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James Alexander

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The Demise of Education or the Eclipse of Compassion? Exploring the Causes of Academic Underachievement

James Alexander[1]

Abstract

Many stakeholders are concerned with the apparent failure of schools to facilitate children achieving at high levels. One explanation of the failure of schools takes a more narrowly focused educational view. In this perspective, the problem is one of inadequate standards and poor teachers. In a second, broadly societal view, the problem of student achievement seems to be a complex societal problem, not easily amendable to strictly educational solutions. The two positions are compared and contrasted. Examples of societal factors affecting student achievement are explored. It is suggested that the broadly societal view provides a better explanation of why students fail to succeed.

Keywords

achievement, education, social sciences, curriculum, educational administration, leadership, policy, schools, students

The purpose of this article is to examine two possible causes of why schools and students underperform. Specifically, I wish to deal with the perceived lack of student achievement in K-12 schools in the United States. It is my aim to examine the attribution of causation for underachievement as proposed in the conventional wisdom. Furthermore, I will offer a different suggestion for the cause of the "problem." What this article *does not do* is to offer a real *solution* to the problem. As the reader will see, if my suggestion has merit, the solution is neither simple nor clear. It will require effort and ingenuity (innovation) from many quarters.

Many stakeholders in the United States have addressed the problem of student achievement. Comparing student achievement to expectations derived from state and national benchmarks has arrived at the conclusion that students are not achieving at a satisfactory level of performance. Furthermore, many point to international comparisons as evidence of underachievement of U.S. students. Finally, it appears that many students lack the skills necessary to succeed in college or the workplace. The conclusion of many is that U.S. students are far behind where they should be when it comes to academic achievement.

It is no secret that some have questioned whether the "problem" is as severe as some commentators and lawmakers claim. Many claim, for example, that U.S. scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are consistent rather than declining. Still, other measures lead stakeholders to conclude that American students are lagging behind. (See Bracey, 2008, for an evaluation of what various assessments prove and fail to prove.)

In this article, I wish to examine two possible interpretations of the cause of the problem. The first cause sees the problem as more narrowly educational. The solutions to the problem, in this view, involve adjusting, what we might call, educational factors. This is the view that represents the dominant educational and political orthodoxy of the day.

The second cause I will describe as more broadly societal. This viewpoint seems to be more associated with the Great Society days of U.S. policy. However, there are new factors that require that Americans take a closer look at this point of view. This article suggests that the broadly societal view of the problem of inadequate achievement is better at describing the problem than the narrowly educational view.

The Narrowly Educational View

In the educational view, the issue of the achievement gap, both in international as well as national terms, is seen as a failure of schools. This failure involves two main components. The first is a lack of rigorous standards for schools. The second component of school failure is inadequate, inept, and, perhaps, incompetent teachers. The solutions here mostly center around creating and establishing higher standards and

[1]Kentucky Wesleyan College, Owensboro, USA

Corresponding Author:
James Alexander, Kentucky Wesleyan College, 3000 Frederica St., Owensboro, KY 42301, USA.
Email: jamesal@kwc.edu

removing poor teachers while ensuring the quality of new teachers.

There are those who, while recognizing an achievement gap, take a more nuanced position. In *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner (2008) describes some of the challenges faced by schools. The challenges, while incorporating concerns about academic achievement, are more far-reaching than that. Perhaps the main difficulty is a lack of creativity—innovation. For Wagner, what our educational system fundamentally lacks is not more standardized tests. The problem is one of shallowness of the curriculum and the failure to emphasize critical thinking.

In his video, *The Finland Phenomenon*, Wagner investigates the educational system of Finland—considered by many accounts to be the best in the world. Many of the directions that U.S. reformers are taking are a clear departure from the standard of excellence typified by the Finnish system. In Finland, there seems to be little in the way of the "testing frenzy" that characterizes U.S. schools. Also, the Finnish system is characterized by demonstrating trust in the wisdom of teachers rather than taking a punitive approach to improvement of instruction. In short, Wagner admits there is a problem with education in America but seems to believe that stakeholders are perhaps "missing the boat" when it comes to solutions.

