

**AQA A LEVEL
SOCIOLOGY**

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ESSAYS (20 MARKERS)

Methods in Context



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METHODS IN CONTEXT

ESSAYS (20 MARKERS)

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of:

- Closed questionnaires for the study of gender and subject choice
- Field experiments for the study of teacher labelling in classrooms
- Group interviews for the study of class differences in educational achievement
- Laboratory experiments for the study of teachers' expectations of pupils
- Non-participant observations for the study of the impact of setting on educational achievement
- Official statistics for the study of attendance within schools
- Official statistics for the study of educational achievement amongst different ethnic groups
- Participant observations for the study of anti-school subcultures
- Postal questionnaires for the study of parents' attitudes towards their child's education
- Unstructured interviews for the study of gender identities within schools

ITEM A: CLOSED QUESTIONNAIRES AND GENDER AND SUBJECT CHOICE

The choice of GCSE and A-Level subjects is clearly linked to a gender bias according to sociologists. Females tend towards subjects such as English and Humanities, whereas males tend towards mathematics and sciences.

Some sociologists would argue that closed questionnaires are an appropriate method for studying this issue as they would provide highly reliable data and as they are quick to complete students may be more willing to do so. However there are of course disadvantages such as the lack of validity and issues of literacy that might influence a student's ability to complete the questionnaire.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods evaluate the strengths and limitations of closed questionnaires for the study of gender and subject choice. (20 marks)

By a closed questionnaire, sociologists are referring to a research method that provides respondents with pre-determined categories of answers from which to select. Closed questionnaires can be delivered in the post, in a written format or even as an interview questionnaire, however their main advantage as a method for social research is their reliability (Item A). Positivist sociologists would therefore favour the method as it allows the researcher to gather large volumes of comparable data in a short space of time and respondents are willing to complete the questionnaires because they are relatively quick to complete. This is important when studying the issue of gender and subject choice because it is likely that the questionnaires would be issued to students themselves, who may be busy working towards examination subjects as this is the time at which subject choices take place (Item A). As such they are unlikely to want to complete a detailed questionnaire that requires longer responses, preferring instead to complete them quickly by ticking boxes, ranking answers on a scale etc.

This would also be the case within the context of the school, as it is unlikely that the gatekeeper such as the head teacher would be willing to accept a researcher into the school if they felt their presence would detract from the main business of the school which is achievement. As such they would be more accommodating to the researcher if they guaranteed that their research would minimise disruption to students. Students might also be more willing to complete a closed questionnaire as it feels less personal and often young people are self-conscious and do not feel comfortable revealing their true feelings about personal issues such as subject choice and gender. This leads onto another key advantage of the method for studying the

The research method has been introduced and reference has been made to the item very early on.

The research context has been identified and strengths and limitations of the method have been applied appropriately.

Clear reference is made to the educational context and the research method has been applied appropriately through an analysis of its strengths and limitations.

Reference has been made to the particular research issue.

Key concepts are used

particular issue as it allows the respondents the chance to remain anonymous. Unlike other research methods such as open interviews, there is the option for the respondent not to reveal their identity when completing a closed questionnaire and as such they may be more inclined to be truthful in their responses and less likely to give answers that are socially desirable to their peers or which they consider to be desirable to the researcher who they would likely regard as someone in a position of power or authority.

From a practical point of view, once the researcher has gained access to the school (following permission from a gatekeeper and a DBS check) it is likely that the method of a closed questionnaire could be used with a larger sample as schools have a significant number of students who are choosing or who have chosen their optional subjects readily available and as students are used to completing written work in school it is likely that they would be willing to do so quickly and so there would be a high response rate. The data yielded from the study would be in quantitative form and this would allow the researcher to determine patterns and trends around the topic of gender and subject choice and this information could then be used to tackle inequality and ensure a fairer distribution of males and females within different subject areas through changes to school policy and practice.

Another advantage of the use of a closed questionnaire is that if conducted under the right conditions it could reduce the influence of peer pressure on young people, as if they are unable to see the answers given by other respondents then they may be more truthful in their own answers. In theory therefore this means closed questionnaires are a useful method for studying gender and subject choice as they provide both reliable and valid data. However, it could be argued that if the questionnaire does not allow the option of "other" as one of the answers and the opportunity for the student to respond to each question beyond the constraints of the answers selected by the researcher then it could potentially undermine the validity of the study and simply be a reflection of the researcher's own values in relation to the issue of gender and subject choice. Students may also feel a sense that the questionnaire is a bit like a test as it has been given to them during school time and so they may be under the impression that there is a "right answer" rather than answering truthfully and it may be difficult for the researcher to explain to them that this is not the case.

Another significant disadvantage of using closed questionnaires as a method for studying gender and subject choice is that it may not provide rich enough data to fully explain the reasons behind the different subject choices made by males and females

effectively to support points.

Reference has been made to the educational setting and appropriate strengths and limitations have been considered in detail and in response to the particular research issue.

There is a clear evaluative structure.

Clear focus on both the context of education and the research issue.

Analysis and application are detailed and appropriate to the demands of the question.

An evaluative point which focuses on the particular research issue and addresses

respectively (Item A). This means that although patterns and trends can be identified it is difficult to fully appreciate the reasons behind the choices made, and interpretivist sociologists such as Weber would therefore be critical of the method as they would argue it does not truly understand the motivations behind the decisions. As such it may be difficult to use the data effectively to inform school policy and practice.

theoretical considerations with reference to the item.

Based on the evidence, sociologists would argue to some extent that closed questionnaires are a useful method for studying gender and subject choice as they provide many practical and ethical advantages. However, there is still some theoretical debate as to their usefulness in providing a truly valid, reliable and representative picture of the issue of gender and subject choice.

A clear conclusion that summarises key points and links back to the question.

[914 words]

*Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20***

This is an evaluative essay which shows good application and analysis. The item has been referenced well and there is sound use of sociological concepts to support points. The candidate has addressed the strengths and limitations of the research method in response to both the research context and the research issue in a sophisticated way.

To improve further they could aim to reference sociological studies to support their points about the usefulness of the method.

ITEM A: FIELD EXPERIMENTS AND TEACHER LABELLING

Field experiments can have many advantages for the sociological study of education as they are conducted within a naturally setting – which is crucial for ensuring the validity of the research data. Positivists also favour the method because it lends itself to the collection of quantitative data and as such it is easy to draw out patterns and trends within the research findings.

