



## Education and the White Working Class

### Education and the white working class

Why is educational achievement lower for white working class boys than other groups? This Factsheet will look at statistics on educational achievement and explore the reasons why differences in educational achievement exist between white working class children and other children. The information in this Factsheet will be useful for the following areas of the specifications:

- Education - educational achievement
- Stratification – different educational achievement of different social groups
- Research methods – using some of the evidence presented

In education, some social groups do better than others from skills of reading and writing in primary schools to achievements at degree level.

### How is educational achievement measured?

There is no easily available data on the social class of parents of children in school. One way researchers attempt to measure social class is the eligibility of children for free school meals (FSM).

Children who live in families with low incomes are eligible for free school meals. Children are eligible for free school meals if parents receive certain benefits, for example, families that receive income support and child tax credit.

Looking at the number of children receiving free school meals allows sociologists to measure the educational achievements of this group of pupils. Statistics show that children who are eligible for free school meals:

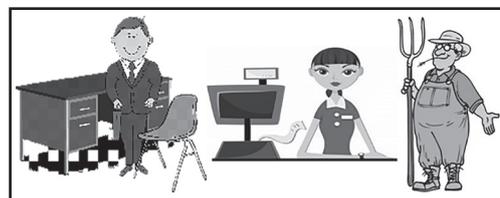
- do not reach the expected level at Key Stage 2 – only 53.5 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals reach the expected level.
- are disproportionately likely to have been in care and/or have special educational needs.
- are more likely to start school unable to read.
- do less well in tests such as SATs.
- are less likely to get places in the best state schools.
- are more likely to be placed in lower streams and sets.
- generally attain poorer examination results – for example, around three-quarters of young people from upper middle-class backgrounds get five or more GCSEs A\*–C compared to fewer than one-third from lower working-class backgrounds.
- are less likely to go on to further education.

### Evidence

A study by Albert Halsey, Heath and Ridge found clear class inequalities in education. They used a sample of 8,000 males born between 1913 and 1952, and divided them into three main groups based on their father's occupation.

- The service class (professionals, administrators and managers).
- The intermediate class (clerical or sales workers, the self-employed and lower grade technicians and foremen).
- The working class (manual workers in industry and agriculture).

The research showed that an individual from the service class, compared to one from the working class, had 4 times as great a chance of being at school at 16, 8 times the chance at 17 and 10 times the chance at 18, while the chance of an individual from the service class attending university was 11 times greater than one from the working class.



While they found a correlation between income and educational opportunity (such as not being able to afford school uniform or educational trips), they also found two more significant factors influencing educational success. These were:

- Home encouragement and parental attitudes
- The uneven distribution of grammar schools with more being in middle class areas than working-class areas.

**Activity:** Can you evaluate this study? Think about the following questions:

- When was the study conducted?
- What methods were used?
- Who was used in this study?

Does this give us a full explanation of educational inequalities?

**Exam Hint:** It is important that you can use evidence in your exam answers. Make sure you are able to summarise key studies and show how they support what you are trying to demonstrate. Don't just include studies without showing why they are important.

## How does this relate to the educational achievement of white working class children?

### Children on free school meals (FSM, 2015)

Ethnicity	Percentage achieving 5 'good' GCSEs including maths and English
White boys	28%
Mixed heritage children	38%
Black children	41%
South Asian children	48%
Chinese boys	74%

On average, FSM children do less well in education than those not in receipt of FSM. However, as white British FSM children progress through the education system, they tend to perform less well than FSM children from other ethnic groups.

At the age of 5, white British children are among the top three highest achieving ethnic groups. However, the picture changes dramatically by the age of 16. By the age of 16, British children have dropped ten places to thirteenth in a UK table measuring performance, behind children from Chinese, Indian, Asian and black African backgrounds.

Similar statistics are found at university entry level. A report from the Institute of Fiscal studies, 2015, showed that children from black and minority backgrounds were significantly more likely to go to university than white British children. Findings showed that Chinese pupils in the lowest socio-economic groups are 10% more likely to enter higher education than white British children in the highest socio-economic groups.

