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The Nature and Identification of Underachievement and the General Principles and Practices in Raising Achievement

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Why Do the Gifted and Talented Underachieve? How Can Masked and Hidden Talents Be Revealed?

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Introduction

Underachievement is the term used when the estimated potential of individuals is not realized in their achievements. This may be in the preschool period, in school or in later life. Although it seems to be a widespread phenomenon even so research suggests that much of it appears to go undetected.

It has come to be of particular concern during the school years especially lately since Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) and other national statistics show differences in achievements of boys and girls and minority groups. Since intelligence and ability should be equally distributed across the groups it is surprising to find that it is not matched by attainment.

Teachers know that there are always pupils who are capable of more could achieve more or are hard to reach, and research backs up these observations. In the past such pupils might have been dismissed as unmotivated or lazy. Some might have considered them beyond help because of their disadvantaged backgrounds or lack of culture. Now we know better. We also know that good schools and expert teachers can and do make a difference.

Studies show that underachievement (UAch) affects pupils across the ability range but is more common and more damaging in some groups than others. In order to understand this and counteract the effects it is necessary to try to understand the origins and causes of UAch as well as how it may be identified. But it is a complex phenomenon and will take some unravelling.

In general terms underachievers show an inability to sit still, pay attention and stay on task. Deeper investigation shows that they have a very poor

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self-image. What they typically say of themselves is, 'I'm useless at this or that . . . I hate school . . . school hates me . . . it's boring.'

Baum, Cooper and Neu (2001) found that underachievers felt:

Everyone in the school knows what I can't do, absolutely no one knows what I can do.

This is not untypical for we can tend to focus on the overt and negative aspects and try to deal with these when research shows that when we concentrate on the positives and celebrate what pupils achieve we help them do better (Montgomery, 1989, 2002).

Concentrating on the negatives can cause pupils to become demotivated and to feel failures. It can also lead in some to even more undesirable depressive and behavioural side effects.

It would be a mistake however to locate UACh only as a problem intrinsic to the pupil. There is a range of external factors that can also cause UACh that the pupil can do little about.

Such factors are underachieving schools whose aspirations for pupils are too low; underachieving departments and teachers whose teaching and learning strategies need to be improved; and underachieving environments where children cannot be given quality nurturance that enables them to take advantage of schooling.

Finally, the ethos and the models of schools, families, popular culture and modern ways of life may not encourage pupils to value the schooling or education in the wider sense that is on offer.

Nor is UACh only a modern preoccupation. The Board of Education for England and Wales in 1923 stated in *Differentiation of the Curriculum between the Sexes in Secondary Schools*:

It is well known that most boys, especially at the period of adolescence, have a habit of healthy idleness (Board of Education, 1923, p. 20). Nearly 70 years later Brereton felt able to write:

Many girls would work at a subject they dislike. No healthy boy ever does (Brereton 1990, pp. 34–35).

These are however not sentiments we would want to accept today but there are still countries, cultures and homes in which women and girls predominantly do all the work and boys and men have all the disposable time.

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In fact our own history of education shows that it is only since the middle of the nineteenth century that girls could expect an education and might have aspirations beyond marriage and the running of a home. It took a further 100 years for the Raising of the School Leaving Age (ROSLA 1970–71) to 16 to ensure that girls might have equal opportunities to stay on at school to gain the qualifications necessary for different careers. Employers still complain that the standard of school leavers is not as high as it once was not recognizing that they are fishing in a different pool.

Finally, the pressures of global economics demand that modern technological societies create a workforce with ever-increasing levels of skill and this places stress upon schools and learners to improve the qualifications of all the pupils. What still perhaps needs to be addressed is the perceived mismatch between school inputs and career and economic outcomes for the learners, the issue of ‘relevance’.

Once upon a time the ‘grammar’ schools defined their role as only teaching Latin and Greek. Headmasters had to be paid extra for offering arithmetic and other subjects. Pupils (boys) were herded into classes of 100 or more and were ‘taught’ by rote and made compliant by force of the cane. Relevance was not considered and school riots at three major public schools had to be put down by soldiers. After the day spent in rote learning the pupils in public schools were left for hours to their own devices with no organized games or activities.

In 1978, the Scottish HMI surveyed all their primary and secondary schools and compiled a report (SED, 1978) that found that the curriculum and pedagogy were the *main causes* of learning difficulties in the schools and pupils were unable to see the relevance of much they were required to learn. Today, despite the introduction of the National Curriculum (NC, 1989) and now its many revisions and updates to ‘the New Curriculum’ our pupils are still complaining of the lack of relevance of much of what they do in school. This was evidenced in the 1000 and more composition scripts I analyzed (Montgomery, 2008). They go home to a dwelling set in an environment where they feel there is little for them to do and nowhere for them to go. Teachers report an increasing tide of disaffection. Everything has changed and everything stays the same.

However, as will be seen as the various chapters unfold lack of relevance, disaffection and UACh are not a necessary consequence of compulsory education although they are the result of inept policies and practices delivered from above.

This chapter will discuss the complex nature of UAch and then outline ways in which it may be identified. A key feature will be ‘identification through appropriate provision (ITAP)’.

Common Indicators of Underachievement

The profile of more able underachievers in school has been well researched and a common list of characteristics is shown below based on Kellmer-Pringle (1970), Whitmore (1982), Butler-Por (1987), Silverman (1989), Wallace (2000) and Montgomery (2000).

A checklist to aid identification of more able underachievers

- Large gap between oral and written work.
- Poor literacy skills.
- Failure to complete schoolwork and homework.
- Poor execution of work.
- Refuses to do work.
- Dissatisfaction with own achievements.
- Avoidance of trying new activities.
- Perfectionism and extreme self-criticism.
- Sets unrealistic goals and aspirations.
- Does not function well in groups or subverts group work.
- Lacks concentration.
- Poor attitudes to school.
- May have difficulties with peers.
- Low self-image.
- Performs satisfactorily in all areas at a level with peers.

Able underachievers do not show all these characteristics, they tend to form in clusters but the overriding feature seems to be the problem over written work. It is probably difficult to find a pupil who does not at times show at least one or two of the above characteristics but with UAch the pattern is persistent. The resultant problem behaviours can mask our ability to see the real potential underneath.

In cases of very high ability, giftedness, then the pupil may simply refuse to do any of the work because it is too low level or it has been covered before. The overt expression may just be, ‘It’s boring’.

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In schools where a lot of written work is required the general profile is of an inability or a refusal to produce written work of a suitable quality and to sit still and pay attention in class, Lee-Corbin and Denicolo (1998) confirmed this in their detailed comparative study of 18 able achievers and 16 lower achievers in three primary schools in Key Stage 2. Teacher assessment and scores at and above the 90th percentile on the British Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn, Whetton and Pintilie, 1982) and Raven's Standard Progressive Matrices (1991 version) were used to help select the groups.

Boy's achievement in general is seen to be lower than that of girls'. Government statistics show that this deficit in boys' achievement is in the order of 10% (DfES, 2006).

