

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Education and social mobility A2

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Last checked 6 October 2026

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What you need to know

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

1. **Explain equal opportunity and meritocracy:** what it means for everyone to have a fair chance in education, and the idea that rewards should go to ability plus effort rather than to family background.
2. **Judge how far education systems are meritocratic today,** using evidence on who succeeds in school and who reaches the top jobs.
3. **Explain why education matters for life chances,** and what happens to individuals and to society when pupils **underachieve** (do less well than their ability suggests they could).
4. **Use evidence and arguments about the links between education and social mobility:** whether schooling helps people move up the class structure, or keeps them where their parents were.

Why particular groups (class, ethnicity, gender) achieve more or less is covered in more depth in the attainment notes; here that material is used for one purpose, to show whether education opens or blocks routes up.

Understand it

Social mobility: the words you need

Social mobility is movement of people between positions in a system of social stratification, usually between social classes, measured by occupation.

- **Upward** mobility is moving into a higher class (a factory worker's daughter becoming a solicitor); **downward** mobility is the reverse.
- **Intergenerational** mobility compares a person's class with their parents' class. **Intragenerational** mobility is movement within one person's own working life (starting as a clerk and ending as a manager).
- **Absolute** mobility is the total amount of movement in a society. **Relative** mobility compares the **chances** of people from different class origins reaching the same destination. A society can have a lot of absolute mobility (many people move up) while relative chances stay unequal (middle-class children are still far more likely to end up at the top).

- An **open** society has high mobility and status is mostly **achieved** (earned). A **closed** society has little mobility and status is mostly **ascribed** (fixed at birth, as in a caste system).
- **Life chances** (a term from Weber) are a person's chances of getting the things a society values: a good income, secure work, decent housing, good health, even a long life.

In modern societies, qualifications are the main gateway to well-paid jobs, so education is the main **route** of mobility. The whole debate in this topic is whether that route is open to everyone.

Equal opportunity and meritocracy

Equality of opportunity means everyone has the same chance to succeed, whatever their class, gender, ethnicity or religion. It is different from **equality of outcome**, where everyone ends up with similar results. Equal opportunity accepts unequal results, as long as the race is fair.

- **Formal** equality of opportunity: the rules are the same for all (free schooling, the same exams, no legal bar on any group).
- **Real** (substantive) equality of opportunity: everyone actually starts in the same place, which needs action on poverty, home background and school quality.

A **meritocracy** is a system where positions are given on **merit**, usually understood as **ability plus effort**. The word was coined by **Michael Young** in a 1958 satire that warned that a society sorted by tested ability could become as rigid and unequal as one sorted by birth.

Turner contrasted two ways education can produce mobility:

- **Sponsored mobility**: an elite picks out a few "promising" children early (for example by a selective exam at 11) and trains them for the top.
- **Contest mobility**: everyone stays in an open race for as long as possible and the winners emerge late.

The case that education is meritocratic and promotes mobility

These arguments come mainly from **functionalists**, **social democrats** and the **New Right**.

- **Davis and Moore**: education **sifts and sorts** pupils by ability so that the most talented fill the most functionally important jobs. Unequal rewards motivate them to train. This only works if the sorting is fair, so functionalists assume it mostly is.
- **Parsons**: school judges every pupil by the same **universalistic standards** (the same tests and rules), so status is **achieved** rather than ascribed. The value of **equality of opportunity** is learned at school.
- **Expansion**: free, compulsory secondary schooling, more universities and more qualifications at every level have opened routes that did not exist a few generations ago. Many graduates are the first in their family to go to university.
- **Policy: social democrats** such as **Halsey** argued that wasted working-class talent is a loss to the economy, so the state should widen access: non-selective (comprehensive) schools, grants for students, and **compensatory education**, which gives extra resources to disadvantaged areas or groups (Head Start in the USA from the 1960s, Educational Priority Areas and later Sure Start in the UK).

