

Which has the
greatest impact on
educational
attainment – gender,
social class or...



Many sociological studies have been carried out in an attempt to explain the variations in educational performance between different social groups.

From these studies, great emphasis has been placed upon certain factors such as social class, gender and ethnicity with relation to educational attainment. Sociologists agree that these facts, being your background, what sex you are (male or female) and what ethnic group you belong to, all impact greatly in the success rate of an individual's educational attainment. When social class is investigated in relation to educational attainment, research carried out by sociologist King (1) (1970) reveals that a child's educational success is related closely to their home background and the social class group to that of the parents. Most socialists would agree with King in the view that the higher a child's parents are in the social class structure the greater that child's chances of educational success. Therefore it is assumed that the children of working class parents do not accomplish as much academically as the children of middle class parents.

Sociologists suggest a variety of reasons for the relative educational "failure" of the working class. These reasons are the influence of the home, the neighbourhood/peer group, and the influence of the school. Along side these explanations is also the issue of intelligence/IQ. Psychologist H Eysenck (1971) would argue that the reason for the difference in educational attainment is that of innate intelligence, the fact that individuals inherit their intelligence/IQ from their parents in much the same way that a person would inherit their facial expressions. Eysenck states " what children take out of schools is proportional to what they bring into the schools in terms of IQ.

“(2). Other sociologists would disagree and argue, what is deemed intelligent varies from society to society, IQ scores vary over time and can improve with practice, and also that IQ tests are biased in favour of the middle class as these tests are largely conducted and carried out by members of the middle class group. Therefore IQ tests only measure the ability of the individual who is being tested to conform to the testers personal idea of intelligence. Most sociologists would largely agree that although we inherit a degree of mental intelligence from our parents, our culture and upbringing determine most of our intelligence. When looking at the role of the home in relation to educational attainment sociologists examine the values and behaviour of the parents, the form of language used in the home and the physical condition of the home. Douglas (3) (1964) places particular emphasis on the parent’s attitude – how much value and the degree of interest showed towards their child’s education.

Douglas argues that the lack of interest or failure to encourage by parents is significant factors in poor educational performance of their child. From his conclusions, Douglas stated that that during primary socialization, middle-class children received greater attention and stimulus from their parents and that this ” formed the basis for high achievement in the educational system”. The National Children’s Bureau (4) carried out a study based on a nationwide survey of children born in a particular week of March 1946. They monitored this particular group of children and followed their progress through out their entire school days. Just like Douglas it was concluded that middle class parents appeared to show more interest in their children’s education than what working class parents did.

Further investigations suggest that the reasons behind this division in interest shown by the classes are that middle class parents are more aware of the importance of education. Also that they are usually in a better position to encourage and advise as they are well educated themselves and can offer assistance in homework etc. Some sociologists link this directly to the reason why the middle class children achieve more academically. However these views are strongly criticized by sociologists Tessa Blackstone and Jo Mortimore (5) (1994). They argue that working class parents are not necessarily less interested in their children's education.

Blackstone and Mortimore make the following points, working class parents have less time than middle-class parents to attend to school matters because of the demands of their jobs. Working class parents can be put off going to the school because of the way teachers interact with them. Some sociologists argue that if the points made by Douglas, Blackstone and Mortimore are all taken into account, then it may be true (although it is far from being established) that there are clear variations in the attitudes and behavior between the middle classes and working classes, and that this in turn has a lasting effect upon educational attainment. However Howard Becker(6) (1971) has challenged this, his main point is that behavior can change radically depending on the situation. He states " that human action is not simply an expression of fixed patterns established during childhood" therefore parental values are not the reasons for differences in attainment between the social classes. Some sociologists criticize Becker for failing to explore what are the reasons for differential education attainment.

