AQA A LEVEL SOCIology COURSE COMPANION:

EDUCATION

This A Level Course Companion has been designed specifically to support teaching and learning, taking a systematic approach closely based on the AQA specification. The Education companion takes each point from the specification and breaks it down into sections. Each section makes a clear link to the specification, provides a checklist of what needs to be known and then explains key content, using both classic and some more contemporary studies and examples.

The sections are:

- Consensus theories of education
- Conflict theories of education
- Differential achievement by social class
- "Differential achievement by gender"
- Differential achievement by ethnicity
- Relationships and processes within schools
- Educational policies

Each section includes regular evaluation of theories, studies or perspectives. This is written in the explicit and developed way that students would need to try to emulate in the exam. Each section concludes with a list of possible exam questions along with expert examiner hints. While potential questions are endless (especially in relation to specific wording and the items) all the types of questions that could be asked are included, providing opportunity to write about all the core content.

It is important to remember that in sociology you are encouraged to apply themes, knowledge and analysis across topic areas, including between different substantive topics. When attempting questions from one section, you should always be aware that you can and should use information from other sections. Two key features of this companion help to facilitate this synoptic approach. These are:

- "making the link": where a connection between content in this module and that of another is explicitly explored.
- "links to core themes": where AQA's core themes of socialisation, culture and identity, social differentiation and power and stratification are applied to each area of the specification.

The language is designed to be reader-friendly, yet packed with key terminology and the sort of academic style that A Level students need to develop in order to excel in their exams.
DIFFERENTIAL ACHIEVEMENT BY SOCIAL CLASS

Specification: differential educational achievement of social groups by social class, gender and ethnicity in contemporary society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Describe differences in educational achievement by social class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Explain, analyse and evaluate how out-of-school factors influence differences in educational achievement by social class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Explain, analyse and evaluate how in-school factors influence differences in educational achievement by social class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Explain, analyse and evaluate how material factors influence differences in educational achievement by social class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Explain, analyse and evaluate how cultural factors influence differences in educational achievement by social class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The government collects a great deal of data about educational achievement. However, it does not directly collect in relation to social class. Social class is a notoriously difficult concept to operationalise as there is some disagreement about how classes should be defined and measured. However, one useful way to consider education data is to look at achievement in relation to those who are eligible for free school meals (FSM). FSM eligibility is means tested based on household income.

Measured in this way, it is clear that there is a significant achievement gap between those eligible for FSM and the rest. At GCSE level that gap has been quite consistent at between 26 and 28% for the last decade. For example, in 2014/15 60% of pupils not eligible for FSM got 5 GCSEs at A*-C, compared with 33% of those who were eligible. While this is a shocking difference (those with a higher household income are almost twice as likely to get 5 GCSEs at A*-C) some suggest that these figures might even understate the differential achievement as pupils from higher-income households are also more likely to take the more challenging “eBacc” subjects at GCSE, whereas for much of this period schools were able to get improved GCSE scores by entering lower-ability pupils for less challenging courses including some BTEC courses which counted for multiple GCSEs and included no examinations.

Other studies have suggested that some progress is being made with narrowing the achievement gap, although they present a complex picture where in fact things are getting worse for the most disadvantaged pupils, despite some progress on class differential achievement overall.

Over the coming sections we will read about a number of achievement gaps in UK education, but today it is still social class which is by far the biggest determinant of educational outcomes.

There have been various attempts to explain these differences. A view that is unpopular among sociologists is that intelligence (and so-called intelligence quotient - IQ) is inherited, genetically, and therefore middle-class pupils are simply more intelligent than working-class pupils because they have more intelligent parents. This leads to a classic nature vs. nurture debate. People point to research by both Jensen and Eysenck including a study which found that identical twins reared in different environments have very similar IQs, although their study has been criticised extensively. Jensen argued that 80% of intelligence was genetic. There have been multiple criticisms of the reliability and validity of IQ tests. Can any test really measure IQ? Most tests also test knowledge of the style of questions asked. People can improve their IQ score by practicing the tests: practice does not actually make them more intelligent.
Therefore, if you have been introduced to similar sorts of questions or conundrums before you will appear to be more intelligent than those who have not. An alternative “nature” argument is one where material circumstances and the environment go hand-in-hand with nature: poor health, including poor diet during pregnancy, can impact IQ, according some doctors.