- **Evidence of mobility:** **Goldthorpe** and colleagues (the Oxford Mobility Study of men in England and Wales) found a great deal of **absolute upward** mobility in the mid-twentieth century, and more recent analyses, such as **Heath's**, found modest signs that class origin matters a little less than before.
- **Saunders** argued that Britain is close to a meritocracy: in his analysis of a large cohort study, a child's measured **ability** and **effort** predicted their adult class better than their parents' class did. Differences in outcome are therefore "unequal but fair".
- **Achievement of other groups:** girls now outperform boys in many countries, and some ethnic minority groups outperform the majority, which suggests ascribed characteristics are not fixed barriers.
- The **New Right** add that markets in education (parental choice, competition between schools, league tables) raise standards for everyone and reward individual effort.

The case that education is not meritocratic and limits mobility

These arguments come mainly from **Marxists**, Bourdieu, interactionists and studies of material and cultural deprivation.

Mobility is mostly "room at the top", not fairer chances. Goldthorpe found that the upward mobility of the mid-twentieth century happened because the number of professional and managerial jobs grew. When the top expands, people must be drawn up from below. But working-class sons' **relative** chances of reaching the top, compared with middle-class sons, barely changed. **Halsey, Heath and Ridge** (*Origins and Destinations*) found the same in education: free secondary schooling lifted working-class qualifications in absolute terms, yet service-class boys remained far more likely to stay on and reach university. **Paterson and Iannelli**, comparing parts of the UK, found that expanding education raised everyone's qualifications but did little to weaken the link between class origin and destination. **Breen** and Goldthorpe criticised Saunders: even comparing children of the same ability and effort, class origin still affects where they end up.

Marxism: meritocracy is a myth.

- **Bowles and Gintis:** family background predicts adult income better than test scores. Schools present success as earned, so those who fail blame themselves; this **legitimises** inequality instead of reducing it. The **correspondence principle** means working-class pupils are trained for obedient, low-level work.
- **Althusser:** education is an **ideological state apparatus**; it reproduces a class-divided workforce while making the outcome look fair. Each time this is used, say **how** it limits mobility (pupils accept low positions as deserved, so the class structure is reproduced).

Bourdieu: cultural, social and economic capital.

- **Cultural capital:** middle-class children arrive with the tastes, language and knowledge the school values, so they look more able. **Sullivan** found that pupils who read widely and took part in cultural activities did better in exams, and these pupils were more often middle class, though a class gap remained after allowing for them.
- **Social capital:** contacts and networks (relatives in professions, work placements through family friends, private-school "old boy" networks) give access to top jobs whatever the qualifications.
- **Economic capital:** money buys private schooling, tutoring and houses near good schools.

- Capital can be converted: cultural and economic capital become qualifications, which become well-paid jobs, so class position is **reproduced**.

Material deprivation. Poverty means a poor diet and health, overcrowded homes without a quiet place to study, and pressure to leave school early to earn. "Free" state schooling has hidden costs (uniform, trips, equipment, transport), as **Bull** and later **Tanner** and colleagues showed, which poorer families struggle to meet. **Flaherty** linked poverty to stigma, such as some eligible pupils not taking free school meals. **Feinstein**, using cohort data, found that bright children from poor homes who scored highly as toddlers were overtaken by about age 10 by lower-scoring children from better-off homes. **Mortimore and Whitty** argued that school improvement alone cannot make up for disadvantage outside school.

Cultural deprivation (a contested view). Some sociologists blame working-class home culture: **Bernstein** contrasted the **restricted code** (short, context-bound speech) with the **elaborated code** (explicit, detailed speech used by teachers and textbooks); **Douglas** linked lower attainment to less parental interest; **Sugarman** pointed to fatalism and preferring immediate gratification. Critics reply that this blames working-class families for a school culture built around the middle class (Bourdieu's point), but either way the playing field is not level.

Inside the school.

