
Reframing ‘Attainment’: creating and developing spaces for learning within schools

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ABSTRACT This article, based on a keynote presentation given at a conference in Tasmania, examines the notion of ‘attainment’ and argues that a narrow focus on standardised test scores is highly problematic for those concerned with social justice. Using examples from the Freedom to Learn Project, this article presents two case studies of schools that ‘think outside the box’. These schools use ideas which act as a disruption to mainstream thinking in that they challenge many assumed norms in education: that children need to be taught; that teachers are experts; that classrooms need to instil discipline; that the essence of learning can be assessed; that ‘standards’ can be equated with test scores. The article argues that part of the task of those wanting to reform education is to create spaces within education; spaces where students, staff and school leaders have freedom to think differently, to learn differently and to behave differently. It ends with a glimmer of optimism for UK schools as the Chief Inspector of Schools has recently criticised those who ‘mistake badges and stickers for learning itself’. This could be a green light to re-frame the ‘attainment’ discourse so that it works in the interests of all children and young people.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, ‘standards’ in schools have become increasingly equated with test scores. In England and Wales, the focus has been not only on GCSE and A-level results, but also on standardised tests (SATS) for children in primary schools. As regular readers of *FORUM* will be all too aware, this emphasis on testing has been criticised by teachers, by parents, by teaching unions and by children themselves. The recent campaign ‘More Than a Score’ (2017), supported by, among others, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the British Educational Research Association (BERA), the Cambridge Primary

Review and Let Our Kids Be Kids, has raised the profile of these concerns and been successful in gathering momentum in support of an alternative system for primary assessment.

The phrase 'educational attainment' has been defined by the OECD (1998) as 'the highest grade completed within the most advanced level attended', and although this has been widely acknowledged to be a 'narrow snapshot of possible measures relating to an individual's educational experience' (Schneider, 2011, p. 1), it continues to be the predominant measure by which the 'effectiveness' of education is evaluated.

This article explores the notion of 'attainment' and argues that a narrow focus on standardised test scores is highly problematic for those concerned with social justice.[1] It argues that by creating inspiring classrooms in which children and young people have the freedom and space to learn in their own way and at their own pace, schools will be enabling 'attainment' on a number of levels, including, arguably, improved academic outcomes.

Two examples of case studies will be presented, both of which are schools that 'think outside the box'. These schools have been involved in the Freedom to Learn Project, an international project which is striving to develop a network of people who are interested in exploring whether 'radical', 'alternative', 'democratic' approaches to education can have a positive impact on reducing social inequalities. Through the work of this project so far, we believe (and we are starting to have evidence to demonstrate) that 'thinking outside the box' is more inclusive, more engaging, more motivating and has a greater impact in terms of learning.

These two schools use ideas which act as a disruption to mainstream thinking in that they challenge many assumed norms in education: that children need to be taught; that teachers are experts; that classrooms need to instil discipline; that the essence of learning can be assessed; that 'standards' can be equated with test scores. The article argues that part of the task of those wanting to reform education is to *create spaces* within education – spaces where students, staff and school leaders have freedom to think differently, to learn differently and to behave differently.

Reframing Attainment

The precise definition of 'attainment' is complex and, as has already been indicated, the significance of it is contested. Is attainment about academic grades? Is it about comparing one school with another? Is it about reaching potential? Is it about happiness, well-being and good mental health? For me, attainment is about making a meaningful judgement as to *whether* children and young people are learning, and if so, *what* they are learning, and *how* this compares in relation to other children and young people from different social, ethnic and class backgrounds. This is, of course, important, especially when we consider that measuring attainment is frequently linked with efforts to address disadvantage and reduce educational inequalities. It gets problematic, however,

when attainment is conflated with test scores, and in particular, when these are 'high-stakes standardised tests'.

Research, notably from Wayne Au with reference to the USA (Au 2008, 2009, 2016), has consistently shown that the impact of this culture of high-stakes testing in schools has disproportionately affected low-income students and those from ethnic minorities so that, rather than addressing educational inequality, precisely the opposite has happened. Schooling is becoming *more unequal*, directly as a result of the tests. Why is this? How could this possibly be the case? Well, as Au comprehensively demonstrates, 'the tests are determining what is taught' (Au, 2009, p. 87), so that teachers are focusing so intently on the tests that they are narrowing the curriculum and changing teaching styles. Schools are reducing or removing parts of the curriculum that do not feature in tests, such as arts, sports and elements of multicultural education. Teachers are using more rote learning with the consequence of making learning shallower, with knowledge becoming disconnected, fragmented and isolated. Students who do not perform well in tests are disappearing from school rolls, either through voluntary drop-out or through being moved elsewhere. This picture is similar in the UK, with extensive research offering the validity of critiques of testing and attainment regimes (e.g. Stoll & Fink, 1996; Baker et al, 2004).

