

# Sociology Factsheet



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## Educational Success - explaining the differences

Looking at the figures for success at GCSE, A level and Advanced GNVQ, or the figures for university entrance, certain patterns emerge. Children of the better off do better in the education system than those of the worst off. More recently girls have started to do better than boys at A level, though they have outperformed boys at GCSE level for years.

There are differences in the educational achievements of different ethnic groups too. Students of Indian origin do very well, better than white students. Those of Bangladeshi origin do less well than white students. As with other areas of social life there are significant differences in educational achievement according to class, gender, and ethnicity.

### Social Class and differences in Educational Achievement.

**Evidence:** 80% of pupils at independent schools gain 5 or more GCSE passes at grade A\*-C



### Highest qualification held by socio-economic group, 1992-93 (%)

	Professional	Employers & managers	Intermediate non-manual	Junior non-manual	Skilled manual & own accountant non-professional	Skilled manual & personal service	Unskilled manual	All persons
Degree	61	19	21	3	2	1	-	12
Higher education	16	19	29	6	9	4	2	13
GCE A-level	7	16	12	13	14	7	3	12
GCSE, grades A-C	7	21	20	35	23	21	12	22
GCSE, grades D-G	1	7	5	16	15	12	10	10
Foreign	4	3	3	3	2	4	3	3
No qualifications	3	15	10	24	36	51	70	28

### Explanations.

**Society** - The ruling class impose their own culture as worthy of being taught in school. Pupils are judged in terms of this body of knowledge and those with more cultural capital i.e. middle class pupils will be more successful.

**Criticisms** - Working class boys were not held back by a lack of cultural capital in the post war period. Evidence was found of education being used to spread cultural capital.

### School environment.

**Teacher-pupil** - Teachers tend to judge children who are well behaved as 'bright' while they tend to be more questioning about the good performance of those children who are less well behaved (Halo effect). Teachers' assessments of students tend to reflect the teachers' views of what middle class and working class pupils should be capable of, rather than their actual performance. This can lead to the self-fulfilling prophecy.



**School organisation** - Streaming into different ability groups can often be linked to social class, with a disproportionately higher number of lower-stream students being drawn from the working classes. Streaming pupils places a label on them and provides teachers with a set of expectations about their future performance. Being placed into a band acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

**Pupil strategies** - Middle class pupils tend to adopt more conformist strategies in school. **Hargreaves** argued that the lower stream secondary modern schoolboys tended to reject the academic values and standards of behaviour expected by the school. The boys had evolved a 'counter-culture'.

**Criticisms** - Teachers' advice to children is a realistic assessment of their potential rather than a stereotyped judgement. This explanation does not take account of different strategies adopted.

### Home environment.

**Material factors** - There tends to be lack of money, books and computer facilities in working class homes and the material disadvantage it entails can obviously affect a child's chances in education. The Child Poverty Action Group has stressed the costs of school uniforms, sports kits and special materials which could all effect educational success. Poor neighbourhoods also lack playgroups and nurseries and may lack library facilities.



**Cultural factors** - These put working class children at a disadvantage and include parents, attitudes and values - middle class parents show more interest in their child's education and are more likely to attend parent's evenings etc. Research by **Douglas** stressed the importance of parental attitudes in determining educational success.

**Language** - The middle class child is at an advantage because the language used by teachers at school is more like that used by their parents at home. The middle class parent is more likely to use an elaborate linguistic code but the working class parent is more likely to use the restricted linguistic code.

**Criticisms** - These explanations do not explain middle class failures or working class success. Visits to school are invalid as a measure of parental interest. Working class parents may not attend for a variety of reasons e.g. shift working. Many middle class occupations involve talking for a living whereas working class parents may find talking to teachers intimidating. There is a tendency to over-generalise differences at the expense of similarities.

**Gender and differences in Educational Achievement.****Evidence**

- Girls achieve better grades at GCSE than boys and are gradually repeating the pattern at A level.
- Girls outperform boys at every stage – throughout the SATs in english, maths, and science, at GCSE and most recently at A level.
- There are now more females than males in higher education.
- There is still a noticeable trend for subjects to be divided by gender when students have a free choice. In 1999/2000, 22,334 males took physics A level compared to 6,586 females whereas 56,826 females took English A level compared to 23,662 males.

**Explanations.****Home environment.****Material factors**

Research has shown that parents give more resources to the education of their sons.

**Cultural factors**

Sex role socialisation begins from the moment a child is born. Girls used to have different priorities, being more concerned about marriage and family with less concern about education. Research by **Sue Sharp** in 1976 showed that the important factors for girls of school leaving age were 'love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers more or less in that order. By 1994 when she repeated her study things had changed. By then girls were more interested in gaining qualifications and getting a job or career. However, she also found that girls were still socialised to be wives and mothers. Gender socialisation is also an important factor with subject choice of boys and girls. If boys and girls are socialised into the traditional gender roles they are more likely to choose subjects that fit in with their ideas of a suitable adult role – girls will choose caring or secretarial courses, boys scientific, IT courses.

**Language**

Girls' toys tend to encourage the development of language skills and boys spend less time reading with their parents.