- **Labelling** and the **self-fulfilling prophecy**: teachers judge pupils against an "ideal pupil" (usually middle class), label others as less able, and pupils come to live up, or down, to the label (**Becker**; **Rosenthal and Jacobson**).
- **Streaming** (placing pupils in classes by general ability for all subjects) and **setting** (by ability in each subject): working-class and some ethnic minority pupils are over-represented in low groups. **Ball** (*Beachside Comprehensive*) found lower bands were taught differently and expected less of; **Keddie** found teachers gave lower streams simpler, practical knowledge; **Hargreaves** and **Lacey** found low streams developed **anti-school subcultures**.
- **Educational triage**: **Gillborn and Youdell** found schools under league-table pressure sorted pupils into those who would pass anyway, borderline pupils worth extra effort, and "hopeless cases" who were given little; entering pupils for lower-tier exams also capped the grades they could reach.

Selection and marketisation.

- **Selection** often favours the advantaged: middle-class children dominated selective (grammar) schools under the UK's old tripartite system, and entrance exams reward those with tuition and cultural capital. Policies meant to help mobility can backfire: low-status **vocational** routes may steer working-class pupils away from the academic routes that lead to the top.
- **Marketisation** (parental choice, competition, league tables, private providers): **Ball** and **Gewirtz** found "privileged/skilled choosers" (middle-class parents with time, money and know-how) win places at the best schools, while "disconnected choosers" take the nearest school. **Brown** called this **parentocracy**: success depends on parents' wealth and wishes, not the pupil's ability and effort. **Leech and Campos** showed parents moving house into the catchment areas of popular schools ("selection by mortgage"). Popular schools can **cream-skim** able pupils to stay high in the league tables. Higher education fees favour families who can pay.

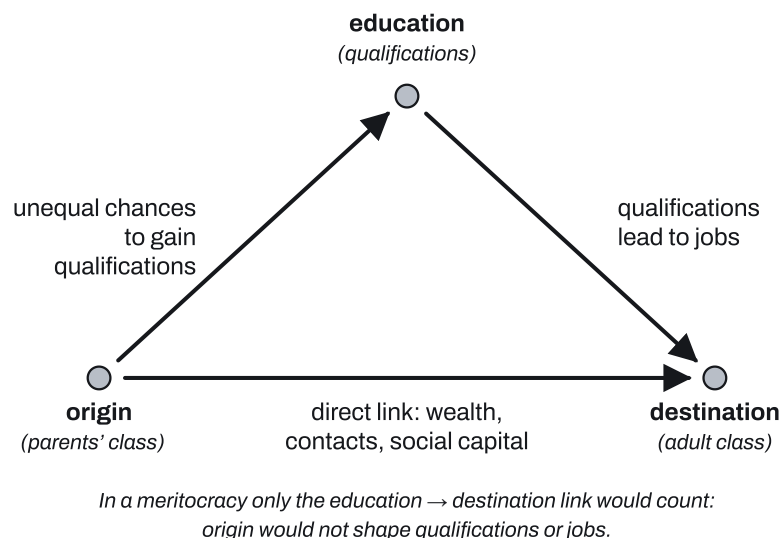
Even qualifications may not be enough.

- **Qualification inflation (Collins' "credential society")**: as more people gain degrees, employers demand ever higher qualifications for the same jobs, so the middle class stays ahead by moving to postgraduate degrees and elite universities.
- **Social closure**: groups protect their positions by controlling entry (expensive training, unpaid internships, recruitment through networks), so working-class graduates may still be blocked.
- **Class combines with other inequalities**: working-class pupils from some ethnic groups, or girls in societies where they are expected to leave school early, face double barriers.

How meritocratic are education systems today?

The honest answer is "**partly**", and more in some places than others".

- **For**: free mass schooling, rising qualifications for every group, girls' success, policies such as compensatory education, and large numbers of first-generation graduates.
- **Against**: class gaps in results open early and persist (government statistics in England show pupils eligible for free school meals do worse on average, and large surveys of school leavers such as the **Youth Cohort Study** found the same pattern); private schools and elite universities are dominated by the advantaged; relative mobility has changed little.
- **Around the world**: in many low-income countries school fees, distance, the cost of a child's lost labour and early marriage for girls stop many talented children reaching secondary school; paid private tutoring alongside school (sometimes called **shadow education**) gives better-off families an edge almost everywhere.



