**ITEM A: OFFICIAL STATISTICS AND ACHIEVEMENT BY ETHNICITY**

There are distinct differences between the performances of different ethnic groups in the education system. White British students tend to do particularly poorly, as do Black Caribbean and some Asian groups such as Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Indians, Chinese pupils and the white middle classes tend to do significantly better however.

Schools are obliged to keep records of issues such as student attainment and also their ethnicity so official statistics can prove a highly representative method to study the issues relating to ethnicity and underachievement. As they are a secondary research method they also save the researcher time and money.

However there are also disadvantages such as the fact it may not focus on the specific issues required for the research and as it is quantitative data is does not necessarily provide a valid picture of achievement by ethnicity.

**Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of official statistics for the study of educational achievement amongst different ethnic groups. (20 marks)**

By official statistics, sociologists are referring to a quantitative form of data which is numerical and allows for clear patterns or trends to be drawn. This is a particularly useful method in many ways for studying the issue of educational achievement amongst ethnic groups for a number of reasons.

Firstly, from a practical perspective the research method is a secondary one (Item A), which means that the sociologist is not conducting the research - rather they are relying on existing research which has been compiled (often by the government or private research organisations). The most significant advantage of this is that it is hugely representative as the government requires all schools in the state sector to keep data regarding the achievement of their students and also relating to their ethnicity in the interests of equal opportunities which is one of the legal requirements placed on schools (Item A). As such the education system is a ready-made sampling frame and as the government has already compiled data relating to schools across the country it is hugely representative as the sample size is considerably bigger than any sample that the sociologist themselves could have achieved. This means that significant patterns and trends can be drawn relating to ethnicity and educational achievement as the data already exists in quantitative form and so generalisations can easily be made. This means that official statistics have a low cost to the researcher and means they do not have to spend much time conducting research themselves - rather their time is spent analysing existing data. This means that official statistics have a
significant practical advantage when investigating the links between ethnicity and educational achievement.

There are also ethical advantages of using the research method because the researcher does not make contact with any students themselves and so they do not have practical issues relating to gaining access to the schools or finding a gatekeeper and there is also no necessity to undertake a DBS check which could be costly and time consuming for the researcher. Similarly, the method is unlikely to cause any direct harm to students and this is important to consider as schools have a duty of care to students and they are seen as vulnerable young people due to their age. As the method does not involve any direct contact with students the researcher is unlikely to face any issues relating to sensitivity or offence and they are also able to ensure both anonymity and confidentiality for the students as they do not receive any identifying information about them from the secondary source - they may simply know their ethnicity and their achievement details.

However from a theoretical perspective interpretivist sociologists are critical of the method as they may see it as reducing an important social issue such as the underachievement of ethnic minorities to a purely quantitative exercise and therefore they do not understand the complex social interactions that go on within the school setting and this means they are unable to achieve a full picture of the achievement of different ethnic groups - in particular the reasons behind differences in achievement. This may mean that any social policies introduced to overcome issues of ethnic underachievement which have been identified by the study are unlikely to truly solve the problem.

There is also a theoretical consideration in terms of validity and reliability as the researcher has not conducted the research themselves and so they may have to trust that the data has been collected appropriately and provides a true picture of ethnicity and educational achievement. There may also be a very specific area of focus for the research project that is not met by the existing secondary research (Item A) and so the sociologist may need to carry out their own research after all. However, it is important to note that generally reliability is seen as a key advantage of the positivist research methods.

Based on the evidence therefore, the use of official statistics to study ethnicity and educational achievement is useful to an extent. There are significant practical advantages in terms of accessing the data as it has previously been collected from a large sample and therefore generalisations can be made at a particularly low cost to the researcher (and within a much

Further analysis of the research context and the appropriateness of the research method for that context.

There is reference to the specific research issue.

An analysis of the research method directly in response to the school setting and the specific research issue, with synoptic links made to social policy.

Further reference to the item and a clear evaluative structure which focuses on sociological approaches such as positivism.

A clear conclusion that summarises the issues in response to the original question.
smaller time frame). There are also significant advantages ethically due to the lack of direct contact with the educational setting by the researcher and this overcomes ethical issues relating to harm, sensitivity, consent, access to vulnerable students etc. It also has theoretical advantages therefore as the lack of a researcher in the school means there is less of a chance of bias being introduced by issues such as social desirability or the Hawthorne effect. However, it is important to note that as the method is purely quantitative it can be heavily criticised as it does not truly appreciate the complexities of the social issue it is investigating - rather it paints a superficial picture of the general trends.

[826 words]

Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20**

*This answer is detailed in its analysis and uses a range of practical, ethical and theoretical considerations in its assessment of the usefulness of official statistics. The item has been referenced a number of times and there is strong use of supporting sociological concepts. There is an evaluative structure and a clear focus on both the research context and the research issue.*