



Cultural Deprivation and Education Attainment

Introduction

Sociologists are interested in why social class differences in educational achievement/attainment exist, and argue that there are a number of explanations. These explanations can be split into two sets of factors: internal and external. Internal factors are factors within schools (e.g. the school structure, teachers, etc.), and external factors are factors outside schools (e.g. home life, influence of parents etc.)

Cultural deprivation is an external factor and plays an important part in education attainment.

Activity: Can you write a definition at this stage, of what you think 'cultural deprivation' is? You can re-visit it when you get to the end of this Factsheet.

Activity: What is the difference between cultural and material deprivation? Make two lists, one of what you believe are cultural factors, and one of what you believe to be material factors.

It is important here, to emphasise, that cultural deprivation is not the same as material deprivation, though the two things are not mutually exclusive.

This Factsheet will look at cultural factors and show how they can influence educational achievement.

The information in this Factsheet can be used when answering questions on:

- Factors affecting educational achievement.
- Social class where educational achievement could be used as an example.
- The family and primary socialisation.
- Stratification and differentiation



Exam Hint: In an exam question on cultural deprivation in education, it is important that you know and concentrate on cultural rather than material factors. It is very easy to slip into explanations for material factors rather than cultural factors.

Cultural deprivation

Primary socialisation

It can be argued that primary socialisation within the family is where we acquire the basic attitudes, values and skills needed to be successful educationally. This can be thought of as **cultural equipment**, which includes: language, self-discipline and reasoning skills. Working class children are often socialised differently to middle class children and often lack cultural equipment and grow up culturally deprived. This line of argument clearly suggests (from a cultural deprivation theoretical perspective) that middle class children will do better within the education system. Those at the bottom of the class system are deprived of certain values, attitudes and special skills that are essential for educational success. Their environment is culturally poor (and most likely economically poor, though not necessarily).

Activity: Go back to the list you made earlier of cultural factors. How far do you agree that socialisation is the main reason for the differences in educational achievement? Think about the two sides of the argument: socialisation is the main reason for differences in educational achievement, and – on the other side of the argument – socialisation is not the main reason for differences in educational achievement.

Parental interest and support

Working class homes often lack books, educational toys and activities that would all help to stimulate children's intellectual development. These children start school at a disadvantage therefore.

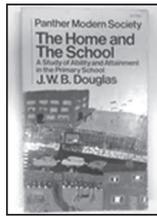
JWB Douglas's (1964) longitudinal study (*The Home and the School*) related educational attainment to various factors, but concluded that the most important factor was parental interest. His findings showed that in general, middle class parents showed a greater interest in their children's education by:

- Visiting the school more frequently to discuss their child's progress.
- Wanting their children to stay in education beyond minimum leaving age.
- Giving their children greater attention and stimulation during their early years.

Similar conclusions were reached by Bernstein & Young (1967), who found that middle class mothers are more likely to choose toys for their children that encourage thinking and reasoning skills, therefore preparing children for school. Feinstein (2003) using data from the *National Child Development Study* reached the conclusion that various factors contributed to a child's educational achievement, but the most important factor was the extent to which parents encouraged and supported their children.

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Blackstone & Mortimore (1994) argue that the aforementioned studies are based on teacher's assessments of parental interest, and it could be suggested that working class parents, because of pressures of work, may have less time to visit the school. They may also be put off going because of the way teachers interact with them.



Exam Hint: Always ensure that you evaluate the theoretical perspectives that you use in your response to an exam question; evaluation is a higher-level skill and will help you secure a higher mark.

Language

According to Carl Bereiter & Siegfried Engelmann (1966), language used in lower-class homes is deficient, and families communicate with gestures, single words and/or disjointed phrases. Therefore, children fail to develop important language skills. It also affects the way they think, explain, describe, enquire and compare. As a consequence, they are less able to take advantage of the opportunities of school.

Basil Bernstein (1975) asserts that speech is an important aspect of communication and learning, therefore attainment levels in schools could be related to differences in speech patterns. He distinguished two types of patterns of speech:



Restricted code: Most typically used by the working class. A kind of shorthand speech. It has a limited vocabulary and users of the code have so much in common that they don't need to make meanings explicit in speech. The working class are usually limited to the restricted code.

Elaborated code: Most typically used by the middle class. It fills in detail and provides explanations left out by the restricted code. It has a wider vocabulary and is based on more complex sentences.

It is therefore apparent that these different speech codes give middle class children an advantage in the education system, and conversely, put working class children at a disadvantage.

Bernstein argued that middle class people could switch from one code to the other, but working class people could not do this, and are only able to use the restricted code. Formal education is conducted in terms of the elaborated code. Teachers, text books and exams all use the elaborated code. Middle class children are socialised into the elaborated code, and so are fluent by the time they start school, and therefore feel more comfortable with using this language. Contrastingly, working class children are more likely to feel excluded.

Bernstein is a cultural deprivation theorist as he sees working class speech as inadequate.



Attitudes and values

Working class parents placed less value on education than middle class parents, and were less encouraging about education generally, according to Douglas (1964). This results in their children having lower levels of motivation and are therefore, less likely to achieve.

Leon Feinstein (1998) argues that middle class parents provide more discipline, support and motivation, and working class parents lack of interest was the main reason for their child's under-achievement, and that this was even more important than financial hardship or factors within the school. As a result, working class children had lower levels of achievement motivation.

Barry Sugarman (1970) defined four key features that act as a barrier to educational achievement within working class subculture:

Fatalism: They believe in fate – 'what will be, will be', you can't fight fate, or change your position in life.

