

## FAILING BOYS AND MORAL PANICS: PERSPECTIVES ON THE UNDERACHIEVEMENT DEBATE

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### Abstract

The paper re-examines the underachievement debate from the perspective of the 'discourse of derision' that surrounds much writing in this area. It considers the contradictions and inconsistencies which underpin much of the discourse – from a reinterpretation of examination scores, to the conflation of the concepts of 'under' and 'low' achievement and finally to the lack of consensus on a means of defining and measuring the term underachievement. In doing so, this paper suggests a more innovative approach for understanding, re-evaluating and perhaps rejecting the notion of underachievement.

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## Introduction

‘Many pupils underachieve during the years of compulsory education, especially in Wales’ (ETAG, 1998, p.27).

‘Today's underachieving boy is tomorrow's unemployed youth. He is public burden number one, needing benefit in the world of global competition where governments want to get taxes down’ (Mahony, cited in Dean 1998)

‘To overcome economic and social disadvantage and to make equality of opportunity a reality, we must strive to eliminate and never excuse underachievement in the most deprived parts of our country’ (DfEE, 1997, p.3)

‘West Indian children as a group are underachieving in our education system and this should be a matter of deep concern not only to all those involved in education but also the whole community’ (DES 1985, p.3).

Here are four statements from four different sources being used to describe four groups of ‘underachievers’ - a nation, a gender, a social group and an ethnic group. Underachievement has been described as probably the ‘predominant discourse’ in education in recent times (Weiner et al 1997, p.620), it is synonymous with the notion that all is not well with our education system. A ‘crisis account’ of the state of our schools seems to permeate our society. Government policy is being made to counter not only the social consequences of underachievement – criminal behaviour, social exclusion, unsuccessful relationships and marriages (Bentley 1998), but also its economic implications for the global competitiveness of nations whose education systems are increasingly tied to the economy (see, for example, ETAG 1998, Istance and Rees 1994, Docking 2000). Hardly a week passes without an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* describing the attempts of schools up and down the country to eliminate the ‘underachievement’ of a certain group of pupils. The list of related

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initiatives is considerable: homework clubs, black gospel choirs, school trips, ICT programmes to get fathers more involved with their sons' education, mentoring schemes and so on (for example, Lawrence 1997, Learner 2001, Wallace 2000).

This paper offers two perspectives on the underachievement debate. The first will examine the case for and against the notion of underachievement as applied to the performance of pupils in school – specifically with regard to groups of boys and girls. The second will focus on the difficulties of defining and conceptualising the term underachievement, and the implications this has for identifying groups of pupils who may be underachieving.

### Presenting the case for underachievement: the failing boys debate

The 'underachievement' debate climaxed in 1998 when, in a speech at the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference for School Effectiveness and Improvement, the former School Standards Minister, Stephen Byers, argued that boys' 'laddish' anti-school attitudes were impeding their progress at school' (The Guardian 1998). The 'moral panic' (Cohen 1972) surrounding the academic achievement of the nation's boys, has come about largely because examination results suggest that the performance of girls, especially at GCSE, has overtaken that of boys. There are no headlines exclaiming 'Well done girls', 'Congratulations to schools and teachers for improving performance' and the fact that the attainment of all pupils has risen steadily over the last thirty years is barely mentioned unless it is used to decry falling standards and a 'dumbing-down' of the school curriculum. In short, boys have fallen behind in this crude measure of success and the dominant view is that something has to be done about it.

Numerous feminist researchers have drawn attention to this 'backlash' (see for example, Epstein *et al* 1998, Salisbury 1999) and have made it clear that any attempts to raise the achievement of boys must not lose sight of the work done over the last three decades to improve the lot of girls in school. However, according to Raphael Reed (1998) focusing on male 'underachievement' is not a case of debating whether

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this 'underachievement' exists because 'its reality is a measure of its productivity in shaping educational policies and practices' (p.60). Indeed, there are a plethora of explanations in the literature for the apparent 'underachievement' of boys; three of the most prevalent are outlined here.

