

## AS SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

### Exemplar answers to 20-mark 'part (f)' questions

#### EXEMPLAR ANSWERS

- Assess sociological explanations of educational underachievement among boys.
- Assess the claim that 'schools are the main cause of educational underachievement among working-class pupils'.
- How far have sociologists agreed that the main aim of vocational education has been to improve the working skills of young people?
- Evaluate the contribution of interactionist sociologists to our understanding of the role of education.
- Evaluate sociological explanations of the relationship between education and the economy.
- Assess sociological explanations of the relationship between ethnicity and educational performance in Britain.
- Assess sociological explanations of the impact of recent government policies on educational choice and standards in Britain.
- Assess the claim that the poorer educational performance of working-class pupils is the result of poverty and negative attitudes towards education.

#### Using these specimen answers

- Each specimen answer is formatted into an opening summary, a 'Deconstruction' of the question (your first paragraph in an answer), a main section(s) and a final 'Evaluation' (your concluding paragraph). These sections offer a good analytical and evaluative structure to an answer. Putting material in this kind of order will help to gain marks for the skills of analysis and evaluation.
- There is more information in each specimen answer than you would probably have time to cover in an exam which is why the main section usually mentions that you **could** make mention of the evidence/arguments.
- Some of the material is highlighted in **bold and italics**. These points are examples of statements that are likely to gain you further marks for **analysis** and for **evaluation**. Try to include as many of these as possible in your answer.
- You should try to include a few opening points in your first paragraph before launching into the main part of your answer. You can draw example opening points from the 'Deconstruction' section in each answer.
- You should try to include a few evaluation points in your final paragraph after the main part of your answer. You can draw example final evaluation points from the 'Evaluation' section in each answer.

## Assess sociological explanations of educational underachievement among boys.

### SUMMARY

The most important trend recently in educational attainment has been the way girls have begun to outperform boys in most areas of education. Because this is a recent trend, the research has not really caught up with this development so a lot of the suggested sociological explanations for boys underachievement are not backed up by a great deal of actual research. Some researchers have also pointed out that the picture is not as simple as just 'boys doing badly' - some groups of boys outperform some groups of girls and there is a lot of variation in attainment in different school subjects.

This question asks you to '**Assess**' explanations so you will need to inject into your answer as much **evaluation** of the suggested explanations as you can. **Evaluation points are highlighted in italicised bold print in the text.**

### A DECONSTRUCTION

- There is clear evidence that at all levels in virtually every subject, male pupils under-perform compared to females.
- At GCSE boys levels of attainment falls below that of girls. In 1995, 48% of girls achieved 5+ grades A-C compared to 39% of boys. A greater proportion of boys also left education with no qualifications whatsoever. This gender difference in achievement has become more marked during the 1980s and 1990s.
- ***However, there is subject variation in attainment*** in GCSE. In Science, there is only a slight female advantage, whilst in Maths there is hardly any variation at all English shows the greatest difference with 63% of girls gaining a grade C or better compared with 47% of boys.
- At A level, girls achieve higher average results than boys do although there is again variation between subjects, mostly linked to the traditional view of a subject being 'male' or 'female' oriented.
- ***Although it is right to talk of a 'gender gap', some groups of girls also under-perform and the gap is fairly small in some subjects.***

### B SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF BOYS UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Some of the arguments that you could examine include:

#### Societal influences

- Changes in the society in general have had a major impact on male attitudes to education and have led to poorer exam performances by boys.
- Changes in the structure of job opportunities, especially the decline in manual work, has led Mac an Gail to conclude that traditional male roles are being challenged. This leads to confusion among working-class males who respond by creating a counter-culture, which does not value education..
- ***But, the difficulty with this kind of explanation is how to justify it by showing how this affects schooling. It is very difficult to track the impact of large-scale social changes on the way individuals and groups think and act.***

#### Different self-perceptions of girls and boys

- Some studies point to the way male and female pupils seem to see themselves in different ways.
- Boys tend to be over-confident in their own abilities and dismiss educational failure as the fault of the task, the teacher or some accidental event. Girls on the other hand, seem to underestimate their own ability and blame their own lack of ability for any failure.

## B SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF BOYS UNDERACHIEVEMENT (cont.)

- Boys seem to respond by thinking that everything will work out in the end and that they will still end up in a successful job. The suggestion here is that boys are less likely to face up to the reality of their situation and therefore less likely to take action resulting to improve their work.
- ***BUT, this is quite a speculative explanation. It is just as logical to suggest that boys will have greater confidence in their abilities and that this would inspire them to do better in school. It is something of a reversal of other sociological claims to say that high self-esteem produces poorer results.***

### Early gender socialisation

- Socialisation in the family has a considerable effect on the attitudes of girls and boys. Parents spend more time talking to and reading with girls than boys do and there are differences in the nature of affection, praise, criticism and punishment males and females receive. By the time they reach secondary school, boys are particularly vulnerable to the 'men behaving badly' image - which places little value on education. Girls on the other hand are more likely to be on a route to being hardworking, well-behaved and more attentive in lessons.
- ***BUT, although this picture is supported by research but it does not explain why the gender gap has grown to the extent that it has in recent years. Boys and girls have always been socialised differently so why has it only recently had an impact on male educational achievement?***

