Education

Formal and informal education, the official and hidden curriculum, types of school and alternative approaches, the functionalist, Marxist and feminist views of education, and explanations for differences in achievement by social class, ethnicity, gender and country.

Education is more than classrooms and exams. Sociologists ask **what schools are for**, **who benefits**, and **why some groups achieve more than others**.

5.1 What is education and schooling?

Formal and informal education

	Formal education	Informal education
Where	schools, colleges, universities	family, friends, community, the media, everyday life
Planned?	yes: a fixed **syllabus**, timetable and tests	no: learned through experience (a child learns manners from parents)
Leads to	qualifications	skills, values and general knowledge

The official curriculum is what schools openly teach: **subjects**, **syllabus content** and **testing**.

The hidden curriculum is what pupils learn without being formally taught: **norms and values**, **punctuality**, **conformity** (obeying rules and authority), **gender roles** (boys steered to science, girls to care subjects) and competition. It prepares pupils for work and society.

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Types of school

Type	Strengths	Limitations
State/public (government-funded, free)	open to all, low cost	large classes, limited resources in poorer areas
Private (fee-paying)	small classes, better resources, high results	expensive, widens inequality
Selective (pupils chosen by exam or ability)	high-achieving, stretches able pupils	those who fail the test may be labelled, favours pupils whose parents can pay for coaching
Non-selective (comprehensive)	mixed ability, more equal	may hold back the most able, according to critics
Single-sex	fewer distractions, may boost girls' confidence in science	less mixing with the other sex, reinforces stereotypes
Co-educational	prepares pupils for mixed society	possible distraction, gender stereotyping in subjects
Faith schools	teach religious values alongside the curriculum	may be seen as divisive

Alternative approaches to education

Approach	Strengths	Limitations
Online learning	flexible, reaches remote areas, low cost	needs a device and internet (digital divide), less social contact, needs self-discipline
Homeschooling	tailored to the child, flexible	depends on parents' time and ability, less peer contact
Unschooling	child-led, follows interests	may lack structure or qualifications
Vocational learning	practical job skills, direct route to employment	may be seen as lower status than academic study
Progressive schooling	focuses on the whole child, creativity and independence	results harder to measure, may lack discipline

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5.2 What are the roles and functions of education?

The functionalist view

Functionalists (Durkheim, Parsons, Davis and Moore) see education as **beneficial for society**:

- **socialisation**: teaches **shared norms and values** (value consensus), so schools act as a bridge between family and society (Parsons)
- **social control**: rules and discipline teach pupils to obey authority
- **economic role**: **teaches skills** needed for work (**role allocation**)
- **selective role**: sifts people by ability so the **most talented** do the most important jobs (**meritocracy**: success depends on ability and effort)
- **social integration**: brings people from different backgrounds together

Strengths: explains why education matters for society. **Limitations**: ignores inequalities (not everyone has an equal chance, so it is not truly meritocratic); assumes shared values; treats pupils as passive.

The Marxist view

Marxists (Bowles and Gintis, Bourdieu, Althusser) say education **serves the capitalist class** and **reproduces class inequality**:

- **socialisation and social control as ideological control**: schools teach pupils to **accept hierarchy and obedience**, preparing them for exploitation at work
- **the correspondence principle** (Bowles and Gintis): school life mirrors work: obeying orders, bells, rewards in grades like wages
- **the myth of meritocracy**: schools claim success is based on ability, which makes failure seem the pupil's own fault
- **the hidden curriculum** teaches workers to be docile
- **cultural capital** (Bourdieu): the knowledge, tastes and language of the middle class give their children an advantage at school

Strengths: shows links between education and class inequality. **Limitations**: **deterministic** (assumes pupils have no choice or resistance; Willis showed some working-class "lads" actively rejected school); ignores gender and ethnicity; many working-class pupils do succeed.

