**Class and Educational Achievement - External**

We will be discussing how class affects educational achievement. Specifically, we will look at external factors that relate to education and class, and how they impact trends in education. As we've mentioned before, middle-class students generally do better in school than working-class students. We will explore why this is the case by analysing sociological theories and studies.

**WHAT IS CLASS?**

The concept of social class is a complex and multifaceted one, posing challenges for its quantification and use in research. Traditionally, social class has been characterized using terms such as working class, middle class, and upper class, based on measures of wealth, occupation, and education. However, these measures have limitations as they do not necessarily reflect an individual's complete socio-economic status. For instance, one may have a high level of education but a low income, or vice versa. Additionally, one may have a significant amount of asset wealth but little liquid cash. Consequently, the traditional class system can be difficult to navigate, leaving some individuals unsure of their place within it.

To address these limitations, the British Social Attitudes Survey introduced a new classification system in 2007 called the "plastic pluses." This system identifies seven distinct classes: the precariat, emergent service workers, traditional working class, new affluent workers, technical middle class, established middle class, and the elite. The classification is based on measures of economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Economic capital includes factors such as income, savings, assets, and homeownership, while social capital considers an individual's network of social relationships and status. Finally, cultural capital looks at an individual's interests and hobbies, including both mass and high culture pursuits.

Although sociologists use the term social class, when examining educational achievement, what they are actually referring to is the advantaged versus the disadvantaged. Disadvantaged students include those who qualify for free school meals, children in care, previously looked after children, and children with parents in the armed services. While these students may not necessarily be economically disadvantaged, their circumstances may impact their educational achievement. In essence, when sociologists talk about working class, what they are really referring to is those who are classified as disadvantaged versus those who are not.

**EVALUATION**

One approach used in sociology to measure advantages and disadvantages is the examination of free school meals and pupil premium. However, this raises the question of whether it is the most effective approach. Some sociologists argue that it provides a standardized measure across different populations, which ensures equal treatment. The eligibility for free school meals is determined by the household income, which should be below £16,000 per year. This criterion is applied uniformly across the country, irrespective of ethnicity, state status, or geographical location. By utilizing such a standardized criterion, sociologists can compare and analyse the data consistently.

However, this approach is criticized for being reductionist as it does not account for the reasons why certain individuals are eligible for free school meals. For instance, individuals who are asset-rich, but cash-poor may be eligible for free school meals, or those who are eligible may choose not to take them. Despite their particular circumstances, they are still considered disadvantaged. Therefore, this approach simplifies the complex class system by reducing it to a single criterion to determine one's social status.

**EXTERNAL FACTORS**

When discussing external factors, we refer to factors that lie beyond the scope of the education system. These factors exert an influence on an individual's educational attainment, which originates from sources beyond the educational domain. External factors contributing to educational achievement can be broadly categorized into three domains based on their relationship with social class. The first category is material deprivation, which encompasses the lack of essential material resources that are necessary to support a student's learning experience. The second category is cultural deprivation, which entails the absence of cultural experiences and the inability to access cultural resources that are vital for academic success. The third category is cultural capital, a term coined by sociologist Bourdieu, which refers to the cultural competencies and resources that individuals possess that facilitate their academic success. The notion of cultural capital as employed by policymakers and media differs significantly from Bourdieu's perspective, which we shall explore.

**MATERIAL DEPRIVATION**

**Housing and health**

Let us first examine the material factors that impact educational achievement by social class. Material deprivation refers to the condition of lacking the necessary economic means to function effectively and comfortably. In the context of the education system, material deprivation involves not having the economic means to engage in education comfortably and efficiently. There are two types of material deprivation, according to Douglas in 1964. The first type is related to "home and health." Lower-income families face disadvantages in education due to overcrowded housing, which can make it difficult for children to find a quiet space to study or complete homework, especially if there are younger siblings or other individuals in the household creating noise. Overcrowded housing can also have health implications, with contagious illnesses spreading more easily among family members. Additionally, children from low-income families are more likely to have poor diets due to the expense of fresh and nutritious foods. Instead, they may consume cheap, processed foods that lack nutritional value, potentially leading to lower immune systems and vitamin deficiencies.

Furthermore, low-income families may push their children to take on part-time work earlier, limiting their study time and educational opportunities. Lastly, the lack of nursery provision can negatively impact a child's early cognitive, language, social, and emotional development, as children who attend nursery generally have higher cognitive abilities and better language skills when they start school. This is particularly relevant for low-income families, who may not have the means to afford nursery provision for their children.

**Hidden Cost of Education**

The other side of material deprivation is what's referred to as the hidden cost of education. In the United Kingdom, state education is provided free of charge, although private education is available as an option. However, it is argued by Bull (1980) that this system is not truly free, as there are covert costs involved such as school uniform, equipment, stationary, lunches, trips, extracurricular activities, and additional materials for subjects such as food technology, art and technology. Moreover, the requirement for homework and computer access has been emphasized during the current COVID lockdowns, revealing the widening gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. This disparity arises due to the fact that advantaged students have access to remote learning, whereas disadvantaged students may have limited access to the internet or limited computer resources shared among siblings. Thus, the education system is not entirely free in the UK, as costs are involved. Tanner (2003) notes that the financial burden of these costs on low-income families can lead to children being stigmatized and bullied, which may deter them from pursuing further and higher education. This stigma may arise from an inability to afford school trips, sports equipment or expensive school uniforms. Such financial implications can be costly for some families and may impact educational achievement. In conclusion, without proper equipment and resources, students may find it challenging to accomplish their academic goals.