### Teacher attitudes towards boys and girls

- Sociological research has shown how it is possible for teachers to respond to and treat different groups of pupils in different ways. ***(The problem here is working out how far behaviour prompts a particular teacher response and how far it is teacher attitudes that generate particular pupil behaviour.)***
- Cullingford's study showed that Year 7 pupils believed that teachers treated boys and girls differently but saw this primarily as a response to the poor behaviour of boys.
- Merton LEA's study drew attention to several aspects of teacher attitudes. A labelling process developed towards boys who were disruptive in the classroom and an increasing sense that male students were expected to dominate the classroom. This concluded that there was a danger of stereotypical images of male students becoming embedded in teacher attitudes.
- ***However, how much of this is recent enough to explain a fairly dramatic change in the exam performances of males and females?***

### Have boys lost out in coursework assessed exam components?

- It was previously thought that girls do better in coursework than in exams and that they have therefore benefited from the greater emphasis on coursework during the 1970s and 1980s. This corresponds to the conventional view of girls as being more organised, careful and hardworking than boys.
- ***BUT, Elwood's study has largely refuted this claim. Her research showed that in GCSE English before 1994 the gender gap was even greater in those syllabuses which had an exam component compared to those which were 100% coursework assessed. In 1994 when there was a maximum 40% of marks for coursework, the gap increased. Not only do girls do better at coursework, they do even better in examined components.***

## C EVALUATION

- ***There are several possible explanations of boys educational under-performance, some focusing on family influences, some on the school and others on wider society-wide factors. Research offers some evidence in support of all of these explanations and all are likely to have played some part in creating the 'gender gap'.***
- ***It is also possible that these possible explanations are linked to each other. For example, gender socialisation may feed into teachers having different expectations of boys and girls, while changes in society are also likely to feed into school processes. So it is likely that there is no simple explanation for the 'gender gap' - and no simple 'quick fix' either.***

## Assess the claim that 'schools are the main cause of educational underachievement among working-class pupils'.

### SUMMARY

Regardless of how the education system has been organised, working-class pupils have always achieved poorer exam results than middle-class pupils. This persistent pattern has been explained in several ways. Some sociologists have looked at how schools might contribute to this pattern. This question wants you to focus on these studies and theories. However, there are other possible causes of working-class underachievement, including home culture and material factors and language. These should be looked at (more briefly) in your answer as they are alternative explanations to school factors.

This question asks you to '**Assess**' a claim so you will need to inject into your answer as much **evaluation** as you can. **Ideas about evaluation are highlighted in italicised bold print in the text.**

### A DECONSTRUCTION

- Working-class pupils have consistently performed less well in education than pupils from middle-class backgrounds. This class-based achievement gap has existed no matter how education has been organised in Britain.
- Sociologists have identified a number of ways in which schools may cause this attainment gap. These include the formal curriculum, streaming and setting, the role of teacher attitudes towards pupils from different social class backgrounds and the creation of anti-school pupil sub-cultures.
- ***It is important to remember that factors outside the school are also likely to have some influence on how well working-class pupils do in education. The question makes the claim that schools are the MAIN cause of working-class educational failure. This suggests that there are other possible causes. These include home background, wider social forces and even the individual capabilities of pupils. Any evaluation of this particular claim must take these other influences into account.***

### B ARGUMENTS/EVIDENCE FOR SCHOOL FACTORS CAUSING UNDERACHIEVEMENT AMONG WORKING-CLASS PUPILS

These are some of the arguments and evidence that you could use in your answer.

#### Teacher Attitudes

- Interactionist sociologists have provided some insight into the role played by teacher attitudes in the creation of working-class underachievement. Two key concepts here are *labelling* and the *self-fulfilling prophecy*.
- Becker showed that most teachers shared a common image of the 'ideal pupil' who was well behaved, intelligent and motivated by school work. As they were less likely to fit this ideal type of student, working-class pupils were more likely to be negatively labelled. These labels created a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' in which pupils lived up to their label behaving in ways which matched their teachers' view of them. This approach suggests that teacher attitudes very important in creating working-class underachievement.
- Hargreaves indicated how this might work in practice with the teacher forming initial opinions of the pupil on the basis of behaviour, personality, perceived attitude to school etc. (the 'speculation' stage). After further contact, teachers 'elaborated' their view of a pupil leading ultimately to the final 'stabilisation' stage in which teachers had confirmed views of an individual pupil.

- Rosenthal and Jacobson attempted to measure the impact of teacher expectations on achievement. They concluded that those, the teachers had been told would gain in academic development, made a real gain - solely as a result of teacher expectations.
- **However, the idea that the teacher labels, the pupils accepts the label and behaves accordingly is a fairly simplistic view of what happens in the classroom. Pupils might reject the label and in secondary schools, where pupils will be taught by many different teachers, it is difficult to see how a consistent label can be applied.**

#### **Streaming and Setting**

- Most schools place their pupils in ability-ranked sets or in *streams* (a broad ability band).
- Several sociologists have pointed to the way in which streaming and setting *institutionalises* failure for those seen as less able. It is a formal way of labelling which penalises working class children. Some would argue that it has led to a re-invention of the grammar-secondary modern school divide.
- The school **Ball** investigated placed pupils into one of three bands' supposedly on the basis of their academic performance in primary school. He found that other social and behavioural factors influenced which band a pupil was placed in. Working-class pupils were far more likely to be placed into the two lower bands. As a result, middle-class pupils were more likely to be entered for academic exams.
- **Keddie's** study confirmed much of Ball's findings. She also identified the way in which knowledge was packaged differently for each ability group. The more able the students, the more abstract academic knowledge they received. Much of the knowledge offered by less able students were ignored by teachers.
- **Teachers however, would argue that it is in the interests of all pupils to be given work appropriate to their abilities.**

#### **Pupil subcultures**

- **Hargreaves** has argued that one of the results of streaming, setting and labelling is the development of pupil subcultures. Pupils who are given a negative label and placed in lower sets form an anti-school subculture which then reinforces teachers' attitudes towards them.