Sociologists of mobility, such as Goldthorpe and Breen, study three links between **origin**, **education** and **destination**. In a meritocracy, origin would not affect qualifications, qualifications alone would decide jobs, and there would be no direct shortcut from origin to destination. Most arguments **against** the view that education promotes mobility attack one of these links: deprivation, cultural capital, labelling and markets strengthen the left-hand link; qualification inflation weakens the right-hand link; social capital and networks keep the bottom link alive.

Education, life chances and underachievement

Qualifications shape life chances because most well-paid, secure jobs require them. Across many countries, people with more education earn more on average, are less often unemployed, have better health and live longer, and take more part in politics and community life.

Consequences of underachievement for the individual:

- low-paid, insecure work or unemployment, and fewer chances to retrain later;
- limited upward mobility, so disadvantage passes to the next generation (a **cycle of deprivation**);
- poorer health and housing, and greater risk of social exclusion (being cut off from the normal life of society);
- lower self-esteem: in a system that claims to be meritocratic, those who fail tend to blame themselves.

Consequences for society:

- **wasted talent**: able people never reach the jobs that need them, which social democrats say lowers productivity and economic growth;
- higher spending on welfare benefits and health care, and lower tax revenue;
- links between low attainment, exclusion and crime;
- **inequality reproduced** across generations, which can weaken social cohesion and trust in the fairness of society;
- Marxists add that underachievement suits capitalism by supplying a pool of cheap labour, while functionalists see it as a failure of role allocation.

Key facts and formulas

There is no formula list in Sociology. "Learn it" means you must remember it.

Key term	Status
Social mobility: upward and downward; intergenerational (compared with parents) and intragenerational (within one career); absolute (total movement) and relative (chances compared between classes)	Learn it
Equality of opportunity (fair start, formal or real) versus equality of outcome; meritocracy = ability plus effort (Michael Young coined it); life chances (Weber)	Learn it
Turner: sponsored mobility (elite chosen early) versus contest mobility (open race)	Learn it
For mobility: Davis and Moore (sifting and sorting), Parsons (universalistic standards, achieved status), Halsey (social democratic, compensatory education), Saunders (ability and effort, "unequal but fair")	Learn it

Key term	Status
Goldthorpe: much absolute upward mobility from "more room at the top", little change in relative chances; Halsey, Heath and Ridge (<i>Origins and Destinations</i>); Paterson and Iannelli; Breen	Learn it
Against: Bowles and Gintis (myth of meritocracy), Althusser (ideological state apparatus), Bourdieu (cultural, social and economic capital), Sullivan (cultural capital and results)	Learn it
Material deprivation: Bull and Tanner (hidden costs of schooling), Flaherty (poverty and stigma), Feinstein (early ability overtaken by class), Mortimore and Whitty (schools cannot offset disadvantage alone)	Learn it
Cultural deprivation: Bernstein (restricted and elaborated codes), Douglas (parental interest), Sugarman (fatalism, immediate gratification)	Learn it
In school: labelling and self-fulfilling prophecy (Becker, Rosenthal and Jacobson), streaming and setting (Ball, Keddie, Hargreaves, Lacey), educational triage (Gillborn and Youdell)	Learn it
Markets: parentocracy (Brown), skilled and disconnected choosers (Ball, Gewirtz), selection by mortgage (Leech and Campos), cream-skimming; qualification inflation (Collins); social closure	Learn it
Origin, education, destination: three links that must all be fair for a meritocracy	Learn it
Paper 3: Question 1 $2 \times 2 = 4$; Question 3 $2 \times 6 = 12$; Question 4 essay AO1 10, AO2 6, AO3 10	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 9 questions for this topic (2021–2026, all from Paper 3), 8 different (Paper 31 repeated Paper 33 in November 2022). None mix two types.

