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Educational potential, underachievement, and cultural pluralism.

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Comments on Donald Gillies' article – issue 16, 2008-9

This article opens with this striking statement: 'The issue of educational 'underachievement' is one which seems to recur as a crisis every so often in public discourse'. We may consider on re-reading this article how far in this current context of austerity we are once again experiencing a 'crisis narrative' in which we need, like Gillies, to examine and de-construct current dominant notions of 'underachievement' and 'potential'; these notions may encourage educators to pathologise children and families rather than to examine the ways in which the education system may evaluate and miss opportunities to develop children's achievement on the basis of narrow and limiting understandings of their capabilities.

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June 2016

Educational potential, underachievement, and cultural pluralism

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I spent a lot of money on booze, birds and fast cars. The rest I just squandered. (George Best. 1946-2005)

Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. (J. S. Mill 1806-1873)

Abstract

The term 'underachievement' is widespread in modern educational discourse, invoked most frequently in relation to a perceived failure to reach 'potential'. In this paper, it is suggested that such terms, though widely used, are highly problematic, masking ideological assumptions which concern socially constructed, culturally sensitive, subjective, and relative matters. In fact, underachievement is most often used to mean low academic attainment and the paper argues that this is already better understood in terms of well-known factors such as prior attainment, socioeconomic disadvantage, and systemic biases.

The paper also suggests that there is a danger of pathologising the low attainer when in fact it may be the system which is failing the learner. Further, the paper argues that the monologic focus on individual academic attainment as the sole measure of 'achievement' fails to take account of alternative cultural values and risks the charge of cultural imperialism.

Introduction

The issue of educational 'underachievement' is one which seems to recur as a crisis every so often in public discourse. Quite apart from these more spectacular eruptions of media or political concern, 'underachievement' has, in fact, been described as the 'predominant discourse' in education in recent times (Weiner, Arnot & David, 1997). Whitmore (1980) argues that it was the post-Sputnik self-excoriation that transfixed American society in the late 1950s which first brought the term to prominence. The shock of Soviet technological superiority had a significant impact on education in the USA, most notably through Rockefeller Brothers (1958) and Gardner (1961), and through reactive initiatives such as the 1959 Woods Hole Conference from which came the seminal work of Bruner (1960).

That is not to suggest that the notion of 'underachievement' was previously unknown. Plewis (1991, p.377) acknowledges sources which suggest that the concept dates back to the 1920s. Certainly, Conklin (1940), Musselman (1942), Terman & Oden (1947) had all addressed the issue with particular regard to 'gifted' students and their 'failures' at school. One can easily see how such a concept should have been of particular interest to the post-Sputnik soul-searching. Gardner (1961, p.137) refers to the impression of a general failure to make the most of young Americans' potential as 'waste on a massive scale' and called for a major rethink about public education. The implications seemed to be clear: the USA could not maintain its position of global pre-eminence if so many of its population failed to reach their 'potential'. This 'crisis narrative' of underachievement in the USA has recurred since: *A Nation at Risk* in the early 1980s, *Years of Promise* in the mid-90s, and *No Child Left Behind* at the start of the new century can be seen as variations on this theme.

Although the position of the gifted underachiever remains an educational topic of some interest, underachievement has been examined lately more in relation to other factors such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. For example, a recent white paper in England (DfES, 2005, p.58), in picking out several groups whose schooling outcomes are deemed to be problematic, commits the government 'to target underachievement of young black people; and focus on driving up the attainment of Muslim pupils'. Similar concern is expressed at the 'underperformance in Gypsy and Traveller communities' and at the fact that 'many white working class boys can also fail to fulfil their potential'. Recent research has also focused on quite specific groups identified as, or at risk of, 'underachieving': a typical example is Datar and Sturm (2006) who looked at gender, age, and obesity as factors in 'underachievement' in US elementary schools.

While 'underachievement' can be used in a variety of ways, it is common in educational discourse for this to be related to the concept of 'potential'. Underachievement thus means a failure to achieve potential, particularly in terms of specific educational outcomes. It is the position of this paper that there remain many conceptual problems with the notions of 'potential' and 'underachievement'

and these can be summarised in three key ways: firstly, that identifying the criteria for achievement and potential is an immensely complex and contested field; that, consequently, identifying underachievement or failure to reach potential is similarly problematic; and thirdly, that judgements made about potential and achievement are socially constructed and thus need to be applied with due attention to cultural norms, difference, and pluralism.