Standards

For many, the first line of attack when it comes to failing schools is to tighten standards and make standards more rigorous. For the past 30 years at least, there has been a move to institute standards that define exactly (or nearly so) what students should be able to do and what they should know at any given instructional level. This is usually combined with some criterion-referenced assessment scheme that aims to measure student attainment of the prescribed standards.

There have been many "versions" of generally agreed upon benchmarks. Originally, these benchmarks were delineated by the various states. Still, if one were to examine standards from state to state, one would find a general agreement in what was expected of students and teachers. Of course, this doesn't mean that there is no variation, both historically and presently. But the general thrust of standards tends to reflect common concerns.

I have noted, talking with teachers and administrators, that often realignment and revision of standards appear to many as merely "shuffling" things around a bit. Standards are framed and reframed, but the basic core remains the same. Normally, mastery of standards is assessed in discrete ways using items on criterion-referenced tests. The combination of standards and testing leaves the system open to criticism by some.

The main critique tends to be that all of this leads to "teaching to the test." Beginning in the mid-70s, my work as a public school teacher was in the area of primary grades remedial reading. The state in which I was teaching put into place a mastery testing system in the mid-80s. At that point, descriptors of what should be taught and when it should be taught were provided to schools. These standards (or perhaps at that point, proto-standards) were assessed by discrete items on a statewide test. The expectation was that my Chapter I (Title I) reading students would improve in the tested areas.

Following the general guidelines, I began to teach to the discrete testing areas. The result? My students' vastly improved test scores. In fact, many "tested out" of remedial reading classes. The problem was that the classroom teachers still felt that many of these students did not read well. It seems, the idea of teaching to the test becomes a critique of the system because it is felt that such teaching is far too narrow.

The latest foray into the world of standards in the United States is the creation and implementation of the Common Core State Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). The promoters and adopters of these standards (most of the states) see these standards as more rigorous and broader than former attempts. In the 2012 Brown Center Report, "How Well Are American Students Learning?" (Loveless, 2012), the success or potential success of standards (such as the Common Core State Standards) in addressing student achievement is explored. In looking at standards historically, the Report finds little in the way of success. Furthermore, the Report questions whether new or revamped standards, namely, the Common Core, are an improvement over earlier standards. The creation of standards is an ever-growing, never-ceasing endeavor. However, the Report suggests that a different approach is required. In short, standards are not succeeding. Of course, it might be argued that the failure of revamped and newly minted standards to improve achievement leads to many adjustments and improvements in pedagogical approaches—as standards are continually reworked and fine-tuned. As a curriculum guide, the Common Core State Standards may prove quite useful. The reality, however, is that standards are often mainly used as a rationale for test items; more feared than used judiciously. Certainly, new standards lead to higher levels of accountability for teachers as well as students.

Overall, are the new standards likely to improve the situation? The standards movement has existed for many years. It seems as if, when faced with less success than expected, the idea is that everything will work out if we can just find the "right" standards (or perhaps the right way to word them). Although many schools (perhaps most) say that they are implementing the Common Core State Standards, and although virtually all teachers and administrators state that they understand the standards, few teachers believe that the Standards will improve student learning (MetLife, 2013).

Teachers

The other major area of education reform deals with teachers—namely getting rid of poor teachers and improving the quality

of the rest. On the face of it, it is difficult to see how anyone could realistically differ with that goal. What we need, however, is to look a bit more closely.

Bracey (2008) suggests that those who raise the cry of reform most loudly are "playing fast and loose with the truth." The notion of a failing education system that can be fixed by working to get rid of teachers is deeply flawed. Oftentimes, the problems of "failing schools" is laid at the feet of teachers. Yet many of these schools are high-need, high-poverty schools. The idea of getting rid of the teachers that are charged with causing the failure and replacing them with more competent, motivated teachers is unlikely to succeed. Few teachers, especially new ones, will want to take on a class of kids who are desperately poor, working far below grade level, and seem to lack motivation (of course, some will).