Question type	Questions
Give two arguments against a stated view (12 marks)	5
Evaluate a view about education and mobility (26-mark essay)	3
Describe two ways (4 marks)	1

1. Give two arguments against a stated view (12 marks) (5 questions)

Always Question 3. Views quoted (counting tagged questions): education or schools help working-class or talented working-class pupils achieve upward mobility (3); marketisation increases equality of opportunity (1); education ensures the most suitable people fill the important roles (1).

Each argument is marked separately out of 6 by levels: 1–2 for a bare point, 3–4 for a clear point whose material is not fully linked, **5–6** for a clear, developed argument supported by concepts, theory or evidence, with its relevance stated.

1. Write **two** separate paragraphs ("The first argument against this view...", "A second argument...").
2. Make each a **different** argument, and give each a broad heading (for example "material deprivation" or "cultural capital") rather than listing many small points.
3. In each, name the material (a sociologist, study or concept) and explain how it works.
4. End each with a sentence saying why this **undermines the view**, using its key words (upward mobility, equality of opportunity, most suitable people).
5. Write nothing in support of the view, and no functionalist introduction: it earns no marks.

Ready-made arguments against each view:

- **Against "education helps (talented) working-class pupils move up"**: access is limited (fees, the pressure to earn, no good school nearby, selection that favours the advantaged); material deprivation (Bull, Tanner, Flaherty, Feinstein); cultural deprivation (Bernstein's restricted code, Douglas); lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu, Sullivan); labelling, streaming and setting lower expectations and motivation (Becker, Keddie, Ball); even with qualifications, mobility is limited by social capital, qualification inflation and social closure; Marxists say school exists to reproduce the class structure, so mobility for the class as a whole is a myth (Bowles and Gintis, Althusser).
- **Against "marketisation increases equality of opportunity"**: middle-class cultural capital makes parents skilled choosers (parentocracy: Brown, Ball, Gewirtz); middle-class social capital gives useful contacts in the school market; economic capital buys private schooling, tutoring and houses in good catchment areas (Leech and Campos), and pays university fees and living costs; schools chasing league-table places select pupils who seem to have cultural capital, for example through entrance exams (cream-skimming); league tables encourage educational triage, so pupils judged least able are neglected (Gillborn and Youdell).
- **Against "education puts the most suitable people in the important roles"**: unequal access by class, ethnicity or gender means many suitable people never compete; under-attainment through material factors; through cultural factors (cultural capital or cultural deprivation); through in-school factors (labelling, streaming, type of school, subject choice steering pupils away from some roles); tests, exams and recruitment may measure class background rather than suitability (IQ tests have been criticised as culturally biased); recruitment through networks and social capital, and social closure; schools may not keep pace with a changing economy; and **Tumin's** point that "important" is a value judgement, so capable people may be drawn away from vital but low-paid work.

2. Evaluate a view about education and mobility (26-mark essay) (3 questions)

Always Question 4. Views asked (counting tagged questions): education enables working-class children or pupils to achieve (upward) social mobility (2); education systems are a barrier to social mobility (1).

The 2023 and 2024 essays were marked **AO1** knowledge and understanding 10, **AO2** interpretation and application 6, **AO3** analysis and evaluation 10, so $10 + 6 + 10 = 26$. The March 2021 essay used one combined scheme of five levels (top level 22–26), rewarding the same things.

1. **Introduction** (two or three sentences): define social mobility and say which kind matters (for working-class pupils, **upward intergenerational** mobility); name the view's source (functionalist and social democratic for "enables", Marxist for "barrier").
2. **For the view** (4–5 paragraphs): each a point, explained, backed by a named sociologist, study, policy or concept, and ended with a sentence tying it to the question's exact words.
3. **Against the view** (4–5 paragraphs): written as **criticisms of the view**, not as a separate summary of another theory.
4. **Conclusion**: a reasoned judgement on **how far** the view holds: for which groups, which kind of mobility (absolute or relative), and where or when.

