The language theory by Bernstein suggests that the language used by the working class is a restricted code, with limited vocabulary, frequent uses of colloquial terms and poor grammar which gives them a disadvantage where the school system uses an elaborate code of language which is also used by the middle class. This elaborate code has a wide range of accurate and universal vocabulary, correct grammar and lack of specific dialect. The middle-class students adapt to this seamlessly as they are used to it from their socialisation whereas the working class often struggles to understand textbooks, teachers and exams due to the code of language used.

It would be nearly impossible to socialise children against the norms they learn from their primary caregivers thus it is unlikely that if this is the issue it can be fixed.

Interactionalists generally do not agree that it is the demographics of the classes that differentiates their educational success, rather that the school system itself promotes success in some classes and failure in others.

Becker’s labelling theory suggests that teachers categorise and label children which affects their educational outcome by starting a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hargreaves theorised about the way in which labels can be attached to students by teachers based on their culture and financial status. The result is the child either responding negatively or positively to the label. As middle-class teachers share a trend of favouring the middle class that they can relate to, the working class are negatively labelled thus may essentially “become” their label. Keddie implies that this usually gets them placed in a lower set or stream, being blocked from a higher level of knowledge, thus they do not achieve the same educational attainment as the middle class who are positively labelled. For the middle class, labels are often encouraging and result in being placed in higher sets/streams for higher attainment.

The effects of setting and streaming may be a direct result of the self-fulfilling prophecy based on an antimeritocratic system according to Stephen Ball. Some sociologists such as Lacey suggests that this leads to polarisation of the classes, that the middle class thus do well at education, the working class do not.

The comprehensivisation of schools to replace the tripartite system was to reduce the effect of class difference in educational results with limited success and many criticisms. Especially as setting and streaming and silt-shifting/cream-skimming basically recreates the former system. Though the effect of labelling may cause fatalism in the working class, the extent of this factor has been challenged by Fuller who believes that they can be rejected and used instead as motivation.

After considering these three main factors, it is certainly true that the middle class outperforms the working class at educational attainment. Since material deprivation has been compensated without the gap closing, it cannot be the only factor and since cultural issues cannot be measure, it is hard to know the extent of its effect. The introduction of exam league tables attempts to measure the effect of in-school factors but does not take into account the specific issues such as labelling theory.

(1114 words)