Ethically however there are concerns about a range of issues such as informed consent and the potential harm or distress that could be caused to participants. Similarly there are theoretical limitations as due to practical constraints on time and money it is unlikely to yield a representative sample.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of field experiments for the study of teacher labelling in classrooms. (20 marks)

By a field experiment, sociologists mean an experiment that is carried out within a natural social setting and which aims to control as many variables as possible (bearing in mind the importance of not artificially influencing the study). In the same way as with a laboratory experiment there is a control group and an experimental group upon whom the variables are tested. According to Item A, positivist sociologists would favour the use of quantitative data as they are seeking to establish a cause-effect relationship between teacher labelling in classrooms and the achievement of students in education. Because the data yielded from field experiments is quantitative it is seen from a theoretical perspective to be highly reliable and as such the sociologist is able to determine correlations between teacher labelling and the impact it has on the educational achievement of the pupils being labelled.

One advantage of using a field experiment to study the impact of teacher labelling (according to Item A) is the fact that it can be carried out within the natural classroom setting rather than in an artificial laboratory environment. This could have a positive impact upon the validity of the study as both teachers and pupils are within a familiar social environment and it is possible for the researcher to control the variables to some extent to ensure consistency as classrooms are naturally a regulated environment, however there will still be some freedom which allows the researcher to observe natural behaviours (particularly if they carry out the experiment in a covert fashion).

A clear introduction that defines the research method and which introduces the research context.

Sociological concepts are used effectively to support the points which are made.

Reference to the item is made early on.

A clear advantage of the method has been offered which again relates to both the item and the educational setting.

Analysis is good and key terms have been used effectively.

However, it is important to consider the closed nature of classrooms and the researcher would need to approach a gatekeeper in order to gain access to the natural classroom setting. They could achieve this by approaching a head teacher and gaining informed consent as well as a DBS check to work with children (this could be time-consuming and costly) but this may have a negative impact on their research from an ethical perspective if they then went on to conceal their identity or the true nature of the research from either the pupils or the teachers participating as this would be an example of deception. To overcome this, the researcher could of course be honest with the participants but this raises the issue of impression management and social desirability as any participants that were aware of the presence of the researcher would possibly change their natural behaviour (the Hawthorne Effect). The teacher for example would be highly aware of the need to behave in line with professional standards as otherwise their job might be at risk and so they would be unlikely to openly label students in front of the researcher.

The inequalities of power and status between the researcher and the students could also prove to be a factor as the students may see the researcher as part of the school hierarchy and therefore may moderate their behaviour to conform to the expectations of the school. This means the researcher is either unlikely to gain a valid picture of teacher labelling in schools or they may have to act unethically to ensure the authenticity of their study.

There are also some significant ethical limitations of using field experiments to study teacher labelling which must be considered. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) famously conducted a field experiment in a Californian primary school which involved giving pupils an IQ test. Teachers were then told that this test had been used to identify the top 20% of pupils (known as the spurters due to their potential to develop) although in reality these pupils had been selected at random and not on the basis of their ability. After eight months, the pupils were re-tested and there was a significant difference between the performance of the “spurters” and the rest of the group which the sociologists put down to the impact of teacher labelling as this was the independent variable. Though this study did indeed provide extremely valid data illustrating the impact

An evaluative paragraph which is grounded firmly in the context of education.

Ethical issues are well analysed and there is appropriate application of the content.

Evaluation continues within the same paragraph.

There is reference to the specific research issue.

A new point has been clearly raised and again focuses on both the educational setting and the particular research issue, using key concepts appropriately.

Further evaluation as part of a well-structured argument with a focus on the particular research issue.

Application of sociological studies which fit the criteria for both the research method and the research issue so highly relevant to the question.

Reference is made to the item and analysis is well developed throughout the paragraph.

of teacher labelling on pupils' achievement it also raised ethical issues. In the first instance, both the teachers and the pupils had experienced deception about the true nature of the research and as such had not been able to offer informed consent. There was also the issue of the psychological harm (Item A) caused to the pupils which went directly against the school's legal duty of care and also their objectives of raising achievement for all pupils. This suggests that field experiments are not a particularly useful method for a sociologist studying teacher labelling as they cause too many ethical objections.

However, one significant advantage of the use of field experiments such as that conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson was that it was highly reliable due to the relative simplicity of the method. As such within five years the research had been replicated numerous times and the original findings still stand. This would suggest that for a positivist sociologist the method of field experiments does in fact have its uses.

Based on the evidence however, sociologists would argue that although there are some clear advantages to using field experiments, in general the disadvantages outweigh the advantages.

[855 words]

*Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20***

This is a top mark band essay which is skilled in assessing the strengths and limitations of the research method in response to the educational context and the specific research issue. The item has been appropriately referenced throughout the essay and there is evidence of strong application and analysis.

Sociological concepts and studies have been used effectively as supporting evidence.

Continued evaluation with clear links back to the original question.

A distinct conclusion which summarises the main arguments and relates to the question.

ITEM A: GROUP INTERVIEWS AND CLASS DIFFERENCES

Generally speaking, sociologists tend to avoid using group interviews as a research method as they are aware of the impact that peer pressure and social desirability can have on the validity of their findings (particularly in an educational context where young people may not wish to speak openly in front of their peers).

However there are clear advantages as the method is far less time consuming, therefore less expensive and it may be the case that pupils actually feel encouraged to speak out about their true feelings if they are motivated to do so by their peers.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of group interviews for the study of class differences in educational achievement. (20 marks)

By a group interview, sociologists are referring to a qualitative research method that involves asking questions (usually open ended questions) to more than one person at once. Interpretivist sociologists would regard group interviews as a useful research method as it would allow them to gather potentially valid data about the research issue of class differences in education. This is because the researcher is able to ask detailed questions and follow-up questions if the respondent raises issues that are interesting to them. However, it is important to note that there are also significant disadvantages to using the method.

Firstly, the sociologist may find that group interviews actually lack validity. This could be for a number of reasons, but particularly because the respondents may experience issues of social desirability or peer pressure (Item A). This is particularly the case when studying pupils because they are very sensitive to the views of their peers and a personal issue such as social class differences in education is not necessarily something they wish to discuss openly with their peers and the researcher. Another reason why the validity of the method could be compromised is because of the power relationships between students and the researcher as the pupils may regard the researcher as a representative of the school and therefore they may be reluctant to speak to them about the true issues relating to class differences in education.

Similarly, the fact that it is a group interview may also result in an oppositional approach with the students taking a hostile attitude to the researcher or being unwilling to participate. However, a skilled researcher will be able to build a rapport with the students and encourage them to be more open about the true issues and their feelings (Item A).

The research method has been clearly defined and key concepts well explained.

There is clear reference to the specific research issue and strengths of the method have been introduced early on, leading on to evaluation.

A clear point is raised and reference has been made to the item.

Application to the research context is strong and analysis is detailed.

There is also a link to the specific research issue.