If the view is that education enables mobility:

- **For**: absolute intergenerational mobility has risen (Goldthorpe, Heath); Davis and Moore (meritocratic role allocation); Parsons (universalistic standards, achieved status); evidence of working-class achievement and first-generation graduates; compensatory education and other policies widening opportunity (Halsey); more qualifications at every level; Saunders (ability and effort matter more than class).
- **Against**: relative mobility has hardly changed ("more room at the top"; Halsey, Heath and Ridge; Paterson and Lannelli; Breen); the Marxist view that education prepares a labour force for capitalism (Althusser, Bowles and Gintis); the myth of meritocracy; Bourdieu on cultural capital; material deprivation (Feinstein, Flaherty, Bull, Tanner, Mortimore and Whitty); marketisation (Leech and Campos, Ball); policies meant to help can backfire (grammar schools, vocational routes); ethnic and gender disadvantage reinforced by class; qualification inflation and social closure.

If the view is that education is a barrier, swap the two lists: the Marxist, Bourdieu and deprivation material supports the view, and the functionalist, social democratic and mobility evidence argues against it.

Evaluation moves that lift AO3:

- Use the **absolute/relative** distinction: "education may have raised the number who move up, but not working-class pupils' chances compared with middle-class pupils".
- Use **intergenerational/intragenerational**: education is a bigger barrier to moving up between generations than within a career, where experience and on-the-job training also count. If you define both, use both.
- Attack the **evidence**: the Oxford Mobility Study covered only men; Saunders' measure of "ability" may itself reflect cultural capital; Willis's study had a small sample of boys in one school, decades ago, though it shows both resistance and class reproduction.
- Show that a point cuts both ways: compensatory education shows the state can widen opportunity, but its modest results show how hard it is to offset home disadvantage.
- Say the view fits some **times, places, policies or groups** better than others.

3. Describe two ways (4 marks) (1 question)

Question 1, asked once on this topic: two ways streaming can harm educational attainment.

1. Write two bullet points.

2. For each: **name** the way (1), then one sentence on **how** it lowers attainment (1). Describe the **effect**, not just what streaming is.

Ways streaming can harm attainment:

- pupils placed in low streams are labelled as less able, leading to a **self-fulfilling prophecy**;
- allocation can follow **class or ethnic stereotypes** rather than ability, shutting some pupils out of higher streams;
- teachers **expect less** of low streams and teach them simpler, practical knowledge (Keddie);
- low streams may get fewer **resources** or less experienced teachers;
- low streams may be entered for **lower-tier exams**, which cap the grades pupils can reach;
- low streams can develop **anti-school subcultures** that reject learning (Hargreaves, Lacey, Ball).

The same plan works for other "Describe two ways" questions on this topic, for example ways poverty limits attainment or ways underachievement affects life chances.

Worked examples

Example 1

Describe two ways educational underachievement can affect an individual's life chances. [4]

- **Lower income and job security (1)**: without qualifications a school leaver is shut out of most professional and skilled jobs, so they are more likely to end up in low-paid, temporary work or unemployed (1).
- **Passing disadvantage to their children (1)**: a parent on a low income cannot easily pay for books, tutoring or a home in a good school's area, so their own children start school behind and the family's class position is reproduced (1).

Two ways, each named and described: **4 marks**.

Example 2

'Expanding university education creates equal opportunity for all social classes.'

Using sociological material, give two arguments against this view. [12]

Argument 1. The first argument against this view is that expansion raises the numbers going to university without equalising chances. Goldthorpe's distinction between absolute and relative mobility shows why: when places grow, more working-class students do enter higher education, but middle-class students fill the new places faster, so the gap in their relative chances stays. Paterson and Iannelli found that expanding education in the UK raised everyone's qualifications but did little to weaken the link between class origin and destination. Expansion therefore increases the amount of education, not the equality of opportunity the view claims. **Level 3 (5–6 marks)**.