There may also be an uneven pattern of performance across subjects with higher performance in arts and sports or good behaviour and performance in just one subject with a favoured teacher. Out of school achievements may be significant in a number of spheres at home and in the neighbourhood yet school achievements are low. Some pupils will only attend on days when their favourite subject is on offer.

Whilst looking across the board at achievement and commitment there are also those individuals who make no impact and function at an average level consistent with that of peers. The 'rhinos' – 'Really Here in Name Only' who are serving time until they can escape from schooling and get into the real world. Some disappear from view and some become highly successful entrepreneurs. The Confederation of British Industry estimates on a regular basis that 30–40% of their most successful industry leaders were 'school averse' or school failures.

My observations in 1250 lessons over a period of years (Montgomery, 2002) suggested that some 80% of pupils underachieved a large part of the time even in the best of lessons in these particular classrooms. Whitmore (1982) found 70% of pupils identified by IQ were underachieving by at least one standard deviation, however, IQ tests do not necessarily identify many of the most able. Richert (1991) found at least 50% of the gifted identified by IQ underachieved academically.

If we think back to our own schooldays few of us can claim to have spent all day on task totally focused. It is too tiring. We need time for thinking, consolidation and mental relaxation within a lesson's time frame. Good lessons arrange for these to happen in legitimate ways without allowing 'dead time'. 'Covering' the syllabus in an overfilled curriculum allows little

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time for more effective or deep learning, nor thinking and consolidation as the learners construct their own knowledge. This is the constructivist theory and approach to learning (Desforges, 1998).

Persistent UACh is a great waste of potential. But it is a complex phenomenon and a careful analysis is needed to identify it and find ways of overcoming it. No single strategy for intervention is likely to work.

The diagram shows a summary of what seem to be the major contributory factors in UACh in the presence of an individual's particular potential and ability.

Internal factors are motivational ones or the drive to behave in particular ways, the personality factors or the type of people we are and the traits that we have that interact with the general and specific learning difficulties barriers we bring to learning. These can undermine progress in all school subjects. Intrinsic barriers are modifiable but will interact with extrinsic barriers set up for example by disadvantage and poor quality schooling that we have acquired in interaction with the environment.

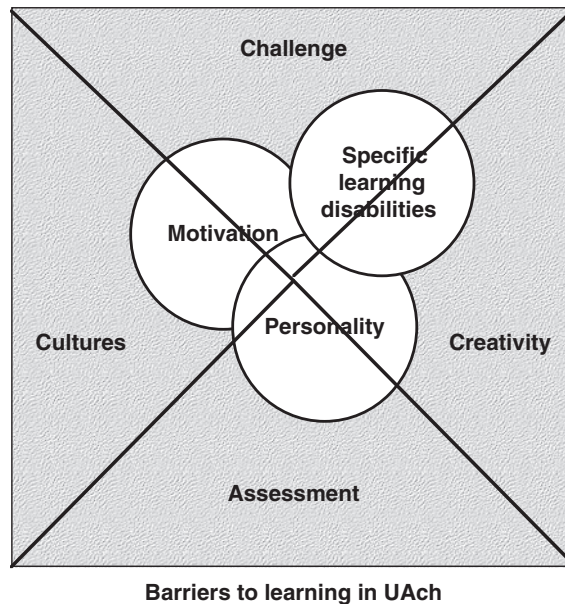


Figure 1 To show internal and external factors contributing to underachievement (UACh).

Internal Factors

Motivation

Intrinsic barriers are modifiable but will interact with others that we have acquired in interaction with the environment. For example Ryan and Deci (2000) found that extrinsic rewards such as gifts and prizes actually caused a decline in motivation to learn and study whereas a positive supportive learning environment raised intrinsic motivation. In addition, work that was self-directed and involved an element of creativity also increased intrinsic motivation. A punitive assessment system with multiple targets and objectives and an overloaded curriculum reduced intrinsic motivation (Feller, 1994).

Thus, whilst we aspire to encourage pupils to become lifelong learners our objectives-based assessment driven school system may militate against this. Pupils in early years education can quickly perceive themselves as system's failures when they do not achieve school targets or the highest levels. Their failures can be extended and reinforced at each subsequent assessment point, added to this is the misery when it is all made public knowledge.

As demotivated pupils move through school some will cease to try, others can become alienated, school averse and exhibit behaviour problems. A coercive system cannot gain the best from such pupils (Mongon and Hart, 1989a) unless the teachers unite under strong leadership to make a difference.

It is the teachers who are the prime source of motivation for pupils in classrooms, providing interest, enthusiasm, positive feedback and feed forward in assessment for learning and who 'catch them being good' rather than catch them being off task and a nuisance. A positive, supportive system can offer education as 'therapy' giving emotional support though learners' engagement with the task.

Personality

Some personalities are more vulnerable than others to lack of success and their self-esteem is more easily lowered. One of the personality dimensions that influences our view of the world and how the world perceives us is the tendency to be more introvert or more extravert. Although extraversion

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seems more common in younger pupils, as they grow older they become less overtly responsive.

The characteristic outgoing, responsive and more social extravert can be observed in classrooms as well as the more quiet and reflective introvert, preferring to work alone. The 'locus of control' in extraverts tends to be external and so they blame others, the teacher and peers for any shortcomings whereas introverts have an internal 'locus of control' and tend to blame themselves when things go wrong or they fail at something. They are thus more vulnerable to failure and fear of failure and even fear of success than other pupils. More boys than girls tend to have an external locus of control and will blame teachers if they do not understand or if they do not succeed in school. Recently schools have been expressing concerns about their highly able girls' perfectionist attitudes (Sisk, 2003) and their perceived inability to cope with perceived failure. In interviews (BBC Radio 4, 24 March 2008) with head teachers and gifted girls they discussed the problem of 'failure'. The girls were expected to gain A and A* in 10 subjects at General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE). The girls said they felt they would be failing if they did not get A* grades in all 10 subjects. They had always succeeded throughout school and the possibility of 'failure' however relative left them without the experience to cope. Some who had gained 9 A* and an A or a B wanted to retake the 'failed' subject. Those set on a particular high status university or career appeared to have no fall back position. School had not equipped them to deal with life in the real world.

The 'big five' personality traits are – neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, openness and conscientiousness. Underachievers will have a mix of positions along each of these dimensions like other people. Although some might argue they are not very conscientious where written work is concerned.

Special educational needs (SEN) and underachievement

Many SENs are the result of internal factors such as genetic, congenital, biological and psychological factors whose origins are still being unravelled. Some of them can have a strong impact on learning especially in school subjects and create barriers to progress and achievement unless they can be dismantled or counteracted at an early stage. The SENs that are the most common and contribute most to UACh in school are specific learning difficulties (learning disabilities) such as dyslexia and attention deficit

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hyperactivity disorder and social emotional and behavioural difficulties. In each category there is a continuum of difficulty from mild through moderate and severe to profound.

The chapter on Dual and Multiple Exceptionality explores these difficulties and their remediation in more detail.