Overall, the goal of reformers of improving the teacher pool is having an impact. In a 2007 report, Gitomer (2007) details the profile of recent graduates of education colleges:

1. Candidates have higher GPA's than in the past.
2. *Praxis* pass rates have decreased, largely due to higher standards put in place over the last several years.
3. The academic profiles of candidates has markedly improved.
4. The improvement in subject-specific areas is especially noted in those pursuing secondary certification.

Even though this data was reported in 2007 (6 years ago), the perception remains that teachers are largely incompetent and lack academic qualifications for the job. This is true, even though admission to college departments of education often requires higher academic and test performance than other degree programs.

Although there is a general tendency to blame lack of achievement on classroom teachers, regardless of the quality of the teaching force for the last several years, that may be a faulty assumption. The notion is that many teachers are incompetent and/or lazy. While this may sound like a worthwhile observation in the aggregate, it breaks down in the particular. I have worked with preservice teachers for many years in three states. In the classroom of practicing teachers, where my students are placed for field experiences, I observe little in the way of incompetent, ineffective teachers. Furthermore, most building principals in U.S. schools rate their teachers as very good or excellent (MetLife, 2013). Certainly, there is little, if any, incentive for principals to retain and praise ineffective teachers. In fact, principals in this age of high accountability would likely have a vested interest in getting rid of poor teachers.

The common notion adopted by many proponents of educational "reform" is that the most reliable and accurate appraisal of student learning and teacher performance can be found in standardized tests. In a report of a recent study funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Sawchuk (2013) casts doubt on the common orthodoxy. The study found that the best evaluations of teacher effectiveness involved a combination of teacher observations, student perceptions of teacher effectiveness, and standardized test scores. The study finds that relying most heavily on standardized test data is counterproductive. Also, such data does not offer much predictive value when it comes to student performance on more cognitively demanding tasks.

In a recent survey of teachers and principals, MetLife (2013) documented the following trends:

1. Only 39% of teachers reported being very satisfied with their jobs (the lowest level in 25 years).
2. Fifty-one percent of teachers report being under significant stress at their jobs.
3. Three out of four principals regard their jobs as too complex.
4. About a third of K-12 principals believe they will likely enter a different profession in the next 5 years.

There may indeed be a problem regarding educators in America. It appears, however, that the problem might be what conditions do *to* educators rather than problems caused *by* educators.

Amidst demands for greater accountability, many methods of ensuring teacher quality are suggested. One that is currently gaining popularity in some quarters is value-added assessment. In this system, statistical methods are applied to determine which teachers are succeeding and which are failing in adding "value" to a child's achievement. The system has been touted as fair and useful for comparing achievement at the building and district levels, across states, and for evaluating the relative success of teacher education units at colleges and universities The idea is that such assessments measure how much *value* is added to a child's educational profile, regardless of whether a child is "on grade level" or not (Alexander, 2008).

There are some problems with the scheme. The major problem is that such systems cannot adequately assign value to the various factors that influence student achievement. In value-added paradigms, the major influence on student achievement is what the teacher does. The approach assumes that teachers must be *threatened* and *cajoled* into putting forth the effort required to ensure student achievement. It remains to be seen if poor teacher performance is widespread. It also remains to be seen if the teacher's classroom performance really is the main determiner of students' academic achievement, or just one of many factors; and perhaps not the most important one.

Bausell (2013) expresses caution regarding value-added evaluation. Although, value-added teacher evaluation is both promoted and criticized, rarely is this approach examined from a scientific perspective pursued without an agenda. The

conventional wisdom is that "causal conclusions can be teased out of huge data sets by economists or statisticians using sophisticated statistical models that control for extraneous factors." Using a model of statistical design and analysis normally associated with medical research, Bausell calls that wisdom into question.

In such a model, subjects are "(a) premeasured on an outcome, (b) randomly assigned to receive different treatments, and (c) measured again to ascertain if changes in the outcome differed based upon the treatments received." This research paradigm is virtually impossible when it comes to research on the effectiveness of value-added assessment in improving student achievement.