**CULTURAL DEPRIVATION**

In the field of sociology, a phenomenon known as cultural deprivation is an important topic to consider. This concept refers to the idea that those from working-class backgrounds may lack the necessary views, attitudes, knowledge, and support required for academic success outside of the formal schooling environment. The renowned sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has introduced the term habitus to describe the way in which the working-class or disadvantaged culture differs from that of the school system. This creates a disadvantage for working-class students as their upbringing does not align with the culture of schools. Cultural deprivation can manifest in three main ways outside of school. The first is through parental interest. Research conducted by Douglas and Feinstein in 1964 and again in 1998 has shown that working-class parents are less likely to show an interest in their children's academic achievements, provide support, discipline, motivation, or attend school events, such as parent-teacher evenings, compared to their middle-class counterparts.

**Cultural Habitus**

Hyman [1967], Sugarman [1970], and Bourdieu have discussed the concept of habitus, which is shaped by an individual's values and beliefs. Sugarman posits that significant differences exist between the working class and middle class, which are reflected in their respective foci. Specifically, Sugarman identifies two contrasting foci: working class foci and middle-class foci. The education system, as a middle-class institution, is built around the latter.

First, let's consider the working-class foci. Fatalism refers to the belief that one's social status and future are predetermined and unchangeable. This can lead to a sense of resignation or hopelessness regarding one's prospects for social mobility or success. Collectivism is a strong belief in the importance of the group over the individual. This can result in a sense of duty or loyalty to one's community or family but may also limit individual agency or ambition. Present time orientation means that individuals are primarily focused on the immediate present, with less attention paid to past or future events. Finally, immediate gratification refers to the desire for immediate rewards or satisfaction, rather than delaying gratification in order to achieve long-term goals.

Now, let's consider the middle-class foci. Optimism refers not to a constant state of happiness, but rather a belief in the possibility of personal growth and achievement. Individualism emphasizes the importance of the individual over the group, which can lead to a focus on personal ambition and autonomy. Delayed gratification involves prioritizing long-term goals over short-term pleasures and is often associated with a willingness to work hard in the present in order to achieve future success. Finally, future time orientation emphasizes the importance of planning and anticipating future events, with an eye towards achieving personal goals and aspirations.

It's worth noting that these foci are not absolute, nor are they necessarily present in every individual belonging to a particular social class. Rather, they represent general tendencies or patterns of thought and behaviour that are associated with each class. Additionally, these foci are not necessarily fixed or unchanging over time - individuals may adopt new perspectives or values as they encounter new experiences and circumstances.

Hyman contends that each social class has its own cultural framework, which he calls habitus, and that it shapes the views, beliefs, and values of its members. Similarly, Bourdieu argues that because schools embody a middle-class habitus, they provide an advantage to middle class students while simultaneously inflicting symbolic violence upon working class students. Symbolic violence refers to the process by which working class culture, foci, and habitus are deemed inferior to middle class values, perpetuating the idea that working class individuals should aspire to middle class values.

**Language Codes**

Cultural deprivation theory suggests that cultural differences between social classes may result in educational underachievement among working-class students. A key aspect of this theory is language codes, as proposed by sociologist Bernstein in 1975. According to Bernstein, working-class and middle-class individuals use different language codes. Specifically, working-class language codes are restricted, while middle-class codes are elaborate. This difference stems from the fact that the education system is built around middle-class values and uses the elaborated code. Children are socialized into these codes from a young age, and working-class children are more likely to be socialized into the restricted language code. This code is characterized by limited vocabulary, simple grammar, reliance on context, and a particularistic, literal approach. In contrast, the middle-class code is characterized by a larger vocabulary, complex grammar, elaboration, abstraction, and universality. The middle-class code can be understood in any situation, regardless of context. It is important to note that Bernstein did not claim that the restricted code was inferior to the elaborated code, but rather that they were different. However, the education system has used symbolic violence against the working class by stigmatizing their language as "improper English," which can lead to educational underachievement.

**Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital is a term used by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to describe a set of resources that individuals possess, which can be utilized to gain social, economic and cultural advantages. These resources include economic capital, which refers to money, property, and land location, cultural capital, which refers to an individual's tastes, interests, hobbies, and art, and social capital, which refers to an individual's social connections, and where they are from. Bourdieu argues that individuals can transfer capital between these three elements to create a better life for themselves. The middle class is more likely to have high cultural and economic capital, which leads to higher educational capital and success. On the other hand, working-class individuals have low cultural and economic capital, which leads to lower educational capital and failure.