### **Changing masculinities**

It has been argued that there are innate, natural born differences between the sexes: boys are more likely to suffer from oxygen starvation at birth, they have poorer verbal reasoning skills, they mature later than girls, their parents do not talk to them as much as they do to their sisters and so on (Arnold 1997, Cohen 1998). However, according to some authors these theories are based on 'crude versions of cognitive psychology' and have little basis in published research (Raphael Reed 1998, p.61). Mahony (1998, p.42), on the other hand, links much of the 'hysteria' surrounding the underachieving youth or 'public burden number 1' to a fear among the male elite that men will lose ground to women in the workforce. The collapse in the post-war boom of heavy industry and the replacement (particularly in some working class homes) of the male as the main family bread-winner, has led to what some researchers call a change in the gender regime of these communities and another explanation for the relatively poor performance of young men in our schools (Connell 1994, Arnold 1997, Jackson 1998, Spendlove 2001, Yates 1997). The interplay between the demands of the academic curriculum and the need for young men to play-out their masculinity in the context of school, have been explored by several authors (see, for example, Francis 2000, Mac an Ghail 1989, Measor 1999, Whitelaw *et al* 2000, Younger and Warrington 1996). The influence of the peer group appears to be central to the role boys adopt in school. There are many examples in the literature of boys resisting working hard in order to avoid being seen as 'gay' or 'spoffs' (Connell 1994, Measor 1999). Behaviour that was evident even in the primary school where no label was worse than that of being called a 'girl' (Renold 2001). As Epstein (1998) points out, 'the rejection of the perceived 'femininity' of academic work is simultaneously a defence against the charge of being gay' (p.97).

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### **Assessment and the school curriculum**

Although the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT) in their formulation of the new GCSE did not define gender bias, it recommended that assessment instruments were reviewed regularly for its presence (DES 1987). Nevertheless, Murphy (1988) has found several ways in which gender bias is very much a feature of the National Curriculum. The manner in which children perceive questions is different - boys in isolation, girls in context; girls express themselves in a more reflective way than boys - which may advantage them in subjects like English and the humanities but less so in science and maths; the types of questions are perceived differently - boys preferring more multiple-choice styled responses. Millard (1997) explores the notion of a gendered curriculum where the non-fiction reading practices preferred by boys have no place. She sees this as disadvantaging boys in the long term as the narrative practices encouraged by the school curriculum, especially in English are not relevant to the literacy skills used by men in the work place. However, research into teacher and pupil perceptions and preferences in English suggests another perspective. In her questionnaire study of 300 pupils and 98 teachers, Myhill (1999) asked pupils to rate their enjoyment of different methods of working in English. Her article points to the existence of fewer gender differences in English than were previously thought. For example, both boys and girls rated an enjoyment of doing narrative and IT based work in English equally, and also enjoyed reading more or less the same type of fiction and non-fiction. Instead, it was the teachers who held gender-stereotyped views about pupil interests in the subject. Interestingly, complaints by teachers that the 1999 Key Stage 3 English paper question on HG Wells 'War of the Worlds', was too boy-friendly prompted a QCA analysis of the papers, which found that they did no better than the girls on the question (Cassidy 2000). Nevertheless, concern over boys' underachievement in English continues, take for example this comment by Francis (2000), 'obviously literacy, English and languages are the areas in which boys' underachievement is most marked' (p.133). One of the most contentious methods of assessment has been coursework. Coursework is seen by some researchers to favour the hardworking methodical girl (Arnold 1997, Murphy 1988, Pirie 2001, Sammons 1995, Spendlove 2000, Younger and Warrington 1996), to such an extent that the high

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coursework element of English was reduced in 1991 in an attempt to reduce girls' lead in the examination stakes.

### **The classroom, the teacher, teaching and learning**

Claims about the feminisation of the school curriculum have come hand-in-hand with criticism of female teachers for imposing female values on our pupils; such assertions according to Delamont (1999) have a long history and little basis in fact. Nevertheless, they are reworked as an explanation for the relatively poor performance of boys and in calls for an increase in the number of male teachers in our schools (Platten 1999, Hayes 2002). The behaviour of boys in the classroom is well documented (see, for example, Barker 1995, Holden 1993, Measor 1999, Younger and Warrington 1996). Boys are frequently seen to be 'more concerned with preserving an image of reluctant involvement or disengagement' (Younger and Warrington 1996, p.303) while girls are increasingly portrayed as being the 'ideal student'. In the classroom it is the boys who command the 'lion's share' of the teachers' attention and receive a disproportionate amount of the teachers' time compared with the girls. Boys can bring another agenda into the classroom, asserting themselves as jokers and as risk-takers, with a noisy approach to their work and a dislike of the tedium of writing. As a result, they are frequently the focus of classroom activity, whereas the girls are 'marginalised' on the edges. Some researchers claim that this behaviour has a detrimental effect on the boys' learning; boys react against work they see as inappropriate and find open-ended tasks involving discussion or collaboration difficult.