Despite these problems, educational discourse continues to make use of such terminology with a combination of ubiquity and confidence. A Google search for 'education + potential', for example, will generate no fewer than 90 million hits. Typical of the pre-eminence of the concept is the logo of England's Department for Education and Skills (since superseded by the Department of Children, Schools and Families) – 'Creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence' – all of which would present considerable challenges to define, far less measure.

Foucauldian critique

The approach employed in this paper to a critique of the discourse of underachievement is one related to the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Foucault (1991, p.50) points to his critique as a 'permanent' attitude of questioning the given and testing the 'limits of the necessary'. His method of archaeology is to examine and unpick discourse at a particular period and in a particular field of humanity, in such a way as to uncover its presuppositions. This is done by probing énoncés – serious statements – which can be found most readily in texts. Foucault's discourse analysis thus tests discursive practices and hopes to point to tensions and contradictions which render the discourse problematic (Jäger, 2001). His second - genealogical - method probes discourse in terms of its relationship to power structures, tracing its descent and emergence in the context of history (Olssen, 2006a, p.14).

Foucauldian methods would involve subjecting the discourse of 'underachievement' to an analysis which both probed the assumptions inherent in the 'system of thought' upon which it rests, and seek to trace its emergence in terms of the practices which have given it birth. This would also examine the way in which 'underachievement' has been problematized, how the 'difficulty' has come to be formulated, how its framing has served to constitute the subject in a particular way (Foucault 1991, p. 50; 2000a, p. 117-118; 2000b, p. 290-291).

This paper, however, is necessarily narrower in scope, seeking rather to critique terminology – in this case, educational 'potential' and 'underachievement' – in a more limited way, to render it questionable and dubious, to make its continued use the subject of debate and contention, but also, where appropriate, to suggest that the way the issue has been problematized rests on certain assumptions and ways of thinking. Foucault's approach to critique is ostensibly non-utopian and non-idealistic (Olssen, 2006b). In other words, he presents no 'better alternative', has no normative object to whose end the critique is directed: 'Critique doesn't have to... lay down the law... It is a challenge directed to what is' (Foucault, 2002a, p.236); 'Criticism consists in ... showing that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted' (Foucault, 2002b, p.456). Similarly, this paper will not present an alternative model but will merely probe the assumptions and suggest implications of the current use of the terminology in question.

Achievement and attainment

One central issue which needs to be tackled is to attempt to distinguish between achievement and attainment. This is important because in many cases the two seem to be conflated. At a simple level one could differentiate the two by limiting attainment, as is often done, to level of academic performance, often expressed in quantifiable terms. In many cases low attainment is what is actually meant by underachievement. The concept of 'boys' underachievement', for example, is generally evidenced by reference to academic performance (attainment scores) in one, some, or all school subject disciplines (Carrington & McPhee, 2008). Similarly, concerns about 'working class underachievement' are based on evidence of attainment in national examinations (Gazeley & Dunne, 2007). What is in question here, therefore, is actually attainment, the interpretation of these cases being that a higher level of attainment should have been reached by the groups in question.

Achievement is a much broader concept than attainment. Recent Scottish Government developments in education have highlighted this very point in that attempts are now being made, allied to a revised school curriculum, to try to broaden the scope of assessment beyond academic/scholastic attainment to encompass a broader range of students' experiences and performance (Scottish Executive, 2004; 2006, p.17–18).

The need to understand 'achievement' in a broader sense, in terms of the whole person and the full breadth of their lives, is evident when one considers

data beyond raw attainment scores. Is underachievement an appropriate label for a student who scores lowly in academic tests but is the main carer at home; for the student who struggles with academic demands but who is a keen and committed musician or sportsperson; for the student who seems uninterested in scholastic targets but who is a community or political activist; for the student whose school attendance is patchy, and whose coursework is incomplete, but who is a loving and supportive parent? Schweitzgebel (1965, p.486) makes a related point relating specifically to academic tests when he suggests that 'underachievers, in contrast to slower learners, may in fact learn rapidly and well, but what they learn may not coincide with the content of our examinations'.

