



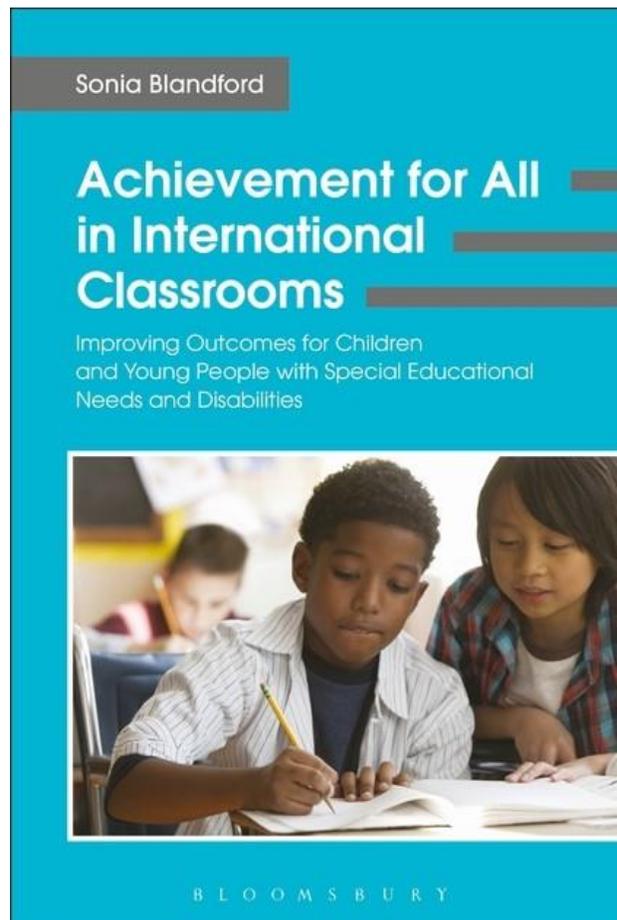
Blandford, S. (2017). *Achievement for All in international classrooms: Improving outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities*. London: Bloomsbury.

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Author Sonia Blandford aims to present the theory, implementation, and impact of the Achievement for All framework in her book, *Achievement for All in International Classrooms: Improving Outcomes for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*. The book promises to provide a research-supported framework for improving the education of young people, so that regardless of their background, challenge or need, they have the opportunity to succeed in both academic and life settings. For an audience of students, practitioners, and policy makers who have at least an elementary understanding of child development and educational agendas, the book describes the framework, based on the 3A's principles (aspiration, access, and achievement), and its implementation and observation in seven countries and three continents, in order to demonstrate the applicability of the framework



internationally. While the book attempts to pitch a systematic game plan for improving the education of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) as well as students deemed vulnerable to underachievement, insufficient evidence is provided to support conclusions of successful implementation resulting in improved achievement internationally. The author struggles with appropriately defining key terminology, oversimplifying topics, and providing legitimate support for the presented arguments. Though the stated goals of the framework are positively intended, implications of the applied policies are not justified or examined adequately within a globalized or localized context.

Sonia Blandford, sole author of the book, is Professor and Chair in Education and Social Enterprise at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education, holding master's degrees in both music and education, as well as a doctorate in education. Blandford has published over 200 articles and seven books on educational leadership, special educational needs, teaching and learning, professional development and music education (London). Blandford is a prominent and well-respected figure in the world of educational development; however, her motives for writing this specific book must be called into question. As CEO and founder of the Achievement for All charity, Blandford's motives for writing a book with the purpose of positively showcasing the program is undoubtedly a wise marketing strategy. This situation creates a conflict of interest, and readers should be critical of the balance between evidence supported facts and persuasive assertions made throughout this book.

The Achievement for All framework presented in the book centers around the mindset that all young people are capable of high achievement, if provided with a supportive, well organized and

systematic academic environment: the Achievement for All programme is based on in-depth interaction, dialogue, and co-construction between the staff and leadership of the participant school [...] and an expert network of Achievement for All coaches" (p. 7).

