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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,