According to sociologist Alice Sullivan, cultural capital plays a significant role in educational achievement. Her 2001 study found that GCSE students who read complex fiction, watched serious TV documentaries, and who had graduate parents developed a wider vocabulary and achieved higher than other students. These students were usually from middle-class families. Robert Putnam's 2000 study Bowling Alone identified the significance of social networking, suggesting that if you have high levels of social capital, you are more likely to consider yourself as having potential. This is because you have more opportunities open to you due to your connections. This "old boys’ network" can create a sense of potential and lead to higher-level job applications.

Gewirtz has also contributed to the field of sociology by highlighting the importance of cultural capital, marketization, and parental choice. Gewirtz’s work has shown that parents' levels of cultural and economic capital can lead to major differences in their choices regarding their children's education. Gewirtz has identified three types of parental choices: privileged skilled choosers, disconnected local choosers, and semi-skilled choosers.

The privileged skilled choosers are those who are able to manipulate the system and successfully secure a place for their children in the schools they desire. They can do this by moving to catchment areas, managing the appeals processes, and making themselves desirable to the school. Disconnected local choosers, on the other hand, lack the skills and resources to navigate the system effectively. They often rely on local schools or default to the closest option, which may not be the best fit for their child. Semi-skilled choosers fall somewhere in between, possessing some skills and resources but not enough to guarantee access to the most desirable schools.

Gewirtz’s work also highlights the impact of marketization policies, such as open enrolment, on parental choice. Parents with higher levels of cultural capital are more likely to use this to impress a school and understand school documents better, which often use complex language. This further reinforces the advantages that those with higher cultural and economic capital already possess in terms of accessing better educational opportunities for their children.

**EVALUATION**

In the process of evaluating the factors that contribute to underachievement among the working class, it is essential to consider counterarguments. These counterarguments question the validity of the external factors such as cultural capital and material deprivation, and also question the theories themselves. One such counter-argument is presented by Nell Keddie in 1973, who criticised cultural deprivation theories for blaming the victims. Keddie argued that the cultural deprivation theories perpetuate symbolic violence and symbolic capital against the working class. According to Keddie, the notion that working-class culture is deficient in comparison to middle-class culture is incorrect. Instead, it is just different, and the focus should be on challenging the prejudices against working-class culture rather than changing it to fit the education system. Therefore, Keddie rejects cultural deprivation as a cause of working-class underachievement, as it reinforces symbolic violence against the working class by suggesting that they are lacking or deficient in some way, when in fact, they are not.

it is also important to note that policies are in place to help overcome this issue, suggesting that other factors may be at play. For example, the Pupil Premium program provides support to children who are materially deprived. Additionally, many schools now offer after-school clubs and homework clubs, where students can access school resources to complete their work. Moreover, most schools have funds available for students who experience financial hardship in regard to uniforms, and some even have uniform Swap Shops. These policies highlight the recognition of the impact of socioeconomic status on educational opportunities and the efforts made to address this issue.

Anderson, Fleming, & Steiner, 1994, criticized the idea that working class parents are disinterested in their children’s education. Instead, it is more likely that time poverty is the underlying issue. Working-class parents are often engaged in shift-based industries or working multiple jobs, which means they have less time to dedicate to their children's education. This may lead to their inability to sit down with their children in the evenings to help them with homework, attend parents' evenings, or participate in school events. It is important to note that many of these activities take place during the workday, when parents are at their jobs. However, the emergence of online parents' evenings has resulted in higher levels of engagement among working-class parents. Nonetheless, practical concerns such as the need to find a babysitter for young children during such events may still be a barrier. Blackstone and Mortimer (1994) further argue that the belief in working-class parents' disinterest in education is an example of symbolic violence against this social class, perpetuating stereotypes that are untrue and unfairly stigmatizing.

Tronya and Williams, in 1986, critically evaluated the language code argument. This argument harks back to Keddie's claim that the working class is somehow deficient. Tronya and Williams reject the notion that the working class underachieve because of their use of non-standard English or their inability to use complex sentence structures. They argue that such claims are a form of symbolic violence, and an oversimplified way of looking at the issue. These claims perpetuate the belief that the working class are somehow inferior, when in fact they simply have a different way of speaking. Therefore, schools must shift their attitudes towards language, and not view cultural and linguistic differences as deficiencies. However, this does not mean that swearing or inappropriate language should be permitted in schools. Rather, educators should be aware of the cultural differences in language, not only with regards to ethnicity but also class, so that children do not feel inadequate in any way.

Moreover, some argue that children's TV shows, such as Sesame Street and CBeebies, help bridge the cultural and language gap. These programs can develop children's language skills, unlike shows such as Teletubbies, which were criticized for their lack of proper speech. For example, "Stop it and Tidy Up," a cartoon series narrated by Terry Wogan, aimed to teach children good behaviour. This program, along with many other educational children's shows, can be found on YouTube and other online platforms.

Lastly, the external factors that impact educational achievement among different social classes are often viewed as deterministic, as if children have little control over their own academic performance. This view suggests that poverty, cultural deprivation, and other factors are beyond the control of students. However, such claims overlook the agency of individuals and communities. Instead, it is important to acknowledge the complexities and nuances of the social structures that shape educational outcomes.