Argument 2. A second argument is that a degree is worth less once many people have one, while the advantages that decide top jobs stay with the middle class. Collins' idea of qualification inflation suggests employers then demand higher degrees or degrees from elite universities, which middle-class families can afford and know how to reach. Bourdieu adds that social capital (family contacts, unpaid internships arranged through networks) turns degrees into well-paid jobs for some graduates but not others. Working-class graduates with the same degree may still face social closure, so wider access to university does not give equal opportunity in the job market. **Level 3 (5–6 marks).**

Two clear, developed arguments, each with named material and a closing link to the view: **12 marks.**

Example 3

Evaluate the view that education policies have made education systems more meritocratic. **[26]**

Introduction. A meritocracy rewards ability and effort, not family background. Functionalists and social democrats argue that policies such as free schooling, comprehensive schools and compensatory education have brought education closer to this ideal; Marxists and Bourdieu argue that inequality of opportunity remains built in.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Free mass schooling and expansion:** every child now has formal access to secondary school, and more pupils from every class gain qualifications and degrees, so opportunity is wider than when schooling depended on fees.
- **Compensatory education:** Head Start and Sure Start gave extra early help to disadvantaged children; social democrats such as Halsey saw such policies as the way to stop talent being wasted.
- **Universalistic standards:** national curricula and exams judge all pupils by the same rules (Parsons), so results are achieved, not ascribed.
- **Saunders** argues that ability and effort now predict adult class better than origin, suggesting the system is broadly fair.
- **Groups once excluded** now succeed: girls outperform boys in many countries, which shows reforms can break ascribed barriers.

Against the view (AO3).

- **However**, relative mobility has hardly changed: Goldthorpe found that mid-century mobility came from "more room at the top", and Breen argues class origin still matters for children of equal ability. Policies widened access, but middle-class pupils used the new opportunities more.
- **Some policies backfired:** grammar schools were dominated by the middle class, and marketisation let skilled choosers win the best places (Ball, Gewirtz), even buying houses in good catchment areas (Leech and Campos). Policy may have made the system **less** meritocratic, a parentocracy (Brown).
- **Policy cannot remove capital:** Bourdieu shows cultural capital is rewarded as if it were ability, and Mortimore and Whitty argue schools alone cannot make up for poverty, so equal rules do not create an equal start (formal, not real, equality of opportunity).

- **Inside schools**, streaming, labelling and educational triage (Gillborn and Youdell) under league-table pressure sort pupils by expectation as much as ability.
- **Marxists** go further: Bowles and Gintis call meritocracy a myth that legitimises inequality, so policies that make the system **look** fairer may strengthen the illusion rather than the reality.

Conclusion. Policy has made education more meritocratic in **formal** terms: access is wider and some groups, notably girls, have gained greatly. But class advantages in capital, choice and contacts have adapted to each reform, so relative chances have changed little. The view is true for **absolute** opportunity and for some groups, but largely false for the class gap in **relative** chances, and how far it holds varies with each country's policies.

How it would be marked. A wide range of detailed points with sociologists, policies and concepts (AO1 9–10), applied throughout to "policies" and "meritocratic" (AO2 5–6), and each counter-argument weighed, with the absolute/relative distinction used to reach a justified conclusion (AO3 9–10). In the exam, make each bullet a full paragraph.