An evaluative structure is presented and there is strong analysis of the strengths/limitations of the method. Reference to item.

Group interviews may also prove problematic for studying the issue of social class differences in education from a practical perspective. Firstly, they are quite time consuming and schools may be reluctant to allow pupils off timetable to complete them, or students may be unwilling to give up their own time to participate unless there is some sort of incentive, which will add to the cost of the method. It can also be difficult for the researcher to gain access to the school in the first place and so they will need to gain permission from the school and have the head teacher act as a gatekeeper in order to allow them access to the students. Once in the school it is likely that the school will have data about the students and their social class background, which may mean it is easy to find a sample as schools are essentially a ready-made sampling frame, however there is still an issue related to informed consent if the students themselves are researched directly.

Firstly, it could be argued that the students are too young to consent to participate themselves and it is important that schools fulfil their legal duty of care to students by ensuring they do not come to any physical or psychological harm as a result of the research. This means the researcher would have to be subject to a DBS check before entering the school and this can add to the cost of the research and the time taken. Similarly, it would be important for the researcher to carefully consider the questions asked and the wording of the questions to avoid ethical dilemmas such as harm or sensitivity and so they may be restricted to using structured interviews which would to some extent limit the validity and so provide an inaccurate picture of class differences in education.

Similarly the students may reveal too much about themselves during the course of the group interview and this raises issues of confidentiality as the researcher cannot guarantee anonymity or that issues raised in the group interview will not be shared elsewhere - though they can advise students not to share information. This could raise further ethical issues from a safeguarding perspective as the students may reveal issues of abuse or neglect as part of the questioning and they would be obliged to report this to the school as part of their duty of care. As such students may be reluctant to share information with the researcher (Item A).

Theoretically, group interviews also lack representativeness (therefore the ability to make generalisations) about social class differences in education as practical constraints relating to time and money mean they are unlikely to be conducted on a large scale. The method also lacks reliability as it is unlikely that the same questions will be asked to all groups and there are also

Sound application to the educational context and a clear assessment of the practical and ethical issues relating to the specific research method and in response to the research issue itself.

Key concepts are used effectively.

Continued evaluation with reference to the educational context. Reference is made to the specific research issue though this could be better embedded in the argument itself.

Further analysis of the strengths and limitations of the method in relation to the research context and with reference to the item.

Links to the specific research issue and an assessment of the theoretical limitations is well explained.

issues with members of the group failing to participate and being overlooked by the researcher.

Based on the evidence therefore, group interviews are not the most useful method for social research as they may lack validity and reliability, they are often not representative and they are limited by practical and ethical restrictions (Item A).

A clear conclusion that addresses some of the key issues but not the specific research issue.

[823 words]

*Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20***

This answer is towards the lower end of the top mark band. Its strengths are its evaluative structure, its reference to the item, its application of key concepts and its relevance to the educational context. Limitations of the answer however include the conclusion which does not reference the research issue and also in the way in which references to the research context seem to be tagged on to the end of the paragraphs rather than being an integral part of the points raised. This response could be improved by developing more research characteristics of the topic, not just the context.

ITEM A: LABORATORY EXPERIMENTS AND TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

Some sociologists would argue that laboratory experiments are a useful research method for investigating teacher's expectations of their students. This is because the researcher has a lot of control over the research environment and therefore they are able to easily control the variables and draw out patterns or trends in behaviour.

However critics would suggest that the method is invalid due to the artificial environment and that there are also issues relating to both practical and ethical considerations that mean it is an unsuitable method to use.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of laboratory experiments for the study of teachers' expectations of pupils. (20 marks)

By a laboratory experiment, sociologists mean a comparative research method that looks at the impact of different variables on an experimental group compared to a control group. According to the item, laboratory experiments are a quantitative research method that is favoured by positivist sociologists. As such they tend to produce more reliable data which some sociologists would argue gives us a consistent view of teacher's expectations of pupils as the same results will be found every time, assuming the research is carried out under the same conditions.

A laboratory experiment allows the researcher to draw out patterns and trends based on the data acquired and to establish a cause-effect relationship. For example, if the experimental group performed significantly badly in educational tests compared to the control group, this could be attributed to the impact of negative labelling from teachers. This suggests that laboratory experiments have clear strengths as a method for studying teachers' expectations as they allow us to establish a cause-effect relationship between the way teachers label pupils and the impact this has on their achievement and which is supported with empirical evidence. A number of sociologists have chosen to use laboratory experiments as part of their research into teachers' expectations, for example Slatin (1976) who used a sample of 96 teachers and showed them 18 photographs of children from a range of social class backgrounds (making sure to control for other variables such as gender and ethnicity by ensuring

A clear introduction that defines the research method and which introduces the research context.

Sociological concepts are used effectively to support the points which are made.

Reference to the item.

A clear advantage of the method has been drawn out and this has been applied to the specific research context. This has been supported by sociological evidence in the form of studies which are relevant to both the educational context and the research method

Ethical considerations have been introduced and are clearly linked to the specific research issue.

they were divided equally). The teachers were then asked to rank the children in the photographs according to a variety of factors that may influence their educational achievement such as parental interest, their aspirations etc. and it was overwhelmingly found that teachers tended to make negative associations between the lower class children and their potential in education and were labelling them as lower achieving students based purely on their own expectations. The impact of such labelling could of course have a negative impact on the children themselves as they may experience a self-fulfilling prophecy of underachievement. This particular form of laboratory experiment had ethical advantages for the study of teachers' expectations because it did not involve real pupils and as such no harm came to them in terms of the impact on self-esteem or educational achievement.

However other sociological experiments such as that conducted by Charkin et al (1975) did involve real pupils and these raised significant ethical issues. 48 university students taught lessons to ten year old boys and were told that some had a higher ability level than others. The experiment focused on the ways in which eye contact and body language conveyed expectations and there was clear evidence of a cause-effect relationship between positive interactions (based on teacher expectations) and educational achievement. This raised ethical issues for a number of reasons and is a significant weakness of the method. Firstly, the research potentially had a negative impact on children's self-esteem and educational achievement and secondly it was conducted on very young children who would not have had the necessary power or status to object. They were not asked about whether they wanted to participate in the study which shows a lack of informed consent. This suggests that laboratory experiments have significant weaknesses as a method for studying teachers' expectations as they can potentially undermine the legal and moral obligations of the school to protect their pupils.

A practical issue of using laboratory experiments to study teachers' expectations is the time it takes to complete the study. Compared to other research methods, experiments are a relatively time-consuming method and they also need to be quite tightly controlled in terms of the variables which can make them somewhat artificial - according to Item A

Clear evaluation of the method which is supported by sociological studies which are relevant to both the method and the educational context.