English as an additional language and underachievement

These pupils do not form part of the SEN group because unless they have a learning difficulty or disability their language development will follow a rapid but normal developmental profile. The Ravens (2008) test can give an indication of their intellectual potential and then immersion in the second language in school will help their language abilities to develop. However, they will at first need some second language support and a buddy in class to help them ease into the new system. It is also helpful if an older pupil from the same language background can be identified to be a mentor. The chapter by Ian Warwick explores the needs of learners with English as Additional Language, the identification of their potential and their support. It gives examples of good practice from schools and Local Authorities.

External Factors

Challenge and creativity

Teachers are the prime resource for motivation of pupils in the classroom providing interest, enthusiasm and feedback. It is they who design and implement the lessons connecting the curriculum with the pupils.

Developing *intrinsic motivation* through the task is a guiding principle in teacher education courses. When pupils are off task and misbehaving student teachers are advised to develop more interesting and relevant activities. To a large extent this is good advice but it fails to work where pupils have a learning history that lacks such experiences or where they come from undisciplined settings. Teachers have to become experts in crowd control.

Managing individuals and small groups is quite unlike managing a class of 30. Herd rules have to be known and understood, rules have to be operated.

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The problem is that many of these ‘rules’ or strategies are implicit. However, they can be taught (Montgomery, 2002) but are often only learned by hard experience.

Positive behaviour management needs to be accompanied by motivating work, curriculum tasks and teaching and learning methods that generate interest and maintain enthusiasm and keep the pupil involved. Tasks have to offer active participation and personal involvement in the outcomes, for these too are prime intrinsic motivators.

It is teachers who design tasks to offer cognitive challenge, creativity and undertake the assessment for learning. These represent the key extrinsic factors in Figure 1. The DfES (Higgins, 2002) initiative on teaching and learning in foundation subjects in primary schools and at Key Stage 3 (11–14 years) matches the provision needed for gifted and talented pupils where challenging questioning, problem-based learning (PBL) and thinking skills are promoted.

It has shown that a wider range of pupils can be engaged and motivated when these strategies are incorporated into the ordinary curriculum for all pupils. Greater pupil activity, and more open ended and individualized learning approaches have enabled disaffected pupils to stay on task and become involved in school learning. This in turn needs to be reinforced by positive and supportive use of formative assessment and behaviour management. The chapter by Belle Wallace illustrates how these principles have worked in practice using her TASC (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) wheel.

Cognitive challenge and creativity built into tasks represent key *extrinsic factors* that have been found necessary not only for highly able learners but for all learners (Montgomery, 1990, 1996). These too develop motivation. They operate on the principle of ‘cognitive dissonance’. When we set a more open problem to which the learner does not know the answer then the inbuilt propensity to seek closure or resolution (consonance) drives them to find one. Kelly (1955) called this natural tendency found from birth as one of ‘man the scientist’. If teachers can harness this natural tendency by appropriate task design then they can motivate pupils very strongly. Setting too challenging tasks would quickly bring about the opposite effect, but getting the right level of challenge for individual learners is a key role for the teacher and is part of ‘personalizing’ the learning.

Getting learners to reflect upon their thinking as they engage in the problem solving and investigative activities is also a part of bringing about more effective learning. This has been evidenced in TASC (Wallace, 2000);

also in Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education (Shayer and Adey, 2002) and related programmes. Thinking about our thinking whilst engaged on solving or working through an issue is also referred to as metacognition and the process as metalearning. Teaching Children Philosophy (Lipman, 1991; www.sapere.org) is strong in this respect and is very popular with pupils in the schools observed for the NACE/London G and T Research Project on Lifting UAch (Wallace *et al.*, 2008). The schools were selected for study because they were known to be very good at counteracting UAch. Key factors showing how case study schools were successful are discussed in the final chapter.

The role of creativity in teaching and learning is often ignored or late. However, it is when more creative options and open-ended opportunities are offered that pupils and students feel satisfaction and pleasure. Creative work does require more space and time than a heavily loaded curriculum may offer. Teachers become anxious that they are not 'covering' the syllabus. But the pupils will spend longer on the task and put more effort into it out of school time and learn much that is not irrelevant to the main curriculum theme as I learned when all my pupils designed and conducted their own investigative/PBL task alone or with a partner in the final month of term. In such a setting the teacher's role changes to make links, to observe, to facilitate and manage the resources.

The new curriculum has freed up more time so that teachers can be more flexible and creative in what they do. Once basic skills at level 4 had been achieved in Key Stage 2 some schools have set aside a day in a week for projects involving creativity and out of school activities.

Not every task can be set to be a problem or creative activity, a rich mixture is what is required. However, too often the pupils do only get one type of approach, the teacher-directed top-down model seen in typical lesson plans – the mini lecture – the question and answer check for understanding – the 'seat work' based upon questions on a work sheet – finish off for homework. In other words, there is little 'engage brain' involved in these activities and the pupils can maintain a constant level of chat with friends during the written work in particular.

Increasing the cognitive stretch and challenge of tasks in ordinary lessons has shown that a wider range of pupils can be engaged and motivated (Montgomery, 1996, 1998; Wallace, 2000, Wallace *et al.*, 2004). This is important for most of the gifted and talented are not going to gain access to special provision and enrichment nor will underachievers and therefore this has to begin at classroom and subject level.

Assessment

Creative activities, even of the desk-based kind benefit from an audience and an appraisal or evaluation. It is not enough for the teacher to collect all the assignments in and give the assessment. Teacher assessment is of course a valuable part of the learning and teaching process but peer evaluation needs to be encouraged and the processes actually taught.

Pupils need to learn how to develop evaluative criteria and use these in a positive way to help the recipients to develop the work and the understanding. Such activities and presentations are common in the performing arts and often in design but this strategic approach to assessment needs to be developed across the whole curriculum and find a place in all subjects and in all age groups. The gross comments and bald statements of like and dislike so common in classrooms can then be replaced by considered views and consideration and respect for others.

Assessment for learning has always been an important part of the teachers' job. However, as the pressure for more and more work to be assessed rises, the quality of that assessment can be diminished. For example the characteristic view of teacher assessment is the mark out of 10 at the end of an exercise with a comment such as 'Good' or 'Mind your spelling!' Pupils always of course look first for their mark or their grade. It tells them how successful they have been in meeting the teacher's criteria. But what these were they may not know so that they go on to the next exercise, essentially in the dark.

Even in subjects where there are some right and some wrong answers the *summative* mark alone however good, does not tell them how to put right what was wrong. This is in essence the role of *formative* assessment. It feeds forward and it feeds backward. It tells the pupil the criteria that have been met and how well and it tells them how the work could have been improved and if they do so next time how the grade will improve.

Establishing assessment criteria with the pupils at the outset of a task can help all to understand what is required of them. However, making the task criteria necessary and relevant also needs consideration. Writing answers to questions using full sentences when one word might suffice, certainly fills time but also wastes it and disadvantages the 30% of the class with handwriting difficulties in form, coordination or speed (Montgomery, 2007). Many highly able pupils simply refuse to do such tasks and are they wrong to assert themselves in this way?

When formative assessment activities and criterion referencing is shared with pupils it makes it easier for them to engage successfully in peer and

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self-assessment. It helps overcome the over elaborate self-assessments that they might make and helps gain control of perfectionist tendencies when they run to extremes (Sisk, 2003).