The gold standard in medical research is random assignment. For reasons known and unknown, schools cannot truly randomly assign students to educational conditions. As Bausell writes (2013), " . . . any student assigned to any teacher can receive auxiliary tutoring, be helped at home, team-taught, or subjected to any number of naturally occurring positive or disruptive learning experiences." In short, value-added systems simply cannot adequately control for such factors. Many of these variables are not only *unknown* but even *unknowable*.

As a transition into our discussion of the societal approaches to understanding the "problem," it should be noted that other factors that influence student achievement and relate to the ways that teachers are evaluated have been noted. Elsewhere, many factors influence student achievement. It is reported that 97% of students receiving A's and B's on their report cards had parents who consistently encouraged them to do well in school, while 49% of students receiving C's received little such encouragement. While about 50% of our proclivities are genetic in nature, the remaining 50% seems to make a real difference. It is this "half" of our personal cognitive profiles that are highly amendable to parental influence (Alexander, 2011).

And parental encouragement isn't the only consideration. Some have estimated that about 9% of variation in student achievement is due to teacher characteristics. About 60% of variation is explained by family characteristics, student characteristics, and such variables. All direct school input combined (teacher quality, classroom variables, etc.) seems to account for about 21% of student outcomes (Goldhaber, 2002). To sum up, the narrowly educational view of the problem of student underachievement is, at best, suspect.

The Broadly Societal View

The alternative view of the "problem" looks to society in general as the impetus for the creation of both good and ill in the education of young people. This view is quite broad. It incorporates such societal/environmental variables as violence, media, youth culture, and politics. Of course, educational factors are not excluded, since they fit into the societal mix as well. However, those factors are only part of the

equation, and perhaps not the major component in student's failure to achieve. In addition, as we have seen, the usual approach to the educational "side of the ledger" is likely misconceived. Perhaps a broadly societal perspective offers a clearer view.

There are far too many factors in the societal mix to sort them out here. For the purpose of this discussion, the focus will be on three major influences that might affect children and schools. The first, family considerations, has an obvious effect on children both in and out of school. The second, poverty, has long been identified as a predictor of academic difficulty. It is widely accepted that socioeconomic status (SES) has a greater effect on student achievement than race, gender, or age of students. The third consideration, technology, is (in some ways) a rather new but major contender in affecting children at school and at home as it may even affect thinking processes. As society and schools in particular wholeheartedly embrace technology, it may be to our benefit or to detriment, as is indicated below.

Families

Olsen and Fuller (2011) point out many ways that families have changed over the years. Many of these trends are patently obvious. There is a shift from two-parent families to one-parent families. There are more grandparents raising children. Modern families face problems of child abuse and domestic violence. There is a precipitous increase in blended families. Families are highly mobile and, depending on factors such as parental work skills and education level, there is the very real specter of creating and furthering generational poverty. It might be that parents are having less input into the lives of their children. Finally, childrearing practices have become more permissive and, in some cases, negligent.

Are all of these changes completely negative? While we might be tempted to say that they likely are not, it is more accurate to say that there is no definitive answer to the question. For many, the general trend toward a more negative outcome for families is a foregone conclusion. Yet, strong, healthy families come in many shapes and forms. It does seem certain, however, that many of the shifting trends bear closer scrutiny.

In Michael Winerip's December 9, 2007 *New York Times* article, "In the Gaps at School, Weighing Family Life," the results of a study by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) are discussed. If ETS has expertise at all, it must certainly be in the field of assessment. ETS researchers examined four variables: absenteeism, the percent of children living in single-parent families, the amount of television watching, and how much preschoolers are read to daily by parents. Using these factors, the researchers found they could predict states' results on reading tests in eighth grade with considerable accuracy. They determined that these four factors accounted for two thirds of the variance of results between states.

The report went on to say that by the time many kids start school, they are already behind. A child from a single-parent home is 2.5 times more likely to repeat a grade. By age 4, a child from a professional family hears about 35 million more words than his more disadvantaged counterpart.

