
From Defective Loafers to Ignorant Yobs: low attainers in a global knowledge economy

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ABSTRACT In a global and increasingly 'knowledge-driven' economy where even semi-skilled jobs require qualifications, what may be done with and for young people whose attainment in school is low? This article draws on recent research with head teachers, college principals and administrators in English local authorities, combined with material gathered on visits to a number of foreign countries, to outline the issues. It illuminates that successive English governments have failed to provide a coherent system of vocational education.

In 1910 the working class population included large numbers of young people variously regarded as defective, feeble-minded and delinquent loafers who neither learned much at their elementary schools nor stuck at their unskilled jobs. A hundred years or so later they have become the yobs, chavs, those not in education, employment or training (NEETS) and work-shy scroungers, who are low attainers in schools, but need to be guided or coerced into more education and to acquire more skills. The rationale for this is that governments now believe that all citizens in nation-states are subject to the forces of globalisation and global economic forces, and that ever higher levels of educational attainments and skills are necessary for successful competition in knowledge-driven economies. Governments panic if their samples of 15-year-old young people participating in the OECD Programme for International Pupil Assessment (PISA) go down in the league tables of country scores. All young people, whatever their learning difficulties or disabilities, are required to invest in their own human capital, constantly learn new skills and compete with each other in stratified education systems and uncertain job markets. There is a persistent and punitive view of social groups who are unlikely to attain higher levels of knowledge, although there is little evidence that young lower attainers

on the whole are the 'ignorant jobs' portrayed in sections of the media or some government circles, or that they are unwilling to work.

While education systems in developed countries expanded from the nineteenth century, after the mid-twentieth century there was a rapid expansion as groups previously excluded or given only minimal schooling were drawn into lengthened formal systems. This was particularly true of those groups regarded as having difficulty in learning to minimal levels of numeracy and literacy, being low attainers in formal testing, failing to achieve constantly raised qualification levels or acquiring one or more of a variety of labels eventually bundled from the 1980s into a shorthand category of special educational needs. A majority of those drawn into expanding systems at lower levels were from lower social classes, and from racial and ethnic minorities. Rationalisation for this expansion has centred around political, commercial and social interests that all young people should be economically productive and not reliant on unemployment or welfare benefits. A further justification for expansion centred around the social control of groups likely to disrupt the smooth running of society. More provision for disengaged, disaffected and disruptive young people is a necessary political tool as well as an economic project. In addition there has been an expansion of middle class demands for recognition and resources for those of their children who have difficulty in learning in competitive school environments, which has helped fuel an expensive 'SEN industry' (Tomlinson, 2012). Parents are driven by anxieties that in competitive education systems their 'less able' children will not be able to find or keep work, although middle class parents are more likely to avoid placement of their children on vocational courses. One consequence is that these courses continue to have lower status and levels of resourcing.

Researching the Issues

A recent research study examined the policies, practices and views of head teachers, college principals and administrators in three English local authorities, discussing issues around the young people post-14 who were regarded as lower achievers, had learning difficulties or special needs, and what sort of education and training programmes were offered or envisaged for them. To provide some comparative information on what was offered to young people regarded as lower achievers or 'special' in other developed economies, visits were made to schools and colleges in New York, Los Angeles, Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia) Malta and Finland. Some 77 discussions were held with participants and there was some limited observation of students on vocational courses (Tomlinson, 2013). Since all young people are now subject to the expectation that they will participate in a global economy, and are seen through the ideology of globalisation, it makes little sense that literature and practices concerning inclusive, special and vocational education remain separate, and in this study they were brought together. From the 1980s the rise of competitive market ideologies placed educational change and reforms firmly within an

economic imperative. Much of education in England has been reconstructed into a series of private businesses. Current educational expansion is based on political claims that economic development and competition in a global economy require more and higher levels of education, and that labour markets require flexible enterprising workers for a knowledge-based economy. Evidence concerning these claims is often counter-intuitive. The notion of knowledge economies is contested and in this study participants felt the concept has little relevance for many young people. The links between education and economic growth are problematic, and education – even to higher levels – no longer guarantees secure employment. In exhorting all to have ‘aspiration’ there is minimal discussion of an economy that might offer more employment opportunities and pay a decent wage for the lower level jobs that all societies need. Those who have invested in their own human capital through courses, time and money may not find employment, yet face punitive sanctions if they do not work. Governments have always found it easier to blame individuals for failure to find work, rather than to invest in job creation.