Sociologists accept that they cannot discount genetic or other natural phenomena but are able to confidently explain that it does not provide anything like the full picture. For example, Douglas (1964) was able to demonstrate that a middle-class child of “average” intelligence was much more likely to pass the 11+ exam than a working-class pupil of “average” intelligence. The 11+ was an exam which determined which secondary school children attended and was meant to separate the academic from the practical. (We shall consider this in further detail in the Educational Policies section). So something happens to children, relating to their social class, that impacts their educational achievement.

Sociologists seek to explain these differences as being a result of either in-school (or internal) factors or out-of-school (or external) factors. This in turn relates to whether this relates to structural factors – the way society is organised – or to processes that occur within schools themselves.

Sociologists further look at material and cultural explanations. That is, whether the differences are because working-class children have less money than middle-class children, or because they have different attitudes or values.

**Out of school factors**

The key out-school factor that might impact differential achievement by social class is **material deprivation**. Material deprivation is the inability to afford basic resources. This will mean pupils are unable to afford things like sufficient food, heating or clothing and educational resources, which is subsequently very likely to affect educational performance and lead to underachievement. Research shows that poor diet and under-nourishment can lead to poor educational performance and clearly poor health and subsequent poor attendance at school has a direct impact on achievement. Access to the internet, books, a quiet place to work are all important **material factors**. Furthermore, it is more likely that working-class pupils will need to undertake employment alongside their studies in order to bring in more income into the household. While a small amount of part-time employment can be beneficial educationally, working too many hours can seriously impact educational performance, both because there is insufficient time for study, and also because pupils are too tired to concentrate at school. Pupils from households with higher income can afford educational visits and also to pay for private tuition.

In contrast to **material factors** there are also **cultural factors** that can impact educational achievement. Some argue that working-class pupils are likely to be **culturally deprived**, often because of inadequate socialisation. They argue that the norms and values of many working-class families are not those that lead to getting the best out of the education system. This argument comes both from a Marxist/neo-Marxist perspective (the idea that **cultural capital** gives middle-class pupils advantages) and from New Right views, that see particularly “underclass” households as reproducing values and attitudes that are detrimental to educational achievement. These arguments have led to some proposing **compensatory education** policies, which we will consider in the Educational Policies section.

It is argued by some sociologists that there is a significant cultural difference between middle-class and working-class pupils. From a right-wing perspective, one aspect of this is said to be that working-class pupils expect **immediate gratification**, whereas middle-class pupils understand the benefits of **deferred gratification**. The impact of this is that working-class pupils prefer to leave school as soon as they can and get a job, while middle-class pupils will delay paid employment in order to attain higher qualifications and get higher-paid occupations as a result. This approach appears blames working-class families themselves
for differential achievement by social class. This idea is particularly associated with the sociologist Sugarman (1970) who was influenced by Hyman (1967) who argued that working-class families were less interested in social mobility than middle-class families. This approach to cultural deprivation is presented as an alternative to Marxist, structuralist explanations for why the children of working-class parents tend to go through the education system and enter working-class occupations. It is not, they argue, because the education system exists to reproduce class inequalities, but instead because working-class children do not appreciate how to get the best out of the system. Douglas (1964) argued that working-class parents took less interest in school and education and therefore pushed their children less and indeed often encouraged them to focus on goals outside school and education.

An alternative, left-wing consideration of cultural deprivation comes from Pierre Bourdieu and his concept of habitus. Habitus refers to the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviours of a particular social group or social class. The idea is often, then, associated with the idea of cultural capital. That is, that the middle-class have a cultural advantage in the education system because they have particular attitudes and behaviours that are deemed superior or correct by other middle-class people (and that tends to include teachers, examiners, employers, etc.) For Bourdieu and Bernstein it is not that the cultural norms of the middle-class are better but that they are better rewarded. The knowledge, skills and experiences gained in a middle-class habitus are more useful in education than working-class ones (regardless of which is more useful in other aspects of life).