Through focusing squarely on attainment, there is a danger of losing track of the individuals, of forgetting that education is about children and young people – children and young people who are curious and full of energy, and who want to learn. This article is presenting an alternative position – that 'attainment' should be re-framed so that it does not have a purely academic focus. This means that (a) schools need to stand firm in their principles about what education is for and how schooling should happen, so that (b) they become creative and innovative in terms of how they create spaces for students – spaces which enable a 'freedom to learn'. In presenting this argument, I am deliberately challenging an over-emphasis on attainment, particularly in the forms of testing, and I am encouraging us to re-think what 'attainment' could mean if it was interpreted more broadly.

Creating Spaces: an 'open-space' school in Denmark

Hellerup School is on the outskirts of Copenhagen, Denmark (West Larsen, 2014). It is a publicly funded comprehensive school with about 650 students aged from 6 to 16. Denmark is known for having higher levels of social equity than the UK. Denmark – and Scandinavia more generally – has a history of offering unusual and innovative schools, though in the 1960s and 1970s there was a trend to revert to more traditional models of schooling, and schools were built and designed on more traditional lines. The school presented here is one of a new wave of innovative schools. It opened in 2002.

Hellerup School was designed as a new build, and from the outset the architecture was of crucial importance. They use the built environment as a 'second teacher'. It has been described as 'the school without walls', and the

description is fairly literal. There are *some* classrooms – science, gym and woodwork are all (for safety reasons) in rooms with lockable doors – but apart from that, the school is open-plan. ‘Class areas’ are delineated by arrangements of furniture such as movable room dividers, lockers and desks. No class area has a door and students can wander freely from one area to another. The school is located over three floors, all looking down over a central well and stairs. The school design in itself is innovative, but it only makes sense *in relation to* the school’s pedagogy. The pedagogy came first; the architecture followed. The school looks and feels very different from most schools in the UK. As part of a recent research study (Hope & Montgomery, 2016), one student described it in this way:

I would describe it as different, I’d describe it as freedom ... I’d describe it as a creative school. Different and free and creative and it’s a really good school, I like it a lot, because you’re not really ... you don’t have any rooms to just like ... you know, like, it’s like when the rooms are open and it’s like your mind is more open also.
(Female student, aged 15)

On initial impressions, the school looks like chaos: children everywhere, all in casual clothes; piles of coats, shoes and bags littering the floor. However, it is clear that this school is highly organised, with six 45-minute lessons every day, each one started by an introduction in the cosy ‘base areas’. The curriculum, testing system and staffing rotas are all organised – it is the *style* of teaching and learning that is flexible and has the appearance of chaos. After being set a task (or learning objectives), children can *choose* how they want to learn. The building is explicitly designed around this pedagogy, and children are encouraged to move around and find a space in which they want to work. There are tables, chairs, sofas, beanbags, stages and steps. Children can work in small groups, in pairs or on their own. Within the school, there are dozens of quiet and cosy working spaces for children to choose to work in, including outside areas. Everything, including the acoustics, has been carefully designed so that even though the school is open-plan, it is remarkably quiet. The underlying ethos of the school is that of ‘individualisation’. The school recognises that children learn differently, and that the traditional organisation of classrooms – and the way in which teachers engage with students – is constraining for some. In short, some children struggle to sit quietly; some struggle to sit still, some even struggle to sit down. Rather than engage in a constant battle with children to make them conform, this school acknowledges that children are different and as a result, it re-shapes itself to accommodate this (for more detail, see Hope & Montgomery, 2016).

As a result, the design of the school is quite deliberate. It challenges, in the words of Catherine Burke, the ‘hegemony of the classroom’ (2011, p. 418). As she argues:

the planning of schools is never random and always reflects the ways that relationships in education are envisaged: relationships between

adults and children, children and their peers, areas of knowledge, and between school and community. (Burke, 2011, p. 417)

Let's look at that again. *The design of schools always reflects the way that relationships are envisaged.* What does this tell us about schools in which the staff room has the best facilities? Or where parents have to sit on tiny children's chairs when speaking with the classroom teacher? Or where the science laboratories are better equipped than the art room? Schools designed in the way of Hellerup School give a radically different message about the position of children, teachers and parents within them – and about the type of activity that might happen within them. They are offering an innovative physical space in which a different school experience can occur.