Formative assessment is in fact a powerful teaching device that backs up and personalizes the more overt teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms. Sometimes it is delivered verbally and at other times in writing. When pupils are working independently or in groups on tasks it is essential for the teacher to move round the class and listen, encourage where necessary, redefine and give formative feedback. I call this on-the-hoof input 'Developmental PCI' (positive cognitive intervention). It acts as positive feedback and feed forward and demonstrates the teacher's involvement with the pupils and the task, again it is a motivating force.

Cultures

The cultures and subcultures into which we are born and brought up determine many patterns of our behaviour. Some cultures provide models inconsistent with education and learning which become attractive to disaffected youngsters seeking emotional support of the peer group and gang. The effects of culture can also be counteracted but this is a lengthy process. Again, it is the positive and supportive experiences that can bring this about for we learn from these what to do and how to do it. From negative experiences we only learn what not to do, not how to do it differently.

The potent effects of gender, disadvantage and culture in UACh will be examined in three separate chapters in more detail to show how some of the problems arise and what can be done to overcome them.

By secondary stage hormonal and biological differences and levels between boys and girls figure more in their responses to education and each other. Some schools and teachers can reinforce boy and girl 'codes' or cultures and stereotypes. Boys' behaviour can become more challenging and difficult to manage but some girls can show even more problematic responses and refuse to participate in an education they see as childish and irrelevant (Montgomery, 2002).

Media models, football icons and older siblings may also offer models inappropriate to play out in schools. Maintaining 'cool' can be inimical to schoolwork and as a result of spending much time off task pupils begin to underachieve.

Any difference may be picked on by an 'in group' for no good reason but just to assert themselves. This can be very threatening and distressing

for the victim. We are all different in many respects so can all become victims. Difference should be enriching yet is often seen as perverse in a traditional schooling culture modelled upon a nineteenth century education that pervades much popular and political debate. This is the model of Dicken's Mr Gradgrind – 'What we want is facts'.

Dynamic Interactions Between Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors

Positive processes For some pupils the intrinsic and extrinsic factors may be in advantageous forms that help them to progress in school and later life. In particular intrinsic motivation, an inner drive, to go on and pursue studies for their own sake, to be able to plan ahead and follow the plan without anyone encouraging them to do so, is very important for success in life. Schools that fail to motivate and interest pupils will fail to help them develop autonomy in learning and intrinsic motivation.

A family background that is supportive and educative and uses extended language is also well known to enhance a child's learning experiences and capabilities (Freeman, 1991, 2001). Rearing patterns that are positively reinforcing, consistent and clear help develop a strong sense of self, self-esteem and identity. All these prepare them to fit in well at school.

Equally rejection, inconsistent rearing, family discord and distress can diminish a child's potential to succeed (Rutter, 1985), as can a coercive, threatening and negative schooling ethos and experience (Mongon and Hart, 1989b).

Positive class control and management (Montgomery 1989, 2002) for misbehaving underachievers

Teachers are not only responsible for the task setting but also maintaining discipline and time on task. Sometimes even the most interesting tasks do not initially make the pupils work at them. Socializing and 'get the teacher' might be more fun. The social interactions between pupils and between pupils and the teacher as well as between the pupils, teacher and task create a set of dynamics that contribute to or can diminish UACh. For example when

pupils are allowed to cooperate this can raise their achievement. However, keeping them sitting singly in rows can be a means of helping keep control of a difficult class. Class control procedures act between the extrinsic and intrinsic factors to provoke UACh signs or diminish them. Consistent, fair and positive class control acts to counteract previous negative experiences and provides models for appropriate behaviour and respect.

Secure knowledge of positive behaviour management routines and strategies by the teacher are important when dealing with underachievers for they are often in the habit of not getting on with the task. They chat continuously, do funny walks and make odd noises to attract attention and annoy. They are prime participants in the continuous low-level chatter that Elton (DES, 1989) found disturbed and stressed teachers so much, and it still does (NUT Survey, 2008).

There are five strategic principles that were evolved from the research on effective behaviour management in the 1250 classrooms. In the process it was found possible to convert unsuccessful teachers into successful ones and consolidate and even improve the skills of good teachers by sharing these strategic approaches with them. The learners settled and got on with their work.

The five strategic principles

1. *CBG: 'Catch them being good'*. That is, both the pupils and the teachers, for people grow more from strengths and then learn to overcome weaknesses. The idea is to catch the pupils when they are on task and praise and support these behaviours rather than continually catching them off task and being a nuisance.

A positive supportive attitude and classroom ethos set by the teacher contribute to feelings of worth and well-being and enables pupils to respect others as they enjoy respect. Too often underachieving pupils arrive at school from a home in which no one has thought to say a kind word to them. The CBG is directed equally to the social as well as the task behaviours. It consists of smiles, 'goods', giving attention to and nodding in support.

2. *PCI*.
 - (a) *Cognitive stretch and challenge*. Whatever is being learnt should be presented so as to appeal to the intellect, or 'engage brain' and should provide opportunities for problem-solving type learning and the learning and exercise of higher order study skills so that

pupils learn how to learn. The lesson plan and the tasks must be designed for this by the teacher and there is discussion and examples in Chapter 5.

- (b) *Developmental PCI*. Pupils must not only know that a piece of work is good through CBG; they must have explained what makes it good and what can be the next stage of development – the formative approach that is given in developmental PCI. The detailed interest taken in the work makes it significant in pupil's eyes. If every pupil in every lesson receives some positive, constructive comment upon work, the off task attention-seeking behaviours diminish. PCI in this form need only take 10 seconds but ways must be found for all to receive it.
3. *Management, monitoring and maintenance (3Ms)*. In any lesson there are basic ground level *tactics* that teachers use in order to gain and maintain pupils' attention whatever teaching method they subsequently use. The 3M's strategy represents a set of related tactics which the effective teacher uses time and again to get and keep classroom control.

Management phase

- (a) The teacher makes an *attention gaining noise* or *signal* that the class learns to recognize and respond to. The signal varies from sharp closing of a door; a sharp noise of ruler on the table; handclap; a speech noise such as 'Uhhh!', 'Now then!', 'Right!', 'Year 7', 'Good morning everybody', and so on. Some teachers stand quietly and wait.
- (b) The teacher gives a *short verbal instruction* (Short Verbal) such as 'Everybody sit down', 'Sit down and get out your books'. 'I want you to listen carefully.' A lively class of pupils will respond to this instruction to the extent of about 70%. Five pupils will continue talking and doing their own thing. The mistakes usually made are either the teacher repeats the instruction louder, and again louder still, so that pupils are either startled and resentful only waiting until later to get their own back; or the teacher anxiously begins the lesson over the talkers who will now continue with others perhaps joining in. Some very difficult classes who have experienced a number of teachers with control problems like this will continue talking whilst the teacher shouts, 'Be quiet!' or some other instruction louder and louder. The pupils thus demonstrate *they* are in control and drive the teacher to threaten

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and bully and perhaps get him or herself into an irretrievable position.