All of this is significant and little of it is within the school's, much less the teacher's, control. Add to this the factors of transience and limited English proficiency and it becomes apparent that approaches such as value-added assessment are far too crude to address something as complex as student achievement and the "problem" with schools. Schools deal with a very multivariate clientele. As we have seen, approaches such as value-added assessment just cannot address the variables (which are multiplying) that teachers face every day. Embracing such heavy-handed approaches to student achievement is overly simplistic. It is a bit like using a sledgehammer as a fly swatter. Many of the solutions proposed to deal with the problems associated with schools are just not sensitive enough to the variables of the real world, which inevitably involve family life and structure.

Poverty

Ruby Payne (2005) enumerates some of the characteristics of generational poverty in the United States. These characteristics include

1. Background noise—The T.V. is almost always on.
2. Little room for academics—Discussions tend to avoid academic topics.
3. Expectations for men—Men are expected to be "real men" not "eggheads."
4. Negative orientation—The orientation in stories and outlook is generally negative.
5. Polarized thinking—Thinking tends to be absolute. Statements such as "I can't do it" are common.
6. Lack of future orientation—There is little real planning for the improvement of conditions in the future.
7. Lack of organization—Homes are often unkempt and disorganized.
8. Distrust of educational institutions—There is a distrust of schools, and children often have a negative view of school.

Certainly, all, some, or none of these characteristics may be obvious in the history of any given child. Some of these characteristics are obviously influential when it comes to children and schooling. Some characteristics may have indirect effects. Some may not impact learning in any measurable way (at least in many cases). What is quite apparent is that poverty impacts kids. In addition, the number of children living in poverty is on the rise. Poverty, as part of the constellation of factors comprising the concept of socioeconomic status, has long been noted to impact student learning (Snowman & McCown, 2013). It is quite safe to say that the impact of poverty is well established and there is little doubt that schools with large populations of underprivileged children tend to perform poorly on most measures of achievement relative to schools with wealthier populations.

There is a mistaken idea that the problems of the poor could be solved if only they worked, or at least worked harder. I sometimes have my classes engage in an activity to investigate that notion. I present my students with a scenario in which a single mother with two children works 30 hours a week for minimum wage. Then we look at expenses such as food, transportation, clothing, and medical care. When viewed in this light, the causes of discouragement are quite apparent.

As stated above, the impact of poverty on children in schools is well known. Yet, the political climate as it stands in the United States hardly favors new expenditures to help alleviate poverty. Certainly, a comprehensive societal approach to dealing with the concerns related to education *must* address poverty.

Technology

Any discussion of the impact of technology on society in general and children in particular needs to begin with the reality that it is not going away. Cris Rowan (2013) raises the question of whether technology is interfering with the development of children. Technology impacts children socially, cognitively, and physically. Children interact with others differently when technology pervades their lives. In fact, they may interact less. They think in different ways in and out of a heavily technology "saturated" environment. Certainly, hours of technology use impacts physical development. When it comes to children and learning, technology is powerful. And when it comes to culture and society, technology is ubiquitous. Still, adopting a Luddite position about the issue simply won't do. At least not anymore. Technology impacts society, and therefore children. This is apparent to the most casual observers. The question of rather the adoption of technology should proceed uncritically is a question of a different order. It bears asking.

No matter what one's political inclination might be, it is beneficial to read Al Gore's insightful book, *The Future* (Gore, 2013), dealing with current and future societal trends. In particular, Gore reviews the place of technology in the lives of world citizens. Gore points out that the upcoming revision (as of this writing) of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* will include a note about "Internet Use Disorder" as being worthy of further study. It is clear that Gore sees the Internet as influencing society and persons. The amount of time spent online may well be changing our consciousness. Humanity evolved literacy over the millennia. Yet, it is possible, as Gore indicates, that our basic neurological structure might be shifting, due largely to technology. The print revolution that accompanied the growth of literacy seems to be rapidly overshadowed by the digital revolution.

The influence of technology is ubiquitous. Gore tells of how 40% of smartphone owners connect to the Internet upon awakening. By 2015, there will be as many mobile Internet devices as there are people on the planet. Much of what Gore writes about deals with the idea that "we make our tools, and then our tools make us." Still, he states that technology does not change human nature. I would argue that technology does interact with our humanness to create new facets of culture and societal influence.