How does this link with attainment? The head of the school is clear about this. Hellerup School has to do the same national tests as other schools. The school also has its *own* testing system for Danish and maths. Given the catchment area for the school, parents will only continue to send their children to the school if test results are good; although they value the 'soft skills', these are seen as extras. And the results *are* good. Hellerup is above average in terms of test scores, and it does particularly well in terms of students with special educational needs (SEN). They have a greater proportion of students with SEN, especially attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), than other schools in the region. They have a dedicated 'quiet space' (and inclusion room) with specialist staff aimed specifically at these students, but using it is a choice – and escape – though many of them never use it. The space is frequently empty because the students find they are able to manage within the flexible open-space design of the school.

However – and this is important as it gives an indication of how the school views attainment – the head argued: 'We need to challenge the old traditional thinking of examinations.' In addition to academic tests, students negotiate *individual goals* through dialogue with teachers. These can be academic, personal or social goals, and students are involved in self-assessing whether they have met these goals. These goals are taken seriously and are written into workbooks. Students self-direct these goals. If they achieve them, this is quite a different type of 'attainment'. It offers a view of schooling that is interested in the development of the whole child, as an individual who needs to be part of the world, and who needs to have the confidence and reflective skills to be able to adapt to changing circumstances. When children have set their own goals in these arenas, and when they work hard to achieve these goals, we broaden out the definition of 'attainment' and we value more of what schools like Hellerup are actually offering to students.

Creating Spaces: a flexible, creative curriculum in an 'outstanding' UK primary school

Hook School is in Goole, East Yorkshire, England (Hook School, 2017). Since 1988, education policy in England has become increasingly centralised, with successive governments of different persuasions becoming increasingly interested in the performance of schools and bringing in, first, a National Curriculum, second, an inspection body (Ofsted), and third, competitive league tables. In 1997, with the election of New Labour as a new government with Tony Blair as Prime Minister, this interest in schools became even more pronounced. Blair's election mantra of his three priorities for government being 'education, education, education' was translated into a far more interventionist approach to education (Tomlinson, 2005; Barker, 2010; Adonis, 2012). One example of this was the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies that outlined a series of targets in terms of expectations for literacy and numeracy among primary-age children. For one of the first times in British history, this was accompanied by a precise set of guidance about *how* schools should achieve this: through running discrete literacy and numeracy sessions every day, known colloquially as the 'numeracy and literacy hours'. This meant that the government was not only telling schools *what* they needed to achieve, but precisely *how* they were to achieve this. The vast majority of primary schools changed their timetables to accommodate the requirement for this new approach, with many running an hour of numeracy and an hour of literacy each morning. A tiny handful of schools resisted. Hook School in Goole was one of these.

The head of Hook School, Janet Huscroft, has been in post for 21 years. She is deeply committed to offering a flexible, creative curriculum in her school. This translates into a strong emphasis on project-based learning, with the whole school having a specific project-based focus for a term. The school does not operate a formal timetable (the school is sometimes described as 'the school without a timetable'). Rather, teachers work out how they want to fit everything into a daily and weekly schedule, depending on how well the children are engaging with various aspects of the project-based curriculum and where their interests are taking them. They still do science, history, drama and all other subjects, but they do these in a far more flexible and creative way than is enabled by a traditional timetable. They do project-based *activities* rather than *lessons*. Janet also refuses to group children into classes based on ability, preferring to use mixed-ability teaching for all classes – again, running against the grain for primary school practices in the rest of the country. She says that when the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were introduced,

we had to think 'will that enhance the learning of the children in our school?' Will it make it better? Will it improve it? If the answer is yes, then we'll certainly move towards it and bring it in to what we do. If the answer is no, then it goes to one side. Now, the

Strategies – how were we ever going to fit a literacy hour into a no-timetable approach? ... So we just didn't do them. (Huscroft, 2016)

Janet was not averse to paying attention to numeracy and literacy – she wants the children in Hook School to be able to read and write – but she objected to the imposition of a set formula for doing this. How did she resist, when almost every other primary school in the country introduced the numeracy and literacy hours? Well, it's simple, she says:

we thought everybody else wouldn't do the Strategies either, but it would appear as if most schools felt that they had to do them. It never was a *must*, so there was a freedom that people missed and I think as a profession, we miss too many of the freedoms.
(Huscroft, 2016)

The numeracy and literacy hours were *guidance*; they were not a statutory requirement. Schools were not forced to do them. Schools would all be assessed on whether the pupils had attained the right levels, but if they did, then they still had the freedom to use whichever approach to curriculum and pedagogy they wished.