- (c) It is important not to get into this inescapable route to disaster and after the short instruction follow it by *individual instruction*. This simply means following up the 'Everybody sit down!' instruction with a pause, looking carefully round and then asking an individual still standing or talking, 'Richard turn round please!' The effect of this quietly done is to cause the group around the individual also to fall silent or get out their books. It creates a *Ripple Effect* (Kounin, 1970). This indicates the importance of learning some names or having a classroom plan as soon as possible.
- (d) When there is quiet, introduce the *main theme* of the lesson immediately. The longer the teacher spends on activities other than this, for example dealing with latecomers, minor administrative matters involving individuals, keeping the rest waiting, the more likelihood there is that other pupils will start to behave in challenging or undesirable ways.

The introductory sequence should have a good pace and soon a habit of getting on with the work will be set up so that all the teacher has to do is enter the room or call for attention and the children will respond appropriately. Student teachers may try to model themselves on the teacher without the same success, because they have not observed the training stage when the teacher has set the ground rules and taught them to respond to the cues.

Monitoring phase Once the individual or group work has been set then the crucial phase of monitoring begins for not all children will settle immediately. The usual response is for the teacher to deal with individual requests and then go out amongst the class to help some get started or iron out difficulties, really the maintainancing function. Some few teachers remain at their desks withdrawn from the class issuing occasional instructions or giving information sometimes engaged in other work. This can create an attitude in the pupils of 'them and us' or represent to them an authoritarian style of teaching that is not interested in them or what they produce only concerned that they should do as they are told.

Pupils who feel even mildly anti-authority in this depersonalized setting may be prompted to undermine the teacher, that representative of authority. Thus, whilst the teacher is *in* legal authority and must be *an* authority in terms of subject content, this is to be distinguished

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from displays of overt authoritarianism for the cues are very easily picked up by older pupils who particularly resent this style (Galloway and Goodwin, 1987).

Monitoring involves standing back, casting one's eye round the class over the whole group and observing individuals who are the focus of disturbance or those who have not yet settled. The teacher then needs either to mention the individual name, for example 'John hurry up and get started please', 'Susan, if you have a problem I will come and deal with it in a moment, just settle down now', or quickly move round the work groups quietening the loudest member. It is important to settle the whole class down to work *before* giving detailed help otherwise some may never start at all.

Once the pupils know the teacher is engaging in this monitoring activity eye contact with ring leaders or a hand gesture to settle or move them is all that is needed. The whole session can be controlled by *non-verbal cueing*, 'conducting' the class by eye contact and gesture. It is much more restful to achieve control by non-verbal methods for any noise the teacher makes can contribute to the pupils modelling and using their voices even louder. I observed a noisy and disorganized teacher convert a class of well-behaved individuals into a herd of ill-behaved out of order children. The noisier the teacher the noisier the children.

The monitoring phase should be short but can be repeated as required throughout the next phase when noise level *seems about to rise* or one or two pupils suddenly can be heard above the general work murmur. Pupils continually test even the experienced teacher's level of observance only resuming work if eye contact is made.

Maintenance phase Once the pupil's part of the work has been set and they have begun to work it is advisable that the teacher moves round the class to find out how well the task is going, to help those with difficulties, to involve those whose motivation is hard to encourage. The pupils should know that *each one* of them can expect to receive some positive comment – PCI, from the teacher about their work or some help during the lesson not just those who are having difficulty or are being a nuisance.

It is this individualized attention to the task that encourages interest and effort. The pupils come to want to work for the teacher because s/he treats the work as important by taking a personal interest in it. Each pupil comes to feel significant and that his or her effort is an

important and relevant contribution to their own development. It enhances self-esteem and generates an active interest in schoolwork. The teacher meanwhile through close observation of performance on task can obtain feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching content and method, and so is able to modify further work or personalize the process.

4. *Tactical lesson planning (TLP)*. Many teachers have been trained to plan their lessons under the following general headings: Objective, Introduction, Method, Contents, Materials and Evaluation. The rejection of this teacher-centred approach in favour of one that mirrors the changes in the learners' activities required at different phases of the lesson, the Tactical Lesson Plan, helped failing teachers become successful (Montgomery, 2002).

The TLP may well begin with the short verbal introduction supported by PowerPoint or pictures, what needs to follow is an activity change on the part of the pupils, that is not more listening by them but perhaps some quick note taking; then some sharing/talking about notes to a peer; followed by some listening again and then some active practical work, next recording what was done and found out ending up with a plenary. The options are listening, thinking, talking, writing, drawing, acting/role-play, practical/making work.

5. *Learning conversations*. In order for teachers to be able to improve their own performance they needed to be helped to reflect on their teaching and hold 'learning conversations' in their heads about it, another way of describing this is that they were able to label and tap into their metacognitions and metalearning. This short form language CBG, 3Ms, PCI and TLP enabled them to monitor their work in lessons by focusing on the key variables. It appeared to facilitate the processes of tapping into these metacognitive processes and reflections even after the mediator had left.

Teaching is also about helping pupils engage in their own reflective learning conversations. This theme will be developed in several chapters throughout the book.

As can be seen already it is not only intrinsic and extrinsic factors that cause pupils to underachieve, it is also their dynamic interaction with each other and processes between that contribute to a particular pattern of UACh.

In the next section of this chapter a range of identification procedures will be explored.

Instruments for Identifying Underachievement

Ability tests in common use in schools

The IQ tests that most secondary schools use for initial screening for potential are the Cognitive Abilities Tests (Thorndike, Hagen and France, 1986). These are group tests of verbal and numerical abilities and some aspects of spatial performance. Schools may also use MidYIS in year 7 and YELLIS in year 10 to compare performance with potential.

Most primary schools tend not to use formal ability tests to identify potential or separate out groups of pupils. Instead they tend to identify those for special provision by SATs levels and teacher observation. If tests are used then the NFER group tests for non-verbal and verbal reasoning, or Young's tests are common as well as the British Picture Vocabulary Scale (Dunn, Whetton and Pintilie, 1982). There is a range of similar tests available from the testing agencies.

Individually administered tests used in primary schools are the English Picture Vocabulary Scale and Raven's (2008) Coloured and Progressive Matrices. At this stage, the literacy and maths levels are generally the key to access to more advanced provision outside the classroom and differentiation is the strategy within the classroom.

For pupils whose culture and first language are different, deaf pupils and traveller children it may be helpful to give them the Raven's Progressive Matrices test (Raven, 2008). This is a non-verbal and nearly culture-free test. It is also a very useful indicator of higher ability in pupils with learning disabilities such as dyslexia.

IQ tests model used

Discrepancy model – an uneven pattern of abilities The simplest strategy is to give pupils an IQ test and then see if their attainments in school match up. We would look for

- discrepancies between a higher IQ and lower school performance or SATs;
- discrepant scores on IQ tests between verbal and performance items or within scales on subtests when performance in class is average;

- uneven patterns of high and low achievements across school subjects with only average ability test scores;
- high achievements only in out-of-school or non-school activities;
Cut-off points become an issue here, should the gap be 8, 10 or 12 points and more? It of course depends on the standard error of the test and significance of differences. As a rule of thumb, 8–10 points difference should be regarded as significant.