Achievement in this broader, holistic sense, therefore, is something which transcends schooling and would appear to be both beyond the remit of, and the ability of, school staff to evaluate. Under-attainment would appear to be the issue which is really in question most of the time when 'underachievement' is referred to. It almost always relates to exam results of some sort. Gillborn and Mirza (2000, p.7), for example, use the term in respect of 'inequality of educational attainment'; Gorard and Smith (2004, p.209) refer to 'relatively poor academic performance'; West and Pennell (2003, p.25) use the term 'to differentiate pupils who are lower attaining than others'.

Underachievement, on the other hand, really relates to something far more profound. The quotation from Mill as this paper's epigraph is a classic example of the clash of values which faces anyone attempting to define such a key socio-cultural term: on what grounds are the lives of Socrates and the fool to be compared, and why, and what notions of, and criteria for, 'satisfaction' are to apply, and why? The example of George Best also, though facetious, is illuminating. He is often referred to as a footballer who 'underachieved' in a spectacular way and yet, as his provocative quote shows, a different perspective produces a very different evaluation. The concept of underachievement clearly depends on one's definition and understanding of achievement, on one's views on life, and it is by no means transparent that one person's values and criteria are better than another's. This essentially personal, cultural issue is one which will be revisited.

Defining 'potential'

Potential is a key tenet in educational provision. It is, after all, used in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) where Article 29 binds signatory states to an agreement that '... the education of the child shall be directed to: the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential'. It is interesting that the superlative 'fullest' is used here which suggests that there could be a range of meanings of 'potential', or that 'potential' represents a broad spectrum of which 'fullest' would be the ultimate, one assumes. This definition of the purpose of state education is the one also used in Scotland, enshrined in legislation (Scottish Executive, 2000, p.1).

Such a commitment to 'potential' invites us into an ideological view of human development, a concept for which there are no objective criteria and so a term over which there will be little prospect of consensus or agreement. What would 'fullest potential' involve: access to a high-paying job; access to a personally rewarding job; happiness; a sense of fulfilment; educational success at doctoral level or beyond; a rich and satisfying personal and social life; a developing role in one's culture; religious commitment and spiritual contentment; the procreation and nurturing of children in a loving environment? The list is – potentially – endless, the means of measurement unclear, and the process undermined by necessarily subjective relativism.

Even longstanding researchers working in the field of academic potential recognise these problems: Clark (1992) points to the fact that trying to define, ascertain, or identify potential is fraught with difficulties principally because there is no measure for 'capacity'. Portsmouth and Caswell (1988), writing from the different perspective of local authority psychological services, are scathing about the misuse of the term 'potential' especially in the case of particular children with special needs who are deemed to have 'reached their potential' and for whom therefore nothing more could, or should, be done:

> Claiming that a particular pupil has 'achieved his or her potential' says more about us than the child. Too many of us continue to base our observations about children, often unconsciously, on the assumption that a child's abilities do have a fixed limit and one that we can confidently predict... We can't assume the limits of a child's ability. If we do so we may also be underestimating our own 'potential' to push a little further and find new ways of extending skills. (p.14)

In some ways the whole notion of 'achieving potential' could be dismissed as idealist fantasy, a conception of human possibility which fails to factor in key environmental, social, cultural, personal, psychological, conscious, unconscious, planned,

accidental factors. Fine (1967, p.233) touches on this issue when he says:

> We are, almost all of us, 'underachievers'... We are not living in a time or a society that demands total performance... almost all of us are specialists, and are not expected to perform to the maximum of our abilities in more than a few limited areas.

How does one tell if one has fulfilled one's potential? Potential for what, or as what? If it is considered, say, in terms of employment potential, then there are various value-laden assumptions which will guide evaluation. For example, is there a hierarchical distinction to be made between manual and professional occupations, and, if so, on what grounds other than cultural preference? Is there a hierarchical distinction to be made on grounds of pay? Is there a hierarchical distinction to be made on grounds of the promoted nature of one's post? Is an unpromoted person always to be seen as having fulfilled less of their potential than a promoted person? Even as few and as simple questions as these alert us to the extreme difficulty of using 'potential' in any useful way.

Redefining 'underachievement': differential attainment

Underachievement is a term, as has been argued, which requires some refinement and a better term for the concept as it is used in education today would be under-attainment. What is meant by underachievement most often refers to academic performance in public examinations, processes which are susceptible of quantitative analysis. 'Achievement' is a much more subjective term, dependent, as has been noted, on profound issues of values, culture, and lifestyle choices. To accuse, or label, someone as 'underachieving' seems to be a subjective value-judgement, monologic, and grossly presumptuous.