Education is political in the widest sense, and the forms education takes at any time are the result of competing interests and ideologies with winners and losers in the competition being a necessary complement. Those in powerful positions can determine the amount and kind of education offered to various groups, with superior groups traditionally using a ‘strategic maintenance of ignorance’ (Archer, 1988) to limit the amount and kind of education offered to subordinate groups. In England political elites have always done their best to denigrate education which did not conform to a traditional ‘academic’ curriculum, from the Permanent Secretary in 1902 who ‘had a particular loathing for vocational and technical education’ (Vlaeminke, 1990), to the recent proposals, eventually abandoned, for an academic English baccalaureate at 16 for a minority, with lower attainers receiving a Certificate of Achievement for completing vocational courses. Over the past hundred years there has been a continual downgrading of vocational and technical education in favour of academic subjects, the ability to parse a Latin sentence being held in higher esteem than knowledge of how to mend a low-carbon boiler.

Who are the Lower Attainers?

Who gets defined as a ‘lower attainer’, or as having special needs or a disability, depends on current definitions of what constitutes adequate attainment and normality. These vary at different historical times, between different countries, and between professions. The political imperative to keep elite groups closed and small can be secured by raising expected levels of achievement, while at the same time providing superior institutions for the children of these groups. An ideology of meritocracy and the spread of beliefs that anyone from outside the groups can achieve if they are ‘able’ accompanies this, and a level of hypocrisy is necessary to overlook the part played by family influence, networks and wealth. The Tang dynasty in China (circa AD 690) and Conservative education

policies (circa AD 2012) illustrate the ways by which raised examination levels create lower attainers. Characteristic of both these periods is disdain for physical and lower skilled labour, while encouraging 'aspiration' to higher levels.

In England and the USA, social class and race have traditionally been markers in deciding who should receive a minimum or inferior education and thus attain less in terms of currently acceptable qualifications. Historical definitions were based on beliefs in the biological and cultural inferiority of lower social classes and racial groups, although the two were often conflated. In the early twentieth century 'feeble-minded' lower class women particularly threatened society by breeding, as '[T]hey produce degenerate children who threaten the racial stock' (RCCCFM, 1908, vol. 1), and in England current reductions in welfare benefits include suggestions that the lower classes should restrict their reproduction. Lower educational achievements have been conflated, historically and currently, with delinquency, crime, and potential unemployment. There has also been an expansion of numbers in groups considered to be problematic educationally and socially. In 1946 in England some 2% of children were candidates for segregated special schooling, with some 8% likely to be lower achievers in mainstream schools. The secondary modern schools attended by some 80% of young people did not offer leaving examinations until the 1960s. Over the years, committees, schools and parents claimed more and more children were not attaining as required and were troublesome in school. In 1984 Education Secretary Keith Joseph identified 40% of children as candidates for his Lower Attaining Pupil Programme (LAPP), an initiative which did not last out the decade. Additionally children were increasingly claimed as in need of some form of special education, and by 2010 in England around 1.7 million children were officially identified as 'having SEN', at a cost for provision of some £5 billion. Of these, 2.7% were in receipt of statements supposedly guaranteeing resources, and 18% were in mainstream schools. In some local authorities up to 40% of children were claimed as in need of special or additional educational provision, with the familiar confusion between normative conditions (physical, sensory, severe learning difficulties) and the non-normative labels which have ranged over the years from 'feeble-minded' and 'educable defect' through 'educational sub-normality' and 'mild learning difficulties', to such designations as: specific learning difficulties, dyslexia, autistic spectrum disorders, maladjusted, behavioural, social and emotional difficulties, hyperactivity, and conduct disorders. All these are subject to value judgements implicit in their 'diagnosis'.

Expansion and Inclusion

Despite worldwide movements towards the inclusion of numbers of young people previously wholly excluded from education, or placed in segregated settings, it is quite logical that given the competitive nature of schooling there is a demand for an expansion of additional professional services, whether in mainstream or in remaining segregated settings. Special educators, language

educators, behavioural specialists, medical, psychological, therapeutic and other professions, now including neuro-scientists, are all involved in dealing with those who cannot perform at higher levels or who disrupt traditional classrooms. In England government anxieties have led to legislative proposals to reduce the costs of dealing with those with learning and behavioural difficulties and disabilities although the inclusion of more young people in what is a highly competitive schooling system demands an expansion of these professional services. Middle class and aspirant parents, who formerly eschewed special education, now demand resources and attention if their children have problems in this competitive environment, and do so the more vociferously given current government policies to raise the threshold for attaining academic qualifications to levels only a minority will achieve.