The discrepancy technique will not however find all the underachievers, many will be missed and so broader strategies are needed. Some of the reasons for this follow.

Test construction and the issue of validity Tests must be well standardized and applicable to the samples they are going to test. Thus, most major instruments undergo regular restandardization using stratified random sampling procedures. The crucial and concerning factors are their Reliability and Validity. Reliability is usually well established by retesting the sample or a parallel one within a few days and checking that the results are the same to within a few points. It is the issue of Validity, which is most concerning even in the IQ test, used worldwide by researchers such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV, 2008). What does this test really measure? Certainly only a small sample of something that can be captured in an hour with an individual child in an interview setting. The test can only be given and interpreted by a trained administrator, usually an educational psychologist. Thus, schools only have this data when a pupil has been referred because of special problems.

One validity issue arises because the subtests were given labels that have changed little since the test's first edition emerged as the Bellevue Intelligence Test in the 1940s. For example one subtest is called Perceptual Organization but is this a valid construct and is there evidence to support the nomenclature other than at face value – it looks apt? What aspects of perception? What is organized? How does it relate to intelligent behaviour?

Another test is called coding. A set of symbols is given to another set of signs and these have to be transcribed. The test involves near point copying, a slow strategy or paired associate learning of the symbols and then handwriting skills for the transcription. Speed of response in number of items transcribed is recorded. Between inspection and recording it is also possible to encode the symbols verbally – subvocally or internally. We have to ask does IQ then depend on speed of handwriting abilities, on verbal

coding or strategic overview? A handwriting problem will result in lower scores as does a dyslexic verbal processing problem.

It is perhaps digit span, an additional test item, used to check the dyslexic profile that is most concerning. Ostensibly digit lists forward and backward have to be recalled and dyslexics tend to have problems with this. The test is even included in a new WISC Subscale for Working Memory. But what does it really show?

If the pupil scores below average the teacher concludes that the pupil has a poor short-term auditory memory and so gives training on Working Memory and auditory training. However, other research shows that poor digit span does not show a poor auditory memory but a verbal coding problem, that it is in saying or subvocalizing the digits the dyslexic has the problems that starts to wipe the memory trace or hampers the encoding (Vellutino, 1979, 1987) not in memory per se.

In addition, Koppitz (1977) and Montgomery (1997) found that digit span increased in direct proportion to literacy skills. Thus, it is dependent on phonological coding that underlies most literacy problems and at which most dyslexics are now known to be poor. This was not known when the WISC was first designed. In fact the same issue arises in relation to phonological skills themselves today. Are they a function of poor literacy skills or do they in fact cause it? (Bishop, 2002). It looks as though both may be the result of a third, more hidden factor (Montgomery, 2007) and this is outlined in the chapter on dual exceptionality. It is the age-old issue of correlation or causation.

Even the mental arithmetic subtest is not a pure test of number skills it is dependent upon the same phonological coding skills as digit span. Dyslexics are frequently poor at reciting tables although they know the pattern of the correct answers (Miles, 1993). It is the verbalizing that seems to confuse them.

Some problems with IQ-based models

- Group IQ tests are not as reliable as individual IQ tests and also miss those of the highest ability because there is a ceiling effect, for example an IQ of 130 may be the top score available and half the class of bright individuals may score this.
- Most dyslexics do not show discrepant scores on IQ verbal and performance scales unless they have additional difficulties (Al-Hroub, 2007; Montgomery, 2007).

- Some dyslexics may show an uneven pattern of subscale scores on individual IQ tests – the ‘ACID’ profile (deficits on Arithmetic, Coding, Information and Digit Span), but it is more usually seen across groups so is not a reliable indicator (Alm and Kaufman, 2002).
- Selection of only 5–10% of pupils to put on the ‘G and T’ register can discriminate against significant numbers of the more and most able. Tannenbaum (1993) showed that in order to identify most of the highly able, it is necessary to select the top 15–20% by *both* ability *and* attainment and even then some of the most able or gifted will be missed.
- In the Welsh proposals for the highly able (Raffan, 2003), the selection of a top 20% is based upon comparisons with the size of the Warnock (1978) special needs group among other considerations. However, this SEN figure may also need to be updated and extended.
- Borderlines are used for setting and selection, but every test has a Standard Error of measurement of plus or minus at least 3 points, for example at an IQ of 130 we should be including those between 127 and 133. Is that child’s IQ of 123 really borderline 130? If s/he is test anxiety prone we might then add a further 5–10 points.
- Most of those with the highest of IQ do not *achieve* at the highest level or gain eminence (Terman, 1954).
- Research of Torrance (1963) established that an IQ of only about 120 was required to gain the highest achievements. Crocker (1987) found that an IQ score of 125 could be used as a cut-off score that would identify the most able. Even so this did not necessarily predict high achievement, other factors such as interest, creativity, environment and motivation come in to play.
- IQ tests show what pupils have had the opportunity to learn in the form of intellectual skills, they do not really test cognitive abilities such as executive functions, planning and evaluation or wisdom. Boring (1963) an expert on testing said that IQ tests test what IQ tests measure.

Intellectual or cognitive skills? Intellectual skills are about knowing ‘that’ and knowing ‘how’. They include converting printed words into meaning, fractions into decimals, knowing about classes, groups and categories, laws of mechanics and genetics, forming sentences and pictures. They enable us to deal with the world ‘out there’. Mostly, these are taught in schools within subjects and also make up most of the items on IQ tests.

Cognitive skills are internally organized capabilities that we make use of in guiding our attention, learning, thinking and remembering. They are executive control processes, which activate and direct other learning processes. We use them when we think about our learning, plan a course of action and evaluate learning outcomes. These were seldom taught in schools or given value there until recently. They form the basis of wisdom and are seldom tested except in real-life situations.

The reason for using these distinctions, first suggested by Gagne (1973), is to indicate that IQ is not only about capacity but also the extent to which skills and knowledge have been taught or absorbed from the contact with the environment, products of memory. Cognitive skills are different from this and calling IQ and phonological tests 'cognitive' could be a misinterpretation.

Attainment Testing

SATs and subject attainments in selecting the most able

English school children are currently tested for their attainments on entry to school at 4–5 years, then at 7, 11 and 14, before they sit GCSE exams at 16 and A levels or the Baccalaureate at 18. They often also have other tests in between:

- Levels achieved can be compared with results on ability tests.
- If teachers rely only on the results of SATs they would miss out on identifying many gifted and talented children and all the underachievers.
- False positives occur in that some do remarkably well by effort and organization in SATs.
- Those with poor literacy skills do worse than predicted by IQ.
- Subject knowledge and skills wider than SATs need to be taken into account.

Attainment tests – reading and spelling

It is very important for pupils entering secondary school to be given screening tests for reading *and* spelling or for these details to be taken from their recent records. They show if literacy skills are at a level needed to meet the

demands of the curriculum. They can then be compared to the ability test results to check for any discrepancy between ability and literacy skills and between chronological age and these attainments. Attainment scores should be somewhat above those of the ability level if all is going well.

