

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Social class and educational attainment

A2

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What you need to know

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

1. **Explain how material factors affect attainment:** how money, housing, diet, health and the costs of schooling make it harder for children from poorer homes to do well, whatever their ability.
2. **Explain cultural explanations of class differences in attainment:** how parents' attitudes and values, the way families speak (**speech codes**) and the knowledge and tastes a family passes on (**cultural capital**) give middle-class children an advantage in school.
3. **Explain in-school factors:** how teachers' **labels**, **ability grouping** (streaming, setting, banding) and **pupil subcultures** can widen or narrow the class gap.
4. **Describe and judge compensatory education:** programmes that give extra resources to disadvantaged children and areas to make up for what they miss at home, and how far they have worked.

You also need to weigh these explanations against each other and against other influences (gender, ethnicity, ability and effort), because most essays ask which matters **most**. Gender and ethnicity have their own notes; here they appear only as rival explanations.

Understand it

The pattern to explain

Educational attainment means the results a pupil achieves: test scores, exam grades, qualifications, and how far they go (staying on after the leaving age, going to university). In almost every society, children from middle- and upper-class families achieve more on average than children from working-class families, at every stage from the first years of school to university. The gap is often wider at the most selective universities.

Sociologists usually measure **social class** by the parents' occupation, and in some countries by income or by whether a child receives **free school meals**, which only low-income families can claim. The question for this topic is **why** the class gap exists. The explanations fall into two groups:

- **outside-school (external) factors:** material deprivation and cultural factors at home;
- **inside-school (internal) factors:** what teachers, schools and pupils do.

Compensatory education is a policy response to the external factors. Good answers show how the two groups **interact**, for example a working-class way of speaking (external) leading a teacher to label a pupil (internal).

Material factors

Material deprivation means lacking the money and goods that most people in a society take for granted. It affects attainment in several ways.

- **Housing and space.** Overcrowded or temporary housing leaves no quiet place to do homework, and moving house often means changing school. Cold, damp housing harms health.
- **Diet and health.** Poor diet lowers energy and concentration and makes illness more likely, so poorer children miss more school. **Howard** linked low-income diets to weaker immune systems and poor concentration.
- **The hidden costs of "free" schooling.** **Smith and Noble** described the barriers that poverty puts up: uniforms, books, computers, trips and private tuition all cost money. **Tanner and colleagues** found that these costs could leave poorer pupils with second-hand uniforms or without the right equipment, which can lead to bullying and to missing out on activities. **Flaherty** found that some families did not claim free school meals because of the shame attached to them.
- **Work instead of study.** Older children in poor families may take part-time jobs (**Ridge**) or, in low-income countries, leave school to work or to care for younger siblings. Fees, even small ones, keep the poorest children out of school in some societies.
- **Fear of debt.** **Callender and Jackson** found that working-class students were more worried about student debt and so less likely to apply to university.
- **Poor schools in poor areas.** Where schools are funded locally, poor communities have poor schools. **Ramachandran's** research on government schools in India found that many in deprived areas lacked basic items such as blackboards, furniture and toilets, which limits learning for every pupil there. **Lupton** found that schools in deprived areas spent more time on discipline, which lowered the quality of teaching.
- **Buying an advantage.** The other side of deprivation is that wealthier parents can pay for private schools, tutors and houses near the best state schools. **Leech and Campos** found that houses in the catchment areas of popular schools cost more, which works as "selection by mortgage".
- **Early gaps.** **Waldfoegel and Washbrook** found that, by the age of three, children from the poorest families were already well behind richer children in vocabulary, a gap they linked to income and to the home learning environment.

Halsey, Heath and Ridge found that material factors were the most important influence on whether pupils stayed on in education. Critics note that not all poor children fail, so material factors cannot be the whole story.

Cultural explanations

Cultural explanations say that what children learn at home (attitudes, language, knowledge) prepares some for school better than others. There are two very different versions.

1. Cultural deprivation (a **deficit** view). Working-class families are said to lack the values, language and support that success in school needs.

- **Parental interest.** **Douglas** followed children born in 1946 and found that, among children of similar measured ability, those whose parents showed more interest in their education (judged largely by visits to the school) did better. Middle-class parents showed more interest. **Feinstein** also found that parents' own education and interest were a major influence on how children did.
- **Class values.** **Hyman** argued that working-class people placed less value on education and saw less chance of getting ahead. **Sugarman** described working-class values, rooted in insecure manual jobs, that made school success less likely:
 - **fatalism**: accepting your situation rather than trying to change it;
 - **collectivism**: loyalty to the group rather than individual success;
 - **immediate gratification**: enjoying rewards now (earning a wage at 16) rather than **deferred gratification** (studying for years for bigger rewards later);
 - **present-time orientation**: little planning for the future.
- **Speech codes.** **Bernstein** distinguished two ways of using language.
 - The **restricted code** uses short, simple sentences, a limited vocabulary and meanings that depend on shared context ("put it over there"). It works well among people who already know each other.
 - The **elaborated code** uses longer sentences and a wider vocabulary and spells meanings out, so a stranger could follow them. It suits abstract ideas.