#### **C ARGUMENTS/EVIDENCE AGAINST THE VIEW THAT SCHOOLS FACTORS CAUSE WORKING-CLASS UNDERACHIEVEMENT**

- Not all sociologists agree that the school is responsible for working-class underachievement. **Some research has claimed that working-class pupils are disadvantaged by their home background.** Sometimes this link has been presented as being the result of materially disadvantage in terms of poorer material resources – lack of computers, home study space, health provision etc. Other sociologists like Sugerman and Hyman, have claimed that it is the fatalistic attitudes and lack of value placed on education in many working-class homes – cultural disadvantage – that causes educational failure. Others like Bernstein have identified the importance of language. **The general suggestion here is that educational failure is rooted in the home, not the school.**
- **Society-wide factors may also play a part in determining attitudes towards education. In particular, poorer employment opportunities for working-class pupils may create a negative approach to education.**

#### **D EVALUATION**

- **The experience of school must have an important effect on educational performance – after all, it is in the school that education takes place, with pupils spending 15,000 hours in the classroom.**
- **It is likely that the different school factors (above) are linked together. Labelling may influence the setting/streaming process, anti-school subcultures might reinforce initial teacher labelling and so on.**
- **It is also likely that individual, home, school and societal factors are not separate but interrelated. Teacher expectations may be based on attitudes transmitted by pupils which have been learned in the home. These may be entirely understandable attitudes given parental experience of limited work opportunities, long-term unemployment etc.**
- **Finally, although social class is very important, gender and ethnicity influence attainment, cutting across class as the cause of different levels of educational performance.**

## How far have sociologists agreed that the main aim of vocational education has been to improve the working skills of young people?

### SUMMARY

There has been a great increase in vocational education both in terms of training and business links in mainstream schools over the past twenty years. Why this has been the case, is open to debate. The conventional view is that the aim of vocational education is there to improve the skills of young people. Marxists and feminists have tended to be more suspicious of the motives behind this emphasis, seeing vocational education as a means of controlling young workers/women.

This question sets up a claim about the reasons for vocational education. Your task is to test this claim. As well as explaining what this claim is, you need to look at **alternative** views and **criticisms** of the claim. So you will need to inject into your answer as much **evaluation** of the suggested explanations as you can. ***Ideas about evaluation are highlighted in italicised bold print in the text.***

### A DECONSTRUCTION

- Since the 1970s, there has been increasing concern to make education more vocationally relevant. At the time, some politicians linked rapidly rising youth unemployment and Britain's weakening economic performance to a failure of schools to produce a skilled workforce.
- The Conservative governments (1979-1997) introduced a wide range of initiatives aimed at increasing the amount of vocational education inside and outside mainstream schools. These included: YOP/YTS/YT training schemes (1978 onwards), NVQs and GNVQs, the growth of Business Studies in schools and initiatives like Young Enterprise and other links between businesses and schools.
- The Labour government 1997- has continued this emphasis on vocational education...
- ***The range of initiatives indicates the importance attached to vocational education by successive governments – but has the aim just been to improve the work skills of young people?***

### B SOCIOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS/EVIDENCE THAT THE MAIN AIM OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION HAS BEEN TO IMPROVE THE WORKING SKILLS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

These are some of the arguments and evidence that you could use in your answer.

#### The New Right

- The New Right made an important contribution to social policy during the 1970s and 1980s.
- Their ideas are often similar to functionalism. Functionalists emphasise the link between education and the economy, with the former preparing young people to meet the needs of the latter. They also stress the importance of competition and achievement as the basis for placing the most able members of society into the positions of greatest importance.
- The New Right claimed that the young unemployed lacked both the skills and the correct attitude to work - problems which required urgent attention through training and re-education into good work habits.
- They also argued that economic growth was only achievable with a skilled workforce. This reflected a view widely held by employers that schools leavers lacked both work specific skills and in many cases, even basic numeracy and literacy.
- ***From this perspective, the aim of vocational education was to improve the skills of the next generation of workers in order to improve Britain's economic performance.***

## C SOCIOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS/EVIDENCE AGAINST THE CLAIM THAT THE MAIN AIM OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION HAS BEEN TO IMPROVE THE WORKING SKILLS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

### Training or jobs?

- **The introduction of a wide range of training schemes was intended to shift the blame for unemployment from government and industry to the unemployed themselves.** Young people have often been represented as being unable to work either because of poor attitudes to work or as a result of inadequate skills.
- **From a Marxist perspective, the real need is not training but jobs.** The result of training schemes alone is a workforce which is over-credentialised but under-employed.
- **Clarke and Willis called training 'suspended animation'**, whilst others have seen the expansion of post-16 education and training as 'warehousing' the unemployed until jobs are created.

### Vocational education - meeting the needs of capitalism, not young people

- Applying Bowles and Gintis' concept of a 'correspondence principle' would see vocational education as meeting the needs of a declining economy. Mass unemployment increased competitiveness between workers. Vocational education makes young people even more conformist and accepting of authority. **Training schemes are therefore primarily a method of social control.**
- **Finn claimed that the real reasons for the introduction of training schemes were to weaken trade union membership, depress wages, provide employers with a source of cheap labour and massage the unemployment statistics downwards.** The numbing boredom of many schemes would also ensure conformist attitudes.
- The aim of vocational education is nothing to do with improving young people's skills and everything to do with **propping up capitalism.**

### The quality of training schemes

- Some schemes are developed very effectively by some employers with day release, formal training and topping up of wages being incorporated. **In other cases, the amount of real training is fairly limited. Other firms use training schemes as a form of elongated interview process by which they can sift trainees for potentially useful employees.**
- So it could be argued that not all vocational education meets the training needs of young people.

