

Activity: The Influence of the Home on Educational Achievement

- Below is a list of ways in which the homes of working class students tend to differ from middle class students.
- For each, suggest two ways in which these factors might influence academic achievement. (Ignore the last line of each box for now)

Working class families tend to be poorer	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Working class families tend to be larger	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Housing/living conditions of many working class families are poorer	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Many working class children live in poor, inner city areas	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Poorer children have more health problems	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Children from w/c backgrounds have less adult time spent on them	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Middle class parents have higher expectations of their children	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Schools are "white, middle class" institutions	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Working class children struggle with the "language of schools"	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Working class families tend to be larger	
1.	
2.	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

- Now imagine that you and your friend have exactly the same ability, but one of you is from a middle class family and one is from a working class family. How would each of your families attempt to resolve the following problems in school

You are having serious problems in mathematics	
Working Class	
Middle Class	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

You are not able to concentrate on homework	
Working Class	
Middle Class	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Your teacher does not seem to like you very much	
Working Class	
Middle Class	
Material Deprivation / Cultural Deprivation / Cultural Capital	

Outside School Factors

Another set of explanations for the relative underachievement of working class children examines the effect of home background. Three main bodies of theory are particularly influential in this section: Material Deprivation Theory, Cultural Deprivation Theory and Cultural Difference Theory

Material Deprivation Theory

The starting point in this explanation is that the inequalities in achievement can be linked to **lack of income** and the many problems that are associated with it.

- Working-class less affluent than middle-class households
- This means that children from these households experience more **material deprivation** – a lack of money and the things money can buy – leading to things such as an unhealthy diet and unsatisfactory housing.
- In turn, these deprivations are said to hinder their chances of success in school.



Above is the beginnings of a spider diagram illustrating how material deprivation can depress school performance

1. Copy the diagram onto the back of this page.
2. Complete it by suggesting three other examples.

Supporting Evidence

A number of studies have produced evidence that points to the influence of material factors on educational achievement.

- In *Origins and Destinations*, **Halsey et. al. (1980)** studied their study of 8,500 males born between 1913 and 1947 – split into three groups; the service class, the intermediate class and the working class. They found that three quarters of working class students left school at the minimum leaving age, in contrast to only one quarter of students from service class backgrounds.
- In *The Home and The School*, **Douglas (1964)** traced the educational careers of 5,362 British children born in the first week on March 1946. He divided the sample into two groups – those living in **satisfactory conditions** (with hot water, own bathroom and toilet) and those in **unsatisfactory conditions** (without these facilities, or sharing them). He found that those children in unsatisfactory conditions scored significantly lower in ability and reading tests.



Author	Findings	Explanation
Halsey et. al. (1980)		
Douglas (1964)		

1. Copy the above table onto another sheet of paper. For each study, give a material explanation for the findings.

- In more recent study, **Gibson and Asthana (1999)** conducted a large scale study in which they found a strong correlation between parents' qualifications, employment and ownership of car or house and attainment of five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C

Critique

One implication of material deprivation theory is that, as living conditions become more equal, differential attainment should close – and this doesn't seem to be borne out by the evidence. The living conditions of the working class in Britain have improved substantially in recent times yet – as we have seen in the earlier data – the inequalities in achievement have remained constant. Two explanations could be given for this

- Whilst the material situation of the working class has improved, those of other classes have also improved.
- There are other factors involved in the underachievement of students from less affluent backgrounds

Cultural Deprivation Theory

For material deprivation theory, underachievement is linked to financial problems within working class families. Cultural Deprivation theory also locates the explanation for differential achievement outside of the school; however, rather than equating lack of success with lack of money, it is instead linked to problems in the socialisation of children within the working class family.

In this way, cultural deprivation theorists suggest that it is the difference in values, attitudes and language of working class and middle class children that leads to differences in their educational attainment. A number of factors have been identified in this.



How do you think working class and middle class culture might differ?

Parental Interest

According to **Douglas (1964)** the most important factor in the educational achievement of children is the degree of interest shown by their parents, and the amount of encouragement given to children – a view echoed by the **Plowden Report (1967)**. According to Douglas, working class parents...