Bernstein argued that middle-class children learn both codes at home, while many working-class children use mainly the restricted code. Teachers, textbooks and exams use the **elaborated code**, so middle-class children understand lessons more easily, write in the style examiners reward and are more likely to be seen as bright. Bernstein did not say the restricted code was inferior; he said the school favours one code.

Criticisms of cultural deprivation.

- **Blackstone and Mortimore** argued that working-class parents attend school less often because of long or irregular working hours and because schools can feel unwelcoming, not because they care less. Douglas's measure of "interest" was therefore biased.
- **Keddie** called cultural deprivation a **myth**: working-class children are not deprived of culture but have a **different** culture, which the school treats as inferior.
- **Labov** showed that non-standard speech can express complex logical ideas, so a different dialect is not a deficit.
- The deprivation view **blames the victim** and ignores material poverty and what happens in school.

2. Cultural capital (a Marxist view of culture as **power**). **Bourdieu** argued that the education system is not neutral: it rewards the culture of the dominant class and treats it as natural ability. He described three kinds of capital that families pass on:

- **economic capital**: wealth and income;
- **cultural capital**: the knowledge, tastes, language, attitudes and manners of the middle class (for example knowing about art, books and classical music, speaking confidently with teachers, presenting work in an approved style);
- **educational capital**: qualifications, which middle-class families can turn back into well-paid jobs and economic capital.

Each class also has its own **habitus**, its taken-for-granted ways of thinking, behaving and judging what is "for people like us". The school's habitus matches the middle-class one. Middle-class pupils feel at home in school and are rewarded for it; working-class pupils may feel out of place, and their culture is treated as worthless, which Bourdieu called **symbolic violence**. This is **cultural reproduction**: the middle class passes on its advantage, while results look like the outcome of individual merit.

Ways cultural capital helps middle-class pupils:

1. **Familiar knowledge**. Reading, documentaries, museum visits and travel build knowledge that the curriculum and exams reward. **Sullivan** surveyed pupils and found that those who read widely and watched serious television had larger vocabularies and more cultural knowledge, and did better at GCSE. Middle-class pupils had more of this cultural capital. (She also found that a class gap remained even when cultural capital was taken into account, which points to material factors too.)
2. **Language and presentation**. The elaborated code and a "correct" style of speaking and writing are marked up and read as signs of intelligence.
3. **Positive labels and higher sets**. Teachers see pupils who share their habitus as ideal pupils, so these pupils are more often placed in higher sets.
4. **Informed choices**. Parents know how the system works. **Gewirtz** found that middle-class **privileged-skilled choosers** used their knowledge, contacts and money to get places at the best schools, while working-class **disconnected-local choosers** relied on chance and chose the nearest school. **Ball** made similar points about parental choice under **marketisation**.
5. **Confidence and expectations**. Middle-class pupils grow up expecting to go to university and feel entitled to be there. **Reay, David and Ball** found that working-class students often ruled themselves out of elite universities, fearing they would fail or not fit in (**self-exclusion**).

Cultural deprivation vs cultural capital. Both say home culture matters. Deprivation theory blames working-class culture; Bourdieu blames a school system that rewards only one class's culture. This distinction is a strong evaluation point in essays.

In-school factors

Interactionists argue that attainment is shaped by what happens in classrooms, not only by what pupils bring from home.

Labelling. A **label** is a judgement attached to a pupil ("bright", "lazy", "a troublemaker").

- **Becker** found that Chicago teachers judged pupils against an **ideal pupil** whose behaviour, appearance and speech were middle class. Working-class pupils were further from the ideal and were seen as less able and badly behaved.
- **Rist** found that a kindergarten teacher in the USA placed children at three tables after only days, using their appearance and home background. The "fast learners" at the table nearest her were mostly middle class and got more attention; the others, mostly poorer children, were given less.
- **Cicourel and Kitsuse** found that US school counsellors judged students' ability partly by their class background, steering middle-class students towards college courses.
- **Keddie** found that teachers gave abstract, academic knowledge to pupils in higher streams and simpler, practical knowledge to lower streams, so lower streams were cut off from the knowledge that exams reward.

The self-fulfilling prophecy. A label can come true:

1. the teacher labels the pupil;
2. the teacher treats the pupil according to the label (more or less attention, praise, challenge);
3. the pupil accepts the label as part of their **self-concept** and acts on it, so the prediction comes true.

