting a diminishing emphasis on the principles that currently underpin

some redistributive policies. This finding supports H1, indicating a growing societal endorsement of education-based meritocracy.

The multivariate analysis highlights the interdependence between preferences for education-based meritocracy and perceptions of education's role in achieving success. Respondents who prioritize education as a criterion for determining earnings are more likely to view educational qualifications as essential for achieving success, confirming the second hypothesis (H2). This alignment underscores the relationship between normative beliefs and perceived social reality, showing how preferences for meritocracy shape individuals' interpretations of the role of education in both personal and societal success (García-Sánchez et al., 2019). In other words, the findings suggest that individuals do not passively observe social reality but interpret it through the lens of their normative beliefs about how society should function. Educational attainment emerges as a key factor shaping both preferences and perceptions of meritocracy, confirming H3. Respondents with lower educational attainment are less likely to prioritize education or perceive it as essential for individual success. This finding aligns with previous studies (Tenret, 2014; Reynolds & Xian, 2014; Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007) and supports the hypothesis of socialization within the heuristic framework proposed by Baer and Lambert (1982), which suggests that education strengthens adherence to meritocracy by linking educational attainment with belief in meritocratic principles. Furthermore, gender disparities observed in 2009, where men were less likely than women to value education's role, disappeared by 2019, showing a convergence in gender attitudes toward meritocracy. Geographical disparities persist, with respondents from Southern Italy consistently placing greater emphasis on education compared to their Northern counterparts. This divide reflects lasting regional inequalities, where, in areas with less dynamic job markets and limited access to well-paying jobs, education is often viewed as one of the few pathways to upward mobility. The role of perceived social mobility weakened over time. In 2009, individuals who perceived themselves as upwardly mobile relative to their family of origin were more likely to view education as a meaningful pathway to success. However, by 2019, this relationship diminished, suggesting a growing recognition of persistent structural inequalities.

The findings reveal a complex and evolving landscape of meritocratic beliefs in Italy, where support for education-based meritocracy continues to grow and education remains the most highly valued factor for achieving success, despite the rise in awareness of barriers such as family background and social discrimination. This suggests that while individuals increasingly acknowledge the structural limitations to meritocracy, they still place significant faith in education as the key pathway to success. This study underscores the importance of critically examining meritocratic beliefs, which

are often taken for granted in societal discourse. By distinguishing between perceptions and preferences, and observing these dimensions over time, we gain a deeper understanding of the factors that shape individual adherence to meritocracy. The findings emphasise the value of adopting a historical perspective to better grasp how these beliefs diffuse and how they relate to broader patterns of social cohesion. Building on these findings, several broader considerations emerge. The persistence of strong support for education-based meritocracy, even alongside growing awareness of structural inequalities, raises important questions about how meritocratic ideals are constructed and sustained. In this context, the results point to the need for greater engagement from the scientific community in disseminating evidence on the structural determinants of educational and social inequalities. While education continues to be widely perceived as a key driver of social mobility, the findings suggest that it may not be sufficient to counteract increasingly entrenched disparities in opportunities. More broadly, these insights call for fostering critical reflection on meritocratic ideals across key socialisation agencies, particularly within the educational system itself. Promoting a more nuanced understanding of merit and its social consequences may help prevent the uncritical legitimisation of unequal outcomes. As argued by Sandel (2020), strong adherence to meritocratic narratives may encourage individualistic interpretations of success and failure, obscuring structural constraints and reinforcing competition within unequal starting conditions.

## Limitations

This study presents some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of the ISSP data prevents causal inference regarding the relationship between education and meritocratic beliefs. Second, the use of self-reported measures may introduce social desirability bias, particularly in relation to normative views on meritocracy. Third, the dichotomisation of key variables may reduce variability and obscure more nuanced differences in respondents' attitudes. Additionally, as survey weights were not applied in the analysis, the findings should be interpreted with some caution regarding their representativeness.

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