Basil Bernstein(7) (1971) looks at speech patterns in relation to social class differences and how this can impact upon educational attainment. He points out “ in order to benefit from an academic education, a wider vocabulary and an ability to communicate clearly and cogently are crucial. Bernstein argues that parents pass on vocabulary and ability with language to their children. The more clearly parents reply to children’s questions and explain things to them, the better the children will be in their use of language. Berstein distinguishes between two codes of speech; elaborated and restricted (8). From his study he concluded that elaborated speech is most often found to be practiced in middle class homes; a wide vocabulary is used with the child and he/she is encouraged to fully explore his/her language potential.

Restricted speech is most often found in working class homes; this is where the child is spoken to with a narrow range of vocabulary. Berstein found that the result is that middle class children are more likely to be adept at language when they begin to attend school or as Bourdieu (markiest in outlook) quotes “(9) they possess the code of the message” and that this gives them a great advantage over working class children when it comes to speaking or writing. Sociologists such as Wedge and Prosser (10) (1958) looks at other areas with in social class they discuss the physical condition of the home in their study. They conducted a national study of children born in one week in 1958. From their results they claimed that factors such as large families, low income and poor housing all influenced attainment; children from poorer homes suffer physical deprivation, this in turn effects their school progress; e. g.

undernourishment leads to a feeling of tiredness and inability to concentrate. Damp over-crowded houses can lead to regular illness and consequent absences from school. The local environment/neighbourhood in which we live plays a powerful role in educational attainment. Sociologist Banks (1956) makes the point that during their years of schooling the child's experience of the world around them continues to be moulded by peer contacts, local community values and the media – all of which are outside the control of the school(11).

If there is positive support for the values of the school, then this can only help the child's school progress, but as the values of school are largely seen as middle class, then the values of the working class neighbourhoods may clash with those of the school. E. G schools stress sacrificing short-term gain now (such as wages and jobs) for longer-term aims (A- levels, a degree and then a job). Working class values stress immediate pleasure (find a job, get a car have a bit of money behind you, why wait five years? You could be dead in the morning).

Children who live in the mainly working class neighbourhoods are then faced with a difficult choice, especially when they see all their peers out enjoying themselves while they sit in and study. Also there is the issue of money (if they don't get a job their parents may not be able to support them financially), and it is unlikely that in predominantly working class neighbourhoods there are many people who are highly educated to give help and encouragement. Another important point is that most of the disadvantages that has been mentioned so far can accumulate, creating cultural barriers that prevent certain children, particularly the poor and some <https://assignbuster.com/which-has-the-greatest-impact-on-educational-attainment-gender-social-class-or-ethnicity/>

ethnic minorities, from benefiting fully from education, sociologists refer to this as cultural deprivation. The Plowden report (12) (a government enquiry carried out in 1967) concluded that cultural deprivation was the main reason for educational failure of the poor and immigrant children.

Most sociologists would largely agree with this conclusion, others highlight the importance of factors within schools in encouraging or discouraging pupils in their studies. When analyzing the actual role of school in relation to attainment sociologists look at the area of teaching practices, labelling, streaming and also the child's peer group. Rutter (Fifteen thousand hours) states " Organized interested teachers provide an excellent situation for children" (13) his main view was that the teacher was the tool to educational achievement; good teaching results in children feeling motivated thus succeeding, bad teaching results in children feeling unmotivated and uninterested thus failing in their education. Labelling has been studied by interactionists Rosenthal and Jacobson (14) (Pygmalion in the classroom) they are particularly interested in the self-fulfilling prophecy adopted by the child as a direct result of labelling. They pointed out that how a teacher acts towards a child could strongly influence their behavior in school and their attitudes towards their attainment.

If a teacher labels a child as a troublemaker then the teacher may act in a different way towards him/her than towards a pupil that has been labelled as hardworking and intelligent. It is believed that the children then respond to the teacher's label, either being discouraged or encouraged in their education. Streaming works along side labelling dividing children into teaching groups according to general ability. Some sociologists have <https://assignbuster.com/which-has-the-greatest-impact-on-educational-attainment-gender-social-class-or-ethnicity/>

suggested that teachers label children according to their social class, and as a result look down upon the lower working class and make less effort with them others would dismiss this and believe that through streaming the child receives the correct level of teaching for their ability. From analyzing all the above points and studies so far, it can be said that social class (your background) can greatly effect educational attainment. It is widely argued that gender influences attainment.