**Activity:** Summarise these statistics. Draw some conclusion about what they show about the educational achievement of different social groups.

## What explanations are there for these differences in educational achievement?

Educational success and failure is influenced by many factors. Many of these factors lie outside the school environment and many factors lie within the school itself. Factors outside school can have a huge influence on children's educational success.

### How external factors affect educational achievement of different social classes

#### 1. Material deprivation

Although state education is free, there are hidden costs of sending a child to a state school amounting to around £1,614 each year per child (2013). These are the costs parents need to pay for things such as:

- School uniform
- Stationery
- PE kit
- School photographs
- School trips

Material deprivation may lead to pupils having to work part time, which may mean they are too tired to study at home or at school.

**Activity:** How does material deprivation explain the poor performance of white working class children?

#### Evidence

Cooper and Stewart found that money makes a difference to children's educational achievements (2013). A lack of money can mean:

- Cold and overcrowded houses
- Inadequate levels of food and nutrition
- A lack of books and computers
- Limited internet access
- Lost opportunities for school trips, sports equipment.

**Exam Hint:** Make sure you can use this study to support material deprivation explanations

#### 2. Cultural deprivation

Working-class children often lack the appropriate attitudes, norms and values that are necessary to succeed in education.

Cultural deprivation may include:

- Parents' level of education
- A lack of support with homework and encouraging a work ethic
- A lack of cultural experiences, for example, visits to museums and going on holiday.

#### Parental aspirations and support

Working class parents have a lack of aspirations for their children.

**Activity:** How does parental aspirations and support explain the poor performance of white working class children in particular?

#### Evidence

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) suggested that the middle class cultural capital is as valuable in education as material wealth (1977). Bourdieu believes that middle class children are at an advantage because they have the right kind of cultural capital – the more cultural capital you have, the more successful you will be in education.

Research by Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz investigated the process of choosing a secondary school. They studied 15 schools in neighbouring Local Education Authorities with different population profiles (for example, class and ethnicity). They found that middleclass parents had a significant advantage over working class parents when selecting a school for their child.

They found that middle class parents had the:

- Knowledge and contacts to find the best school for their child
- Money to send their children to better but more distant schools, or even move into the catchment area of the best schools
- Cultural capital and material resources to ensure success. Working-class parents lacked the cultural capital and material resources required.

J.W.B. Douglas followed the educational careers of 5,362 children born in the first week of March 1964, up until the age of 16. Douglas found significant variations in educational attainment between pupils of similar ability but different social classes. Douglas argued that the most important factor was the degree of parents' interest in their child's education. He found that middle-class parents generally showed a greater interest in their child's education than working-class parents.

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Some of the evidence given to the House of Commons Education Committee in their report published in June 2015 focused on the role of parental aspirations. Evidence from Leicester City Council stated: *'In some parts of Leicester the white working class culture is characterised by low aspirations and negative attitudes towards education.'*

Similar views were expressed by Sir Michael Wilshaw, chief inspector of schools in England and Head of Ofsted:

*'Children from disadvantaged backgrounds very often have high ambitions, especially when they are young but the odds against achieving them can worsen with age. These initial aspirations are not encouraged by parents and there often comes a point at which expectations shrink. They don't see their elder siblings or friends going to university and no-one in their household is in paid work so they don't expect to get a job.'*

**Exam Hint: Is this always the case?**

*Make sure you can evaluate explanations – this is something you need to practice.*

*Not everyone would agree that the differences in the educational achievement are down to parental aspirations.*

*A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that aspirations were high across all social groups. The difference between children from richer and poorer families was the strength of their belief in their ability to achieve such goals.*

### 3. Speech patterns

It has also been suggested that working-class children lack appropriate language skills to succeed in education.

**Evidence**

According to Basil Bernstein (1971), there are two speech codes:

Elaborate code used by middle classes	Restricted code used by working classes
Complex sentences	Simple sentences
Greater vocabulary	Limited vocabulary
Correct grammar	Grammar mistakes

**Activity:** *Make a list of all the different ways language can affect a child in school.*

Bernstein argues that the elaborated language code provides significant advantages for middle-class children entering education where the elaborated code is used by teachers.