### Gender bias in vocational education

- **Many training initiatives seem to have reinforced traditional gender stereotypes.** Most health and social care related courses are almost entirely filled with female trainees whilst the opposite is true for construction training schemes.
- **It can be argued that vocational education limits the opportunities of girls** rather than improving their skills.

## D EVALUATION

- **There is a fundamental division of opinion between the New Right and conflict approaches. Possibly neither has a monopoly on the truth.**
- **In a capitalist economy there is a real need to have a competitive edge and education should reflect this concern.**
- **However, it is also relevant that vocational education, by linking education and work so closely, has become a powerful form of social control.**

## Evaluate the contribution of interactionist sociologists to our understanding of the role of education.

### SUMMARY

Interactionism has made an important contribution to a sociological understanding of educational processes. It has created many useful concepts and research studies, mainly about the internal workings of schools and classrooms. However, interactionist claims have been criticised from functionalist and Marxist perspectives and there are some problems with their research techniques.

This question asks you to **evaluate** the work of interactionists. So as well as setting out what you know of their work, you also need to point out **criticisms** of their claims and **alternative explanations**. So you will need to inject into your answer as much evaluation of interactionism as you can. ***Ideas about evaluation are highlighted in italicised bold print in the text.***

### A DECONSTRUCTION

- Interactionists are interested in small-scale social interaction, so their approach has been very useful in looking at what goes on in the classroom between pupils and teachers.
- With this focus, Interactionism is a useful counterbalance to Marxist and functionalist approaches which concentrate more on the structure and function of education for society as a whole.
- Interactionist research has also been useful in examining how sexism and racism might operate in schools.

### B THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERACTIONISM

#### Basic concerns

Interactionists are interested in the way actors construct and negotiate meanings. They focus on the experience of schools and classrooms. This is very different to the way functionalism and Marxism focus on how social structures determine behaviour.

- Some of the major concerns of Interactionists include:
- labelling
- the idea of a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'
- the notion of an 'ideal pupil'
- teacher expectations
- classroom negotiation

#### Labelling, 'self-fulfilling prophecy' teacher expectations and the 'ideal pupil'

- Labelling is the idea that we often identify individuals by a single, defining characteristic. This label tends then to be reinforced by the later interpretation of their behaviour and often, they come to 'live out' the label and come to believe it themselves. Therefore a pupil who is labelled as a 'problem' may well change their behaviour and act out the role of a troublemaker with teachers seeing their actions as confirmation of the original label.
- Becker analysed the images of the 'ideal pupil' held by 60 teachers. This model student was bright, well behaved and motivated to achieve - behaviour most commonly found in middle class students. As a result, Becker found that when compared to this ideal, many working class pupils were negatively labelled.
- ***However, some educationalists have been sceptical about the way labels can be applied in secondary schools where pupils are taught by a number of different teachers. It is difficult to see how a common label can be created and consistently applied when a pupil may have ten or more teachers.***

- **Hargreaves** examined in greater detail how this worked in practice. They suggested that the construction of teacher attitudes went through three stages. In the 'speculation' stage - teachers made their 'first impressions' of pupils. After further classroom contact, teachers 'elaborated' this impression and by the final 'stabilisation' stage, they had determined a clear picture of the pupil.
- **Rosenthal and Jacobson** attempted to measure the effect on attainment of teacher expectations. By setting up expectations of different groups of pupils in the minds of teachers and then measuring any changes in pupil attainment, this research found that high expectations (unrelated in reality to ability) did lead to an increase in achievement. ***Rosenthal and Jacobson have been strongly criticised not just for their method - which did not observe to see if and how labels were transmitted in the classroom - but also for their dubious interpretation of the results.***
- **Teacher expectations.** Ball's study indicated that teachers had differing expectations of pupils in different ability bands and this was recognised by pupils, resulting in a negative impact on their performance. Keddie took this further in her analysis of the way teachers defined appropriate knowledge for different ability groupings. As with many interactionists, Keddie related this to social class.
- **Pupil adaptations.** Woods has developed an eight-fold typology of the ways pupils adapt to the demands of the classroom. Through these modes, including rebellion, compliance, ingratiating, ritualism and colonisation, pupils negotiate the meaning of schooling. Teachers reinforce this process.
- **Gender in the classroom.** Some interactionist research has looked at the ways female and male students are perceived by teachers. **Stanworth** found that teachers learned boys names more quickly, held higher academic and career expectation of boys and tended to upgrade boys work whilst downgrading that of girls. **Spender** argued that girls were 'invisible' in the classroom, receiving less teacher attention than boys do and having sexist abuse largely ignored and unpunished.
- **Ethnicity and the classroom.** Interactionist research has shown that some teachers hold ethnocentric attitudes that prejudice the achievements of black and Asian pupils. **Wright's** investigation of primary schools noted that teachers saw Asian students as quieter so gave them least classroom attention. Afro-Caribbean students on the other hand were often seen as having behaviour problems. Other research in secondary schools has found a similar pic-

