

## Education study-guide 7

### External factors: cultural deprivation theory

Cultural deprivation theory focuses on class differences in achievement within state schools. **It essentially blames working-class parents and culture for depriving working-class children of the essential cultural skills required for success in schools.** Consequently, it suggests that working-class children do less well than their middle-class peers because **they are allegedly culturally deficient or disadvantaged by their parents' failure to either show an interest in their education and/or their failure to equip their children with certain skills.**

Cultural deprivation theory argues that working-class children are 'failed' by their parents in three crucial cultural ways

- (1) **They do not teach their children to speak or think in a way that suits the classroom.**
- (2) **They subscribe to values that impede educational success**
- (3) **They lack interest in their children's education.**

### LANGUAGE

Bernstein (1975) argued that middle-class parents socialise their children into an 'elaborated speech code' which means that **their children can confidently use language that is both abstract and complex.** Consequently **the language use and level of middle-class children is similar to that used by teachers and found in textbooks and exams.** In contrast, **working-class parents socialise their children into 'restricted speech codes' which involve less use of adverbs and adjectives and which fail to fully convey complex meaning.** As a result, **working-class children fail to fully understand teacher exposition or instruction, and are less likely to understand information conveyed in textbooks or exams as quickly as their middle-class peers.** Bernstein suggests that this **linguistic deprivation** is responsible for working-class underachievement.

### WORKING-CLASS CULTURE

Some cultural deprivationists blame **working-class culture** for the educational underachievement of working-class children,. **Sugarman**, for example, argues that working-class culture generally sees the world as an **insecure place.** As a result, **working-class children are encouraged by their parents to think in terms of short-term goals and immediate gratification or reward.** They supposedly rarely think **long-term, for example, in terms of the possibility of going to university.** They are rarely encouraged to make sacrifices, for example, **to work hard now in order to achieve the long-term goal of university.** Instead, they are encouraged to leave

school, to get a job and to start earning. Sugarman argues that consequently **middle-class values stress the future, and highlight aspiration, ambition, long-term planning and the need to sacrifice immediate pleasure in return for rewards years down the line.** In contrast, he argues that working-class values are all about short-term rewards and that consequently **working-class children are reluctant to make such sacrifices and less willing to forego gratification now for future rewards.**

## PARENTAL ATTITUDES

Douglas (1964) claimed that **working-class parents are less interested in their children's education** and consequently less willing to invest time or money. Consequently Douglas argues that **working-class children are poorly motivated and less ambitious than their middle-class peers whose parents take a more active interest in their children's education and who are often heavily involved in Parent-Teacher associations.** Douglas measured parental interest by counting the number of times parents turned up for school parents' evenings.

Feinstein, forty years later in 2008 argued that **middle-class parents are more child-centred than working-class parents.** This was reflected in **greater personal investment in their children.** For example, middle-class parents often

- Sought guidance with child rearing
- **Spent more time in one-to-one interaction with their children**
- **Regularly helped their children with their homework.**
- Set high standards of discipline.
- **Have high expectations of their children.**
- **Praise their children for achievement.**
- Take their children to museums and art galleries.
- Encourage their children to join libraries and clubs.
- Invest in educational toys, books, computers, private tuition and study aids.

## Evaluating cultural deprivation theory

Some sociologists argue that the academic underachievement of working-class children is the **product of material deprivation or poverty** rather than cultural deficiency. Material deprivationist theory is critical of cultural deprivation theory because

1. It **stereotypes all working-class parents as inadequate.**
2. It is **ethnocentric** – it heavily implies that **middle-class parental culture is superior to working-class culture.** It may be that **working-class culture is merely different to** rather than inferior to middle-class culture.

3. Douglas' research methods are problematical. **Working-class parents may be less likely to attend parents' evenings because they work long irregular hours or lack access to transport rather than because they are less interested.**
4. Cultural deprivation theory rarely focuses on the **impact of poverty**. **Peter Robinson (1997) argues that tackling child poverty is the most effective way to tackle working-class underachievement in state schools.**

## **The effects of poverty on schooling**

**David Bull (1980) argues that so-called free state education actually comes with many hidden costs. For example, children from poor families often miss out because their parents do not earn enough to pay for educational supports such as computers and broadband, books and school trips.**

**Families in poverty are more likely to be located in deprived areas in which schools are most likely to be failing. In contrast, middle-class parents can often afford to move into suburban areas in which the best schools (in terms of league table position) are located. Some working-class families may be accommodated in poor-quality and overcrowded housing. Children from such families may lack space for private study. They may also suffer more illness because of poor living conditions and an inadequate diet and consequently more absence from school. Emily Tanner (2016) found that children from poorer families were less likely to attend after-school clubs and sports clubs because of the cost of kit, equipment and transport.**

Other sociological studies have found a strong relationship between poverty and educational underachievement in the following respects.

- **Research by the Sutton Trust found that teenagers from working-class families are up to three times less likely to attend a top university than their middle-class peers because parents cannot afford to support their children through A-levels and the three years of university. The Sutton Trust also found that only 11 per cent of students at Oxbridge come from working-class homes.**
- **Poorer students are more likely to attend local universities and to continue living with their parents.**
- **Quinn et al (2005) found that white working-class males were more likely to drop out of university.**
- **Working-class students are more likely to combine studying for a degree with a part-time job. Those students who combine jobs with study are more likely to drop out of university due to stress.**

- **Nearly four-fifths of middle-class university students receive financial support from their parents compared with only two-fifths of working-class university students.**
- **Callender and Jackson (2005)** found that many bright working-class teenagers do not apply to university because of **fear of debt**.
- **Forsyth and Furlong (2000)** used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to investigate class differences in application to university. About 500 students from a state secondary school completed a questionnaire and a follow-up postal questionnaire nine months later. 41 unstructured interviews were carried out with students identified as coming from poor backgrounds. Postal questionnaires were also sent to parents. Forsyth and Furlong concluded that **working-class students experienced a number of barriers to higher education**. These included **a lack of familiarity with HE** (which meant that they often enrolled on inappropriate courses), **a lack of funds** (which limited their choice of university and their length of time in HE), **a fear of debt** (which deterred some of them from applying) **and a fear of cultural isolation** (which lowered their morale and commitment to higher education). Forsyth and Furlong found that **working-class students were wary of 'elite' universities because they feared they would not fit in**.