Rosenthal and Jacobson told teachers that randomly chosen pupils were about to "spurt" ahead; a year later many of them had made bigger gains in measured IQ than other pupils, suggesting teacher expectations changed results.

Ability grouping. **Streaming** puts pupils in one class by general ability for all subjects; **setting** groups them separately for each subject; **banding** groups them in broad bands. Placement often follows class.

- **Gillborn and Youdell** found that league-table pressure to raise the share of pupils with five good grades (the **A-to-C economy**) led schools into **educational triage**: sorting pupils into those who would pass anyway, borderline pupils worth extra help, and "hopeless cases". Working-class and Black pupils were more often placed in the last group and in lower sets, often entered for lower-tier exams that capped their grades.
- **Ball**, in a comprehensive school, found that banding by ability matched class background, and pupils in lower bands became increasingly anti-school.
- **Boaler** found that working-class pupils of similar ability did better in maths in a school with mixed-ability classes than in one that used sets, where low sets brought anxiety and low expectations.

Pupil subcultures. A **subculture** is a group with values different from the mainstream. Grouping and labelling divide pupils into those the school rewards and those it rejects.

- **Hargreaves** and **Lacey** described **differentiation** (teachers categorise pupils and treat each group differently) and **polarisation** (pupils respond by moving to one of two opposite poles: **pro-school** or **anti-school**). Pupils denied status in low streams gained status from their peers by flouting school rules: truancy, smoking, messing about in class.

- **Willis's** twelve working-class "**lads**" formed a **counter-school culture**: they mocked hard-working pupils ("ear'oles"), rejected qualifications and valued having a laugh. Their attitudes prepared them for manual factory work, so their failure was partly their own choice; school reproduced class inequality through their resistance.
- **Mac an Ghaill** found several subcultures in one school, linked to class and gender: working-class **macho lads** rejected schoolwork, working-class **academic achievers** aimed for upward mobility, and middle-class **real Englishmen** appeared to scorn school but quietly worked to reach university.
- **Woods** found that pupils adapt to school in more than two ways (for example ingratiating themselves with teachers, going through the motions, withdrawing, or rebelling), so polarisation is too simple.
- Pro-school subcultures raise attainment: **Fuller** found a group of Black girls who rejected their teachers' low expectations and worked hard to prove them wrong, which also shows that labels do not always come true.

Peer pressure can work both ways: an anti-school group pulls members away from study, while a pro-school group encourages it.

Marxist links. **Bowles and Gintis** argued that schools prepare working-class pupils for low-paid work through the **correspondence principle** (school mirrors the workplace) and legitimise their failure through the **myth of meritocracy**. **Althusser** saw schools as an **ideological state apparatus**. In-school processes such as labelling and setting are, on this view, how the system turns class background into "fair-looking" results.

Compensatory education

Compensatory education gives extra resources to children and areas with disadvantage, to make up (compensate) for what they lack at home. It grew from cultural deprivation theory and from **social democratic** ideas about equal opportunity.

Programme	What it did
Operation Head Start (USA, 1960s)	Pre-school education, health checks and parenting support for children from poor families, to give them a better start before school
Educational Priority Areas (UK, late 1960s)	Extra money, teachers and buildings for schools in deprived areas
Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities (UK, 1998–2000s)	Partnerships of schools, parents, businesses and councils in deprived urban areas, with extra funding, mentoring and programmes for gifted pupils
Sure Start (UK, from 1999)	Children's centres giving pre-school education, health and parenting support in poor areas
Education Maintenance Allowance (UK, 2004–2011 in England)	Weekly payments to students from low-income families who stayed in education after 16
Pupil Premium (England, from 2011)	Extra money to schools for each disadvantaged pupil, to be spent on raising their attainment

Programme	What it did
National Tutoring Programme (England, after the Covid-19 school closures)	Subsidised small-group tutoring for pupils who had fallen behind
Free or reduced fees, scholarships, free meals and uniforms (many countries)	Removing costs that keep the poorest children out of school

You can use similar programmes from your own country.

Judging compensatory education.

- **Successes.** Some gains in attainment and in staying on; long-term studies of some US pre-school programmes found later benefits such as higher earnings and less crime. Programmes for whole areas recognise that schools in poor areas need more money.
- **Limits.** Early gains from Head Start often faded after a few years. Funding has been small compared with the size of the gap and often short-lived, and Ofsted found that Pupil Premium money was not always spent on disadvantaged pupils. The class gap has narrowed only slightly.
- **Critiques.** **Bernstein** argued that **education cannot compensate for society**: schools cannot remove poverty, which needs wider economic change. **Keddie** and others argued that the programmes rest on the cultural deprivation myth and try to change working-class culture rather than the school. Marxists see them as covering up the class inequality that the system needs.