However, 'under-attainment' is itself value-laden as there must be implicit, understood criteria of some sort against which the person and/or their performance is being measured. To be rid of this, we need to use the term 'differential attainment' which merely seeks to describe the factual position of some students attaining x while others attain y and so on.

What the underachievement concept seeks to suggest, therefore, is that such differential attainment can, in some way, in certain circumstances and for certain students, be seen as out of line with a 'true' level of ability or performance, that the level attained does not meet expectations. Plewis (1991) makes a helpful, general distinction in this regard (still focused on attainment scores, however) between this psychological understanding (where a student is deemed to have fallen short in an ipsative sense) and a sociological understanding where a certain group in society is said to 'underachieve' when its mean score on an educational test is less than the mean of some other (control) group. This then is a relative sense as opposed to an ipsative sense. Examples of this have been already noted above in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, and many other factors. Gorard and Smith (2004), in a study to be considered later, detail and criticise the ways in which such claims of relative underachievement are made at international, national, group, school and individual levels.

Differential attainment - individual

The key issue here is that of 'expectations'. In what way can one predict in any accurate way a person's expected level of attainment? Dowdall and Colangelo (1982) describe three underlying themes in a definition of psychological underachievement: one, a discrepancy between potential achievement and actual achievement; two, a discrepancy between predicted achievement and actual achievement; three, a failure to develop or use potential. This helps unravel the issue only to a limited extent as the terms used – discrepancy, potential, predicted, failure, develop – are all unclear and continue to be problematic. Rimm (1997, p.18) hazards a definition thus: 'Underachievement is a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some index of the child's ability. If children are not working to their ability in school, they are underachieving.' The critical term here is 'some index', and this is worth exploring further.

In terms of judging a student's attainment potential there are only two ways in which this can be done: one is to depend on the teacher's professional judgement of the pupil's potential; the other is to use some form of standardized test (Lau & Chan, 2001). Problems with teachers' judgements are well known, having been notoriously highlighted by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) while the issue of testing for 'potential' is just as problematic. As Thorndike (1963, p.5) explains

> all behaviour is complexly determined. No one predictor will ever include all the determinants of a behavioural outcome. We have tended to become preoccupied with scholastic aptitude measures because they do correlate substantially with later achievement, and consequently do permit some improvement in the accuracy of predictions. But neither our psychological insights nor our statistical evidence give us reason to believe that a scholastic aptitude test

measures all of the significant determiners of scholastic achievement.

Thorndike even questions, given the problems of prediction, why school achievement, as measured by attainment, should not just become the standard, and to be done with these other 'predictive' tests. This is a specious solution, however, as snap-shot tests cannot trace or predict an attainment trajectory, cannot identify prior attainment, cannot measure between-test factors, and so can do no more than simply identify differential attainment.

Comparing test scores is by no means a straightforward way of identifying 'underachievement'. If we were to examine the relatively low attainment of Student X in a test at time B and his/her relatively higher attainment in an earlier test at time A, an observer could well judge that this lower attainment result compared to peers represented underachievement for this individual. Indeed, this is how the concept is normally used in education today. However, is this justified ? We do not know, but would need to know, if the first test represented for student X a significant improvement from prior attainment - had student X 'overachieved' at the starting point ? What was the position of his/her peers at that point too? How can we judge what would be expected at the second test? What has happened to Student X relative to peers in the intervening period? These all need to be acknowledged as, for example, a change in family circumstances, health problems, truancy, level of academic support, degree of private tuition, would need to be factored in.

Ford (1996, p.54) identifies one of the key problems: 'underachievement is a multidimensional construct that cannot be assessed with unidimensional instruments'. Certainly it is counter-intuitive at the very least to suggest that some form of IQ test is going to provide global predictors for performance across the full range of curriculum subject areas. This seems to be a particular issue in the very complex area of 'gifted underachievement' where inadequate IQ models are used as the basis for the claims of underachievement being made. Sternberg's triarchic model (1985) – involving contextual, experiential, and componential elements - provides a much richer picture of intelligence and its use would make it harder for underachievement to be claimed as it specifically involves the practical and the social in its range. In other words, intelligence is seen to involve the performative and not simply the logical and the mathematical and this matches much better the nature of attainment which is displayed in the performative – in sitting tests, for example. Similarly, Gardner (1983) has exposed the inadequacies of the old IQ model of intelligence. Concern with this problem of matching somehow perceived 'ability' with assessed 'performance' has been dubbed the 'assessment conundrum' (Lazear, 2004) and there does not seem to be any ready solution.