## **C EVALUATION**

- ***Labelling seems a very deterministic model of behaviour - the teacher labels, the pupils recognises and accepts the label and behaves accordingly. Pupils do not necessarily accept the label they are given. Mac an Gail noted several female and ethnic minority students in his study who consciously rejected the label they felt they had been given – as did the female Afro-Caribbean pupils studied by Fuller. Both Swann and Stone found little evidence of low self-esteem among students who allegedly had been negatively labelled.***
- ***Other researchers have questioned the apparent assumption that all teachers behave in a basically similar manner. Hammersley for example has pointed out that although some teachers made racist comments in private they did not act in a racist way in the classroom. Taylor found that many teachers were very aware of issues of racism and their teaching was sensitive in this respect.***
- ***Looking in such detail at the individual classroom and school means that sometimes the influence of wider social factors such as changing social norms, employment structures and changes to the education structure cannot be identified. Classroom interactions do not take place in a social vacuum.***
- ***However, despite these problems, interactionist research has revealed a great deal about the social processes that go on in the classroom. As a result, we understand a great deal more about how teacher-pupil interaction can affect behaviour and educational achievement.***

## Evaluate sociological explanations of the relationship between education and the economy.

### SUMMARY

Sociologists have examined the relationship between education and the economy. Functionalists have seen this as a very positive relationship, with education functioning to provide the economic sub-system with a workforce that is skilled and motivated. This is of great benefit to society as a whole as it secures economic survival and it also benefits individuals as they have the chance of a better lifestyle and economic security. Marxists on the other hand have viewed the relationship as meeting the needs of capitalism rather than those of all groups in society.

This question asks you to **evaluate** sociological explanations. By comparing Marxist and functionalist explanations you would be doing some basic evaluation but as well as this, you should point out **strengths and criticisms** of their claims. So you will need to inject into your answer as much **evaluation** of these explanations as you can. **Ideas about evaluation are highlighted in italicised bold print in the text.**

### A DECONSTRUCTION

- The earliest sociological perspective on education was developed by Durkheim and his work has been followed by a succession of functionalists including Parsons and Davis and Moore. Functionalism asks certain key questions about the role of education in society. One of these key questions is: in what ways does the education system benefit the economy?
- Marxists have asked a somewhat different question in that they raise the issue of what the role of education is in protecting capitalism.
- ***The main criticism of functionalism has been that it focuses on what is seen as the positive benefits of this relationship and tends to ignore some of the negative aspects of the link between education and the economy. The main criticism of Marxism has been the opposite, that it emphasises the negative and ignores the positive aspects of the relationship between work in a capitalist society.***

### B SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMY

Some aspects of sociological theories you could refer to include:

#### Functionalism

Functionalists have seen education as making two main contributions to the successful functioning of the economy. These are through **socialisation** (especially socialisation into work roles) and the **allocation of occupational roles**.

#### Socialisation

- In schools, pupils acquire a set of general social values which connect into those learned in the home.
- Schools also instill values and norms which link closely to the needs of the economy. Schools teach values such as punctuality, commitment to work, competitiveness, the importance of effort, organisation, recognition and respect of authority and so on - all of which are important elements in the 'work ethic'.
- It is also argued that the role of education is to develop in young people the skills needed by the economic system. This may mean simply the skills of basic literacy and numeracy, but can also include more specific work skills. Vocational education is one example of the way this can operate.

#### Allocation into work roles

- Functionalists have argued that education 'sorts and sifts' pupils, matching them to appropriate work roles. Davis and Moore have argued that the role of the education system is to identify who has what talents, develop them and allocate individuals into relevant jobs. The higher rewards given to those occupying the most important occupations are justified by the time spent in gaining the necessary qualifications and training to fulfill these positions.

## **B SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND THE ECONOMY (contd.)**

### **The New Right**

- The New Right has had an impact on education policy in Britain during the last twenty years. Their fundamental assumptions - that education has failed to produce workers with the work skills and attitudes necessary for Britain to be competitive - draws on functionalist views of the role of education. They argue that when education 'gets it wrong', then economic decline follows.

### **Criticisms of the functionalist view**

- *The idea that there is an agreed set of values in society can be seen as rather simplistic and inaccurate. Functionalists underestimate the degree of conflict in society which springs from economic divisions. Who decides what the 'agreed set of shared values' is?*
- *Functionalists, especially Davis and Moore, assume that the education system operates fairly on the basis of meritocratic principles. In reality, the existence of a private education sector and the overwhelming evidence that the greatest influence on educational achievement is not based on individual 'talent' and effort but social class, gender and ethnicity, undermines the claim that the education system is fair.*

### **Marxism**

- Marxist sociologists have presented an alternative view, that education is organised to serve the interests of the ruling class in a capitalist society and maintains class-based privilege.
- Bowles and Gintis describe the 'correspondence principle' which links education and the economy. Schools are structured in ways that prepare pupils for the experience of work in a capitalist society. The school corresponds to the workplace in many ways:
  - Hierarchy:** schools have hierarchies (Headteacher, Deputy Head, Senior Teacher etc.) just like workplaces (Managing Director, Section Head, Supervisor, etc.)
  - Power:** teacher/boss has authority over pupil/worker
  - Organisation of work:** separate school subjects mirroring separate workplace tasks
  - Motivation;** exam results and pay rather than enjoyment of learning and work
  - Equal opportunities:** educational success/promotion at work is based on merit
- In these ways, the school corresponds to the workplace. The school is where '**social reproduction**' occurs as future generations of workers are prepared to understand and accept their roles in capitalist society. So the education functions to create a workforce suited to the needs of capitalism and to reinforce social inequalities.

