

Item C

Streaming involves teachers differentiating between pupils on the basis of their perceived ability, placing pupils whom they believe to be of similar overall ability in the same teaching group. This may result in working-class pupils and those from certain ethnic minorities being placed in lower streams. Lower-stream pupils may lose self-esteem, give up trying and even join an anti-school subculture. By contrast, higher-stream pupils may identify strongly with the school's values and goals.

One way of studying streaming is to use unstructured interviews. These are often effective in exploring interviewees' personal feelings about sensitive subjects. However, for a variety of reasons, some pupils and teachers may refuse to participate in an unstructured interview.

Applying material from Item C and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of using unstructured interviews to investigate streaming.

Unstructured interviews are a method that are preferred by interpretivist sociologists as they provide the researcher with the opportunity to gain valuable in-depth information about a person's experiences or opinions on a topic. Unstructured interviews do not consist of a strict interview schedule, rather they are one or two thematic questions, that allow the researcher to respond to the interviewee and probe deeper than other, more structured methods, giving the researcher insight into their experience or 'verstehen'. As such they are useful for investigating a wide range of sensitive topics.

One strength of using unstructured interviews to investigate setting and streaming would be gaining an insight into how being placed into sets and streams influences the pupil's perception of themselves. As many students, particularly those in the lower sets and streams, will have been judged to be less academically intelligent than their peers it would be useful for the researcher to be able to probe deeply and ask these students how it impacted on their attitudes towards school, their work ethic and their self-esteem. This would require the interviewer to build up a rapport with those being interviewed, a considerable strength of unstructured interviews. A problem with using this method would be that many of the students in the lower sets and streams would be from a working class or Afro-Caribbean background and being interviewed by an authority figure, such as a middle-class researcher may result in less information being given due to status differences. Labov found this in his research, where young black males were less likely to elaborate on their responses to a white researcher.

A further problem with the use of unstructured interviews would be how the researcher would gain access to potential interviewees. Access could be limited by a gate-keeper, either a head teacher or the student's parents. In the case of a potentially damaging topic, such as setting or streaming (particularly if students had been labelled negatively on ethnicity, class or gender) the head-teacher may refuse permission to interview the students as it might impact negatively on the school. Similarly, working class parents might be more

reluctant to give access to the interviewer as they may have suffered negative experiences of school or believe that the interviewer is an agent of the school. However, the ability of the interviewer to develop a rapport with these parents or students could enable them to explain the purposes of the interview and convince access to be granted so that the student's voice can be heard.

Even if the researcher were to gain access through a gatekeeper, there are further limitations to using unstructured interviews about setting and streaming, particularly with teachers. It can be assumed that teachers would be of a similar status to the researcher and a teacher's ability to impression manage could influence the validity of the interview in a number of ways. Teachers would be less likely to disclose that students had been placed into lower sets based on physical or social characteristics because of the potential implications for their career. Furthermore, given the similar status with the interviewer, teachers are more likely to respond in a socially desirable manner, thus further influencing the validity of the interview.

Another limitation of using unstructured interviews to investigate setting and streaming would be that if consent was given, the gatekeeper may select students that would speak positively about the policy of setting and streaming. Children from pro-school subcultures, usually middle class would not only extol the virtues of the school but would see the absence of lower ability students in their classes as a positive thing. However, a skilled interviewer, utilising the flexibility of an unstructured interview may be able to probe a little deeper with these students and find out why they were placed in the top sets and streams, through asking a range of questions about their test scores, attitudes towards teachers and social backgrounds.

A further strength of using unstructured interviews to investigate setting and streaming would be the ability of the researcher to show empathy and direct the conversation in a way that avoids any psychological harm, which would be particularly useful given the potentially sensitive nature of dealing with students who had been labelled as less gifted from an early age. The researchers' interpersonal skills would enable students from lower sets and streams to expand upon their experiences in a safe environment away from their peers and teachers. However, the interviewer could be accused of leading the students into giving responses that suit the purpose of his research, such as stating that anti-school attitudes had stemmed from the way they were treated by teachers.

In conclusion there are many positives to using an unstructured interview to investigate the topic of setting and streaming. The flexibility of the questioning and the potential for the interviewer to be able to probe deeper by using open questions and following them up could provide, rich, qualitative data on what is a complex topic. However, much of the success of unstructured interviews, particularly for topics that are viewed negatively, such as setting and streaming is reliant upon the skills of the individual interviewer, not only to gain access to the students and teachers in the first place, but also to be able to elicit responses from students who may or may not understand the real reasons they have been put into these sets and streams.