Despite these problems inherent in the dominant conception of psychological underachievement, it remains hugely influential and used with remarkable confidence. For example, many have pointed out that *over*achievement must also be a phenomenon in that some students must outperform their predicted levels of attainment. Yet this is rejected forthrightly by many in the field: 'Overachievement - Performance that exceeds ability. Because this is not possible, overachievement does not exist' (Nordby, 1997-2004). The position gets more murky, however, when one reads things like this: 'Overachievement is within the reach of every man, woman, and child... I want to show you how overachievement really happens and arm you to get there yourself - free of the psychological hocus pocus (sic) - to become, at last, the consistent overachiever you always knew you could be' (Eliot, 2004). Fortunately, this outlook remains very much on the more exuberant fringes of performance psychology.

Differential attainment - group

One way to avoid being drawn into the assessment conundrum is to do what many sociological analysts have done, as was recognised above, which is to address themselves to the *post facto* reality that there is differential academic attainment and that these differences are not spread evenly throughout society's various perceived groupings, which suggests that there is an inequality at work which is not simply a feature of human variance. This would not suit the case of 'gifted underachievers' as their reputed 'giftedness' relies on some (psychological) tests, the results of which are then measured against academic attainment.

Recent work by Gorard and Smith (2004), Smith (2003), and Gorard (1999, 2000a, 2000b) have all cast serious doubt on the 'underachievement' narrative. At the international level, the difficulty of comparing attainment scores and thus declaring one country as 'underachieving' relative to another is highly significant. The problems raised 'include the comparability of different assessments, the comparability of the same assessments over time, using examinations as indicators of performance at all, the different curricula in different countries, the different standards of record-keeping in different countries and the competitiveness (especially) of developing countries' (Gorard & Smith, 2004, p.208). They argue, therefore, that small differences in such

an unreliable measure render any claims made on their basis as dubious. Similarly, in terms of the so-called gender gap, they argue that once other key factors, such as home background, are attended to, 'a simple gendered explanation of achievement does not work' (p.212). They also argue that differential attainment by ethnic group, region, or sexes is largely accounted for by these same factors and the nature of the assessment system. The same story emerges with schools: 'once levels of poverty, and other background factors, are taken in to account in regression equations then there is no evidence that any type of school performs any better than any other... the overwhelming majority of variance in school results is predicted by the nature (or prior attainment) of the intake'. (p.216)

In other words, claims of underachievement really refer to low attainment largely accounted for by socioeconomic factors, the nature of the assessment system, and low prior attainment. A different question may legitimately be asked, if this low attainment seems unevenly spread amongst social groups, as to why certain groups should be particularly affected by these determining factors. In no way, however, could they be said to be 'underachieving' in terms of *these tests in these circumstances*. What it would mean, and require, is a change in all of these implicated factors.

Pathologising 'underachievement'

A pressing problem with the use of the term 'underachievement' is the way it has become more of a label for the learner as opposed to a problem for the system. In relation to race, for example, Benskin (1994) saw the unequal attainment of black children in England as pointing to school and institutional factors as the key as opposed to family or cultural factors. Wright (1987, p.126) similarly argues that much more diagnostic attention needs to be directed away from the person and instead towards the 'structural and institutional realities' facing the black student within the education system. Reay and Mirza (1997) are able to reveal, by comparing the experience of black learners in the state system with experience in 'black supplementary schooling' (essentially weekend community education classes), 'the silent, pervasive, seemingly invisible hegemonic project of whiteness implicit in mainstream schooling' (p.497). Troyna (1984, p.157) highlights the tendency towards a 'pathological' interpretation or conception of black academic attainment, whereby the causal factors become solely rooted in the individual or ethnic group. Gillborn (1990, p.141) draws on this research to show how the very term 'underachievement' itself 'can be interpreted as in some way locating the problem within the group that is suffering. Thus educationists speak of the underachievement of Afro-Caribbean pupils rather than the underachievement of the educational system'. Meighan and Harber (2007, p.435) use the analogy of war to make the same point: casualties of war should not be blamed for sustaining injuries; ending the war is what will stop the injuries, not some re-adjustment by combatants. In the same way, they argue, the system is the problem not the users. Tizard *et al.* (1988, p.13) suggest that 'low teacher expectations, an ethnocentric curriculum and teachers' stereotyped attitudes' may be important factors, a position endorsed in some way by the Rampton (1981) and Swann (1985) Reports.