Another important factor is social capital. Social capital refers to the networks and relationships a person possesses based on class membership, which enables them to build and maintain relationships with others. For example; a middle class individual with high social capital will be able to build and maintain productive positive relationships with teachers. Teachers sometimes know pupils’ parents socially, or are aware of them and have different expectations as a result of this. Pupils can sometimes succeed in educational tasks because of out-of-school social connections who have relevant specialist or professional knowledge.

Evaluating out of school factors
- A lot of government policies have been put in place to try and resolve out-of-school factors over many years, and yet the statistics remain stubbornly clear: social class is perhaps the main predictor of educational achievement. Policies directly designed to combat material factors included Educational Maintenance Allowances, Pupil Premium, free school dinners, etc. While some policies have been given longer to succeed than others, it is clear that governments have tried to compensate for this and that, while they may have had various useful impacts, they have not shifted the statistics. Similarly, in terms of cultural deprivation, policies such as Surestart have been put in place to try and deal with issues relating to parenting, etc.
- However, while governments and schools will try hard to ensure that those without material means are not disadvantaged they cannot prevent those who do have the material means from purchasing an advantage, whether this be the small minority of pupils who attend fee-paying schools, or the many more who pay for private tuition or are able to buy or access extra resources of various sorts. As such, it is highly likely that wealth or the lack of it will have an impact on education attainment. People would not spend many thousands of pounds on this wide range of educational services if it did not pay any dividends in improved results.
- There is something of a chicken/egg situation with some of the cultural factors. Working-class children may have preferred immediate gratification, been less concerned with social mobility and have parents more interested in them finding work than continuing in education because that was realistic. If working-class children predominantly do not succeed as well in school and are less likely to go onto higher education, etc. then such pupils and their parents might be being realistic in not focusing on
such goals, rather than suffering from cultural deprivation. Furthermore, it might sometimes simply be a material necessity. A family might need the child’s income and could not afford for them to stay in education any longer than is essential. As such what might at first appear to be a cultural phenomenon might in fact be a reaction to or a result of material factors.

**In school factors**

As well as factors outside school affecting the achievement of pupils, depending on their social class, so factors within the school can have a significant impact. These are often suggested by interactionist sociologists who argue that it is not necessarily the structures of society that impacts educational achievement, but the relationships and interactions between pupils and between teachers and pupils. Some neo-Marxists agree with interactionists that these relationships can have a significant impact. Some of the theories and studies relating to this are detailed in a later section (*Relationships and Processes Within Schools*) and therefore this section tends to give more of an overview.

One important example of an in-school factor is labelling. Labelling theory was developed by the interactionist sociologist Howard Becker in relation to the concept of deviance, but other sociologists have developed the concept in the context of education. While details about labelling and the concept of a self-fulfilling prophecy will be considered in detail later, the broad idea is that teachers subconsciously label their pupils. Some of them are labelled as clever, well-behaved, etc. and others are labelled as trouble, naughty or stupid. The way the teacher will interact with the pupils differently, depending on how they label them and the student will in turn react to that labelling and one way they can react is to internalise it, accept it and live up to it. The important point here is that teachers might be more likely to label working-class pupils (especially working-class boys) negatively and therefore could create low achievement by expecting it.

Another important internal factor is the existence of anti-school subcultures. Theories and studies about this, such as Paul Willis’ “Learning to Labour” are detailed in other sections, but the key point is that some students (particularly working-class boys, according to Willis) form subcultures within the school that are hostile to the school. For them, praise from teachers is bad, getting into trouble is good. The norms and values of the subculture are of messing about and avoiding work and to welcome poor grades. The subcultures have little interest in achievement and therefore it is unsurprising that the students who are likely to form such subcultures are also statistically likely to underperform.