Typical tests used by schools for screening that are cheap, quick and easy to administer are Salford Sentence (Bookbinder, 1979) Reading test; NFER and Young's (1983) group reading tests, and maths tests; the Schonell and Schonell (1970) group Spelling tests A and B, or Daniels and Diack (1958) Spelling test among others. Speed of handwriting also needs to be assessed (Ch 10).

Diagnostic tests

When difficulties are observed then individual diagnostic tests are available that the SENCo usually administers. Some pupils will need referral for further investigation to an educational psychologist who will generally use WISC-IV. WISC is an individual test giving verbal and performance scales and subscales for working memory plus new reading and spelling assessments with Wechsler Oral Reading Dimension.

Other skills tests include NARA, the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability 2nd edition, the Macmillan Reading Tests (1989) and Detailed Assessment of Speed of Handwriting (Barnett *et al.*, 2007).

More able pupils show a profile of higher comprehension scores than reading speed and accuracy on NARA for example and this is an indication of UAch. They are able to make better predictions about story content than average readers from the partial cues they pick up during fractured reading.

One final note of caution on tests; in test conditions some highly able children work very slowly, others see uniquely different answers to items and problems and so their scores may appear artificially low until their performance and rationales are explored. A few children will deliberately exploit the tests and give wrong answers so as to remain with their friends or not appear to be noticeably different. If schools obtain high test scores and then pupils fail to shine in school subjects there is a tendency to perceive this as laziness and failure to pursue school goals. Pupils' reports read 'could do better', 'has good ability but. . .', 'must work harder' and so on. This negative stance adopted by the school can be very frustrating for the pupil may not know why nothing seems to satisfy them – a scene set up to create an alienated able misfit.

Other measures to identify underachievement

Checklists Teachers will have been trained by their coordinators and lead teachers to develop and use checklists and one has already been given to show the characteristics of underachievers. Each department needs to have its own agreed subject checklist based on the school's general one.

Checklists focus teacher attention on factors wider than IQ, SATs and attainment test scores. They offer a more rounded view of the learner's task behaviour as well as success in school subjects.

Traits These are characteristic patterns of behaviour dependent on experience and the individual's personality. Underachievers may show a range of traits that give a clue to higher potential. Some of the positive ones are

- inventive and original when motivated;
- quick to learn new concepts;
- very good at posing and solving problems ingeniously;
- asks awkward and penetrating questions about everything;
- persevering only when motivated;
- streetwise and full of commonsense wisdom;
- perceptive about people and motives.

The negative ones appear in the earlier checklist.

Another set of traits is those related to personality. From birth we are known to exhibit characteristic patterns (Thomas, Chess and Birch, 1970). They found three that play out in classrooms. In behavioural terms as infants we are

- difficult to pacify and rear;
- slow to 'warm up', or;
- easy to rear.

In classrooms these characteristics are maintained. Some pupils who are difficult to get on with or get to do things may meet a teacher with similar traits and difficulties ensue. The teacher needs help in managing such pupils and motivating them to work and learning to be more flexible. The pupil needs help to learn adaptive strategies and conflict management. All these can be built into Continuing Professional Development by curriculum

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leaders through PBL and reflective teaching initiatives. These are discussed in the later chapters.

Typologies Less frequently encountered are typologies. They appear mainly in the literature on personality. Richert (1991) suggests four types of underachievers and others such as Belle Wallace and I have added to the broad categories:

- Coasters the ‘invisible underachievers’.
- Overactive inattentives.
- Class clown.
- Dreamers.
- Anxious conformist.
- Disruptive, behaviour problem.
- Absentee, truant.
- Doubly exceptional – masked gifted.

However, the research in 12 schools that were successful in overcoming UACh for the NACE/London G and T project (Wallace *et al.*, 2008) showed that effective schools intervened before these behaviour types evolved into problems. The schools were still however concerned that some pupils were coasting.

Informal Identification Procedures

Curriculum-based identification or identification through Performance

This form is also termed as Performance-Based Assessment or Authentic Assessment. Teachers will set more challenging curriculum tasks and observe the responses to them.

- This can be formalized so that responses to more challenging and open types of task are recorded.
- Some schools use the TASC criteria for this – Teaching Thinking in a Social Context (Wallace, 2000).
- All pupils, including slower learners with the right sort of support (Montgomery, 1990; Watson, 1996), can become more motivated and

develop their abilities when they are given tasks that require them to think or that involve personal and more creative responses.

- Paired and group problem-solving activities (problem-based learning–PBL) are particularly useful for these sorts of assessment. They frequently reveal some unsuspected results such as reversibility and flexibility in thinking.

An informal writing test

Because many underachievers have writing problems this informal assessment is very valuable and can reveal a number of previously hidden difficulties so that immediate interventions can be put in place.

Allcock's (2001) 20 minute writing test can be set up by the English department and all the pupils have to do after 2 minutes to make a plan is write on any subject of their choice for 20 minutes. The test was originally devised just to find pupils' speed of writing. The average speed was found to be 13.9 words per minute in Year 7 and went up about a word in each following year. This can be compared with the research of Roaf (1998) who found that pupils' writing slower than a speed of 25 words per minute on a 10 minute test were *failing* in all lessons.

The details of the spelling and writing results using the 20 minute test are discussed in the chapter on Double Exceptionality. Significant numbers of pupils across the ability range appeared to have problems with lower order writing skills after they were expected to have become fluent. It meant that they quickly became vulnerable to UACh in a curriculum that made heavy demands upon their writing abilities.

Strategic Approaches to the Identification of Underachievement

Grids

Schools now have registers for the gifted and talented and for pupils with SEN. Compiling a grid integrating this information is thus not a difficult task for year groups and tutor groups. The grid should be extensive, capturing as much information as possible and contributed to by the pupils, for example on out of school achievements and interests.

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A typical grid/spread sheet has the pupils' names across the top and all the subject and test information available plus the outside school achievements and so on down the side.

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	etc.
CA											
VQ											
PQ											
Full Q											
RA											
SA											
HW speed											
SAT Eng											
SAT Ma											
SAT sci											
School subjects											
Hobbies etc.											

In the first set of six or so columns the exact chronological age should be recorded followed by the test scores on verbal quotient, performance quotient, maths Q/score, reading age, spelling age, reading comprehension, and so on.

This can be followed by a general assessment by each of the 12 or more subject tutors. So as not to create a burden for staff the assessment should be a simple impression mark, for example A, B or C, with A representing more able/good and B average and C poor performance. An additional star can identify any especially good performers*.

After the subject columns there should be columns for behaviour (again denoted by A, B or C), this can be followed by SEN using an agreed code, then out of school columns/hobbies and so on.

Just scanning these completed grids can reveal many different and interesting patterns and they can also indicate need for interventions and support, praise and acclaim or mentoring.

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Checklist grids

The checklist for identification of UACh can be converted into a grid if the problem items are listed along the top and the pupil names down the side. Each teacher can have a copy of the grid for each class and simply ticks any item that applies.

The teaching aide can then collate the responses for each pupil from the grids and put a score number in each square. This again will reveal patterns of persistent responses and show how strong they are.