### **Criticisms of the Marxist view**

- *Like functionalism, Marxism makes some fundamental assumptions which are open to challenge. This analysis only works if these assumptions are accepted.*
- *It often seems that schooling has little relationship to work—how much school-learned knowledge is directly transferable to the world of work?*
- *Does capitalism just want docile, subservient workers? Modern systems of work often demand imagination, flair, teamwork etc.*
- *This approach sees a very tight relationship between education and work. Giroux suggests that the education system is less closely tied into the demands of the economy.*
- *They also assume without any direct evidence that pupils accept that there is equality of educational opportunity.*

## **C EVALUATION**

- *There is a sound logic to, and some evidence in support of, both perspectives.*
- *Each approach offers a clear-cut but possibly over-simplified view of the relationship between education and the economy*
- *However, both approaches are strongly ideological, so that it very much depends on how far their basic assumptions about society, education and the economy are accepted.*
- *There seems little likelihood that these two approaches could ever be reconciled and most educational policy mainly reflects a broadly functionalist view.*

## Assess sociological explanations of the relationship between ethnicity and educational performance in Britain.

### SUMMARY

The evidence suggest that there is a link between ethnicity and educational attainment. It is very important to recognise that there are many ethnic groups in Britain, some of which do better educationally than others. Social class and gender also have an effect. Sociological explanations of this relationship were initially fairly simplistic but the current trend is to try to analyse the variations between ethnic groups. Explanations have been sought in terms of language, home cultural background, the role of schools and the experience of racism in society.

This question asks you to **assess** these explanations. So as well as setting out what you know about them, you also need to point out *criticisms* and *alternative explanations*. *Ideas about evaluation are highlighted in italicised bold print in the text.*

### A DECONSTRUCTION

- *The relationship between ethnicity and educational performance complex and difficult to measure.*
- There is a lot of *variation in educational performance between ethnic groups*. Kysel (1988) used an eleven group classification which for qualifications at 16, placed Indian, African Asian and Pakistani pupils at the top followed by African, South East Asian and Greek students. In the middle of the range came ESWI (English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish) pupils, followed by pupils from Turkish, Caribbean and Arab backgrounds. At the foot of the attainment ladder came Bangladeshi pupils.
- Earlier studies used a much more simplistic set of categories which gave a less accurate picture (hiding the great variation within ethnic groups) and which make it *difficult to identify trends in attainment over the last three or so decades*.
- Sociological explanations of the differential educational attainment of ethnic minority students have focused on home background, school experiences and wider, societal factors. However, sociological studies have not always applied so sophisticated an analysis as that used by Kysel, making it difficult to explain variations between specific groups.

### B SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND ATTAINMENT

Some aspects of sociological theories you could refer to include:

#### Family background

- Some researchers have emphasised particular aspects of the home background of different ethnic minority students in their explanation of differential educational achievement.
- Afro-Caribbean family life has often been identified as having a higher than average proportion of single-parent households and a higher than average proportion of working mothers. This, it is argued leads to an absence of male role models and a family life described by Pryce as 'turbulent'. These aspects of family life have an adverse effect on the educational performance of Afro-Caribbean students. Some on the **New Right** have identified this form of the family as 'pathological'.
- Asian family life is often described in quite different terms. Typically it is seen to be much larger and more closely knit. It is also more closely linked into the community, material resources are shared and a higher value placed on education. **Driver and Ballard** described this as a 'positive resource' helping educational development.
- *However, Afro-Caribbean parents are often amongst those most prominent in developing supplementary schooling at weekends and in school holidays. Other research has produced data indicating that Afro-Caribbean parents make more contact with schools than white or Asian parents do.*
- *Some of the claims about family background and education get very close to being stereotypical and they the additional danger of 'blaming the victim'.*

### Language

- This explanation has usually focused on the claimed linguistic disadvantages experienced by those Asians whose first language is not English and those Afro-Caribbean's who use 'Creole'.
- Research suggests that it is an unlikely cause of differential achievement. **Driver and Ballard** found a similar level of language development among Asian and white pupils at age 16 regardless of home language. This may be a positive effect of the English as a Second Language programmes in many LEAs.
- **Taylor** makes the important point that it may be useful to differentiate between Asian students for who English is a second language and Afro-Caribbean's who may use 'Creole' as a defence mechanism.
- ***There is a danger of stereotyping certain groups in terms of their language and of finding something different between certain ethnic groups and the general population and creating rather than proving some link with educational underachievement.***

### Social class

- Some research has developed the idea that much of the differential educational advantage experienced by Afro-Caribbean's is the result of being disproportionately working class. **Swann** put the contribution of class at 50% or more. **Smith and Tomlinson's** study of inner-city comprehensives measured attainment and found large variations according to class but a very limited variation according to ethnicity.
- ***One problem with this claim is that Asian pupils are also disproportionately working-class yet they achieve higher than average results.***

### School factors

- Many researchers have looked at the impact of a range of school factors. These have included language, teacher attitudes, curriculum content, ethnocentric resources, streaming etc. The general notion here is that it is primarily the experience of school which creates differential attainment.
- Wright's study of primary schools saw how Asian pupils were largely 'invisible' in the classroom and were treated insensitively by teachers and white pupils. Afro-Caribbean pupils were identified as being disruptive and classroom management problems. Other studies of secondary schooling have found similar results including the fact that according to DfEE statistics, Afro-Caribbean's are four times more likely to be excluded from school than white pupils.
- ***Mac an Gail found that there was no clear link between students who expected to fail and those who had experienced racism. How well post-16 students expected to do was much more influenced by the school they had come from, whether it was in an inner city or suburban area.***
- ***Whereas the way teachers see Asian and Afro-Caribbean students differently may help us to understand the variation in these groups' levels of attainment, the difficulty is that both groups are defined as 'problems' by some teachers. If Asian pupils are seen as 'problems' how do most of them end up achieving better qualifications than white pupils?***
- ***Much of the research evidence does not see teachers as being racist in their contact with ethnic minority pupils. Taylor identified many teachers as being very sensitive to multi-cultural issues whilst Hammersley found that even those teachers who were racist in private did not bring racism into the classroom.***

## C EVALUATION

- ***To a large extent, research into the differential achievement of different ethnic groups has not moved much beyond looking at the broad categories of 'Asian', 'white' and 'Afro-Caribbean'. There is a lack of research into the educational experiences of more specific groups.***
- ***This is a very sensitive area and it is all too easy to generate stereotypical images.***
- ***The whole issue of differential educational attainment according to ethnicity is extremely complex. There are several identifiable ethnic groupings which are then cut across by both class and gender.***

## Assess sociological explanations of the impact of recent government policies on educational choice and standards in Britain.