- Visited schools less frequently to discuss their children's progress.
- Were less likely to want their children to stay at school beyond the minimum age and encourage them to do so
- Were perceived by teachers to be less interested.



Douglas argues that these factors are evidence of a lack of interest amongst working class parents in their children's education. Others, however, have suggested that the evidence could be interpreted as a product of material deprivation. Try to explain the above findings in this context.

Values (Sub-Cultural Theory)

A number of sociologists have argued that social class grouping are essentially **sub-cultures**: although they exist within the wider society, working class and middle class families have distinct and differing values.

- **Douglas (1964)** maintains that, on the whole, middle class parents value education much more than working class parents. He argues that this has much more of an impact than material factors, and is translated into a middle-class expectation of achievement.
- **Hyman (1967)** has extended this argument, stating that working-class families tended to be **fatalistic** (they see little chance of their children obtaining non-working-class careers). This limited career ambition means that they consequently place little value on education as a means to get on in life.

- **Sugarman (1970)** has added to this analysis of the difference between working class and middle class culture. He argues that middle class families are **future-oriented** (planning for the future) and consequently emphasise **deferred gratification** (putting off today's rewards for future gains). In contrast, as working-class families are **present-time orientated** (lack of emphasis on long-term planning) and emphasise **immediate gratification** (getting rewards now rather than putting them off). This means that working class children are, for example, far more likely to drop out of school at the earliest possible time in order to get a job and earn money (immediate gratification).



Once upon a time...

Write me a story about two children from different social classes showing how the differing values of their families affect their educational attainment and future success.

Language – Bernstein (1971)

Success in education depends very heavily on language. The ability to read and understand books, to write clearly, and to be able to explain yourself fully in both speech and writing are key language skills required for success in education. If these skills are not developed through discussion, negotiation and explanation in the family then a child will inevitably be disadvantaged in education.

Basil Bernstein has developed a theory – which remains influential in education today – which argues that there are two types of language use, which he calls “**elaborated code**” and “**restricted code**”.

- **Restricted code** is the sort of language that is used between friends or family members. It's features include:
 - A limited, informal vocabulary (often using slang)
 - Grammatically simple, short and descriptive sentences
 - Context bound speech (the listener must be aware of the topic of discussion)
 - Particularistic meanings – it assumes that the listener has some “insider knowledge”.
- **Elaborated code**, in contrast, is the kind of language used in formal situations. It's features include:
 - An extensive vocabulary
 - Grammatically complex, long and analytical sentences
 - Context-free speech (the listener can understand what is being said independently of the context in which it is spoken)
 - Universalistic meanings (anybody can understand it)



Elaborated and Restricted Code

Write a paragraph in elaborated code and then try to rewrite it in restricted code.

According to Bernstein, working-class students are limited to use of restricted codes, whilst their middle-class counterparts are able to practice **code switching** (moving between the two codes, based on the situation they are in).

Crucially, Bernstein argued that the language of education is elaborated code – and those who are unable to use this means of communication will be inevitably disadvantaged in education. Consequently, Bernstein argues that at least part of the reason for the relative underperformance of working class students lies in the language into which they are socialised.

Bernstein insists that working class speech patterns are not substandard or inadequate – it is simply a mismatch between the

language which the working class bring to the classroom and the language that they are expected to use within it (in many ways he should be included under the Cultural Difference heading). He does, however, imply that for certain operations the elaborated code is superior – e.g. detailed or logical communication. Others have gone much further and extreme versions of Cultural Deprivation Theory see working class language as inferior and inadequate and the root cause of educational inequalities.

Cultural or Material Deprivation?

In *Origins and Destinations*, **Halsey et. al. (1980)** attempted to measure the effects of material and cultural factors on educational attainment. They found that both material (e.g. Income) and cultural factors (e.g. Parental Values) influenced the type of secondary school – grammar or secondary modern that a boy went to. However, once at secondary school, cultural factors appeared to have little effect on his attainment. Students from working class backgrounds who stayed on after 16 were almost as successful in examinations as their service-class counterparts. The difference, as noted earlier, was that a far higher proportion of service class stayed on – and this was due to material factors, as their parents could afford it.