The feminist view

Feminists say education **perpetuates gender inequality** within a **patriarchal culture**:

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- **male power**: men hold more senior posts in many schools, women are teachers, men head teachers (a **gender hierarchy**)
- **role models**: few female scientists in textbooks; few male primary teachers
- **gender stereotyping** in subject choice and the hidden curriculum
- **sexual harassment** in schools

Strengths: exposes hidden gender bias. **Limitations**: **girls now outperform boys** in many countries, so the picture is more complex; ignores class and ethnicity; progress has been made.

5.3 What factors help to explain differences in educational achievement and experience?

Patterns

- **Social class**: pupils from **middle-class** families on average achieve more than working-class pupils.
- **Ethnicity**: differences between groups (some do very well, some below average), which also vary by class and gender.
- **Gender**: in many countries **girls outperform boys**, but boys may still dominate some subjects and higher-paid careers.
- **Global differences**: achievement and years of schooling differ between countries.

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Social class: explanations

Type	Explanation
Material factors	poverty: no quiet study space, no books, no **digital technology** (laptop, internet), poor diet and health, cannot afford trips, uniform or tuition
Cultural and social factors	**cultural capital** (Bourdieu): middle-class children have language, tastes and experiences that match the school
Linguistic factors	Bernstein: middle-class pupils use an **elaborated code** (complex, detailed language used in school); working-class pupils may use a **restricted code** (shorter, context-dependent)
Home/community factors	parents' attitudes, expectations and their ability to help with homework
Compensatory education	extra help for disadvantaged pupils (e.g. free school meals, extra funding for poorer schools) tries to make up for disadvantage
In-school factors	**pro-school and anti-school sub-cultures** (Willis, Lacey: pupils who reject school values form groups that disrupt learning); **streaming** and **setting**
Selective and private education	pupils whose parents can pay get small classes and high results
Labelling theory	teachers label working-class pupils as less able, creating a **self-fulfilling prophecy** (Becker; Rosenthal and Jacobson)
Marxist	the system is designed to favour the middle class and reproduce inequality

Ethnicity: explanations

- **Institutional racism**: discrimination built into school policies and practices
- **Ethnocentric curriculum**: the curriculum reflects the culture and history of the **majority** group, ignoring others
- **Role models**: too few teachers from minority backgrounds
- **Linguistic factors**: pupils who speak another language at home may struggle with the language of instruction
- **Cultural, material and social factors**: differences in family income, parental education and expectations (some groups value education highly)
- **Home/community factors**
- **In-school factors**: anti-school sub-cultures, **ethnic sub-cultures**, exclusion rates
- **Labelling**: teachers may hold stereotypes about certain groups

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Gender: explanations

- **Gendered socialisation and social control**: girls are encouraged to be quiet, neat and hard-working; boys more active
- **Teacher expectations**
- **Cultural and social factors**: **girls' changing ambitions** because of feminism and more career opportunities; boys may think study is "uncool"
- **Access to education**: in some countries girls are kept out of school because of poverty, early marriage or tradition
- **In-school factors**: **gendered sub-cultures** (laddish culture among boys can reject school)
- **Labelling**
- **Feminist explanations**: **patriarchy** shapes subject choice and careers

Global differences

Reasons include **availability of schools** (distance, number), **cost and poverty**, **child labour**, **conflict**, **gender discrimination**, **teacher quality**, **government spending** and **access to technology**.

Evaluating explanations

When you write "to what extent":

- Give the **explanation**, then **evidence for**, then **limitations or an alternative**.
- Class: material and cultural factors explain a lot, but **not all** working-class pupils fail (so individual choice, school and teachers matter).
- Ethnicity: differences are partly **class** differences too.
- Gender: the "girls do better" pattern needs explaining; but gaps in subject choice and pay remain.
- Global: poverty and government choices matter most, with culture and conflict.

> **TRY IT**
>
> **Explain how cultural capital can affect educational achievement.** Cultural capital is the knowledge, language, tastes and experiences (museum visits, reading, confident speech) that middle-class families pass to their children. Schools reward this kind of knowledge, so middle-class pupils fit in and are favoured by teachers, while working-class pupils may feel out of place. This gives them an advantage in exams. **However**, some working-class pupils succeed anyway, and material factors such as poverty may matter more than culture.

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