Weighing the explanations

Essay questions usually ask whether one factor (class, cultural deprivation, home background, in-school factors) is the **main** influence. Useful arguments:

- **External and internal factors interact.** Speech codes and habitus matter because teachers and exams reward one code and one habitus; poverty leads to tiredness and absence, which teachers may read as laziness and label.
- **Class as a whole vs other factors.** Class gaps are large and appear early, but in many countries girls now outperform boys in every class, and some ethnic minority groups (for example pupils of Chinese and Indian heritage in the UK) achieve highly whatever their class, while others do not. **Intersectionality** says class, gender and ethnicity combine: in the UK, white working-class boys are among the lowest achievers.
- **Meritocratic views.** Functionalists and the New Right argue ability and effort decide results in a fair system; **Saunders** argued that ability and effort explained more of people's class destinations than their background did.
- **Changing class structure.** As manual jobs decline and more people count as middle class, older class categories (and studies from the 1960s) may fit less well. Postmodernists argue that identities are now more individual and less shaped by class.
- **Time and place.** Material factors weigh far more where families must pay fees or children must work; cultural and in-school factors may matter more where schooling is free and universal.

Key facts and formulas

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

Key term	Status
Material deprivation: lack of money and goods (housing, diet, costs of schooling, need to work, fear of debt); Smith and Noble, Tanner, Flaherty, Howard, Ridge, Callender and Jackson, Ramachandran, Lupton, Waldfogel and Washbrook; Halsey, Heath and Ridge (material factors and staying on)	Learn it
Cultural deprivation: parental interest (Douglas, Feinstein); working-class values of fatalism, collectivism, immediate gratification, present-time orientation (Sugarman, Hyman); criticised by Blackstone and Mortimore, Keddie, Labov	Learn it
Speech codes (Bernstein): restricted code (short, context-bound) vs elaborated code (explicit, abstract, used by schools and exams)	Learn it
Cultural capital (Bourdieu): economic, cultural and educational capital; habitus; symbolic violence; cultural reproduction; Sullivan, Gewirtz (skilled and disconnected choosers), Reay, David and Ball (self-exclusion), Leech and Campos (selection by mortgage)	Learn it
Labelling: ideal pupil (Becker); Rist (kindergarten tables); Cicourel and Kitsuse; Keddie (classroom knowledge); self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal and Jacobson)	Learn it
Ability grouping: streaming, setting, banding; educational triage and the A-to-C economy (Gillborn and Youdell); Ball (banding); Boaler (mixed ability)	Learn it
Subcultures: differentiation and polarisation (Hargreaves, Lacey); counter-school culture (Willis); macho lads, academic achievers, real Englishmen (Mac an Ghail); adaptations (Woods); pro-school Black girls (Fuller)	Learn it
Marxist links: correspondence principle and myth of meritocracy (Bowles and Gintis); ideological state apparatus (Althusser)	Learn it
Compensatory education: Head Start, Educational Priority Areas, Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, Sure Start, Education Maintenance Allowance, Pupil Premium, National Tutoring Programme; "education cannot compensate for society" (Bernstein)	Learn it
Paper 3: Question 1 $2 \times 2 = 4$; Question 2 $2 \times 4 = 8$; Question 3 $2 \times 6 = 12$; Question 4 essay 26	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 28 questions for this topic (2021–2026, all from Paper 3), 24 different (four Paper 31s repeated a Paper 33 question). None mix two types.

Question type	Questions
Explain two ways or reasons a factor affects attainment (8 marks)	10

Question type	Questions
Give two arguments against a view on the cause of attainment differences (12 marks)	5
Describe two ways a class factor affects attainment (4 marks)	4
Describe two compensatory or equalising education policies (4 marks)	4
Evaluate or assess a view on class and attainment (essay)	4
Explain how teachers influence which pupils succeed (9 marks, old format)	1

1. Explain two ways or reasons a factor affects attainment (8 marks) (10 questions)

Always Question 2. Factors asked (counting tagged questions): cultural capital (3), pupil or school subcultures (2), speech codes (2), material deprivation (1), cultural deprivation (1), labelling of working-class pupils (1).

Each way is marked out of 4 (points-based, not levels):

1. **Point** (1): name the way in one sentence, for example "Speech codes can create a communication barrier between pupils and teachers".
2. **Explain** (1): say how it works, for example "pupils who mainly use the restricted code may not follow the explicit, abstract language of lessons and textbooks".
3. **Material** (1): name a study, sociologist, concept or theory, for example Bernstein.
4. **Link** (1): show **how** that material supports the point, for example "Bernstein argued that schools teach and assess in the elaborated code, which middle-class children learn at home, so working-class children start at a disadvantage".

Write two separate paragraphs ("The first way...", "The second way..."). A point without named material stops at 2 marks; material without an explained point also loses marks.