### SUMMARY

Since the 1980s, Conservative and Labour governments have carried out a range of policies which had a substantial impact on educational provision in Britain. The aims of many of these policies have been to raise standards through increasing parental choice and introducing competition between schools. New Right theorists have argued that these changes were needed to improve Britain's industrial competitiveness. Other sociologists, Marxists in particular, have claimed that the real aim and result was to undermine comprehensive education and maintain educational inequalities.

This question asks you to **assess** these explanations. So as well as setting out what you know about them, you also need to point out **criticisms** and **alternative explanations**. *Ideas about evaluation are highlighted in italicised bold print in the text.*

### A DECONSTRUCTION

- Both Conservative and Labour governments from 1979 to the current day have based their educational policies on a need to raise standards. Both have also seen that the most effective way to do this was by developing an 'education market' in Britain.
- New Right educationalists believed that by giving parents and students (consumers) greater choice, schools and colleges ((providers) would have to improve their service delivery as they would now have to compete with each other for 'customers'.
- Connected to this principle of 'choice' has been the idea of developing a range of different types of schools and colleges specialising in different aspects of education.
- Some sociologists have argued that aim of all these changes has not been to improve standards but to destroy the comprehensive system. From this point of view, choice and competition has had the effect of creating greater inequalities between schools than in the past.
- ***So what had been the impact of these policies - higher standards and more choice or greater inequalities between schools?***

### B HAVE THESE POLICIES LED TO GREATER CHOICE AND HIGHER STANDARDS?

Some of the policies you could examine include:

Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s introduced a range of new educational policies directed at creating a greater degree of educational 'choice' and an improvement in educational standards. The Labour government after 1997 maintained most of these policies.

- **Grant Maintained Schools (GM schools) and City Technology Colleges (CTCs)** The 1988 Education Act allowed schools to 'opt out' of LEA control on the basis of a majority vote by parents (ended in 1998). CTCs - also funded directly by central government - were set up to develop a greater curriculum emphasis on science and technology. **Local Management of Schools (LMS)** Schools have been given more control over their budgets. The idea was to make schools more competitive. Under LMS, a value was placed on each pupil the school had on its roll so the 'better' the school, the more students it would attract, the more funding it would receive and the more resources the school would have. With their jobs on the line teachers have been more aware of the need to improve results.
- **National Curriculum, testing and 'league tables'** The introduction of a National Curriculum in England and Wales with testing allows parents to make an informed choice of school for their children. LEAs and schools are required by law to publish their public examination results, SATs results and attendance statistics. Parents can use this information to compare schools in their area through 'league tables' and select the school they wish their children to attend.
- ***Has choice increased? It has for some parents but not for all. If there is only one school in travelling distance, there has been no increase in choice. Schools are also still limited in terms of the number of pupils they can accept. Only a few CTCs were created so the vast majority of parents did not have the opportunity to send their children to a CTC.***
- ***Some CTCs and GM schools operated systems of selection (via examinations, SAT results, and interviews) - which excluded some pupils.***

## **B HAVE THESE POLICIES LED TO GREATER CHOICE AND HIGHER STANDARDS?(cont,)**

### **Have educational standards improved?**

- Exam results have improved at all levels since 1980 suggesting an improvement in standards.
- *However, how far these are result of the policy changes during these years is open to question. Some New Right theorists have claimed that exams have become easier to pass and standards therefore have not risen.*
- *Standards have not improved uniformly. Girls have outperformed boys and middle-class pupils have continued to outperform working-class pupils. Once again it looks to be a case of another educational change primarily benefiting middle-class families.*

## **C HAVE THESE POLICIES LED TO GREATER INEQUALITY BETWEEN SCHOOLS?**

- Inequalities in funding have meant that schools do not compete with each other on an equal footing. Schools in middle-class areas begin with the great advantage of a strong reputation and as a result attract more students from other schools. This gives them more resources and over a period of time schools in an area separate into 'star' and 'sink' schools. ***What 'choice' does this give parents and what does it do for overall educational standards?***
- League tables report only the raw performance figures and do not take into account the social characteristics of different school intakes. Not surprisingly, in most areas, schools with more middle-class pupils are more highly placed in the local 'league table' than those with mainly working-class intakes.
- The 'better' a school, the more pupils it attracts and therefore the more money is brought to the school by these additional students. These additional resources then make the schools stronger through having smaller class sizes, more books and equipment etc. and even more students are attracted.