The focus is on pupils as the research participants and their teachers which clearly places the method in the context of education.

Practical issues are introduced within the context of education and in relation to the specific research method.

Reference is made to the item and key concepts are used

(therefore influencing the validity/reliability). It is also difficult to conduct a laboratory experiment on a large scale due to time and money constraints and this means that the results do not necessarily provide a representative picture of the impact of teachers' expectations and so few generalisations can be made about the issue.

Another practical limitation of using laboratory experiments for investigating teachers' expectations is the fact that it is difficult to gain access to participants. Schools are generally a closed environment and so the researcher would have to appeal to the head teacher to gain permission to access teachers/students to participate in the experiment. Many head teachers would be reluctant to allow this if they felt it conflicted with the main business of the school which is raising achievement and they may feel that participating in the experiment is not the best use of the teacher/student's time. Researchers may also need to complete a DBS check to be allowed into the school or to work with children which could prove costly and time consuming.

It would also be necessary from an ethical point of view to gain informed consent from all participants and this could put pressure on vulnerable pupils who may feel forced into participating because of their unequal levels of power and status and they may feel the researcher is above them in the school hierarchy, as is the case with their teachers – so they feel obliged to conform with their requests, particularly if they feel intimidated by the artificial laboratory environment. This suggests laboratory experiments are not a particularly useful method for researching teachers' expectations.

There is also the issue of impression management to consider as teachers are skilled at hiding their true feelings and within the artificial environment of a laboratory setting they would most likely be able to work out the true focus of the investigation and so may give socially desirable answers as they are mindful of their professional reputation. This means that any findings are potentially both invalid and unreliable and so it would be difficult to make generalisations about the impact of teachers' expectations on pupils.

Based on the evidence it would appear that although there

effectively.

Further analysis of the practical issues which shows depth of knowledge and more appropriate application to the educational context.

Ethical issues are introduced as evidence of evaluation and are applied appropriately to the educational context.

Clear links back to the question.

Theoretical issues are introduced and are framed within the educational context and in relation to education.

A clear conclusion which

are some strengths of using laboratory experiments such as an ability to control variables, yielding reliable data and an ability to draw out patterns/trends to establish a cause-effect relationship between teachers' expectations and pupil's achievement, there are many significant limitations of the method from both a practical and ethical perspective which mean it is not a particularly useful method for studying the issue within the context of education.

summarises the key issues and which relates back to the original research issue.

[1044 words]

*Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20***

This essay is highly effective in applying the research method to both the context of education and the research issue. Sociological evidence has been used well to support analysis and there is a good evaluative structure throughout. Reference has been made to a good range of strengths and limitations.

To improve further the answer could have been more explicit in its use of the item.

ITEM A: NON PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

There are clear differences in educational achievement based on social factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity which sociologists feel is particularly concerning. In order to overcome such issues, it is important to establish the causes of them and therefore sociologists would advocate using qualitative research methods such as non-participant observations to see the group behaving in an educational setting. The advantages of this method are that it is usually a valid method of research and if it is done overtly can avoid ethical issues relating to deception. However, the disadvantages of the method could include the difficulty of gaining access to a school in the first place and the practical issues of time and money. Teachers and students are also unlikely to behave naturally if they feel they are being watched.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of non-participant observations for the study of the impact of setting on educational achievement. (20 marks)

By a non-participant observation, sociologists mean a research method that is favoured by interpretivist/qualitative sociologists and which is based on watching an individual or social group but not taking part in the activities of that group. A non-participant observation can be both covert (undercover) or overt (open) depending on how much the researcher feels the need to protect the validity of the study, as well as more practical factors such as gaining access to the research group. For example, if a researcher wanted to use non-participant observation as a research method to investigate the impact of setting on educational achievement they would first have to approach the school and gain access (Item A). This may mean they are unable to do a covert non-participant observation as the true focus of the research would have to be revealed as schools may be unwilling to allow an outsider in without knowledge of their true intentions.

Schools have a duty of care to their students and this is a legal requirement, so the head teacher of the school may be unlikely to allow the researcher in to the school if they felt the research project could have a negative impact on the students or cause them any harm. This could be overcome by ensuring that the researcher undertakes a DBS check to ensure they are suitable to work with children, however the disadvantage of this for the researcher is that it may add practical constraints to the research in terms of the time available to conduct the research and the money (Item A). This may mean the researcher has more limited practical resources and so they would most likely have to conduct the investigation on a much smaller scale. This means that non-participant observations can have theoretical disadvantages as they are likely to be unrepresentative as it is not practical to use the method on a larger sample. It may also

The research method is introduced at the start and is well explained using key concepts.

There is reference to the item and this is appropriately applied to the research context of education as part of a detailed analysis.

The paragraph has a focus on the educational context and the associated ethical issues.

There is reference to the item and the research method has been assessed in terms of its usefulness both practically and theoretical issues.

prove difficult to make generalisations about the population as a whole.

Another ethical limitation of conducting non-participant (overt) research is that parents will possibly need to be informed if their children are participating in a research project and this is known as informed consent. However, as schools are often tight-knit communities where individuals know one another, word is likely to spread about the presence of the researcher. This may lead both teachers and students to act in an artificial way as they are wary of the researcher (this is known as the Hawthorne effect) and therefore the validity of the study is compromised. Students may also behave differently around the researcher because they may regard them as a representative of the school and therefore feel they need to either impress them or rebel against them depending on their own relationship with the school and the authority figures within it. This again could have a negative influence on the validity of the study. This may be particularly the case amongst children in lower sets as they may have a negative relationship with their teachers and may blame them for their underachievement.

There are also ethical issues to consider if the researcher did decide to remain covert as this is effectively deceiving the participants about the true nature of the research. Though it may have a positive impact upon the validity of the study it would have a negative impact on the participants as they do not have the free will to choose to participate. With both forms of observation there is also the issue of confidentiality to consider as neither method allows for anonymity. This is particularly important within the school setting as the research topic is dealing with potentially sensitive issues such as class, gender, ethnicity and educational underachievement and as such it is essential that the researcher ensures confidentiality when publishing their research as otherwise this could result in bullying or harassment for the students or staff involved.

In a non-participant observation there is also the issue of image management from the teachers who will be accustomed to having external observers in the classroom as part of their performance management and so they will be unlikely to behave naturally (Item A) as they know they need to live up to the professional standards that they must work within. The result of this is that the researcher may again lack validity in their findings as the teachers are not behaving in a way which is typical for their classroom.

Positivist sociologists would also be critical of observations in general as they see them as producing vast amounts of qualitative data which may be difficult to record accurately

An evaluative structure is present and key concepts are used effectively to support the points made.

There is a clear focus on the educational context though more explicit reference could be made to the specific research issue as an integral part of the point.