Ready-made ways, each with material:

- **Cultural capital:** familiar knowledge rewarded by the curriculum (Sullivan); elaborated code and approved style of work (Bernstein, Bourdieu); habitus that makes school feel natural, or alien for working-class pupils (Bourdieu); positive labels and higher sets (Becker); informed school choices and the confidence to deal with teachers (Gewirtz, Ball); applying to top universities, or ruling yourself out (Reay, David and Ball).
- **Subcultures:** anti-school values and peer pressure lowering effort (Willis, Hargreaves, Lacey); pro-school groups raising attainment (Mac an Ghaill's academic achievers, Fuller); hidden effort behind an anti-school front (Mac an Ghaill's real Englishmen); teachers labelling members of a subculture and placing them in lower sets, reinforcing the self-fulfilling prophecy (Ball, Gillborn and Youdell); career aims and subject choices shaped by the group (Willis); subcultures linked to class, gender or ethnic identity (Mac an Ghaill, Fuller).
- **Speech codes:** a communication barrier with teachers (Bernstein; Bourdieu on the school's habitus); written and oral work marked higher in the elaborated code (Bernstein); speech read as a sign of intelligence, leading to labels and the self-fulfilling prophecy (Becker, Rosenthal and Jacobson). Each way

must be different: "elaborated code helps, restricted code hinders" is one way, not two.

- **Material deprivation:** poor school facilities in poor communities (Ramachandran, Lupton); no space or equipment to study at home (Smith and Noble); poor health and absence (Howard); work or caring instead of school, or leaving early (Ridge); no money for tuition, trips or private schools (Tanner, Smith and Noble); fear of debt deterring university (Callender and Jackson).
- **Cultural deprivation:** low parental interest or support (Douglas, Feinstein); working-class values such as immediate gratification and fatalism (Sugarman, Hyman); the restricted code (Bernstein); less cultural capital for choosing schools (Bourdieu, Gewirtz).
- **Labelling of working-class pupils:** judged against the middle-class ideal pupil (Becker); placed in lower groups (Rist, Gillborn and Youdell); given simpler knowledge (Keddie); self-fulfilling prophecy lowering self-concept (Rosenthal and Jacobson); anti-school subcultures as a reaction (Hargreaves, Willis).

2. Give two arguments against a view on the cause of attainment differences (12 marks) (5 questions)

Always Question 3. Views quoted (counting tagged questions): cultural deprivation is the main reason (2, one a repeat); home background is the main reason (1); what happens in schools is the main influence (1); pupil attainment is determined by factors outside school (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, broad argument, for example "in-school processes" and "material deprivation".
3. Back each with named material and explain how it works.
4. End each with a sentence that turns it back on the view, using its words ("so cultural deprivation is **not the main reason**").
5. Write nothing in support of the view: only arguments against are credited. You can also attack the view's **logic or evidence** (for example Blackstone and Mortimore on how Douglas measured interest).

Which counter-arguments fit which view:

- **Against an outside-school view** (cultural deprivation, home background, factors outside school): labelling and the ideal pupil (Becker, Rist, Cicourel and Kitsuse); setting, streaming and educational triage (Gillborn and Youdell, Boaler); anti-school subcultures produced by labelling and streaming (Hargreaves, Lacey, Willis); the school's habitus and curriculum are what turn home culture into failure (Bourdieu, Keddie); pupils have agency and can reject labels (Fuller). Against cultural deprivation in particular, also: material deprivation matters more (Smith and Noble, Halsey, Heath and Ridge); the capitalist system needs a failed working class (Bowles and Gintis); in a meritocracy ability and effort decide results (Saunders).
- **Against an in-school view** (what happens in schools): material deprivation (Smith and Noble, Ramachandran); cultural deprivation (Douglas, Sugarman); cultural capital (Bourdieu, Sullivan); the Marxist view that the structure of capitalist society shapes results (Bowles and Gintis); the functionalist

view that ability and effort decide results (Saunders); feminist arguments that gender socialisation at home holds girls back in some societies; government policy, such as compensatory education or marketisation, shaping who succeeds.

3. Describe two ways a class factor affects attainment (4 marks) (4 questions)

Always Question 1. Asked: how middle-class pupils benefit from, or attainment is influenced by, cultural capital (2); how speech codes affect attainment (1); how anti-school subcultures affect attainment (1).

1. Write two bullet points.
2. For each: **identify** the way (1), then one sentence showing **how** it affects attainment (1).
3. No introduction and no study needed.

For example: "Familiarity with high culture (1): pupils who read widely and visit museums already know much of what the curriculum and exams reward, so they find lessons easier and gain higher marks (1)."

