

Education study-guide 5

An introduction to under-achievement by social class

Since the introduction of compulsory state education in 1870, the educational level of the average UK citizen has dramatically improved. However, at all stages of education – primary, secondary, further and higher – there are observable social class differences in educational achievement outcomes between children from middle-class families and children from working-class families. On virtually every educational scale, working-class pupils and students underachieve. In contrast, middle-class pupils and students benefit disproportionately from state education. For example;

Working-class students are more likely to

- Fall behind their middle-class peers in reading, writing and maths from an early age,
- Be placed in lower sets or streams
- Gain fewer GCSEs and lower grades
- Leave school with few or no qualifications

Middle-class pupils, on the other hand, are more likely to be

- Academically successful and to have achieved good set of GCSEs and A-levels.
- Studying for degree courses at universities

There are **two broad sociological explanations** for educational success and failure:

- (1) Some sociologists blame **social factors** which are **external** to the school, which mainly revolve around the idea that working-class students are denied access to **types of capital** which are taken for granted in middle-class homes.
- (2) However, other sociologists, especially **interactionists**, blame **in-school or internal social factors**, notably **negative labelling or stereotyping of children by teachers** and **the social organisation of schools**, especially setting, **streaming** and banding.