Analysis is detailed and application is appropriate to the research context and the specific issue.

Further reference is made to the item and the use of key concepts is effective.

Sociological perspectives are introduced as part of the theoretical debate. Key concepts

(particularly where the researcher is acting covertly and so is reliant on their own memory) and therefore the results may lack validity but will certainly lack reliability as it is difficult to draw out tangible patterns or trends. This suggests although the method allows for a rich understanding of the issues around setting and achievement in schools it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about it that can be compared elsewhere.

Based on the evidence therefore, non-participant observations are of limited use when investigating the impact of setting in schools.

[854 words]

are used effectively and the specific research issue has been addressed. There is a strong evaluative argument.

A brief conclusion that references the original question.

Examiner comments: Mark Band 17-20

This essay uses the item well and is strong in its use of key terminology to form an evaluative argument. There is thorough analysis of a range of practical, ethical and theoretical issues relating to the educational context and also the particular research issue. To improve further the conclusion could be stronger and more detailed and there could be references to sociological studies as evidence. This places the answer towards the bottom of the top mark band.

ITEM A: OFFICIAL STATISTICS AND ATTENDANCE

Official statistics are a positivist research method that has as one of its main advantages reliability. It is also advantageous as a method, particularly for studying national issues such as school attendance because the government requires schools to keep this data and this means they are likely to be more representative than any study conducted by an individual sociologist and so generalisations can be made.

However it is important to note that official statistics may not meet the specific demands of the research project and they also do not provide the richness of qualitative methods which are favoured by interpretivists.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of official statistics for the study of attendance within schools. (20 marks)

By official statistics, sociologists are referring to a positivist research method which achieves quantitative data. As the method is a secondary form of social research it has been conducted prior to the research investigation by the sociologist. As such they may not match the specific needs of the research project and this is a significant limitation of the research method for studying attendance within schools.

Although schools have a legal requirement (Item A) to register their students daily and to keep accurate records of their attendance they do have some freedom to manipulate the statistics. Schools in urban areas where there is a high ethnic minority population for example may try to schedule a training day on the same day as a significant religious holiday to ensure their attendance figures are not hit. Similarly, there could be an issue for the sociologist as although they are able to obtain clear data about the levels of attendance within a school and this is broken down according to social factors such as class, gender and ethnicity, it is not possible to conduct a detailed qualitative (Item A) analysis of the issue, using official statistics as a method. This means the sociologist may struggle to truly understand the meaning school attendance or absence has for the students themselves, or how the ethos of the school and other significant factors such as the relationship with the teacher and the quality of learning and teaching play a part in determining attendance. It is also difficult to fully investigate the impact of external factors which may be hugely significant using official statistics as the research method.

Douglas for example pointed towards the impact of parental interest on a child's educational achievement and this could have

Introduction explains the research method and the specific research issue being studied.

Early reference to the item which has been fully analysed in response to both the educational context and the specific research issue. Examples have been given to illustrate points.

Clear use of key concepts and an evaluative structure in terms of the theoretical debate the method raises when studying the specific issue.

Sociological studies used to support points but used

a direct impact on their levels of attendance at school - but the method does not lend itself to investigating it. Similarly, peer groups are a hugely important factor influencing school attendance but it is unlikely that information about this will be part of the school's official statistics on attendance and therefore another hugely important variable has been overlooked.

However, the use of official statistics does have some significant ethical advantages as a method for investigating attendance. For many students, attendance at school can be a complex and sensitive issue which they may feel uneasy talking to a researcher about. The fact that official statistics are a secondary research method and that they do not require the researcher to make direct contact with the students themselves means they are unlikely to cause any harm or offense to the students involved or their families. There is no necessity to make contact with hard-to-reach families as the focus of the research is unlikely to be qualitative and therefore the information is readily available to the researcher. They have not had to negotiate access to the students with the school's head teacher and they have not had to spend time and money undergoing a DBS check (an important practical consideration) and therefore they can potentially provide a much more representative picture (Item A) of the issue as they are dealing with statistics from across the country and from a range of different types of schools. Students also have complete anonymity and confidentiality is easy to ensure - which is an important consideration relating to student data as students are potentially a vulnerable social group and schools have a duty of care to protect them.

A key advantage of the method of official statistics is also their reliability as they are a positivist/quantitative research method that can be used to draw patterns and trends of attendance amongst different social groups (Item A). This information is clear to interpret and therefore can be used by schools and governments to inform their policy and practice and help them devise strategies to overcome attendance issues (though interpretivists would argue without a true sense of *verstehen* (Weber) they will struggle to truly solve the social problem of poor attendance).

In some respects, the use of official statistics can also have a positive impact on validity as the researcher does not make contact with any students, teacher or parents. This means there is unlikely to be any bias introduced to the study as a result of social desirability or due to the Hawthorne effect. This might be a particular issue if parents for example feel they are being judged negatively by a researcher who they may regard as a representative of the government or some other authority so they potentially could be untruthful if other methods were used.

appropriately as it remains within the context of the issue being studied and education.

A further evaluative paragraph assessing the usefulness of secondary methods within an educational context and the benefits it may have ethically.

Reference is made to the item and is built upon.

Key concepts are used effectively and there is clear evidence of wider knowledge.

Further reference to the item in response to the theoretical debate into investigating the specific research issue.

Synoptic links are made to the theory and methods module and content is appropriate.

Focus on the specific research context of education and the limitations that other methods may have in that context as a means of illustrating the strengths of official statistics (evaluation).

Similarly, students may have felt pressure to participate in a study they felt uncomfortable with (this is an ethical consideration) if they felt that the school had authorised it and therefore the researcher had some sort of power or authority over them. As these situations are unlikely to arise with the use of official statistics they have a significant advantage as a method for studying attendance in schools.

Further development of the educational context and associated ethical issues. This has been applied to the research topic.

Based on the evidence therefore, sociologists would argue that in many respects, official statistics are a positive research method to use when investigating attendance in schools as there is effectively a ready-made sampling frame and the research data already exists - saving the researcher time and money. However, it is important to recognise that the data may not represent the specific focus of the researcher or that it may not provide sufficient detail about the complex issue of school attendance and this in turn influences the validity of the study.

A clear conclusion that focuses on summarising the arguments and explicitly addressing the question.

[916 words]

*Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20***

This answer draws synoptic links and uses a wide range of sociological concepts and ideas to assess the usefulness of the method, both in the context of education and in response to the specific research issue. The item has been used effectively and analysis is detailed, with appropriate application of sociological studies.