The market-driven school system has created legitimate fears among these groups that their children will not progress to higher education or find and keep paid work. This was acknowledged in the research reported here, although discussants still considered that the majority of low achieving young people, whether or not in need of special education services, were predominantly the children of working class parents, with a high representation in some areas of migrant and minority groups and second language learners. In England definitions of 'lower attainers' ranged from those not attaining required numbers of GCSE passes at 16, (51% in 2011), to the 21% officially recognised as having special educational needs, but with variations noted between schools and local authorities. Government ministers continued to be particularly concerned with the million or so young people leaving school at 16 and officially not in education, employment or training (NEET), although this group was never static as many of its members moved in and out of courses and jobs. (By 2015 all young people will be required to stay in some form of education or training until 18.) Official emphasis is on higher attainers and 'social mobility' via higher education, with assumptions that lower attainers will attend further education colleges and undertake a variety of vocational courses, with work experience and short apprenticeships.

Low Attainers in Other Countries

In the USA, Germany, Malta and Finland, heads, principals and administrators also discussed who they thought were their lower attainers. The USA is still strongly influenced by beliefs that racial minorities are likely to be less-educable to higher levels and a large literature indicates that such students are more likely to be considered as potential lower attainers, to drop out from school more and to receive a less equitable education (Blanchett, 2008). The history and treatment of lower attainers and those falling within expanding categories of special education are similar to the United Kingdom (UK) and influenced by medical and psychological models, although in the USA there is a wider separation of general and special educators. The Learning Disabled (LD) emerge as the largest group in need of special attention although there are competing

theories as to what constitutes a learning disability. With variations between states and schools around 20% of young people are identified as LD, with a further 20% being low attainers. There were suggestions that the competitive culture of testing and grading was highly likely to produce 'failure', with individual and family deficits regarded as contributing to failure. It was also acknowledged that more parents were claiming recognition and resources for those of their children who did not achieve well.

Germany retains its traditional model of selective education after primary school. Even the five former East German states opted for this model rather than their previous comprehensive model. Germany has been criticised for its early selection, but praised for the deliberate links of education with labour markets. On average in all the German states (*Länder*), the *Gymnasium* (academic school) caters for around a third of students, with only 11% being from the working class. The *Realschule*, whose students may go on to technical and higher skill training, takes another third, with the *Hauptschule* taking predominantly working class and minority students, especially those of Turkish and Kurdish origin. A few *Länder* have developed *Gesamtschule* (comprehensive) schools. Around 6% of children are in special schools, from where it is difficult to return to mainstream. It is the young people who leave *Hauptschule* and special school without a leaving certificate who are regarded as the lower attainers.

The small island of Malta, influenced by its former British colonial status and by the Catholic church, has a long history of selective education, with sporadic attempts to develop comprehensive schooling. The middle classes dominate in the church and private schools, and around 40% of mainly working class young people leave education and training at 16. Malta has embraced the idea of a knowledge economy, and a selective education system continues to benefit elite groups. As in other countries it is accepted that all social classes can produce severely disabled children and four special schools cater for these while it is the lower class, lower attaining children, especially those regarded as being disruptive and with social and emotional behavioural disorders, who are most problematic for the system. The psychological and therapeutic professions have expanded to assess, counsel and guide young people into approved social behaviour. In schools, Learning Centres and nurture groups cater for lower attainers.

Finland, widely regarded as a country where students achieve well, regularly hosts education tourists, from policymakers to a variety of educationalists, who visit to check on what appears to create the good results. One indisputable result in the PISA tests is that the lowest quintile of students (lower attainers and special needs) obtain higher scores than in any other country. A major difference compared to England and the USA is that the system is openly egalitarian, with the declared aim of disrupting the transmission of inequalities between generations. There is little choice or competition between schools, and no school league tables. There is no government or academic literature suggesting that genetic inheritance or 'deprived brains' are barriers to learning. Around 30% of children and young

people will receive 'special' education, or more accurately additional educational support, during their educational career to the age of 19. The identification of children with possible learning difficulties starts early. The progress of individual children is closely monitored, and 'special' education is offered in a variety of settings. One result of the additional attention is that the children do not have to 'wait to fail' before they are helped (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011). However, as in other countries, 'special' education has expanded in the face of more demands from parents, more migrant children needing help, and more behavioural problems among students.

Education towards a Labour Market?