Thus, there are three dominant explanations for the apparent underachievement of boys in schools: the conflict of masculinity in contemporary society, the curriculum and its assessment and finally the every-day experience of students and teachers in the classroom. However, the complexity of the gender debate becomes apparent from a consideration of examination results. For example, similar percentages of young men and women achieve no GCSE qualifications at age 16 (approximately 4% and 6% respectively in 2001/2002) as do the proportions of pupils gaining an A-level pass

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across all subjects (90% for boys and 92% for girls in 2001/2002). Girls achieve consistently higher results than boys in English; while in maths and science there is a 'notable shift' towards both groups achieving similar results (Arnot *et al* 1999, p.17). Yet the debate is frequently reduced to the binary notion of underachieving boys and successful girls.

This dichotomous approach is not confined to gender; there are numerous examples in the literature of the underachievement debate applied to pupils from white or ethnic minority backgrounds (see for example, Gillborn and Gipps 1996). According to authors such as Gillborn and Youdell (2001), the widespread media attention given to the underachievement of boys has failed to address what they see as the real issue; that it is pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds who, along with those from the working class, experience the most pronounced inequalities in our education system. Inequalities which have become more apparent as schools move towards an 'A-C economy' in an effort to secure favourable league table positions.

This section has considered the patterns of attainment in the context of the underachievement discourse specifically as they relate to gender. Many of the findings present a rather depressing picture of the state of the British education system where many leave school with few or no qualifications and large groups of pupils appear to be failing to fulfil their potential. However, while there is seemingly strong evidence in favour of the underachievement discourse, the issue is not so straightforward. The concept of underachievement itself is one that has little consensus about its definition and measurement. The very notion of underachieving boys, which contributes to most people's perception of what constitutes the underachievement discourse is open to re-interpretation. These are important issues, as they have a profound impact on how we understand the nature of any underachievement of these groups of pupils.

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## Re-examining underachievement: an alternative account

Research into school achievement has focused on a range of factors that may or may not contribute to school success, such as family background, gender, ethnicity, personality, school and country. However, what constitutes 'achievement' often has a narrow focus relating to the number of 'good' passes an individual gains at GCSE or the percentage of pupils who achieve the widely publicised National targets and/or key skill competencies. Unfortunately, this is not the whole picture - what about those pupils for whom simply turning up for school is an achievement? In the present educational climate, which seems wedded to the 'allocation of success and failure' (Slee and Weiner 1998, p.3) it is performance data that is seen to constitute high, low or underachievement and it is within this framework that success in school is now constructed.

Given the complexity and media sensitivity of the gender debate, it is not surprising that an alternative account of the underachievement phenomenon also exists. For example, Delamont (1999) contends that 'it is pointless to be swept away by a moral panic about 'failing', anti-school working-class boys. This is not a new problem' (p.13). Schools, she argues, have never been able to deal with the working-class boy. According to Delamont (1999), the whole standards debate is surrounded in a 'discourse of derision' (p.3), compounded by a lack of understanding of the academic gains made by all pupils, and coupled with the media's resistance to hearing good news. That 'underachievement' was not a new phenomenon has also been demonstrated in an historical study by Cohen (1998). She noted the seventeenth-century academic John Locke's consternation that young men found it difficult to succeed in Latin, while their younger sisters would 'prattle' on in French having had little or no formal instruction. The standard of the young men's English also gave him little joy. According to the authors of the Black Papers, Cox and Dyson (1969, cited in Lawton, 1994), standards were reported as being in crisis as far back as the 1960s. Reading was argued to have been of a lower standard than previously, older children did not know their tables, examiners were appalled at the poor levels of English and the standard of the 11+ intake into grammar schools was also reported to have been

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lower. More recently, Gorard (2001a) has disputed the fact that boys have ever attained higher grades than girls in compulsory education at any time over the past 25 years.