ITEM A: OFFICIAL STATISTICS AND ACHIEVEMENT BY ETHNICITY

There are distinct differences between the performances of different ethnic groups in the education system. White British students tend to do particularly poorly, as do Black Caribbean and some Asian groups such as Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Indians, Chinese pupils and the white middle classes tend to do significantly better however.

Schools are obliged to keep records of issues such as student attainment and also their ethnicity so official statistics can prove a highly representative method to study the issues relating to ethnicity and underachievement. As they are a secondary research method they also save the researcher time and money.

However there are also disadvantages such as the fact it may not focus on the specific issues required for the research and as it is quantitative data it does not necessarily provide a valid picture of achievement by ethnicity.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of official statistics for the study of educational achievement amongst different ethnic groups. (20 marks)

By official statistics, sociologists are referring to a quantitative form of data which is numerical and allows for clear patterns or trends to be drawn. This is a particularly useful method in many ways for studying the issue of educational achievement amongst ethnic groups for a number of reasons.

Firstly, from a practical perspective the research method is a secondary one (Item A), which means that the sociologist is not conducting the research - rather they are relying on existing research which has been compiled (often by the government or private research organisations). The most significant advantage of this is that it is hugely representative as the government requires all schools in the state sector to keep data regarding the achievement of their students and also relating to their ethnicity in the interests of equal opportunities which is one of the legal requirements placed on schools (Item A). As such the education system is a ready-made sampling frame and as the government has already compiled data relating to schools across the country it is hugely representative as the sample size is considerably bigger than any sample that the sociologist themselves could have achieved. This means that significant patterns and trends can be drawn relating to ethnicity and educational achievement as the data already exists in quantitative form and so generalisations can easily be made. This is at a relatively low cost to the researcher and means they do not have to spend much time conducting research themselves - rather their time is spent analysing existing data. This means that official statistics have a

There is a clear introduction to the specific research method and a link to the research issue/context.

Reference is made to the item and there is a clear point made that has been analysed effectively and where appropriate material has been applied.

There is a clear link to the educational context.

Key concepts have been used effectively and links have been drawn between practical and theoretical issues.

significant practical advantage when investigating the links between ethnicity and educational achievement.

There are also ethical advantages of using the research method because the researcher does not make contact with any students themselves and so they do not have practical issues relating to gaining access to the schools or finding a gatekeeper and there is also no necessity to undertake a DBS check which could be costly and time consuming for the researcher. Similarly, the method is unlikely to cause any direct harm to students and this is important to consider as schools have a duty of care to students and they are seen as vulnerable young people due to their age. As the method does not involve any direct contact with students the researcher is unlikely to face any issues relating to sensitivity or offence and they are also able to ensure both anonymity and confidentiality for the students as they do not receive any identifying information about them from the secondary source - they may simply know their ethnicity and their achievement details.

However from a theoretical perspective interpretivist sociologists are critical of the method as they may see it as reducing an important social issue such as the underachievement of ethnic minorities to a purely quantitative exercise and therefore they do not understand the complex social interactions that go on within the school setting and this means they are unable to achieve a full picture of the achievement of different ethnic groups - in particular the reasons behind differences in achievement. This may mean that any social policies introduced to overcome issues of ethnic underachievement which have been identified by the study are unlikely to truly solve the problem.

There is also a theoretical consideration in terms of validity and reliability as the researcher has not conducted the research themselves and so they may have to trust that the data has been collected appropriately and provides a true picture of ethnicity and educational achievement. There may also be a very specific area of focus for the research project that is not met by the existing secondary research (Item A) and so the sociologist may need to carry out their own research after all. However, it is important to note that generally reliability is seen as a key advantage of the positivist research methods.

Based on the evidence therefore, the use of official statistics to study ethnicity and educational achievement is useful to an extent. There are significant practical advantages in terms of accessing the data as it has previously been collected from a large sample and therefore generalisations can be made at a particularly low cost to the researcher (and within a much

Further analysis of the research context and the appropriateness of the research method for that context.

There is reference to the specific research issue.

An analysis of the research method directly in response to the school setting and the specific research issue, with synoptic links made to social policy.

Further reference to the item and a clear evaluative structure which focuses on sociological approaches such as positivism.

A clear conclusion that summarises the issues in response to the original question.

smaller time frame). There are also significant advantages ethically due to the lack of direct contact with the educational setting by the researcher and this overcomes ethical issues relating to harm, sensitivity, consent, access to vulnerable students etc. It also has theoretical advantages therefore as the lack of a researcher in the school means there is less of a chance of bias being introduced by issues such as social desirability or the Hawthorne effect. However, it is important to note that as the method is purely quantitative it can be heavily criticised as it does not truly appreciate the complexities of the social issue it is investigating - rather it paints a superficial picture of the general trends.

[826 words]

Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20**

This answer is detailed in its analysis and uses a range of practical, ethical and theoretical considerations in its assessment of the usefulness of official statistics. The item has been referenced a number of times and there is strong use of supporting sociological concepts. There is an evaluative structure and a clear focus on both the research context and the research issue.

ITEM A: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND ANTI-SCHOOL SUBCULTURES

Anti-school subcultures are a source of concern for sociologists who would argue they directly link to issues such as social class, gender and ethnicity and represent a significant factor in educational underachievement. Some sociologists such as interpretivists would favour a qualitative research method such as participant observation to study this issue as they feel it offers them rich and valid data of a difficult group to research.

However there are of course ethical considerations, particularly where the research is undercover and these are particularly important within an educational setting where young people may be subjected to potential harm.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of participant observations for the study of anti-school subcultures. (20 marks)

By a participant observation, sociologists mean a qualitative research method which involves the researcher themselves undertaking the activities of the group. This can be done either overtly, where the research participants know about the presence of the researcher, or covertly where they are unaware of their presence. If a sociologist were to conduct covert participant observation within the context of a school they may come up against ethical issues as well as practical ones when trying to study anti-school subcultures.

Firstly, in order to gain access to the school the researcher would have to ensure they have informed consent to undertake the research and this is particularly important as it would most likely involve working with children. As such they would firstly need to make contact with the head teacher of the school who may or may not act as a gatekeeper, depending on whether the research could be seen to be beneficial or disruptive to the business of the school. It is also an ethical consideration to make contact with the parents as students are under the age of 18 and many parents may object to their children being involved in a research project without their knowledge or consent. This means the researcher would struggle to keep the participant observation covert as they would need to make parents and the school aware of the true nature of their investigation and as schools are often quite tight knit communities and young people use social media to communicate it is likely that word would spread quickly and undermine the validity of the study (which is a theoretical disadvantage) or indeed the willingness of students to participate in the study (resulting in a small sample and therefore lacking representativeness and the ability to make generalisations).

A clear introduction which explains the method being used and the specific research issue investigated.