As the title implies, SEND students are the primary focus of the Achievement for All framework. Blandford acknowledges that miscommunication across countries exists regarding the definition and terminology referring to SEND students, contributing to disorganized and inconsistent approaches to supporting those students. Ironically, Blandford fails to identify SEND students as an independent group from students labeled as vulnerable to underachievement in this book, a failure that other educational researchers have critiqued. For example, discussing intersectionality between the lives of marginalized groups, Artiles (2017, October) noted that an equity remedy for one oppressed group can create inequities for other marginalized groups, and treating groups of students with different needs using the same method and expectations will not benefit all. Following this thread of argument, the act of distinguishing special needs, disabilities, socioeconomically disadvantaged, along with other groups of students joined by the same descriptors in this book is essential to ensure that every student's education is approached equitably and appropriately contextualized.

While Blandford fails to characterize SEND students, GOV.UK (2017) defines SEND students as those whose special educational needs and disabilities can affect a child or young person's ability to learn. These needs may include: behavior or socialization, ability to read, write, comprehend and concentrate, as well as physical abilities. Within the Achievement for All program, these students are

inappropriately categorized with students who are identified as vulnerable to underachievement, generally students who perform at the bottom 10-20% of their peers. Blandford goes so far as to identify the target group of the program as the “weakest 20 percent of students” (p. 115).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, teachers who hold low expectations for students based on factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity and other stereotyped labels are rarely aware that their low expectations have been established (Cotton, 1989). Thus, efforts must be made to raise teachers’ awareness of harmful stereotyping in order to avoid unconscious biases, and the resulting harmful behaviors reflecting low expectations in the classroom that influence student performances and outcomes. While Blandford attempts throughout the book to raise awareness of the ill effects of defining students based on assumptions, she reproduces this fact by creating the umbrella term SEND to encompass the lowest achieving 20% of students. This mentality inflates an already existing stigma associated with students who struggle in school, influencing how decisions are made regarding their education.

Blandford’s concentration on socioeconomic status, home life, and parental involvement as the all-encompassing factors responsible for creating the academic achievement gap is a dangerous perspective, as SEND students and students vulnerable to underachievement exist uniquely in the classroom and require separate approaches to education. As Artiles (2017) has shown, adults play an important role in a student’s educational and life trajectory, but each student has individualized needs in particular academic settings. Similarly, Jimenez and Trela (2013) discussed the importance of implementing personally relevant strategies and requiring modifications be made for students based on their broader school and community experiences and complex

ecological network. Despite this, the Achievement for All program insists on representing all underachieving students as comparable, and applies practices that are not considerate of individual needs and backgrounds.

Achievement for All’s programmatic structure around the 3A’s of aspiration, access, and achievement sounds promising. Aspiration is defined as the shared mindset that goal setting will enable learners to fully and positively engage in the learning process, given the support of practitioners, parents and careers. Access is viewed in two ways: the process of students overcoming low expectations, physiological, social, environmental, and educational barriers in order to take advantage of all the opportunities schools have to offer, as well as the supply of compulsory education, and the perceived value education has in the lives of students. Finally, achievement is not limited only to academic success measured by data and examinations, but also encompasses the sense of wellbeing, resilience, self-efficacy and self-respect. Together, efficient and effective interactions between these three themes facilitate an environment where all students, no matter their personal circumstance, should be able to take advantage of their education and enhance their life opportunities.

While these three themes play an important role in the development of positive academic environments, Achievement for All’s definitions of each factor limits and misguides efforts to address their roles in developing a systematic structure. First, Blandford’s problematic interpretation of aspiration promotes a ‘can do’ attitude and encourages high expectations of learners (p. 17). Blandford states that an aspirational mentality will be met by students’ ready enthusiasm to meet challenges and thus will receive an increased access to learning. Assuming that low achieving students have low aspirations suggests that, if only students desired to

succeed academically and improve their future, then they would. In reality, however, numerous factors influence a student's ability to access school, regardless of his or her motivation to succeed.