Common mistakes

- **Defining mobility, then never using the definition.** Examiners report many essays that explain intergenerational and intragenerational mobility at the start but never ask whether education affects one more than the other. Only define a term you then use in the argument.
- **Writing about mobility in general.** When the question is about **working-class** pupils, an answer about how middle-class pupils get ahead, or about mobility with no link to education, loses application marks. Keep both the group and education in every paragraph.
- **A good account of underachievement with no mobility link.** In Question 3 many candidates explain material or cultural deprivation well but never say how it blocks **upward social mobility**; the last sentence of each argument must make that link.
- **Arguing for the view in Question 3.** An introduction explaining how education is meritocratic, or a paragraph on how it does help working-class pupils, earns nothing.
- **Listing instead of developing.** Several short points scattered across a paragraph score lower than one argument under a broad heading (such as cultural deprivation) developed with material.
- **Concepts named, not applied.** "Althusser says education is an ideological state apparatus" earns little; explain **how** that limits mobility. The same goes for outlining the correspondence principle without saying how it holds back talented working-class pupils.
- **Tumin left undeveloped.** If you use Tumin, show how capable people are drawn away from vital jobs with low pay or status.
- **Juxtaposition in essays.** A functionalist block followed by a Marxist block, with no weighing, stays in the lower AO3 bands; use each counter-argument to show why the view is weaker or stronger.
- **Common sense instead of sociology.** "Education helps people get good jobs" is general knowledge; essays need named studies, theories and concepts.
- **Describing streaming instead of its effects** in Question 1: say how it lowers attainment, not just what it is.

How to get the marks

- **"Describe two..." (4 marks):** two bullet points, each named and described in one sentence. No introduction, no theorist needed.
- **"Using sociological material, give two arguments against this view" (12 marks):** two separate, developed arguments, each with named material and a closing sentence on why it weakens the quoted view. Arguments can attack the view's **logic or evidence** as well as offer a rival view.
- **"Evaluate..." (26 marks):** AO1 10 for a wide range of detailed points with concepts and research; AO2 6 for applying them to the exact wording (working-class, upward, barrier); AO3 10 for evaluation that is explicit and sustained. A descriptive account of the other side, however good, stops at the 7–8 band for AO3.
- **Sociological material** means a named sociologist (Goldthorpe, Saunders, Breen, Halsey, Bourdieu, Bowles and Gintis, Feinstein, Ball, Gillborn and Youdell, Leech and Campos), a theory, a policy (compensatory education, marketisation) or a concept (absolute and relative mobility, meritocracy, cultural capital, parentocracy, social closure).
- **Balance and judgement:** argue both sides at similar length, show that a claim can be partly true (true for absolute mobility, not relative; for girls, less for working-class boys; in one country, not another), and end with a conclusion that weighs the evidence used.
- **Use your own knowledge of society:** examiners credit relevant awareness, such as how access to schooling or private tutoring differs between countries.

Quick check

1. What is the difference between absolute and relative mobility, and why does it matter for judging whether education is meritocratic?
2. Which sociologist is linked to each idea? (a) Bright poor toddlers overtaken by less able richer children by about age 10. (b) Selection by mortgage. (c) Educational triage. (d) Ability and effort explain more than class. (e) Restricted and elaborated codes.
3. Give two consequences of educational underachievement for society.
4. What is parentocracy, and how can it be used against the view that marketisation increases equality of opportunity?
5. In Question 3 (12 marks), what earns no marks at all?

Answers

1. **Absolute** mobility is the total amount of movement; **relative** mobility compares the chances of people from different origins reaching the same destination. Rising absolute mobility can come from "more room at the top" (more professional jobs) while working-class pupils' relative chances stay unequal, so it does not prove education is meritocratic.
2. (a) Feinstein. (b) Leech and Campos. (c) Gillborn and Youdell. (d) Saunders. (e) Bernstein.
3. Any two of: wasted talent and lower economic growth; higher welfare and health spending and lower tax revenue; links to exclusion and crime; inequality reproduced across generations, weakening cohesion.
4. **Parentocracy** (Brown) means a child's success depends on parents' wealth and wishes rather than the child's ability and effort. In a market, middle-class parents with money, contacts and knowledge of the system win places at the best schools, so choice widens the gap instead of equalising opportunity.
5. Explaining the view or giving arguments that support it; only arguments **against** the view are credited.

Past questions to try

- [9699/33/O/N/22 Q3](#): two arguments against education letting talented working-class pupils move up.
- [9699/31/M/J/23 Q4](#): essay on whether education allows working-class pupils upward mobility.
- [9699/32/F/M/21 Q4](#): essay on whether education systems are a barrier to social mobility.