Turkle (2011) writes of how technology has the potential to isolate individuals and undermine community. It seems counterintuitive. It seems as if digital connectivity would only serve to broaden our relationships and deepen our sense of community. Some years ago, I attended a Peter, Paul, and Mary concert where they commented on how we are never so alone as when we are "connected." As Turkle indicates, *real* relationships often suffer in the face of increasing embrace of technology. It is unclear how the supplanting of "face to face" relationships with digital connections might affect children.

There is some evidence that the Internet is making us more "shallow." Technology can tend toward superficiality. Some commentators (see Carr, 2010, for example) urge caution in the embrace of technology. These critics view technology as a potential impetus in "dumbing us down." While society in general and schools in particular seem eager to embrace technology, the verdict is not yet fully in on the impact on society, culture, or schools. As Moore's Law suggests, the growth of technology proceeds in an ever-accelerating pace. Could it be that the rapid pace with which society embraces technology is outpacing the accumulation of data relative to the impact of that embrace?

Although there are many implications of the rise in technology in our society, and these all affect the ways that children and adults relate to the world, to school, to work, and to each other, some aspects of technology do seem to have a rather direct impact on children and schooling. For years, some voices in the field of learning and cognitive psychology have urged caution in how children utilize technology. Carr (2010) sounds a cautionary note concerned with the effect of technology on attention spans and thinking processes in general. Furthermore, some researchers state that the effectiveness of teaching with a large component of technology has not been demonstrated to outperform more conventional approaches (see Alexander, 2012).

What is clear is that, whether in school or out of school, technology is here to stay. It is ubiquitous. In a positive appraisal of technology in society and biology, Kurzweil (2005) describes how the growth of technology, both in terms of computing power as well as prevalence, is exponential. Although some may have concerns, and although some legitimate cautionary notes might be voiced, the "genie cannot be put back in the bottle." Nor should we wish to generally reverse the trends that have led to advancements in technology applications. This does not mean, however, that society's embrace of technology should be unexamined or unequivocal.

Final Thoughts

Although it is not my purpose here to offer specific solutions to curricular and pedagogical concerns, there are many ideas which have promise, and which should be implemented. Reorganization of schools to implement ideas such as competency-based education (Kentucky Department of Education, 2013) might certainly help compensate for environmental and societal factors which hinder student learning. However, even with this being the case, the main problem is not specifically "educational" nor can it be adequately addressed by changes in the way that schooling is delivered. The problem lies much deeper, and superficial fixes are unlikely to succeed.

This, then, is my diagnosis of the "problem." As stated at the outset, it is not my intention to offer a solution here. I feel a bit like a physician that has only partial training. It seems that I can diagnose, but I cannot say how to cure the disease.

Since poverty, technological impact, the nature of families, and other such contemporary concerns are very human, societal factors, the answer seems to call for very human solutions. Perhaps the demise of education, if such a demise exists, is not so much due to pedagogical and curricular factors. Perhaps the demise of education is, in reality, an eclipse of compassion.

This article has contrasted two views dealing with the problem of student underachievement: the narrowly educational view and the broadly societal view. It is suggested that the broadly societal view more aptly frames the problem. This view may well suggest solutions as well. Societies *can* change directions. If the civil rights movement of the 1960s proves anything, it proves this. Throughout history, societal concerns have lead to paradigm shifts. Perhaps it is time for a civil discussion once again. It is reasonable to assume that society and societal changes impact schools and children. The task of social science analysis is to "tease out" the ways that the educational endeavor is diminished. Then, seeing more clearly, society can better determine which societal shifts or changes should be embraced, when caution is warranted, and when change should be resisted. Caring for children and supporting teachers is a far better way forward than accusing and punishing.

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Author Biography

James Alexander is Professor is Elementary Education at Kentucky Wesleyan College. His research interest include the philosophical foundations of education and the interface of religion, education, and public life. He may be contacted at: jamesal@kwc.edu.