

Socio-economic factors and educational achievement



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In this essay, we will be looking at the effect that different socio-economic factors have on educational achievement in schools. It is a fact that girls out-perform boys at every level from SATS to A-Level, making them more likely to move on to higher education. This year, the gap in gender achievement was at a record high with 73. 3% of girl achieving a grade A*-C compared to only 65. 4% of boys - a gap of 7. 9% percentage points (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk>).

There could be a number of factors contributing to this, such as the ideas of Mitsos and Brown (1998) who say that teaching has been dramatically feminised in schools. Women are more likely to be classroom teachers, particularly in primary education, giving the girls more positive role models to look up to. The teachers are also thought to spend more quality time with the girls in the classroom, using this time to help with work progression whereas any time spent with boys may be focused more on behaviour management (Swann & Graddol 1993).

Some argue that in cases such as GCSE coursework, it may be that females are at an advantage thanks to their superior organization skills and levels of concentration, allowing them to complete the work to a higher standard. Jackson (1998), says that boys may be automatically given a negative label at school through the belief that boys are associated with bad behaviour. This may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy causing male pupils to behave in accordance with the way they are treated (Parsons, 2004, p. 55).

However not all of the factors could be inside of the classroom. Sue Sharpe (1994) believes that girls priorities have in fact changed in recent years

thanks to the number of working female role models today. This causes them to aspire to be financially independent, motivating them to work harder.

Females are also known to spend more time on activities such as reading or communicating in their spare time, developing their language skills, as opposed to boys who spend a majority of the time being physically active (Parsons, 2004, p. 55).

Class has been found to be a major factor in affecting pupils' performance, with students from a professional background achieving substantially better grades than those from an unskilled background, making them more likely to enter higher education. Labelling can also have an effect here too, as Bali (1981) found that the top subjects sets of students were largely from higher social classes. This means that the working classes do not have the same access to higher levels of knowledge, potentially sparking a self-fulfilling prophecy of underachievement.

As a response to this, anti-school subcultures may form amongst working class students, further lowering educational achievement as a result.

However, there are factors at home that could contribute. Firstly is the theory of material deprivation, the idea that some children do less well because of their financial circumstance. Working class pupils without private study space at home, or materials such as books and a computer, may not do as well as those from more comfortable backgrounds - nor can their parents afford to support them through university.

It can also be argued that lack of nutritious food in a poorer household may also affect the performance of the child at school (Parsons, 2004, p. 55). On

the other hand, it may be a case of cultural deprivation, which argues that the working class culture is not aimed towards educational achievement. Educated middle-class parents are more likely to encourage their children and attend open evenings at the schools, having higher values for education than the working class.

This parental knowledge could also be helpful in helping children with homework and guiding them through school, something that working class children do not have access to. Another cultural factor could be the language code, as Bernstein (1970) found. Working class pupils were found not to be comfortable with the style of language required by their school, so instead talk in a restricted code that is more familiar with them. The middle-class pupils tend to be more well-spoken, using the same elaborated code as their teachers (Parsons, 2004, p. 55).

This correct use of language, and a more positive attitude and use of knowledge is what Bourdieu (1971, 1974) called “ cultural capital”. He believed that having cultural capital is the key to success and is something that working class children can not easily access. In conclusion, there are many socio-economic factors that can contribute to educational achievement. We have found that gender is a major factor and that girls tend to achieve higher than boys, but that it can also be a combination of reasons behind the pupils’ class background, with a number of factors both in school and at home that can affect achievement.