Ways to choose from:

- **Cultural capital:** knowledge for assignments and exams; high-status "legitimate" tastes in books and music; family cultural experiences (music lessons, galleries, travel); feeling at home in the school's habitus; elaborated code and approved style of work; positive labels and higher sets; knowledge of school, university and career choices; parents' confidence with teachers; expecting to go to university.
- **Speech codes:** misunderstanding the teacher; lower marks for written or oral work; being labelled less able; finding abstract subjects harder.
- **Anti-school subcultures:** disrupting lessons; truanting or being excluded; teacher labelling of the group; peer pressure against working hard; aiming for jobs that need no qualifications.

4. Describe two compensatory or equalising education policies (4 marks) (4 questions)

Always Question 1. Asked: two ways compensatory education has tried to help working-class children (2, one a repeat); two education policies that aim to reduce inequality (1); two education policies designed to help disadvantaged groups (1).

1. Write two bullet points.
2. **Name** a specific policy or kind of policy (1).
3. Say **how** it helps the disadvantaged group (1): what it provides and why that raises attainment or access, not just that "it aims to reduce inequality".

Policies to use: pre-school programmes (Head Start, Sure Start); extra money for schools in poor areas (Educational Priority Areas, Pupil Premium); area partnerships (Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities); payments to stay on (Education Maintenance Allowance); extra tutoring (National Tutoring Programme); scholarships and free or reduced fees; free meals and uniforms; compulsory, free schooling; comprehensive schools and mixed-ability teaching; teaching in a child's own language; schemes encouraging girls into science (for inequality in general). Two examples from the same area (for example Head Start and Sure Start) can both score.

5. Evaluate or assess a view on class and attainment (essay) (4 questions)

Question 4 (26 marks) since 2021; the June 2021 Paper 34 asked a 16-mark part (b) in the older format. Views asked: class is the most important influence or factor (2); working-class underachievement is mainly due to in-school factors (1); the education system works against working-class pupils (1).

The 26-mark essays from June 2022 are marked **AO1** knowledge and understanding 10, **AO2** interpretation and application 6, **AO3** analysis and evaluation 10, so $10 + 6 + 10 = 26$. The November 2021 essay used one scheme of five levels (top level 22–26), and the 16-mark part used three bands (0–6, 7–11, 12–16), where the top band needs explicit assessment. All reward the same things.

1. **Introduction** (two or three sentences): define attainment and class; state the pattern; name who holds the view.
2. **For the view** (4–5 paragraphs): for "class is most important", the class gap at every stage; material explanations; cultural explanations (Douglas, Sugarman, Bernstein, Bourdieu, Sullivan); in-school processes that follow class (Becker, Rist, Gillborn and Youdell, Willis, Boaler); the limited success of compensatory policies; Marxist arguments (Bowles and Gintis, Althusser); class often explaining gaps that seem to be about gender or ethnicity; feminist and anti-racist reforms narrowing gender and ethnic gaps while the class gap persists. For "in-school factors", put labelling, grouping, subcultures and the school's habitus here instead.
3. **Against the view** (4–5 paragraphs), each written as a criticism: meritocracy (ability and effort, Saunders); evidence that gender or ethnicity matters as much or more, with examples from more than one society; intersectionality; social democratic reforms and compensatory education reducing the effect of class; a changing class structure making old statistics less relevant; global differences (fees and child labour in some places, free schooling in others); postmodern doubts about class itself. For "in-school factors", argue that material and cultural factors matter more, and that labels are not deterministic (Fuller).
4. **Conclusion**: a reasoned judgement on **how far** the view holds, for whom, and where.

Evaluation moves that lift the mark:

- Link external and internal factors: Bernstein's codes matter because teachers and exams reward the elaborated code; poverty causes absence, which teachers may read as a lack of interest.
- Criticise the evidence, not just the view: Douglas's measure of parental interest (Blackstone and Mortimore), small samples (Willis's twelve lads), old studies from the 1960s and 1970s.
- Treat cultural capital as **power** (the school rewards one class's culture) rather than as the opposite of cultural deprivation.
- Treat class as part of the **structure** of society (Marxism), not just one variable among many.
- Say where and when the view fits best: in societies with fees and child labour, material factors dominate; where schooling is free, cultural and in-school factors may matter more.

6. Explain how teachers influence which pupils succeed (9 marks, old format) (1 question)

Asked once, as part (a) of a June 2021 Paper 34 question (the older format, not used since). Two bands: 0–4 and 5–9. A basic account of two or three ways reached 7; higher needed detail and range. Use the in-school material: labelling and the ideal pupil (Becker), the self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal and Jacobson), setting and streaming (Gillborn and Youdell, Keddie), the teacher's reaction to speech codes and cultural capital (Bernstein, Bourdieu), subcultures as a response (Hargreaves, Willis), and teachers as role models.