Another in-school factor is suggested by Basil Bernstein and it is the idea that teachers, textbooks and external examiners use a particular language code (the elaborate code) which middle-class pupils are also able to use, while working-class pupils tend to use the restricted code. Language codes are the different ways people communicate and Bernstein argues that middle-class pupils can switch between casual speech (the restricted code) and the elaborate code that is used in more formal situations. This is simply a result of the language codes used in the home and the life experiences that they have had (and therefore this links with the concept of cultural capital).

Working-class pupils, in contrast, tend to only use the restricted code. That is the code of informal spoken English that often features colloquialisms and idiomatic turns of phrase, non-standard grammar and simplistic sentence structure. The elaborate code often uses unexpected words and phrases, or uses words to mean something different from its usual meaning. This form of language often finds its way into textbooks and exam papers and therefore middle-class pupils are at an immediate advantage. To give an example, from an A Level Politics exam paper from several years ago:

“The powers of the prime minister are considerable.” Discuss.
A significant minority of candidates did not understand the meaning of the word considerable in this context. Whereas many pupils were able to see that this was a question they were well-prepared for (evaluating whether or not the prime minister was very powerful) others got into difficulties evaluating whether or not people considered the powers of the prime minister. The second group had not misread the question but they had tried to make sense of it in the restricted code. The writer of the question would not have tried to trip up the candidates who misunderstood; the meaning of the question was obvious to them because it was in the language code that they routinely used. The students who understood the question would have been surprised that some of their classmates did not: people tend not to be conscious of their own use of language codes. Teachers and exam writers tend to spot if they’ve used unusual or complex vocabulary and provide a definition or glossary. But this isn’t about difficult vocabulary, but about sentences and phrases that use familiar words but in unfamiliar ways.

In fact, teachers will often use sentences and refer pupils to articles and sections in textbooks that are largely meaningless to some of their pupils. This is not because those pupils are less intelligent than those that understand them. If the teacher taught the lesson in French and some pupils in the class spoke French and therefore understood, that is not necessarily because they are more intelligent, they just happened to have learnt that language.

Evaluating in school factors

- In reality, it is hard to fully divide factors up between in-school and out-of-school as both impact each other. Something like language codes for instance is really both an out-of-school and in-school factor as it relates both to how people speak at home and in school. Anti-school subcultures might explain why working-class pupils underperform, but the question of why working-class pupils join them is more complex and must at least in part relate to matters outside school.

Links to Core Themes

- Clearly these sections on different social groups relate very closely to the core theme of stratification. However, in the case of differential achievement in education, it is this form of stratification – social class – which is by far the most directly influential. It is important to consider who these different identities intersect. Social class is very clearly a factor in determining educational achievement, but it also works alongside ethnicity and gender.

Possible Exam Questions

1. Outline two cultural factors that may affect social class differences in educational achievement (4 marks)

**EXAM HINT:** Help the examiner out and make your two points really distinct. Bullet points on separate lines is a good idea. Don’t expect the examiner to try and dig your two points out of a paragraph where they’re all jumbled up together.

2. Outline two in-school factors that may affect social class differences in educational achievement (4 marks)

**EXAM HINT:** Remember, while you need to make sure you finish off your point and get both marks each time, these answers need to be brief. Do not give the examiner paragraphs here. For example: “labelling; anti-school subcultures” would get at least 2 marks. “Labelling working-class children leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy; working-class boys joining anti-school subcultures and therefore not placing any value on educational achievement” would get all 4.
3. Outline three material factors that may affect social class differences in educational achievement (6 marks)

4. Outline three out-of-school factors that may affect social class differences in educational achievement (6 marks)

5.

ITEM B:

There is still a significant gap between educational outcomes for people of different social classes. Children with the lowest household incomes are eligible for free school meals. 15% of boys and 10% of girls eligible for free school meals leave school with less than 5 GCSEs. For both genders this is three times as many as for those who are not eligible for free school meals. Therefore, it is clear that how much money a family has is a major factor in how well pupils succeed at school. Sociologists disagree on why this might be the case.

Many sociologists suggest that it is pupils’ experiences in school that determine whether they are successful or not, while others disagree and suggest that pupils’ home life and family background has a larger impact.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the view that differential educational achievement by social class is mainly due to in-school factors. (30 marks)