### **Criticisms**

- *Even if some inequality has resulted, the general level of attainment does seem to have risen. Competition has contributed to improved standards.*
- *At its most crude, some schools deserve to fail and it is only through the pressure to improve that pupils will benefit from more effective teaching and learning.*

## **D EVALUATION**

- *How far these changes have led to greater educational choice for parents and pupils largely depends upon how 'choice' is defined. On the one hand, these changes have empowered parents and made schools respond to parental pressure. Many parents take advantage of the new rights they have and many schools have had to make some fairly fundamental changes to the way they operate.*
- *On the other hand, how genuine is this 'increased choice'? Has the old grammar/secondary modern school division been re-created in a new form? It could be argued that certain parents - particularly middle class parents - have been able to use these rights more effectively to gain an educational advantage for their children. Arguably, the downside of improved choice for some parents and children has been a disadvantaged education for others.*
- *Finally, how far standards have risen is open to debate as there are several reasons for any possible improvement.*

## Assess the claim that the poorer educational performance of working-class pupils is the result of poverty and negative attitudes towards education.

### SUMMARY

Some sociologists have argued that differences in the educational performance of different social groups is mainly the result of differences in their home background. Poverty and negative attitudes in the home background may all have an effect on how well certain pupils do in school. The attitudes of parents towards school, experiences during socialisation and the physical resources pupils have are likely to be important influences on educational attainment.

This question sets up a claim about the causes of working-class educational underperformance. Your task is to test this claim. As well as explaining this, you need to look at **alternative causes** and **criticisms** of the claim. So you will need to inject into your answer as much **evaluation** of the suggested explanations as you can.

*Ideas about evaluation are highlighted in italicised bold print in the text.*

### A DECONSTRUCTION

- Working-class pupils do less well than their middle-class counterparts. Sociologists have been very interested in identifying the reasons for this difference.
- Some sociologists have focused on the home backgrounds of different social groups, looking at differences in culture and material resources to see what effect these may have on educational performance.
- *These factors are all likely to have an important effect on pupils as it is in the home where attitudes towards school are formed and where the physical resources for educational development are found.*
- *However, it is not easy to measure the impact of these factors or to separate them from other potential influences, especially the impact of school factors.*

### B HOW POVERTY AND NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS EDUCATION RESULT IN THE POORER EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF WORKING-CLASS PUPILS.

Some of the ways home background can affect educational performance that you could examine in your answer include the following:

#### Different levels of parental interest in education

- Douglas carried out a large-scale study of over 5,000 young people who were 11 in 1957. He identified a number of reasons why working-class pupils did less well educationally. These included the level of maternal care in early childhood, family size and placement of child relative to siblings and general health. He also noted the importance of the level of parental care, interest and encouragement of children both in early childhood and in school years.
- Middle-class parents placed more emphasis on achievement and demanded more from their children. This was present in pre-school socialisation as well as in formal education.
- Middle-class parents were more involved in their children education, for example through being more likely to attend parents evenings.
- Other sociologists have identified the importance of parental attitudes to education in determining their child's educational performance. Research following this theme was often presented or interpreted as providing evidence of a weakness in working-class culture. *Working-class families were seen as failing to give their children the necessary motivation for the to do well in education.*
- Hyman (1979) suggested that working-class parents place less emphasis on education as a means to get on in life. This undervaluing of education by adults combined with more limited career aspirations, results in working-class pupils looking to find a job as soon as they could leave school.

### **Negative attitudes towards education**

- **Sugarman** claimed that working-class culture was fatalistic - parents passed on the idea that there little could be done to alter their low status. As a result, working-class children do not see much point in investing time and effort into something which will have no effect on their lives. Middle-class children put more into schooling because they believe that they will greater rewards later in life. Working-class pupils think more about leaving school as early as possible and getting a job.
- **Murray**, from a New Right perspective, has more recently pursued the theme of the development of an underclass culture. The poorest stratum in society have a distinct set of values which stem from high rates of illegitimacy, single parenthood, welfare dependency, poor socialisation of children etc. This cultural deprivation is seen as creating a group of pupils who are fundamentally alienated from the education system.
- ***These studies promote the idea that working-class pupils experience some kind of 'cultural deficit' in their home background.***
- ***For Marxists and other radical sociologists, this is a case of blaming the victim. The capitalist system creates structured inequality. Working-class educational failure is therefore seen as the result of something wrong in their background disguising the reality that it is the system to blame.***
- ***How different are working-class and middle-class values? It could be argued that the middle-class have the financial resources to both defer and have immediate gratification. Arguably the reason why the working-class may focus on immediate goals is that their income limits their opportunity to do anything else.***

### **Material factors**

- Working-class families have fewer material resources with which to help their children. Fewer books, poorer access to ICT/internet, less personal study space and so on all reduce the chances of working-class pupils. Middle-class families also have more resources and a better understanding of 'the system' which enables them to get their children into higher achieving schools.

### **C ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS**

- School factors are an alternative explanation of the poorer educational performance of working-class pupils. Teachers are more likely to have lower expectation of w/c pupils, they may label them negatively, place them in lower sets and enter them for lower tier exams.
- The school curriculum is also likely to be less accessible to working-class pupils in terms of content and language. Both the formal and the hidden curriculum may penalise pupils from poor backgrounds.
- They may also lack the 'cultural capital' to do well in schools.
- ***So school factors may be a more important cause of working-class underachievement than poverty or negative attitudes towards education.***

### **D EVALUATION**

- ***There seems to be some evidence that working-class children are less well-equipped than pupils from middle-class homes to succeed in education. There is little doubt that middle-class families offer greater material resources which assist their children in education.***
- ***However, the issue of negative attitudes towards education is more contentious. Sometimes this gets very close to sounding as if there is something 'wrong' with working-class culture and this is great value judgement to make. Why blame working-class families, why not blame the education system or the general structure of inequality in Britain instead?***
- ***It is also very difficult if not impossible to separate home and school factors.***
- ***This is also a very stereotypical and simplistic view. It assumes that all middle-class and all working-class culture is the same. There are difference within working- and middle-class cultures as well as between them.***