Worked examples

Example 1

Describe two ways material deprivation may affect pupils' attendance at school. [4]

- **Poor health (1)**: children in low-income homes are more likely to have a poor diet and cold, damp housing, so they fall ill more often and miss more days of school (1).
- **Need to earn or care (1)**: older children in poor families may have to work or look after younger siblings while parents work, so they miss lessons or leave school early (1).

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

Example 2

Explain two ways parental attitudes may affect educational attainment. [8]

The first way. Parents who show interest in their child's education help them do better (1). They check homework, talk about school and go to parents' evenings, so the child sees education as important and gets help when stuck (1). Douglas's study of children born in 1946 supports this (1): among children of similar measured ability, those whose parents showed more interest in their schooling achieved higher results, and middle-class parents showed more of this interest (1).

The second way. Parents' values about the future affect whether children stay on in education (1). Families who value **deferred gratification** encourage children to keep studying for long-term rewards, while families who expect their children to start earning early may not see the point of further qualifications (1). Sugarman's description of working-class values supports this (1): he argued that immediate gratification and a present-time orientation, rooted in insecure manual jobs, made working-class pupils more likely to leave school at the earliest chance, lowering their attainment (1).

Each way has a point, an explanation, named material and a link: $2 \times 4 = 8$ marks.

Example 3

'Material deprivation is the main reason for working-class underachievement.'

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

Argument 1. The first argument against this view is that cultural capital matters more than money. Bourdieu argues that schools reward the knowledge, language and habitus of the middle class, so middle-class children succeed because their culture matches the school's, not only because their parents are richer. Sullivan's survey of pupils supports this: those who read widely and watched serious television did better at GCSE, and this cultural capital was more common among middle-class pupils. So even if poverty were removed, working-class pupils would still be disadvantaged by a school that values a culture they do not share, and material deprivation is not the main reason. **Level 3 (5–6 marks).**

Argument 2. A second argument is that what happens inside schools produces much of the class gap. Interactionists such as Becker found that teachers judge pupils against a middle-class ideal pupil, and Gillborn and Youdell showed that working-class pupils were more often placed in lower sets and treated as hopeless cases under educational triage, which capped the grades they could reach. Through the self-fulfilling prophecy, these pupils come to see themselves as failures and give up. Working-class pupils with the same material circumstances can therefore do very differently depending on how their school labels and groups them, so material deprivation is not the main reason. **Level 3 (5–6 marks).**

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

Example 4

Evaluate the view that compensatory education can overcome working-class underachievement. [26]

Introduction. Compensatory education gives extra resources to disadvantaged children to make up for what they lack at home. Social democrats see it as a route to equal opportunity; Marxists and some interactionists doubt that schools can make up for class inequality.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **It targets the causes:** pre-school programmes such as Head Start and Sure Start tackle the early vocabulary and development gaps that Waldfogel and Washbrook found by age three.
- **Money where it is needed:** Educational Priority Areas and the Pupil Premium direct extra funding to schools and pupils in poverty, offsetting the costs Smith and Noble identified.
- **Removing barriers to staying on:** payments such as the Education Maintenance Allowance and free or reduced fees in some countries reduce the pressure to leave school and earn.
- **Some lasting gains:** long-term studies of some US pre-school programmes found later benefits such as higher earnings, which suggests early help can change life chances.

Against the view (AO3).

- **However,** early gains from Head Start often faded within a few years, so the programmes changed short-term scores more than final attainment.
- **Education cannot compensate for society** (Bernstein): poverty, housing and insecure jobs remain, so schools are asked to fix problems created outside them.

- **The deficit model is wrong** (Keddie, Labov): programmes try to change working-class culture, while Bourdieu shows the real problem is a school system that rewards only middle-class cultural capital.
- **In-school processes continue**: labelling, setting and triage (Becker, Gillborn and Youdell) can undo the effects of extra funding inside the same schools.
- **Marxists** (Bowles and Gintis) argue such policies hide the fact that capitalism needs a failed working class, so they legitimise inequality rather than end it.
- **Scale**: funding has been small compared with the gap, often short-lived, and not always spent on disadvantaged pupils.

Conclusion. Compensatory education can reduce some material and early-years disadvantages, and well-funded pre-school programmes show real benefits. But because the class gap also comes from cultural capital, in-school processes and wider inequality, compensatory education alone cannot **overcome** working-class underachievement; at best it narrows it.

How it would be marked. A wide range of detailed points with sociologists and named policies (AO1 9–10), applied throughout to "overcome" and "working-class underachievement" (AO2 5–6), and each argument weighed to reach a justified conclusion (AO3 9–10). In the exam, make each bullet a full paragraph.