At-risk students are placed under the umbrella term of children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. While a correlation could likely be made between these two conditions, the problem lies in the assertion that families of low socioeconomic status inherently lack aspirational motivation. Presented in the case study of Meads Primary School, parental engagement from socioeconomically disadvantaged families rose from zero to one 100% following a structured conversation with the students' teacher. The case study presented was incredibly vague, neglecting to define parental engagement, structured conversations and markers of progress. Despite this, the conclusion was made that a structured conversation between teachers and parents of low-income families would result in an undefined progress for students. Evidence to support parental involvement and encouragement as the key factors required for increasing student aspirations and access to opportunities remains unfounded.

One method Blandford suggests for increasing access to students is to make the same curriculum available to all students, regardless of exclusionary labels placed on the student. This leads to increased enjoyment of learning, greater aspirations and higher levels of achievement. While making curriculum available to all students does promote inclusivity, it is unrealistic to presume that SEND students will automatically achieve greater success. SEND students often require modifications to curriculum, which cannot be neglected once it is established that their access to curriculum has been met,

“the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers; the only way to improve

outcomes is to improve instruction.”  
(Barber & Mourshead, 2007).

Access to curriculum is not enough to address every student's individual needs. According to Schweitzer (2015), many teachers would argue that teaching to a child's age is as “arbitrary as teaching to their shoe size.” Standard curriculum is created and implemented based primarily on the age and grade of students, while little consideration is given to individual needs of the student.

In a competitive and globalized system, it is impossible to measure achievement without a focus on attainment, experience of success, progress and recognition. In practice, this requires attainable goal setting and maintenance of high expectations. Achievement for All utilizes goals as measurements of growth and development, often by encouraging teachers to set targets with parents and students. In a world where standardized test scores are used as a major measure of achievement, Achievement for All integrates the necessity for testing into their framework when developing the program with partnering schools. It is acknowledged that good teaching is difficult to define outside of a quantitative framework, and thus, to train educators to develop their teaching abilities, measurable goals and objectives are necessary to determine whether policies are working or not. Beyond attainment, achievement relies on well-being, resilience, self-efficacy and self-respect. Achievement for All strongly promotes the development of the student as a confident, well-rounded individual who respects their education. Reiterated throughout the book, inclusion acknowledges the impact that social environment has on one's ability to learn and develop, and that children's education must be approached with equity and diversity. Leaders, teachers, parents and carers must genuinely believe in achievement for all in order to promote

aspirations and access. As argued throughout this review, Blandford's lack of empirical evidence renders her arguments unconvincing at times; however, the 3A's principles work together to promote a powerful education.

The book examines the Achievement for All program in the context of three regions where the Achievement for All framework was implemented including England and Wales, Norway, and the United States. The 3A's principles is also examined in context of leadership development in Lithuania, Latvia and South Korea. Two main concerns are elicited when considering the implications of the program. First, caution must be taken when applying these practices globally. Blandford states that policies on inclusion "are as applicable in other countries as they are in England." (p. 180).

Several of these inclusion policies are, according to Blandford, viewing the diversity of students as resources to support learning, rather than as problems to be overcome, fostering mutually sustaining relationships between schools and communities, and acknowledging the right of students to an education in their locality (p. 13-14). Although inclusion policies presented should be recognized globally, implications for the Achievement for All framework cannot also be generalized internationally. While six are a considerable number of contexts to investigate, the nations examined are relatively similar in political, economic and social structure. Despite South Korea's significant cultural differences with the Westernized world, the school chosen for the program was an international school, comprised of teachers primarily from England, Canada Australia, United States, South Africa and the Netherlands, and the student body was composed of students from similar international roots. Although the Achievement for All framework was found to indicate positive outlooks in these

countries, these successes cannot immediately be assumed to transfer to other countries, especially those that differ characteristically (for example, across continents, political frameworks and dominant religions). Many national factors contribute to the ability of a school to successfully implement the Achievement for All framework. While trained leaders are integral for advancing the program, administrative, economic, cultural and political elements can often play determining and difficult-to-overcome roles in changes to education systems.