Boyd and Bee (2006), from a US perspective, and Troyna (1984) from an English perspective, both highlight the fact that the stultifying experience of racism in society, of an unsupportive education system, and the perception that black educational qualifications may not make any personal difference, all contribute to differential attainment outcomes for many black students. Troyna (1984, p.159) goes further and argues that 'In these circumstances, in which racism is seen as assuming a powerful and determining part in the allocation of adult life chances, continued commitment to succeed at school may well be construed as maladaptive and unintelligent behaviour'. This necessarily brief review of 'black underachievement' highlights the complexity of the issues involved and the simplistic dangers of attributing the attainment differential to some set of factors inherent in the group under consideration, and indeed, the inadequacy of viewing the group as homogenously fixed. (Gillborn & Mirza, 2000, p.7)

Cultural dominance

As has been already noted, notions of, and judgements about, achievement, underachievement, and potential are socially constructed. These social constructions will vary internationally, nationally, regionally, from cultural group to cultural group, from ethnic group to ethnic group, from religion to religion, from community to community, from family to family, from person to person, and even intrapersonally over time. What one views as achievement as an adolescent, one's view of one's potential, one's notional view of fulfilment and happiness, will not necessarily be the same a few years later, a decade later, and beyond. There can be no fixed standards to apply.

The dominant discourse in society at any time will shape its values and beliefs, reflected in policy, and, ultimately in the education system and its goals. These will probably suit a majority of the population, or in Foucauldian terms, they will have been assimilated as 'givens' according to the

prevailing episteme (Foucault, 2002c, p.211) . They will map out for society both the ends of education and the elements of the system and its operations which are to be given particular value and importance. This creates tensions, especially for groups who do not share this dominant ideology. Meighan and Harber (2007, p.434) itemise the ways in which unquestioned assumptions, emanating from a particular, dominant cultural perspective, will determine the nature of educational provision and its purposes and priorities, a provision which may well run contrary to other, legitimate ideologies and belief systems. Boyd and Bee (2006, p.251) point out a particular case of this where the dominant individualistic social paradigm clashes with those groups who adhere to more collectivist cultural views. As a result, notions of personal achievement, of attainment, of potential will differ considerably, but if there is a monologic view presented in official discourse then, clearly, such social groups and the individuals within them will be seen to 'underachieve'.

Jeffcoate (1984, p.73) bemoans the fact that even where the idea of equality of opportunity has been addressed in liberal society it has been 'perverted into a preoccupation with the academic destinies of an intellectual elite', and there is considerable literature on the way in which measuring achievement has retreated into this narrow focus on academic attainment. Indeed, it is odd to make such an issue of underachievement within a system which is specifically geared to differentiate and separate, to select and reject, to reward and promote, on the grounds of attainment. Were there not low attainment, the system would be abandoned as failing to produce the results for which it was designed (Gorard & Smith, 2004). To justify itself, the system specifically requires to create and identify low attainers.

This clash of cultures is made all the more intractable when the system is seen to operate according to the rules and mores of one specific cultural group. In Britain, in the USA, in Australia, and across the world, are countless examples of minority or marginalised groups who have faced, been immersed in, and judged by, educational systems at best ignorant of, and at worst inimical to, their way of life, their values, their perspectives. The issue of class is well known in this respect: it is often argued that the system in the UK, at least, reflects middle class values and priorities, middle class constructions of knowledge and worth, and so renders it extremely difficult for working class learners to succeed, and certainly difficult to succeed without abandoning their class roots (Reay, 2001). As Jeffcoate (1984, p.46) suggests, the principal issue may be that, by accident or design, the education system creates, for the working-class and the marginalised, a situation whereby they face, and are disadvantaged by, 'a discontinuity between the values of home... and the values of school'.