A strong first paragraph which explicitly assesses the strengths and limitations of the method within an educational context.

Key terms are used effectively and there is a focus on a range of practical, ethical and theoretical issues which shows depth of knowledge.

Analysis is sound throughout and use of key concepts is sustained.

However, it is also important to consider the advantages of using a covert participant observation as it is likely that anti-school subcultures would be unwilling to participate in research (Item A) if they felt the researcher was a representative of the school and therefore part of the hierarchy which they distrust. As such it is likely the only way they could gain access to the sample is through a covert participant observation where they convinced those in anti-school subcultures that they were either one of them or a member of staff in the school. This would allow them to gain rich and valid data (Item A) about anti-school subcultures and to see them behaving naturally in the school setting. Though there are additional ethical considerations which could be seen as a limitation of the method such as the potential harm that could come to the researcher if they were discovered - particularly if those in anti-school subcultures were also involved in criminal activities as well as the psychological harm or offence that might be caused to students or their families if they were negatively labelled as being part of an anti-school subculture (Item A). Alternatively, the researcher could adopt an overt participant observation which would of course overcome many of the negative ethical issues of the method but which would compromise the validity of the study as people are less likely to behave naturally if they know they are being observed (the Hawthorne Effect).

There are of course other key strengths of using participant observations as a method to study anti-school subcultures, as well as some further disadvantages. Firstly, a strength of the method is the high response rate as the researcher is with the group and is able to yield a vast amount of rich qualitative data which could give a very valid picture of anti-school subcultures (Item A). However, a disadvantage could include the fact that it would be difficult to record all the information as a participant (particularly if they are covert) and so it would rely on the researcher having a particularly good memory. From a practical perspective there are other disadvantages such as the fact participant observations are very time consuming and as such often cost a lot of money to employ additional researchers, or focus on a much smaller sample which can mean the data collected cannot be used to make generalisations about anti-school subcultures. There is also a practical issue relating to cost and time in terms of applying for the DBS check that the researcher would need in order to undertake research within the school - as children are considered vulnerable individuals and the school has a duty of care to protect them.

Based on the evidence sociologists would argue that although there are many significant strengths of using participant observations to study anti-school subcultures, such as its validity

A good evaluative structure with good reference to the item and the educational context/specific research issue.

Good analysis and depth of knowledge shown and key concepts are used effectively to support points.

Further reference is made to the item and the research context and there is also a clear appreciation of the limitations of the method within an educational context.

which is favoured by qualitative sociologists and its ability to access hard-to-reach groups such as anti-school subcultures, there are still significant limitations of the method which need to be overcome, most of which relate to the ethics of the research, practical issues such as time and money and the representativeness of the research as it is likely to be on a much smaller scale than with other more quantitative methods.

A clear conclusion that addresses the demands of the question.

[839 words]

*Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20***

This essay shows a clear understanding of the strengths and limitations of the research method and applies these appropriately to both the context of education and the specific research issue. There is a good use of sociological terminology and reference to the item is made throughout. There is a strong evaluative structure.

ITEM A: POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRES AND PARENTS ATTITUDES TO EDUCATION

Postal questionnaires can prove a useful method for investigating issues such as parental attitudes towards education (which the sociologist Douglas argued are a key factor in determining academic success) as they allow for a large number of questionnaires to be distributed, resulting in a large sample size – so the findings are likely to be representative and generalisations can be made.

However, there are of course disadvantages such as the fact that postal questionnaires may go unanswered or that they have a low response rate. Similarly there may be issues with the validity of the research method due to a lack of detail in answers.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of postal questionnaires for the study of parents' attitudes towards their child's education. (20 marks)

By a postal questionnaire, sociologists mean a questionnaire that is sent to participants in the mail, rather than one which is distributed face-to-face. There are many advantages of using a postal questionnaire to study parents' attitudes to their child's education. Firstly, a postal questionnaire can contain both open and closed questions. This would allow the sociologist to get both quantitative (reliable) and qualitative (valid) data about the way parents respond to a child's education and the level of interest they take.

The sociologist Douglas (Item A) showed that there was a clear correlation between parental interest and educational achievement and this was particularly linked to social class - as it was the middle-class parents that took the greatest level of interest in their child's education. Similar trends might occur when using postal questionnaires as a method for researching the issue as the middle-class parents may be considerably more likely to respond to the questionnaire than those of a working-class background who may struggle with literacy issues or may not have time to complete the questionnaire due to work or childcare commitments. This could influence the validity of the study as it would not necessarily be representative of parents as a whole, but rather middle-class parents. It is also the case that middle-class parents are concerned about social desirability and image management and so they may not be entirely truthful about their level of interest in their child's education as they want to ensure they appear suitably involved.

However, there are significant advantages to using a postal questionnaire. Firstly, from a practical perspective it is easier to gain access to a larger sample (according to Item A) as postal questionnaires are relatively inexpensive and not particularly

Introduction clearly offers an explanation of the research method and the context of the research into education.

Key terms are used effectively.

Reference to the Item and sociological studies are used effectively as evidence.

A clear series of points are made that focus on the educational context and applies the method appropriately with detailed analysis.

Key concepts are used effectively to support points.

Further reference to the item in this evaluative paragraph that deals with a range of appropriate practical issues

time consuming for the respondent, particularly if they involve primarily closed questions. This means that the researcher is able to gain a more representative picture of parental interest in education from schools across the country and is therefore more able to make generalisations about the population. Another practical advantage of the method is the fact that schools have already got contact details for parents and students and therefore a sampling frame is readily available to the researcher if they can gain access to it through the gatekeeper at the school. The researcher would have to ensure confidentiality however and would have to work within professional guidelines that relate to data protection - particularly with regards to potentially vulnerable young people.

From an ethical perspective, postal questionnaires also have advantages over other methods as they can be sent anonymously and this may actually encourage respondents as they know their honest answers will not have negative consequences for them. This would ultimately increase the validity of the study and would allow a more truthful picture of parental attitudes to education. It is also possible for the sociologist to give due care and attention to the wording of the questionnaire beforehand - testing it out in a pilot study to ensure there are no inaccuracies or potentially offensive questions. This is important when researching issues such as parental interest in education as it could be a sensitive subject if a child or parent felt they were lacking in some way. Schools have a duty of care to young people including issues of safeguarding and therefore it is important that the researcher does not ask questions that might be too personal or that may reveal a safeguarding issue which is unable to be dealt with as the questionnaire would likely be anonymous.

