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**A Foucaultian Discourse Analysis of Educational 'Underachievement':
Psychology's Run Away Concept**

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Abstract

Underachievement is a dominant feature in educational discourse; it is often framed as a 'crisis' affecting different social groups, or even whole countries. A particularly common depiction of underachievement is that of a 'gap' affecting ethnic minority and working class groups. Nearly 60 years of research, reform and policy attempts to address this 'gap' have made little progress in lifting achievement levels. This paper uses a Foucaultian discourse analysis method to encourage a reformulation of underachievement discourse, particularly as it relates to minority ethnic students. A genealogy of the conditions of possibility which gave rise to underachievement reveals this concept and its related assumptions and processes (such as testing) to be part of a broader system of power relations which structure education in favour of dominant cultural and economic needs. The discipline of psychology has been instrumental in providing a supposed scientific basis to the dominant educational values of scientific management, efficiency and neoliberalism. This thesis posits that underachievement is a socially located concept which is able to exist and shape social realities due to its convenience to dominant educational and cultural practices. In revealing the social nature of psychological knowledge on underachievement, psychology's claims of the possibility of objective social knowledge under post-positivistic, empirical methods are also brought into question.

Keywords: Underachievement, Foucault, Discourse Analysis, Genealogy, Psychology, Education

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Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iiii
Introduction	1
Objectives and Outline	5
Theoretical Background	8
Discourse: A Broader View	10
Knowledge	11
The Sovereign Era	14
The Reformist Era	15
The Disciplinary Era	16
Detheorizing Power	18
Understanding the Link Between Knowledge and Power	20
Technologies of Power in Disciplinary	23
Punishment in the Disciplinary Era	25
Normalization	27
The Subject	28
Psychological Power-Knowledge	30
Methodology: Foucaultian Discourse Analysis	32
The Resurrection of Subjugated Knowledge	33
Reversal	33
Discontinuity	34

Specificity	35
Exteriority	36
Ethics	37
Analysis	40
Defining Underachievement	40
Underachievement and Potential	42
Psychological and Sociological Definitions	43
Unpacking these Definitions	45
Predicting Underachievement	48
Conditions of Possibility	53
The Conditions of Possibility in the US	53
Education and the Labour Market	56
The Testing Movement	56
Psychological Theories of Learning and Testing	58
The Changing Relationship of Education and Psychology	59
The Rise of Individual Psychology	61
Summing it all up	64
Modern Psychometric Testing	65
The Problems with Current Assessment Practices	66
Setting Performance Standards	72
Modern Conditions of Possibility	77
School Effectiveness Movements	79
Neoliberalism: The New Global Orthodoxy	81
Underachievement Discourse	89
A 'Lack of Aspiration'	89
The Gifted Underachievement Crisis	99
Underachievement as Pathology	104
Underachievement as Rational Choice	107

Underachievement as Underattainment	109
Underachievement as a Failure of Potential	110
The Boys' Underachievement Crisis	115
The Minority Underachievement Crisis	122
Assimilation to the Norm	125
Deficit and the Treatment of Difference	135
The 'Ideal Pupil'	142
Disability and Giftedness	142
The Imperial Empirical Reality	147
The 'Gap-gazing' Fetish	156
Cultural Gaps	160
'Closing the Gaps'	163
Returning to Where it all Started	167
Discussion	172
Tying it all Together	174
References	181