Sociologists have noted the development of the 'the gender gap' i. e. a difference in the level of achievement in boys and girls under sixteen. Studies show boys do not Perform as well as girls in standard subjects (literacy, math's) in school, girls are now overtaking boys at a higher-level standards, notably the 'A' level results of 2000, however Post-16 girls tend to drop out of science and technology despite doing better than boys at GCSE.

Boy's early literacy skills are markedly lower than girls. Although sociologists agree that there is a definite 'gender gap' between males and female under sixteen, it is not just as simple case of 'boys doing badly, girls doing well'. The relationship between gender and attainment is much more complex; problems have arose within the area of 'the gender gap', it is not the same in all subjects- boys perform slightly better in GCSE math's than girls, it can not be applied to all levels of education, particularly university where the dropout rate is higher amongst girls, social class and gender affect it, it does effect better jobs/careers for women. A variety of reasons have been suggested for the difference between male and females in relation to attainment. Sociologists have attempted to explain firstly why females out <https://assignbuster.com/which-has-the-greatest-impact-on-educational-attainment-gender-social-class-or-ethnicity/>

perform males in most subjects under the age of sixteen and secondly why females are less likely to enter higher education (post 16 education) despite the fact that female school leavers tend to be better qualified than male ones. It has been suggested that females out perform males because of the following facts, educational policies to help girls over the past twenty years has seen attempts to improve the academic performance of girls.

However this was reasonably patchy and their impact is difficult to evaluate. Coursework favors girls- course work in many subjects has helped to improve the academic standards of many girls. Girls have higher career aspiration; there is now a greater range of role models in society than in earlier years. Improved employment prospects for women- changes in the industry. There are poorer employment prospects for men in regard to the changes in the traditional male manual work.

Male overconfidence in their own abilities causes unrealistic high expectations. Anti-school culture makes boys vulnerable to acting out the 'men behaving badly' role, which in turn places little emphasis on education. Male literacy problems- it is a fact that boys read and write less than girls. Labelling- teachers are more likely to label boys negatively and create a self-fulfilling prophecy of educational failure. In explaining the reasons why females are less likely to go on to university sociologists such as Fiona Norman (15) (Just a bunch of girls), suggests the following facts, parental expectations of their children differ, boys are expected to be tougher and more boisterous, girls tend to be quieter and neater.

They are encouraged to play different games and are given different toys thus this creates the basis for differences in interests and attitudes.

Curriculum differences - there are two levels the ordinary (overt) and the hidden curriculum. Although schools have to offer girls and boys equal access to all courses, clear differences emerge. Girls are less likely to choose CDT, science or computer courses, (it has to be noted that this may not always be the case, especially in more modern times) they are more likely to take home economics, modern languages, social studies and secretarial courses, it is quite normal for 'male' subjects of CDT to be on the timetable at the same time as the domestic science and the office skills subjects, therefore the official curriculum varies by gender. The hidden curriculum; this is the way that certain ideas and values of the teachers, other pupils and the wider society penetrate through the school.

This is not part of the official school lessons. Feminists Blackstone and Weinreich-Haste argue that as a result of attitudes shown by both parents and teachers, " girls learn to under achieve"(16). By this they mean that sex stereotyping occurs in which teachers (and parents) know what sorts of jobs girls do, and have been traditionally successful in, and they then gear girls to follow courses which lead to careers in these areas. It has been suggested that the main reason why girls perform differently in the educational system from boys is mainly due to the way society creates ' gender roles' which stress how males and females ought to behave. There are clear gender roles expected of girls, e.

g. to be feminine, to want to marry and to have children and to follow only a relatively narrow range of occupations in nursing and office work, etc. These <https://assignbuster.com/which-has-the-greatest-impact-on-educational-attainment-gender-social-class-or-ethnicity/>

views are strengthened by the media, which portray women as sex symbols, nurses or housewives. Sociologist Lobban (1974) studied reading schemes(17), Lobban found that girls were rarely portrayed as the central character and rarely showed initiative.