Hook School has been inspected by Ofsted, the government's independent inspection body, and has been rated as 'outstanding'. Children take SATs, but they do not spend a whole term cramming for these and practising these, unlike many other schools. The attainment levels of the pupils are average, or above average. There are no causes for concern in relation to this. And yet Janet Huscroft claims to not be particularly interested in attainment measures per se. For her, the focus of the school is on meeting the needs of the individual children in the school and on providing an exciting, engaging, interactive, creative curriculum. It is about not limiting children by making assumptions about their ability and streaming them accordingly. It is about holding a position that says that all children are capable and can learn. Through holding these values and working in this way, the staff team, working with the head, offer a learning environment in which attainment happens. Rather than 'teaching to the test' or letting the assessment pressures drive the teaching and learning, this school focuses on the core business of schooling, and it gets the outcomes that others are striving for.

New Tone from Ofsted: a glimmer of hope for teachers?

Teachers are under great pressure (Galton & McBeath, 2008; Hutchings, 2015; Williams, 2017). This is evident through the statistics about the worrying numbers who have chosen to leave the teaching profession (Boffey, 2015). Given this, it would be easy to take a doom-and-gloom position and to argue that teachers in the UK cannot provide an 'open-space' school such as Hellerup in Denmark, or even that Hook School with its 'flexible, creative curriculum' is unique and thus cannot be replicated more widely.

A more optimistic position would be to point to the numerous examples of ‘thinking outside the box’ that take place within mainstream schools in the UK.

Even though Hook School is unusual, there are many examples of other primary and secondary schools which are working differently from the ‘norm’ – for example, many of the schools in the Learning without Limits project exhibit creativity and innovation in the way they work with children (Hart et al, 2004; Swann et al, 2012; University of Cambridge 2017). There are many projects, collaborations and networks that are working to try and challenge mainstream practices. These include Freedom to Learn, Phoenix Education Trust, Personalised Education Now, Whole Education and Human Scale Education – as well as many of the teaching unions.

There is a glimmer of hope that the mainstream education landscape is set to change. Amanda Spielman, Head of Ofsted, made a speech in June 2017 in which she argued that the way that the inspection regime has operated in the past ‘reflects a tendency to mistake badges and stickers for learning itself. And it is putting the interests of schools ahead of the interests of the children in them.’ She went on to state: ‘We should be ashamed that we have let such behaviour persist for so long’ (Adams, 2017). This signals a significant change of direction, one in which schools might be encouraged to put learning first and to re-prioritise. Common practices of ‘teaching to the test’ might, if Spielman gets her way, be coming to an end. This provides a real opportunity for school leaders, for teachers, for parents, and for children themselves to design schooling in a way that meets their own educational aims and desires.

Conclusion

Extensive research demonstrates that a focus on ‘attainment’ in a traditional sense is narrowing the curriculum and changing pedagogies in schools, and that the impact of this is that inequalities are actually exacerbated rather than addressed. The importance of this cannot be overstated. When a focus on attainment is correlated with an emphasis on high-stakes testing, this is highly problematic. It does not have to be this way.

This article has given examples of two schools – one in Denmark and one in the UK – that have a different approach to education. They offer open, free and creative spaces for children and young people to engage in learning. In the Danish example, this is a physical space in which children can move around, can mix together, and can take personal control of their own learning. In the British example, there is a flexible timetable and flexible curriculum, based on project-based learning, which enables children to engage in relevant, interesting and meaningful learning. In both examples, academic attainment levels are good – but that is not the primary focus.

I would urge us all – whether we are policy-makers, teachers, parents or academics – to work together to resist the move towards greater and greater levels of increasingly high-stakes testing. In the UK, the recent message from

the Chief Inspector of Schools is that Ofsted might adopt a different focus in its inspections. This is our chance to make a change.

Note

- [1] A version of this article was presented as a keynote address at the Education Transforms 2017 Symposium, University of Tasmania, 12-14 July 2017. More details from: <http://www.utas.edu.au/underwood-centre/events/education-transforms-2017>

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