Despite the apparent contradictions and confusion surrounding issue of ‘failing boys’, it is important to remember the need for such debates to avoid over simplification. Often boys are considered to be part of a homogeneous group and individual differences and diversities are not always taken into account. Indeed, as several researchers have pointed out, differences within the gender groups can be greater than those between them (Arnot *et al* 1999, Salisbury *et al* 1999).

### **Re-examining examination results**

The issue of male underachievement is central to the standards debate. This ‘moral panic’ has come about largely through interpretations of examination data that suggest that not only are girls outperforming their male peers but also that the performance gap between them is increasing. However, it needs to be remembered that, as Delamont (1999) and Salisbury *et al* (1999) both point out, there are many problems and restrictions thrown up by the analysis of examination results. These are further complicated by the different statistical methods carried out on the raw data and also, crucially, in the way the data is reported (Gorard 1999). At least three different techniques for measuring the absolute differences between groups are cited in the literature (see for example, Gorard 1999, 2001, Heath 2000). One method, also described by Arnot *et al* (1996 and 1999) uses the notion of achievement gaps as a measure of the relative performance between the genders. The achievement gap is defined as ‘an index of the difference in an educational indicator (such as an examination pass rate) between two groups (such as male and female)’ (Gorard 2000, p.203). By analysing the gaps in entry and in performance of school leavers obtaining 5 or more A\*-C grades at GCSE (or ‘O’-level grade C or above/CSE grade 1) from 1974 to 1998, Gorard (2001) has shown that the proportion of boys and girls achieving these grades was more or less the same in the period 1974 to 1987, with the girls marginally in front. However, the author shows a change between 1987 and 1989

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when the gap increased in favour of the girls. This trend then stabilised and all pupils made the same parallel gains, with girls being ahead of the boys by the same margin. Thus the differential achievement of girls over boys occurred during a brief period from 1986-1989, a period which coincided with the introduction of the National Curriculum. Similar patterns were found when examination data for the same period was analysed at the subject level (Smith 2002), the most pronounced trend appearing in English where the gap between boys and girls' performance has hardly changed since the early 1970s and where the current gap is the smallest since the early 1980s.

A similar case can be made for a reinterpretation of the underachievement debate as it applies to different ethnic groups; a lack of recent large-scale analyses, problems with categorising ethnic groups and difficulties similar to those described above with the interpretation of examination trends over time, all contribute to the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the discourse (for example, White and Gorard 1999).

That certain groups of pupils are performing less well than others in certain subjects is indeed a cause for concern. But the focus should be on which (if any) particular group of pupils appear to be failing to reach their potential and why. This would herald a move away from the traditional binary notion of, say, boys versus girls to include an assessment of other variables such as poverty and home background which may have a more profound effect on an individual's learning. One possible implication of a shift away from boy/girl or black/white comparisons of performance would be if LEAs became obliged to provide more detailed examination statistics than are currently available, particularly with regard to the ethnic group of pupils. This might provide us with a very different picture of the performance of pupils in school and go some way to resolving the confusion surrounding the underachievement debate.

The focus of this paper will now turn to the concept of underachievement itself. It will briefly outline a review of the literature which suggests that rather than being a straightforward concept, it is one which is fraught with methodological inconsistency and difficulty.

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## Understanding Underachievement

As the opening section to this paper has demonstrated, the term ‘underachievement’ is widely used by politicians, journalists and academics to describe relatively poor academic performance, from a nation to an individual; but a review of the academic literature suggests that a consensus on its definition and measurement is hard to come by. Often the notion of underachievement is confused and conflated with that of *low* achievement, particularly in media accounts of the phenomenon. For example, when (until recently) lower proportions of pupils in Wales were achieving the benchmark number of GCSE A\*-C grades, compared with their English peers; pupils in Wales were labelled as ‘underachieving’ (ETAG 1998). Whether the Welsh pupils were underachieving or not is not evidenced by these results, what the commentators should have made clear was that on this basis, the achievement of pupils in Wales at the benchmark GCSE level was *lower* than that of the English pupils – the concept of low achievement *not* underachievement.

