

“Fish swim, birds fly and educational standards fall”. Did social background influence GCSE attainment in the 1990s? An exploration of data from the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales.

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A long running empirical research theme within the sociology of education and the sociology of youth has been the relationship between social background and educational attainment. Historically the weight of evidence has indicated that attainment is stratified. Typically, those from more advantaged social backgrounds generally achieve higher levels of attainment than their counterparts from less advantaged backgrounds.

The *Education Reform Act 1988* led to rapid changes in the secondary school curriculum, and to the organisation, management and financing of schools. A major change for pupils was the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). GCSEs differed from the qualifications that they replaced. A new grading scheme was established and all pupils were entered for a common set of examinations. There were also changes in the content and format of examinations and assessment by coursework was introduced. It is conceivable therefore that in the 1990s the reorganisation of schools, changes in the system of examinations and qualifications could have altered previously observed relationships between social background and educational attainment.

In this presentation I will examine relationships between social background and GCSE attainment in the 1990s with data from the Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales (YCS). Through harmonising data from a number of nationally representative Year 11 YCS Cohorts, I will outline trends in GCSE attainment. A number of competing GCSE attainment measures will be compared and contrasted. A range of indicators of social background will be explored. These include gender, ethnicity, social class, school and family measures. A specialized dataset that contains alternative classifications of parental occupations has been constructed for this analysis.

Despite the introduction of GCSEs and various changes within secondary education, attainment in the 1990s was still stratified. Young people from some social backgrounds achieved higher levels of attainment than their counterparts. I argue that gaps in GCSE attainment are sociologically important. GCSEs are public examinations and mark the first major branching point in a young person's educational career. Poor attainment is a considerable obstacle which precludes young people from pursuing more advanced educational courses. Young people with low levels of GCSE attainment are usually more likely to leave education at the minimum school leaving age and their qualification level frequently disadvantages them in the labour market. Low levels of qualifications are also likely to have a longer term impact on experiences in the adult labour market.

Keywords: General Certificate of Secondary Education; GCSE; Attainment; Social Background; Social Stratification.