**Criticisms**

Much of the research is now out of date by trying to explain girls' underachievement. Boys are now the cause for concern. In addition to parental socialisation media and peer groups play a role from a very early age. Unisex toys becoming more usual.

**School Environment.**

**Teacher-pupil** - Girls tend to be praised for appearance and conduct, boys for their work and they are treated differently for punishments. Teachers used to pay more attention to boys in the classroom.

**School Organisation** - School systems are often based on gender e.g. uniforms, lining up, seating plans. In the classroom males tend to dominate in mixed sex classes.

**Pupil Strategies** - The laddish subculture adopted by many young males at school is seen by them to be a way of expressing their masculine identity. It is a way that teenager boys have of showing that they are 'real men'. They express their masculinity through sports such as football, by messing about in class and also by appearing to be 'hard'.

**Criticisms**

There are still many girls who underachieve at school. The National Curriculum has opened up subject choice for girls and although subjects are still divided by gender, the divide is less today.

**Society.**

Patriarchal power has restricted girls' access to the full curriculum e.g. quota of females at medical school, girl orientated subjects etc. However, the changing job market has created more opportunities for female employment. Legal changes and equal opportunities policies have not only affected education but also employment.

**Criticisms.**

The National Curriculum ensures all children follow the same subjects until the age of 16. While the pattern of attainment may be changing at GCSE and now at A level, this severely over-estimates the amount of change that is taking place in broader society where women are still less well paid and often combine work and family chores. Feminists argue that while girls are attaining higher grades, boys are still the focus of attention among educationalists.

**Exam Hint:** The explanations for inequalities in educational achievement can be divided into three broad categories – **home environment**, **school environment** and **society**. These three explanations can be used to explain differences in educational success between gender, class and ethnic groups. You may be asked a general question to explain why differences exist between different groups **or** you could be asked to assess whether the school is more important than other factors. You should therefore be able to use these three explanations to answer any question on inequalities in educational achievement. (see example exam questions at the end of Factsheet)

**Ethnicity and differences in Educational Achievement.****Evidence**

- Although ethnic minorities make up 6.6% of the working age population of Great Britain, 11% of the pupils of primary and secondary schools in England are from minority ethnic groups.
- Bangladeshi, black and Pakistani children perform less well than other pupils in the early key stages. Pupils from these groups tend to achieve less by the end of compulsory education.
- At the age of 18, 83% of Indians have a level 2 qualification or higher, compared to 68% of whites, 56% of Pakistani/Bangladeshis, and 48% of black students.

**Explanations.****Home environment.****Material factors**

The Swann Committee (1985) pointed out that some ethnic minority students suffered as a result of social and economic deprivation. Many factors affecting the attainment of working class students may also affect some ethnic minority students.

**Cultural factors**

The cultures of some ethnic minority groups may be different to 'mainstream' culture. This may affect students' achievements because schools are seen to be institutions where white 'mainstream' norms and values dominate. Parents from some ethnic minority groups are less interested in their children's education than parents from other groups.

**Language**

The language spoken at home may also be an important factor affecting achievement. Some children who have only recently arrived in the UK may speak English as a second language; as a result they may be disadvantaged at school. Creole, a dialect spoken by some Afro-Caribbean students, may not be seen as acceptable in certain schools and this may lead to students feeling less confident about written and oral work thus affecting their achievement levels.

**Criticisms**

Ethnic minorities are more likely to be working class. Explanations are stereotypes with a biased interpretation of culture.

**School Environment.****Teacher-pupil**

Research has shown that teachers believe that children from an African-Caribbean background are less academic than those from other ethnic backgrounds, with African-Caribbean boys being seen as more disruptive. Teachers expect less, so black students do not receive as much encouragement as other students. In this way the teachers' labels may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. **Wright** found that Asian children may face discrimination based on exclusion from discussion work as a result of teachers' assumptions about their language abilities.

**School Organisation**

It has been argued that the subjects that students study are biased towards the white European culture. Jayleigh School (CRE, 1992) used setting as a barrier to a large number of Asian pupils. Research by the Commission for Racial Equality (1988) showed that teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds are significantly under-represented in schools in Britain.

**Pupil Strategies**

It is argued that many black pupils may feel rejected by the school and as a result they may reject the school and therefore not achieve their full academic potential. Racism and bullying on the playground often goes unsanctioned.

**Criticisms**

Most teachers are actively and sensitively concerned to treat all pupils fairly. Schools are developing anti-racist policies.

**Society.**

The National Curriculum is ethnocentric in the teaching of British History and the requirements for a Christian assembly. The English language contains the images of racism e.g. black is associated with evil, white with good.

**Criticisms**

Most religious festivals are recognised and celebrated in schools today. The idea of racism has been taken to extremes when no negative association is present e.g. the renaming of blackboard to chalkboard.

**Typical Exam Questions**

Outline and assess the view that the way schools and teaching are organised is more important than external influences, such as the home, in explaining working class underachievement.

Outline and assess cultural explanations of the differential educational achievement of ethnic minority groups.

Outline and assess the view that males underachieve in education.

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