One definition of underachievement that figures heavily in the literature is that of ‘school performance, usually measured by grades that is substantially below what would be predicted on the basis of the student’s mental ability, typically measured by intelligence or standardised academic tests’ (McCall 1992, p.54). This and many other conceptual definitions represent a consideration of the discrepancy between achievement and ability, either by statistical measures of difference or through teacher nomination (see, for example, Carr *et al* 1991, Clark 1988, Gold 1965, Rimm 1997, Whitmore 1980). However, they have all presented methodological difficulties and according to Shaw (1966, p.325), ‘no useful solutions’. Many researchers have blamed this apparent lack of consensus on the use of a definition, which employs terms that are themselves difficult to quantify. For example, what constitutes a bright or a gifted child? How much of a difference is a ‘substantial’ difference? How do you measure potential? Can ‘giftedness’ be defined using IQ? Problems with this conceptual definition of underachievement have led to many researchers

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operationalising the description to include statistical measures of difference (see, for example, Frankel (1960), Lau and Chan (2001), McCall (1992), Tuss *et al* (1995)).

The assertion that achievement ought to correspond exactly to the level of performance on an ability test is, according to Thorndike (1963) one of the reasons why a consensus is hard to establish. He argues that the problem of underachievement is 'one of understanding our failures in predicting achievement and of identifying more crucial or additional factors which will predict achievement more accurately' (p.3). Would it then follow that if we were to come up with a perfect model, underachievement would not exist and is therefore an artificial phenomenon brought about by the shortcomings in our analytical techniques? As to whether a perfect model that predicts all types of achievement could exist, the answer must surely be not. Consequently there will always be pupils whose achievement is hard to predict, but whether this group will constitute the underachievers is another question.

In common with other researchers (Carr *et al* (1991), Cattell (1968), McCall (1992)), Thorndike (1963) recognised the need to consider other characteristics of the individual in order to come up with a modified method for predicting achievement. He advocated the use of what he called 'stable relatively unmodifiable factors' (p.18), such as sex, family background, parental education and socio-economic status. Combining these factors with ability and achievement scores would lead to a refined definition of underachievement, understood as 'achievement falling below what would be forecast from our most informed and accurate prediction, based on a team of predictor variables' (p.19). It is worth noting that although his work is widely referenced, it has proven difficult to find research that has adopted Thorndike's refined definition of underachievement. Instead, researchers seem to prefer to adopt one of the conceptual or operational performance/IQ definitions widely used by psychologists. However, an approach that brings together a wide range of factors considered in the academic literature to have an effect on academic performance and models them against an accepted outcome appears eminently sensible.

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This section has suggested that not only is a basic definition of underachievement hard to come by, but also that different researchers have used different methodologies with differing results. However, as if one methodological uncertainty was not enough, intermeshed with the underachievement debate are uncertainties surrounding the whole concept of mental ability testing. A discussion of the issues surrounding this form of testing could fill many volumes and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, schools *do* use these tests, and invest and expect a great deal from them. Their value cannot be underestimated or ignored, and no investigation into any form of predictive achievement would be complete without them.

By replicating a model of achievement, and thereby finding the best possible method of predicting an individual's achievement, it follows that the better the model, the less likely any underachieving pupils will be identified. If *all* the factors specific to an individual's performance could be included in the model, all levels of achievement could be fully accounted for. Obviously, accounting for every single factor will be beyond the scope of study (for example, whether a pupil slept well the night before an exam might have an influence on how well they do on the paper). However, Thorndike's definition and conceptualisation of the notion of underachievement does open up exciting possibilities for further exploring the phenomenon, particularly in light of recent 'moral panics' concerning the underachievement of boys, and working class boys in particular.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that despite being the 'predominant gender discourse in education' (Weiner *et al* 1997, p620), the underachievement phenomenon is one which can be characterised by methodological inconsistencies in the design and reporting of much research in this area. On the one hand there is what has been termed a 'discourse of derision' surrounding the standards debate, coupled with sometimes inadequate data, often open to differing interpretations. And on the other there is the frequent confusion and conflation of the terms underachievement and low achievement. Underachievement and low achievement are not the same thing, it might

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be possible to have a high achieving underachiever (for example an individual who failed to convert their three level six outcomes at Key Stage 3, to level sevens) or a low achieving underachiever (for example, someone who achieved the same lower levels at Key Stages 2 and 3). Whether these pupils belong to the same homogeneous group of underachieving working class boys is unlikely and indeed recent research suggests that this is not the case (Smith 2003).

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