Cultural Deprivation: Evaluation

- ✓ Both Cultural and Material Deprivation Theories are an improvement on earlier genetic-based theories as they recognise the importance of social (as opposed to biological) causes of class inequalities in educational attainment
- ✓ The explanations have also served to generate a great deal of further sociological research into class inequalities in educational performance
- ✓ Empirical research has been generated which supports these theories. This evidence tends to be quantitative (which means it is reliable) and large-scale (which means it is representative of the general population).
- ✗ However, outside-school theories focus too much on the home background, and assume that schools play little part in the success or failure of students.
- ✗ **Marxists** and other radical sociologists argue that this is a clear case of **victimology**: blaming the victims of inequality for their problems.
- ✗ They imply that the background of working class children is somehow inadequate or **deficient**. Others have argued that it is just different, and that it is the schools that are deficient, as it is not prepared for the working class child.
- ✗ They fail to link material and cultural deprivation together. **Douglas**, in particular, has been criticised as his conclusion that working class parents visits schools less because they are less committed to their children's education could equally be explained by the practical problems working class parents face in visiting schools.
- ✗ Are working class values really so different from middle class values, or does immediate gratification simply represent working class recognition that they will inevitably end up in working class jobs.
- ✗ The theory treat working class culture as homogenous and do not recognise a range of working class values
- ✗ The theory is deterministic and assumes that the working class will inevitably fail. This does not account for those working class children who succeed in education.
- ✗ **Bernstein** has been criticised for being overly simplistic – his equation that “two classes = two speech codes” seems very convenient
- ✗ Furthermore, writers such as **Labov** have accused Bernstein of harbouring “cultural deficit” assumptions and misunderstanding working class language and argue that it can be as rich – if not richer than middle-class language.

Activity 10 The Odds Are Against Them

Item A



Inner city slums

Questions

- 1 a) Outline the disadvantages highlighted in Items A, B and C and place them under the headings of either material or cultural factors.
- b) Which (material or cultural) do you consider most important? Give reasons for your answer.
- 2 How might the disadvantages be passed on from generation to generation?

Item B *Against the odds*

Mandy Rogers (not her real name), 33, lives on a low income east London estate where she grew up in a family of five children. She is a single parent but her son, Carl, four, has contact with his father. A qualified nursery nurse, she is currently living on income support.

‘My parents never put enough into our education. They were a loving mum and dad but they didn’t see more for you than they had for themselves. My mum was a machinist and my dad a painter and decorator, when he worked. I don’t remember having any books at home and I didn’t know further education existed until after I left school. I did two O levels when I was 25, which was a big achievement for me, then got into a National Nursery Examination Board course.’

Adapted from *Times Educational Supplement*, 28.1.94, p3

Item C *Homelessness*

In 1992 local authorities accepted responsibility for 167,000 homeless households, nearly two thirds with dependent children. A report on the effects of homelessness on schoolchildren by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Schools makes the following points.

Their chances of doing well, say the inspectors, are slim. ‘Sustainable achievement is often beyond their reach.’ Cramped sleeping conditions leave the children tired, listless and unable to concentrate. In one London school a four year old boy spent a whole day sleeping outside a headteacher’s office.

The inspectors found evidence of ill health caused by poor diet and stress from permanent insecurity. For some the crises which lead to homelessness produce social and emotional difficulties.

Weak reading, writing and verbal skills among primary school children are combined with a poor self-image. ‘I can’t read,’ a seven year old girl told her teacher. ‘Don’t you know I’m simple?’

The report notes that many hostel rooms lack such basics as chairs and tables. As a result, children often find it hard to do homework. A fourth year GCSE pupil had to work on her bed and could only start when the sisters she shared the room with were asleep.

Adapted from *Social Trends*, 1994, p113 and *Times Educational Supplement*, 10.8.90, p5

Stolen from Sociology in Focus