Collectivism: Placing more value on the collective rather than the individual, therefore, succeeding as an individual is not of primary importance.

Immediate gratification: The working class look for pleasure now, not making sacrifices with a view to a reward in the future.

Present-time orientation: Working class see the present as more important than the future, therefore not having long-term goals.

For all of these factors, the middle class share contrasting views. Working class children will internalise the values, beliefs and attitudes of their subculture through socialisation, and as a consequence, they under-achieve at school.

Cultural deprivation theorists argue that parents pass their values on to their children through primary socialisation, therefore, working class parents fail to equip their children for educational success, whereas middle class parents do the very opposite.

Pierre Bourdieu – Cultural Capital

The French Marxist sociologist Bourdieu (1984) argues that the education system is biased towards the culture of the dominant classes, therefore devaluing the knowledge and skills of the working class. He refers to the dominant culture as **cultural capital** – this is because cultural capital can be translated into wealth and power via the education system. For Bourdieu, the educational attainment of social groups is commensurate to the amount of cultural capital they have. Middle class students, therefore, have better success rates because middle class culture is closer to the dominant culture.

For Marx, **capital** equates to money or wealth or land – **cultural capital** suggests that we are rich culturally. Middle class parents are more likely to help their children engage in cultural pursuits:

- Reading good literature.
- Going on holiday to interesting places.
- Visits to art galleries, museums, etc.
- Trips to theatres to see plays, opera, ballet, etc.
- Eating out at good restaurants.

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For a middle-class child, to be familiar with such things as the works of Dickens, Austen, the Bronte's, being familiar with different cultures (on holiday in Italy, India, Mexico, etc.), to know the works of Caravaggio, Monet or Titian, to be familiar with the works of Shakespeare and Wagner, and to taste world cuisines (such as South Korean, Thai, Italian, etc.) gives them a greater advantage within the education system and helps them to better communicate with teachers.

Activity: What might be the equivalent working class cultural pursuits (you might need to be a little stereotypical in your response here)?

Activity: Evaluate Bourdieu's cultural capital perspective for strengths and weaknesses, trying to ascertain how much you agree with him.

Some sociologists see cultural deprivation theory as a myth. Nell Keddie (1973) does. She dismisses the whole idea that a child's failure at school can be blamed on a culturally deprived background. Her argument is, that a child cannot be deprived of his/her culture, they are just culturally different, not culturally deprived. Their failure at school is because they are put at a disadvantage by middle-class values dominating the education system. Other critics of this theory argue that the real problem is poverty and material deprivation not cultural deprivation.

Compensatory education

'Educational programmes intended to make up for experiences (such as cultural experiences) lacked by disadvantaged children'

Compensatory education policies are intended to offset the effects of socio-economic disadvantage which may restrict the educational opportunities of children from socially deprived backgrounds.

Conservative Governments of 1979-1997 claimed that overall educational standards could best be improved through the extension of individual parental choice which would result indirectly in the expansion of effective schools and the contraction and possible closure of ineffective schools.

Labour Governments between 1997-2010 introduced compensatory education policies such as Sure Start, Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities Programmes, Educational Maintenance Allowance and the Aim Higher Scheme are all based less on the concept of cultural deprivation and more on improving pre-school facilities, improving the schools themselves and providing financial help and advice designed to give socially disadvantaged children a fairer chance to fulfil their ambitions. However, under the Coalition Government of 2010 to 2015 Educational Maintenance Allowance and the Aim Higher Scheme have been replaced by alternatives, and introduced the Pupil Premium and extended the Academies Programme.



Activity: Do some research into Sure Start, Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities Programme, Education Maintenance Allowance, Aim Higher Scheme, Pupil Premium and the Academies Programme. Then decide which, if any of these initiatives would help counter cultural deprivation. Then think about what you think would. Try to be objective and evaluative in your approach to this.

Try the following quiz to test your knowledge:

Quiz

- Is cultural deprivation an internal or external factor with regards to education?
- What is the difference between material and cultural deprivation?
- What is cultural equipment?
- What, for JWB Douglas in the Longitudinal Education Study is the most important factor responsible for educational attainment?
- When Feinstein (2003) used data from the National Child Development Study, what did he conclude was the most important factor in educational achievement?
- What is Blackstone & Mortimore's (1994) criticism of cultural deprivation theory?
- What are the two language codes that Bernstein (1975) identifies?
- What is the educational consequence of these codes?
- What are the four factors that Sugarman (1978) identifies as being the barriers to working class educational achievement?
- What does Bourdieu (1984) argue is the concept that determines that middle class children do better in education?
- What is compensatory education? Give an example.

Exam Hints: You may or may not see a specific essay question on cultural deprivation and educational attainment, though you might be asked a question that asks, for example: "Using one example, briefly explain how cultural deprivation may affect educational achievement." To answer this, you could give an example and a brief explanation, such as:

- Restricted or elaborated code plus a brief explanation
- Valuing immediate gratification plus a brief explanation
- Fatalistic subcultural values plus a brief explanation

An exam essay question could be "Discuss the view that social class is the most important factor affecting the educational attainment of children." Though not specifically on cultural deprivation, this could form part of your argument. In terms of a theoretical position, cultural deprivation theory could be explored, as could the Marxist concept of cultural capital. Compensatory education could also be covered. In a question such as "Define and explain the concept of cultural capital in education", you would certainly refer to:

- Bourdieu and Marxist explanations generally
- The impact of cultural capital on the educational success of specific social groups
- How cultural capital is acquired
- Plenty of illustration by way of examples

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ISSN 1351-5136