The second concern rising from Blandford's examination of the Achievement for All framework delivery in these countries is the lack of concrete evidence suggesting that the program accomplishes its goals. The difficulty of measuring success is acknowledged throughout the book, however, these complications are disregarded as Blandford makes bold conclusions without reasonable evidence. Blandford admits that, "parameters are frequently set by the researchers with the result that measurement of parental involvement and parental engagement is subjective" (2017, p. 130).

By recording changes in attitude, motivation, aspiration, and shifts in mindsets as measurements of program success, acknowledgement must be given to the fact that success and failures are primarily subjective conclusions. While the Achievement for All program has presented their findings using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative data, Blandford often supports conclusions with little to no convincing evidence. For example, two years following the introduction of the Achievement for All framework in an underperforming Norwegian school, Blandford concludes that,

"as a result of using the Achievement for All framework, Lindeberg School has strengthened its leadership: which

is now dynamic, courageous, risk-taking, reflective and strategic (p. 100).

They now have high expectations of staff and students alike, and the school's culture has shifted towards more openness and professional trust. To supply evidence that a strategic method for identifying target groups is now taking place, Blandford notes that the leader group has developed a system for identifying target groups guided by evidence and data rather than just custom and practice. Despite this move towards objectifying research results, Blandford (2017) suggests that trust has been built between leaders and teachers, thanks to "small but significant gifts for those undertaking work associated with the changes" (p. 102).

The only information this explanation gives readers is that buying trust might be a reason for program success. The conclusion made that the Lindeberg School as a whole has transformed for the better is supported by instances and occasions where positive exchanges occur, but true improvement in academics and well-being remain unverified.

Turning to another example at a school in the United States, when teachers implementing the Parent Engagement Partnership Program (PEPP) were asked to describe how they think parents perceived the program, teachers who had never interacted directly with the parents described parent enthusiasm with the following comments:

"I believe the parents that did a walk-through of our school have a positive attitude towards building a relationship with their child's teachers and the school [...] I have not heard from the parents but those who did the visit left sticky notes with happy faces on classroom doors" (Blandford, 2017, p. 154-155).

Once again, assumptions are translated into conclusions on the basis of groundless claims, with the intentions of endorsing the program. Similarly, vague language is used to describe the impacts of the program at various schools in order to describe the success of the program when, in reality, the results are not necessarily favorable.

Blandford (2017) provides disclaimers that the related arguments are and may be idealized, for example, when she states, "only primary data had some statistical significance [...] although still largely underdeveloped [...] in the schools where the programme was developing well" p. 52).

In another example, Blandford (2017) mentions "despite these challenges, [...] one school arranged themed weeks that were very helpful in equipping parents with strategies to support their children's learning" (pp. 53-54), yet she fails to provide a description of "themed weeks" or how and why these themes might be relevant to the Achievement for All framework. This statement requires the reader to deduce that the ambiguous action taken by the school was positive and effective in implementing the program.

The primary flaw of this book is that it fails to provide evidence-based claims. While the educational framework assessed is promising in the development of inclusive schooling for all, far too many assumptions and conclusions are made in an attempt to glorify the results of the program in applied settings. The book is well organized, straight forward to navigate and ultimately easy to read. The writing is concise and to the point, making the goals of the book clear to understand. Most readers should be able to sympathize with the arguments made, but must be cautious in accepting the reasoning behind the claims. At times, this book reads like a brochure for the Achievement for All program. The structure is consistent in providing detailed lists, quotes and arguments endorsing the program. Claims

are repetitive and rarely self-critical, enhancing the advertisement-like style.

A recurring theme throughout is the idea that all stakeholders in education should be transparent in their goals. The goals of this book are transparent in more ways than one. This book aims to provide a structural framework for narrowing the achievement gap and making classrooms more inclusive for all, but sacrifices legitimacy for the

purpose of endorsing a brand. Stakeholders in education should use the information presented in this book with caution when developing and implementing educational practices across nations, and should augment reliability of these practices by independently identifying and assessing valuable components and applications of equitable and inclusive structures.

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