If the written questionnaire were to be offered to students there are some advantages in terms of the fact that students are used to completing surveys in school and so would be more likely to complete them as they feel it relates to them and their education and so may benefit them in some way, and they may also feel duty-bound to complete it if it is sent by the school due to the power inequalities that exist. This would obviously be positive in terms of the response rate but also potentially negative in terms of the sense of obligation it places on the student to complete it and therefore there are issues around a child being able to refuse consent. It could also be problematic for a child to complete the questionnaire as they may struggle with the language or understanding the questions and this would naturally affect the reliability/validity/representativeness of the study. To overcome this however the sociologist could take care with the way questions were worded and could also spend time operationalizing the key concepts to make them meaningful for students, which is easier to do in a postal questionnaire than

relating to the method.

There is also reference to ethical and theoretical issues and key concepts are used effectively.

Points made are relevant and related, with a focus on the educational context.

Further development of ethical issues in response to the particular educational issue and the educational context.

Examples are given to support analysis and are well explained.

Key concepts are used well.

Additional focus on the educational context when addressing the strengths and limitations of the method.

To improve, greater reference could have been made to the particular research issue being studied.

with other methods.

Based on the evidence, sociologists would agree that postal questionnaires can be a very useful method for investigating parent's involvement in education as they have many practical and ethical advantages and they can also be used to obtain both reliable and valid data from a representative sample. However, it is important for the researcher to work within the guidelines of professional research and to ensure they have complied with the school itself in ensuring a duty of care for students and confidentiality over their data.

[872 words]

*Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20***

This essay falls towards the middle of the top mark boundary and is strong in its application of the research method to the context of education. A range of strengths and limitations of the method have been well applied and analysed (with supporting use of key concepts) and there is a clear evaluative structure. The item has been well referenced.

To improve further the candidate could make reference to the specific research context in greater detail.

A clear conclusion that summarises key arguments and relates back to the question.

ITEM A: UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND GENDER IDENTITIES

Sociologists have used a range of research methods to investigate issues of gender in education. Unstructured interviews are seen to have many significant advantages as they offer rich, valid data which can provide clear explanations of the meanings behind the issues being studied.

However as with all methods there are limitations, such as the ethical issues relating to the potential harm or offence that could be caused to participants, as well as the associated costs in terms of both time and money.

Applying material from Item A and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of unstructured interviews for the study of gender identities within schools. (20 marks)

By an unstructured interview, sociologists are referring to a qualitative method of social research which is more like a free conversation around the issue being studied (in this case gender identities within schools). As the questions and even the specific topic areas have not been predetermined this is a highly valid (Item A) method of social research as it takes its leads from the respondents and does not seek to influence the research in any way. This is a particular advantage when studying the issue of gender identities within schools as this is a highly personal issue which means a lot to young people and which the researcher should not seek to influence in any way. It is important that the young person does not feel pressured by the researcher or see them as an authority figure to whom they must give the “right” answer and as such they must take advantage of the flexibility of the method to first establish a rapport with the pupil being questioned in order to put them at ease and encourage them to answer truthfully about the issue of gender identities.

However, from a practical perspective it will most likely be difficult for the researcher to undertake an extended conversation with the students as there will be time limitations within the school day and it is unlikely that students will be allowed out of examination classes in order to participate in the study. Young people may also have after-school commitments or be reluctant to stay behind in their own time (Item A) to be interviewed due to peer pressure and so without some sort of incentive the researcher may struggle to gain participants for the study. The incentives they may then have to offer will of course cost money and this could be a practical disadvantage of the method. In fact, gaining access to students to conduct interviews will be time consuming and potentially expensive (Item A) as the researcher will first have to seek approval from the school, they

A strong introduction that introduces the research method and issue immediately.

Reference is made to the item early on.

Key concepts are used effectively.

Strong application to the research issue.

An evaluative paragraph which shows detailed analysis in response to the demands of the question and which focuses on the educational context.

Reference is made to the item and there is clear application to the particular research issue.

A range of strengths and limitations are considered

will then have to undertake a DBS check to ensure they can work with children and will then be bound by the existing commitments of the school in terms of when they can conduct their research. As the process of carrying out an unstructured interview is also very time consuming the researcher may need to employ other interviewers and there will of course be additional costs and time constraints in preparing them for the task and to work with students.

It is also important to consider the ethical issues (Item A) of using unstructured interviews to investigate gender identities in schools as it is a very personal subject and the researcher would have to be very skilled at wording their questions so as not to cause offence or harm to the participants. It is important to ensure informed consent before carrying out the interview and this can be difficult as young people may not have the maturity to offer consent themselves and if they are given too much information about the research project it could have a negative impact on reliability and validity as they may answer in a socially desirable way rather than a truthful one. Similarly, it is important to consider issues of safeguarding as schools have a duty of care to students and it may be the case that they reveal something to the researcher with whom they have built a rapport that can raise concerns about their safety. As such the researcher may find themselves in a difficult position where they are unable to guarantee the pupil anonymity if they feel they need to pass on information that they have received to the safeguarding team.

It is possible that there may also be issues regarding understanding the language used by the researcher as students may have lower literacy levels and verbal comprehension skills due to their age, or they may demonstrate a lower attention span. At first glance this could appear to be a weakness of unstructured interviews, however they can also have advantages in the sense that they allow the interviewer to study nonverbal cues such as eye contact and body language and this may result in the researcher actually gaining a more in-depth and valid picture of gender identities within schools.

Positivists however would be highly critical of the method for a number of reasons. Firstly, they would argue it is difficult to compare responses, in fact almost impossible as the open and flexible nature of the conversation may mean that no two respondents ever discuss the same issues. Similarly, it is important to recognise the fact that unstructured interviews are unlikely to be conducted on a large scale due to practical limitations such as time and money (Item A) and therefore it is difficult to guarantee any form of representativeness or ability to generalise from the findings.

which shows detailed knowledge of the method.

Further reference to the item and application to the educational context.

Key concepts are well explained and are used effectively to support points.

There is a clear evaluative structure.

Continued analysis and evaluation which is detailed and focuses on the educational context.

Further reference is made to the item as theoretical issues are raised – though there is limited reference to the research context or issue.

Based on the evidence therefore sociologists would agree that to some extent unstructured interviews are a useful method for investigating gender identities within schools as they could potentially yield very valid data. However, this is highly dependent on the skills of the researcher to build a rapport and to phrase questions in such a way that they would be understandable to young people and also ensuring concepts have been operationalised effectively and this is very difficult in the context of an unstructured interview.

A solid conclusion that focuses on the specific question and summarises key points.

[893 words]

*Examiner comments: **Mark Band 17-20***

This essay shows detailed analysis and evaluation and makes good reference to the item, the educational context and the particular research issue.

Key concepts are used effectively and application is appropriate and meets the demands of the question.

To improve further the candidate should aim to reference both the educational context and the specific research issue within all paragraphs. Greater use of supporting sociological studies would also be an advantage.

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