Common mistakes

- **Material or cultural mix-ups.** Examiners report answers to cultural capital questions that discuss money (private school fees, tutors), which is economic capital, and answers to material deprivation questions that discuss values or labelling. A cultural or in-school point only scores in a material deprivation answer if you show it is caused by poverty (for example, poverty leads to absence, which leads to labelling).
- **Describing the factor without its effect.** Many answers explain the features of Bernstein's codes, or describe a subculture such as Willis's lads, but never say how this changes attainment. Every point must end with the effect on results.
- **The same point twice.** "The elaborated code helps middle-class pupils" and "the restricted code hinders working-class pupils" count as one way. Choose two genuinely different ways.
- **No material in Question 2.** Many answers explain a good point and stop at 2 of the 4 marks because no study, concept or theory is named and linked. Others name a study but never explain the point it supports.
- **Unsupported stereotypes.** Claims such as "working-class parents don't care about education" are not credited. Say what sociologists found (Douglas) and how others challenged it (Blackstone and Mortimore).
- **Vague policies.** "Gender equality" or "helping poor children" is not a policy. Name one (Sure Start, Pupil Premium) and say how it helps.
- **Losing the class focus.** In essays on working-class underachievement, weaker answers drift into gender, ethnicity or classroom interaction in general. Keep every paragraph on class.
- **Evaluation by list.** Essays often place studies side by side, or outline Marxism and functionalism, without saying which is more convincing. Weigh each argument, and use more than one alternative to class.
- **Undeveloped gender evidence.** When gender is used against the view, say whether it supports or weakens the view, and note differences over time and between societies.

- **Introductions and extra points in Questions 1–3.** Long introductions and a third way earn nothing; start with your first point.

How to get the marks

- **"Describe two..." (4 marks):** two bullet points, each identified and then described in one sentence that shows **how** it affects attainment or helps the group. No introduction, no study needed.
- **"Explain two..." (8 marks):** for each way, **point, explain, material, link**: four separate marks. The material can be a study, a sociologist, a concept or a theory, but you must say how it supports the point ("this study supports the argument that...").
- **"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 explanation.
- **"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 ("class", "most important", "in-school factors"); AO3 10 for explicit, sustained evaluation and a justified conclusion. A good account of the other side with no weighing stops at the 7–8 band for AO3.
- **Sociological material** for this topic: Douglas, Sugarman, Bernstein, Bourdieu, Sullivan, Gewirtz, Reay, David and Ball, Smith and Noble, Ramachandran, Becker, Rist, Keddie, Gillborn and Youdell, Hargreaves, Lacey, Willis, Mac an Ghaill, Fuller, Boaler, Bowles and Gintis; concepts such as material deprivation, cultural deprivation, cultural capital, habitus, speech codes, labelling, self-fulfilling prophecy, polarisation, educational triage and compensatory education.
- **Use examples from your own society:** school fees, tutoring, scholarships or local compensatory schemes are credited when relevant.

Quick check

1. What is the difference between the restricted code and the elaborated code, and why does it matter in school?
2. Name Bourdieu's three kinds of capital, and explain how cultural capital differs from cultural deprivation.
3. What is educational triage, and who found it?
4. Give two criticisms of compensatory education.
5. Which sociologist is linked to each idea? (a) Children placed at kindergarten tables by appearance. (b) The "lads" and the counter-school culture. (c) Working-class parents miss parents' evenings because of work, not lack of interest. (d) Poor school facilities in deprived areas of India.

Answers

1. The restricted code uses short sentences, a limited vocabulary and meanings that depend on shared context; the elaborated code spells meanings out with a wider vocabulary and suits abstract ideas. Schools teach and examine in the elaborated code, which middle-class children learn at home, so they find lessons easier and are more often seen as able (Bernstein).
2. Economic, cultural and educational capital. Cultural deprivation theory says working-class culture is lacking; cultural capital theory says the school rewards middle-class culture as if it were ability, so the problem lies in the system's bias, not in working-class culture.
3. Sorting pupils into those who will pass anyway, borderline pupils worth extra help, and "hopeless cases" who are neglected, under pressure to improve league-table results. Gillborn and Youdell found it, with working-class and Black pupils more often treated as hopeless.
4. Any two of: gains such as Head Start's often faded; education cannot compensate for society (Bernstein), since poverty remains; it rests on the cultural deprivation myth (Keddie); funding has been too small or short-lived; Marxists say it hides inequality that capitalism needs.
5. (a) Rist. (b) Willis. (c) Blackstone and Mortimore. (d) Ramachandran.

Past questions to try

- [9699/31/M/J/21 Q2](#): explain two ways labelling can disadvantage working-class pupils.
- [9699/32/M/J/23 Q2](#): explain two reasons why material deprivation may affect attainment.
- [9699/32/O/N/22 Q3](#): two arguments against the view that attainment is determined by factors outside school.
- [9699/32/O/N/21 Q4](#): essay on whether working-class underachievement is mainly the result of in-school factors.