This normalizing tendency can be seen in one example in Scotland where a universal, Anglophone, monoglot system, reflecting in the main Lowland, middle class, urban values came to suppress Gaelic culture, the language and way of life, almost to the point of extinction despite its (largely) well-intentioned aim of social 'improvement' and individual opportunity. Hutchinson (2006), for example, quotes the 1973 views of the Raasay crofter, Calum MacLeod, highly critical of an education system, designed in the 'best interests' of its users, but which threatens their very way of life:

> The tyrannous system of centralised education... compels every pupil on attaining 11½ years of age to leave home and be boarded elsewhere for the rest of their education – about 4½ years. The result is that homes in rural areas are systematically emptied and, in fact, all rural areas and especially the islands reduced to a skeleton of aging population while villages and towns are crammed by youngsters outwith parental supervision and growing up urbanised to such an extent that they become practically alien to home environments or participating in agriculture or fishing. In fact, industrial or manual work is frowned on. (pp.107-109)

MacLeod goes on to compare the architects of this centralised education system as having the same effects as those of the Highland Clearances 'harassing and driving their less fortunate fellow-countrymen out of their homes' (p.109). Indeed, he claims the outcomes to have been worse: 'This demonic system of education caused far more devastation on Raasay (so far as depopulation is concerned)... for now the young were taught and trained in city style, alienated from rural life and swept off the island in the name of progress' (MacLeòid, 2007, p.47). In terms of the dominant educational discourse, continuing in the crofting tradition would be seen as 'underachievement'.

Thus, we can see far greater and more serious issues of cultural difference than that represented rather flippantly by the case of George Best. What is deemed achievement, what is viewed as potential, is culturally relative and even where the concept is narrowed to attainment, the value put on academic attainment, the value put on scholastic performance, is very much open to cultural interpretation.

In a world still beset by wars, by famine, by poverty, by gross inequalities, by religious and ethnic

divisions, it would take either a very bold, or a very blinkered, person to claim to be able to establish any fixed conception of achievement or potential, a conception which was both culturally and globally sensitive.

Conclusion

The concept of 'underachievement', thus, can be seen to be far from the rather simple issue presented so often in modern educational and political discourse. Centred on the issue of academic attainment, at the personal level it remains highly problematic, given the difficulties in predicting and defining individual academic potential. At group level, the issue of differential attainment can largely be accounted for by the well-known educational predictors of socioeconomic disadvantage, prior attainment, assessment instrument bias, and structural or institutional issues.

In broader terms, the use of words such as 'potential' and 'achievement' enters highly charged areas of ideology, religious and cultural difference, and lifestyle choices. It does not seem appropriate for educationalists to be making judgements in those terms about any fellow human beings.

The issue of differential and low attainment is hugely important in a democratic society. But many of the likely solutions are already well known, involving fairer assessment systems, socioeconomic change, and culturally sensitive educational provision in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

From a Foucauldian perspective, perhaps a more important issue may be to challenge the dominant paradigm which identifies academic certification as the prime individual and institutional goal of schooling. In this sense it is both individualising and totalising (Foucault, 2002d): each person is interpellated to construct an identity as a self-actualising individual, acquiring the personal academic credits which further that identity, within an overall system which promotes the idea that without such credits only an impoverished, diminished, and incomplete personal future is in prospect; it is totalizing as such a universal system of educational assessment creates a manageable totality of so categorized individuals – educated/certificated 'subjects' (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005, p.61-62). The person without evidence of academic attainment becomes just that – no longer able to be defined except in the negative, as the person 'without qualifications', as the person 'not in education, employment, or training', as the person without prospects.

Tomlinson (2008) argues that the discourse promotes a one-dimensional view of schooling, contending that the narrow promise of success associated with exam results entices parents and students to embrace this unequal chase for educational credentials and certification and, by so doing, to subject themselves to 'permanent oppressive educational competition' (p.64). Paradoxically, such a concept depends on low attainment for its continuation: if there were not low attainment, the promise of individual success for the few would vanish. 'Underachievement', the attainment gap, far from being problems for such a system, are features which give it strength.

A consequence, therefore, may be that questioning how the concept of 'underachievement' has been problematized, questioning the discourse in terms of its goals for schooling, questioning what it purports to measure and what it purports to reward, is the key task if a more rounded, a more complete, a more enriched, and a fairer view of human achievement, human aspiration, and potential is to flourish. The move within the Scottish school system towards recognising broader achievement beyond academic attainment, while welcome, must also be probed to ensure that this does not have the related result that more and more claims of 'underachievement' simply come to be made as more and more elements of children's and young people's lives are opened to evaluation of this sort.

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