### How internal factors affect educational achievement of different social classes

As well as the numerous factors that lie outside the school environment, there are many factors within the school environment that influence educational achievement.

#### 1. Teacher/pupil interactions

There are a number of processes in schools that have led to the widening gap between working-class and middle-class achievement. Teachers are inevitably involved in making judgements and classifying pupils. Labels are often given to pupils on the basis of their appearance, language and attitude.

**Evidence**

Howard Becker (1971) interviewed 60 Chicago high-school teachers and found that they judged their pupils on the basis of their appearance and conduct. Becker argued that the middle-class pupils were more likely to be seen as 'ideal students'.

#### 2. Setting and streaming

Labelling can lead to pupils being placed in different ability groupings within school. Working-class pupils may be placed in lower sets and streams and middle-class pupils are more likely to be placed in higher sets.

**Evidence**

Ball (1981) conducted research at Beachside Comprehensive School, on the south coast of England. His research was based on three years' fieldwork as a participant observer and he examined the internal organisation of the school.

At Beachside, first year pupils were placed in one of three bands on the basis of information supplied by their primary school. The first band was supposed to contain the most able pupils and the third band the least able. He compared this group of students with another taught in mixed-ability classes. Ball observed that most pupils were conformist and eager when they first entered the school, but gradually the behaviour of the children began to diverge.

**The band 1 child:**

*'Has academic potential ... will do O levels ... and a good number will stay on in the sixth form ... is bright, alert and enthusiastic ... can concentrate ... produces neat work ... is interested ... wants to get on ... is grammar school material ... you can have discussions with ... friendly ... rewarding ... has common sense.'*

**The band 2 child:**

*'Is not interested in school work ... difficult to control ... rowdy and lazy ... is immature ... loses and forgets books ... cannot take part in discussions ... of low standard ... lacks concentration ... is poorly behaved ... not up to much academically.'*

**The band 3 child:**

*'Is unfortunate ... is low ability ... anti-school ... lacks a mature view of education ... emotionally unstable ... a waste of time.'*

*Source Beachside Comprehensive, Stephen Ball (1981)*

**Activity:** *Can you evaluate this study?*

*Think about the following questions:*

*When was the study conducted?*

*Where was the study conducted?*

*What methods were used?*

*Who was used in this study?*

*Does this give us a full explanation of educational inequalities?*

#### Working-class subculture

Some pupils rebel against school and form anti-school subcultures that can affect the work they do and their achievements. This is particularly true with working-class boys who are more likely to develop anti-school subcultures.

## Conclusion

The reasons for the underachievement of white working class children are complex and as you will see from this Factsheet it is difficult to isolate one single explanation for why this pattern exists. It is very easy to think of the under achievement of minority ethnic groups in the British education system but it is important that you also consider the underachievement of working class British children – a group who are largely invisible in the education system today.

### **Exam Hint:**

1. Briefly explain how cultural deprivation may affect educational achievement.

### **2. Item A**

*Social class differences in achievement can be seen at all levels of the education system, from pupils' performance in primary school to the likelihood of their going to university. Many sociologists believe differences in pupils' home backgrounds is the main cause of class differences in achievement.*

*However, other sociologists see factors within schools as more important. Some sociologists also argue that home background and school factors are often interlinked.*

*Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate the view that social class differences in educational achievement are mainly caused by differences in pupils' home backgrounds.*

### **In answering this question, you need to:**

- Use the item – it is really important that you quote from the item in your answer
- Use other information to support your argument – information from this Factsheet would be useful here
- Evaluate – make sure that you look at both sides of the debate:

### **One side of the debate:**

*Differences in the educational achievement of different social classes is due to home background (you could include material deprivation, cultural deprivation, parent encouragement and support)*

### **The other side of the debate:**

*Differences in educational achievement of different social classes is not due to home background but is due to other factors inside school (you could include teacher/pupil interaction, streaming/setting, subcultures)*

### **Conclusion:**

*You then need a conclusion: how important is pupils' home background in determining educational achievement of different social classes?*