Boys were far more often shown as the central character and tended to engage in more exciting activities. The result of all this is to " trap girls into a self selected choice of careers and educational courses that maintain their low status and less exciting activities". Michelle Stanworth (1983) tape-recorded a number of classes. She found that boys largely dominated classroom discussion, while girls were allowed to sit quietly. This occurred with both male and female teachers.

She further claimed that teachers underestimate the potential of girls. The result, she claims, " a lack of confidence in themselves by the female pupils and this affects their career aspirations and their studies"(18). The relationship between ethnicity and education has proved to be a difficult area of study for sociologists. It is not easy to define and measure ethnicity, as we do not always have detailed statistical evidence with which to compare groups. In earlier studies many sociologists used the broad term of ' Asian' to describe nearly all groups either than ' whites'.

Instead of using ' Asian' we now use the terms Chinese, Indian etc.) Apart from running the risk of being deeply offensive to certain individuals who do not identify with being called ' Asian' results of earlier studies now prove to be unreliable. The main reason why the area of ethnicity is quite complicated is due to the high number of different ethnic minority groups within Britain,

plus their educational performance varies greatly. Kysel (1988) examined the test results of eleven ethnic minority groups (19). African Asian and Pakistani pupils scored the highest grades at age 16 followed by African, South East Asian and Greek Students.

In the middle of the range came English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish students followed by Pupils from Turkish, Caribbean, Arab and Bangladeshi backgrounds. This shows that there are considerable variations within the various ethnic minorities, with some children of Asian origin performing exceptionally well in the education system; especially the African Asian and Pakistani children, other children from Turkish, Caribbean, Arab and Bangladeshi backgrounds performed quite badly. It is therefore wrong to term all these different origins as 'Asian' as what had been previously done in earlier studies. In order to achieve reliable evidence it is necessary to look at the individual groups.

Various reasons have been put forward in an attempt to understand why some ethnic minorities do better than others in the education system. The following factors have been suggested. A main point is that gender and social class also 'cut across' this picture, e. g. Caribbean girls do better than Caribbean boys and as already stated working class children do less well in the education system than middleclass children, the majority of children in the ethnic minorities belong to the working class, so the same explanations can be applied here. The hidden curriculum of the school also plays an important part in lowering the self-respect of children from the ethnic minorities.

Their use of English may be looked down upon in the school and the content of the schoolbooks may ignore their culture, stressing only white European culture. PE deals only with western sport. Ethnic minorities are underrepresented in the teaching profession. Language can prove to act as a barrier for some groups. Family values in relation to education plays a major factor, it has been suggested that the reason why the African Asian and Pakistani ethnic groups do well is that their families are very close knit and this provides an exceptionally stable background for study (however this point is criticized by some, Pakistani children usually come from large families, the point of large families is used negatively at times but in this case it is seen as a positive point). Children from ethnic minority groups also have to face racism (20) (both differently and indirectly).

It has been suggested that Pakistani and African Asian children seem better able to reject it. It is thought that this is because they have a greater sense of cultural identity than say for example West Indians. They are more able to retain a sense of community and independence of culture, which makes them sure of their own worth. Most schools operate a policy in order to respond to the educational underachievement of some ethnic minority students. One method is the secularised approach, this is the case where religious education is removed and replaced with ethical and cultural studies designed to raise awareness and give pupils a better understanding of their fellow students. Another method is anti-racist education, this being the most difficult approach.

It usually focuses on the prejudices held by individual pupils. It is confrontational and controversial. This method is regarded as the colour-
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blind approach and is largely criticized. In conclusion to the question of which has the greatest impact on educational attainment gender, social class ethnicity, it can be said that all three impact greatly upon attainment. However some sociologists would raise the point that differences and opportunities still vary by and are influenced mostly by social class background.