



Social class



Preparing the ground

We can begin this section by identifying some of the ways social class impacts on educational performance at various levels of our education system, from achievement at Key Stage 1 (7 year olds) to participation at degree level. Once we have outlined the basic relationship between class and educational performance we can then move on to examine some explanations for this relationship.

Key Stages 1–3

Table 4.2 illustrates achievement differences between social classes using eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) as a measure of attainment. This does, of course, assume (probably quite reasonably) pupils with FSM status come from the lower social classes.

The most notable feature of these figures is the comparatively lower performance of FSM pupils at all stages of compulsory schooling, (from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4 (GCSE)).

	KS1	KS2	KS3	KS1	KS2	KS3	KS1	KS2	KS3	KS4 (GCSE)	
	Reading	English		Writing	Science		Maths			5 or more A*–C	No Passes
Non FSM	88	79	74	85	79	74	93	76	75	55.2	4.1
FSM	69	54	44	64	52	42	80	53	46	24.4	12.2

Table 4.2 % Achievement: Key Stages 1–3 (ages 7, 11 and 14) to Key Stage 4 (GCSE)
Source: Department for Education and Skills, 2004

Key Stage 4

If we look in a bit more detail at Key Stage 4, by breaking the figures down into specific social classes, we can see more clearly the general relationship between class membership and achievement. Firstly, middle-class (professional) children perform comparatively better than working-class (skilled and unskilled manual) children – but there are also clear achievement divisions *within* the working class. Secondly, educational performance for all social classes has improved in recent years, although, as I have just noted, the performance gap between the higher and lower social classes is still apparent.

	1989	2000	2002
Professional	52	74	77
Skilled manual	21	45	52
Unskilled manual	12	26	32

Table 4.3 % of selected social classes gaining 5 or more GCSE grades A*–C
Source: Department for Education and Skills, 2004