Classroom observation

Good teachers use a wide range of verbal and non-verbal positive supportive behaviours towards behaviour and task behaviour of pupils (Montgomery, 2002; Scott MacDonald, 1971). This was in comparison with poorer teachers who used many negative interventions and desist responses.

When the desists and negatives were more frequent than the positives the lessons deteriorated and the learning declined, a whole class became underachievers. A positive school and classroom ethos can have a constructive impact on behaviour, learning and UACh.

Strategies for monitoring one's own and peers' interactions in classrooms can provide valuable data for identifying UACh. Audiotape recording (avoid video for legal reasons) of first 20 minutes of own lessons enables

- analysis using tallies for positive and negative statements;
- comparison of amount of teacher talk with pupil talk (Flanders, 1970);
- counting the number of open questions;
- counting the number of cognitively challenging questions.

Negotiation to observe a peer teaching a different subject can help develop a wider range of skills and techniques, as well as observing pupils in a different setting.

Shadowing

Pupils identified in the grids as being of concern can be followed for a day through all their lessons to see what is happening to them and their

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responses to it. Observing the daily diet of school to which pupils are subject can prove very revealing and enable plans to be developed for both teacher development and learner individual education plans.

Mentoring – an informal pupil voice

Many schools have adopted mentoring schemes for all pupils but it is difficult in a large school to find enough adult mentors to train and take on the role. There is thus room for schemes involving pupil mentoring, peer tutoring and ‘buddies’; these can prove particularly beneficial for under-achievers.

All ‘looked after’ children need a mentor to identify their needs and help them through school. Similarly pupil counsellor schemes for identifying and dealing with bullying have an important place. Buddies are really helpful for pupils with language difficulties and English as an additional language

Schools councils – a formal pupil voice

Schools that have been most successful in helping underachievers were also found to have very active and live school councils that met regularly. They are usually based on a tutor group or classroom system. It is here that pupil voice can officially be heard and can provide a model for pupil–staff involvement at all levels. Often post boxes for suggestions are used. Despite the worries about abuses of such a system they can yield very useful information and feedback.

Nurture groups – linking identification and intervention

Pupils with low learning resources often express constant boredom. It may result from their low ability or a disadvantage and poor learning history. Both can be addressed by more personal involvement by the teacher in the task and the learning process with that particular pupil. This of course means that a smaller class size is essential to nurture these learners whether in primary or secondary school. Nurture groups can give these pupils a second chance and enable them to integrate well into mainstream classrooms (Bennathan and Boxall, 1996).

Nurture groups have been used both to identify and intervene in UACh. They consist of smaller class groups set up with specialist teachers who are skilled in working with, for example disadvantaged groups, behaviourally challenging pupils or pupils with additional language learning needs. They usually operate for one or two terms when most pupils can then be mainstreamed.

Some schools should consider making the transition year, Year 7, a year beginning with nurture groups since this is a key time in the lives of pupils when many fail to integrate into their new large schools, are already underachieving and become disaffected and alienated by the end of that year, 'nobody knows who I am'. Too often they can gravitate towards the gang for emotional support especially as they sink deeper into failure.

The parent voice

In a family one child may be of average ability and attainment, another may be of high ability doing very well in school and the third may be of even higher ability but functioning in school at a level lower than the average one. Parents very often know that such a child is underfunctioning but the school sees only the poor attainment and can conclude the pupil is of low ability or lazy and may refuse to investigate further.

It can be difficult for parents to secure an assessment through the school as there are often many other children whose special needs seem more severe. Even if an independent psychological assessment is obtained there is no guarantee that it will show the high ability or that if it does that any provision will be made.

Parents are on hand to observe the challenging questions raised and the ingenious ways their children may solve problems and how quickly they 'catch on' when being given an explanation or demonstration. They can note the different profiles of development. Teachers with large classes do not always have the time to observe these nuances. Parents have an important contribution to make to assessment of high ability especially when they can compare the different levels and profiles of several of their children. Parents of lone children can be helped by briefing meetings, examples and interviews.

Ian Warwick's chapter shows how the involvement of parents in the teaching and learning of pupils in and out of school can be a powerful motivational force for both and raises learners' achievement.

Links also need to be made with parents and the National Association for Gifted Children, UK, who also offer a network of support and understanding as well as special workshops and events for both pupils and parents.

Multidimensional assessment

The DCFS (2007) published a report into the nature of the problems of children who were losing momentum in English and mathematics in Key Stage 2 (www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications). The researchers used a range of assessment techniques including SATs, the G and T register, teacher assessments, interviews and classroom observation. The number of schools involved was limited but deemed to be representative. What the report shows is that more able underachievers who were making less than expected progress shared many of the following characteristics in response to English. They were

- generally well behaved;
- highly articulate and perceptive in small group discussions;
- could be quiet in whole class situations;
- confident, motivated and enthusiastic;
- overwhelmingly positive about reading;
- picked up on ideas quickly, constantly trying to improve and were eager to please;
- displayed a positive approach to learning;
- were however 'easy to miss';
- unwilling to take risks and did not like to make mistakes;
- did not ask for help and found difficulty in identifying their own success;
- usually persevered with the task set, especially where the task was routine and of limited challenge;
- when stuck they relied on a friend or were happy to leave a task incomplete.

In addition

- they often worked exclusively in mixed ability groups and rarely worked with children of similar ability;

- they often perceived themselves as additional support to less able children, especially those not regularly receiving class teacher or teacher assistant support;
- the majority of pupils said they would have liked more opportunities to work in ability groups or independently (DCFS, 2007, p. 6).

In mathematics, the results were similar but girls more often were the invisible children, quiet and undemanding, tentative and cautious, they had few self-help strategies.

There was also a smaller group of children who were overconfident and rushed their work often making mistakes. They were competitive and would try to finish first, they were demanding and misbehaved. They often wasted time if they finished early (DCFS, 2007, p. 31).

The report goes on to offer a number of practical suggestions to help overcome some of the difficulties observed. As can be inferred from these characteristics they arise in some measure from the type of curriculum and pedagogy on offer. Some of the questions to the children may also be considered to be leading questions, often a problem in interviews.

Conclusions

UAch is a complex phenomenon made up of a range of internal and external factors. These can interact to form different patterns of individual UAch or achievement. They are also mediated by the dynamic interaction of social communications in and out of school and the classroom management procedures that teachers use. These latter create a classroom climate and school ethos that promote achievement or hamper it.

There is a wide range of ability and attainment tests that can be used to assess potential and attainment. However, these have their limitations and it is found that schools that are successful in identifying UAch and then intervening use a wider range of techniques than tests. A range of these techniques are discussed and recommended especially the method of ITAP. The experienced practitioners who write in this volume go on to show how this method in particular is the method of choice, it identifies the hard to reach and teach, the hidden gifted and talented. It can then be backed up with other evidence.

In order to open up identification all the principles of open access and self-referral need to be applied. This does not prevent tutors and mentors suggesting to pupils they should try a programme nor does it prevent them from recommending them, for example masterclasses and special enrichment but it also means that every pupil needs a mentor, someone who will promote their best interests. Freeman's (2001) 'sports approach' is also relevant.

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