The issues facing policymakers, practitioners and administrators in these five countries are similar, and may be summed up simplistically by asking what is to be done with lower attaining young people in a global economy where even low-skilled jobs require qualifications? All the discussants in this research accepted that lower attainers, including those previously excluded, or offered a minimum or a 'special' education, must continue in education and training schemes with the assumption that they will take low skill, low wage jobs, or may with application progress to higher skill levels, but that all will need some kind of qualification. While the rhetoric of a knowledge economy does not include much recognition of the continued necessity for the services of the low-skilled – even millionaires need their streets cleaned and their rubbish collected – governments are now prepared to encourage the participation of those who will do low-skilled and manual jobs and provide some professional assistance for those who have difficulty gaining required levels of certification. Vocational education and training continue to be associated with lower class, lower status training and work. This is more obvious in England and Malta, to some extent in the USA, and less so in Germany and Finland.

In England the historic need of the middle classes to avoid the relegation of their children to practical and vocational courses has meant that the academic–vocational divide continues to be associated with a class divide. This situation is not helped by current government assertions that social mobility requires more 'disadvantaged' young people at top universities and that all young people should 'aspire' to higher education. Politicians, largely unfamiliar with anything other than an academic education, have not yet caught up with the realisation that requirements to incorporate literacy, numeracy and IT skills in all courses have reduced the dichotomy between 'academic' and 'vocational', and the influence of a worldwide disability rights movement has meant that some young people with physical or sensory disabilities now have more opportunities for training, work experience and work. Such politicians firstly castigate colleges of further education for not producing skills required by employers or helping young people to progress, even though these institutions cater for a majority of young people at 16 (or 14 in some cases), and secondly rely on Ofsted to police a further education system where colleges are in

competition with schools and with each other for students and funding. Government has no plans for a coherent vocational education system. Higher level apprenticeships benefit those students with A level equivalents, and increasingly middle class students are taking these, displacing students at lower levels. The lower attainers may be able to take short apprenticeships in such areas as hotel and catering, retail and hairdressing. Policy still lays stress on individual and family skill deficiencies and a student's 'attitude', rather than on the amount and kind of employment available locally.

Some Comparisons

In the USA there was an acceptance that low-level jobs existed but that in future all would need some kind of qualification. The individualistic work ethic appears stronger than in England. Students (apart from 'drop-outs') stay in school until 18 and there are fewer welfare benefits available. This situation has encouraged schools to prepare the learning disabled and all lower attainers for at least a two-year college course, for a trade or for occupational college. There was more emphasis on transition systems to guide students into work experience and vocational courses from 14-15. In Germany the long standing attention given via the 'dual system' of education and training made it easier for Federal and State governments to understand the problems which occur with a decline in this system, and see an increasing number of young people 'in transition' via lower-level college courses to other courses, apprenticeships or employment. Although – as in other countries – the low attainers are likely to be from working class and minority families, there was more emphasis on shaping labour markets than on the deficiencies of the young. Malta was grappling with the issue of school drop-outs at 16. With the system supposedly changing to become less selective there was, as in England, a stress on academic subjects, although the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) offered a range of vocational courses at all levels, and there was an expanded number of professionals dealing with the disengaged and disruptive. The Finnish education system held to egalitarian assumptions that all young people were to be valued whatever their learning problems. However, although the language of social class is not used, children from working class and minority backgrounds were more likely to attend vocational colleges, although all who completed the courses were qualified for a job. In all the five countries vocational courses for the lower attainers, with some possibilities of progression, were generally in such areas as motor vehicle maintenance, construction, brick-laying, carpentry, painting, hair and beauty, social care, horticulture and gardening, animal care, sport and leisure, pool-cleaning, janitorial duties, hotel and catering, bakeries and fast food, removal services and suchlike. Manual labourers were still called for. Mending roads and building nuclear reactors require semi-skilled labour, but some level of literacy and numeracy certification is now needed for this work. In England especially, the complaint was voiced that migrant workers

were 'taking our jobs'; however many young people were reluctant to take seasonal agricultural jobs.

The Need for Coherence

Although the study could not cover the large literature on labour markets in developed economies, there was considerable scepticism about the assumptions by government that raised educational standards and constant 'upskilling' would automatically improve national competitiveness in a global economy. Discussants took the view that while there had been a massive expansion of human knowledge over the past 150 years, many of those classed as lower attainers had always had a place in the production and development of this knowledge. While the splits between the 'haves and have-nots' in the workplace has increased (Farrell, 2010), and economies are blighted by recessions, redundancies, bad working practices and financial greed, it should be possible nevertheless to provide some stability and employment for lower attainers. In England in particular, new thinking is needed to move beyond the hand-wringing that social mobility has stalled, over perceptions that schools are failing, and that many young people are work-shy or disruptive ignorant jobs. What is needed is the development of a coherent vocational system and an economy that could employ all its citizens, including lower attainers, with more respect and fewer insults, and that will also care for those who may not be employable but are still worthy citizens.

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