



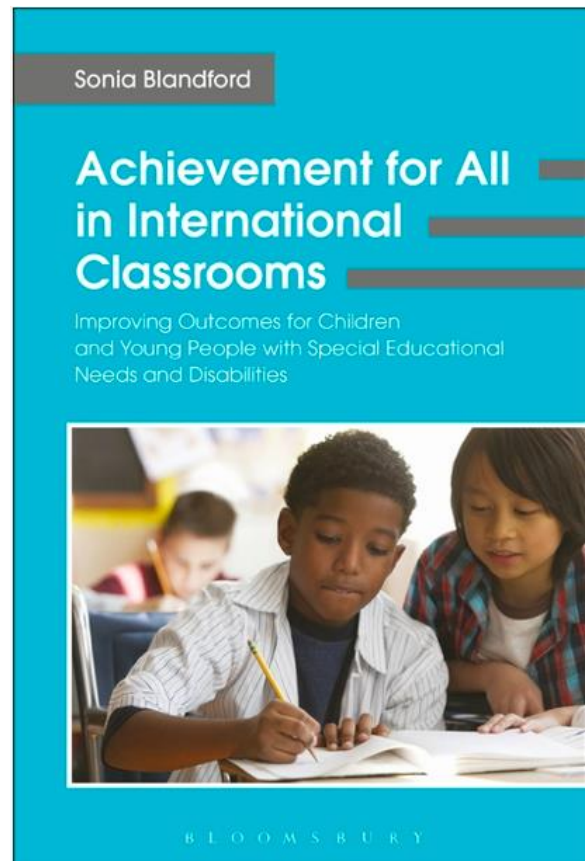
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Sonia Blandford's *Achievement for All in International Classrooms: Improving Outcomes for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities* describes the educational not for profit, Achievement For All's (AFA's), approach to closing the educational gap between children with additional learning needs and their typically developing low-risk peers. *Achievement for All in International Classrooms* was released by Bloomsbury Publishing in June 2017, and is the second Bloomsbury title published by Blandford (2013, 2017). Blandford is a well respected educational leader in the UK with internationally acclaimed achievements. In addition to her two Bloomsbury publications, she has published nine other books and over 150 articles and columns about special education, charity work, leadership, and international schools (AFA Profiles, n.d.). Along with her charity work and authorship, Blandford is the Professor of Education and



Social Enterprise at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning at the Institute of Education and an Honorary Professor of Education, University of Warwick.

The Achievement for All organization ties together all strands of Blandford's work in leadership development, special education, and business. AFA was founded in England in 2011 as an international education charity and has since developed two sister programs, Parental Engagement Partnership Program (PEPP) and Time for Leadership (TFL). According to Blandford, all three groups were founded on the vision that when schools improve their "educational opportunities," all students "can achieve regardless of their background, challenge or need" (pp. 5-6).

The program appears to have made a significant impact on schools, improving student's grades, attendance, and parental engagement. *Achievement for All in International Classrooms* describes case studies on AFA programs in England, Wales, Lithuania, Latvia, Norway, America, and a short workshop in South Korea to demonstrate AFA's practices. All programs focused on helping schools develop observation, planning, and assessment skills to achieve high quality teaching and interventional strategies (Blandford, 2017, pp. 30). For each two-year project, the charity selects a coach from a team of experienced educational leaders to conduct bi-weekly half-day visits and lead between 2-4 whole school training days. The coach also works with a designated 'school champion' responsible for conducting a needs assessment to identify areas of growth for the school and a target group of students testing in the bottom 20%. While there are no mandatory demographics, the target group over represents students living in poverty, who have special educational needs or a disability, or are 'at risk' (Blandford, 2017, p. 44). The school and coach then work together to find solutions based on a set of principles including the '3 A's' (Blandford, 2017, p. 7). From a practical standpoint, AFA operates under the "3 A" principle: Aspiration, Access, and Achievement. While the 3 A's

have the potential to be empowering, their applications perpetuate the myth of universal personal agency, ignoring societal barriers and assigning structural issues to cultural deprivation and personal failures.

The assessment results and participant comments Blandford included in her book generally reflect positively on AFA. All schools that implemented the program saw improved scores on standardized math and literacy tests, increased parental engagement, and higher attendance rates (p. 50). Surveys of students, parents, and the school champion indicate that behavioral concerns and broadly defined 'wider outcomes' improved throughout the two year AFA and PEPP programs (p. 50). While not presented to encourage replication by other educational initiatives, these results were provided at the end of each case study as evidence of AFA's success.

One of the metrics of success AFA considers is the level of inclusion reported by students. AFA's integrative practices are informed by the Growth Mindset framework. This pedagogy is key to developing a culture that values inclusion and the academic contributions of all students. The Growth Mindset theory, proposed by Carol Dweck, challenges the traditional "fixed mindset" that assumes talent and intelligence are static traits (What is Mindset, n.d.). According to the "Growth Mindset" framework, people are capable of developing their abilities "through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point" (What is Mindset, n.d.). Accordingly, Blandford and her charities fundamentally reject a fixed mindset, and in contrast, encourage teachers to see the potential for success in every student, school, country, and culture (p. 20).

While the Achievement for All theory is appealing, the scientific justification for the 3 A's is insufficient. Without empirical evidence to substantiate Blandford's claims, it is impossible to gauge the accuracy of her statements or evaluate her charity. The empirical data provided in the book is only

partially cited and draws heavily from unscientific reports to evaluate the success of AFA in schools. *Achievement for All in International Classrooms* incorporated test results that were collected from their case studies. However, before releasing these results to AFA, leaders within the school were encouraged to curate results by reflecting “on each process and ensure that only necessary and relevant information is presented” (p. 191). Despite this overtly flawed data collection, AFA still used this information to create final reports presenting their initiatives success.

The research design in itself has clear data collection flaws. Blandford uses a before and after research approach characterized by the evaluation and observation of a single group before and after an external variable is applied (Before-And-After Design, 2017, p. 19). This method of before and after research does not apply to long term evaluations because “over the course of a longer period of time, more circumstances can arise that may obscure the effects of an intervention” (Before-And-After Design, 2017, p. 19). As the time frame lengthens, it becomes increasingly difficult to control other variables that may affect the study. In her book, Blandford bases her conclusions on generalized results from all of her case studies’ quantitative and qualitative data before and after implementing the AFA program. At the schools in which AFA is implemented, the time frame is too long to conclude the program as the singular cause of change in the school. In the text, Blandford does not attempt to account for external variables that may have affected the results of the study making it impossible to determine the specific outcomes of AFA.

Replicable and significant research relies on scientifically sound methodology. Yet, the methods outlined in *Achievement for All* are riddled with faults and biases. Blandford’s role as the CEO and founder of AFA and lack of disclosure about her status within the company, present a unique

challenge to her book. Her proximity to the initiatives makes her endorsement without evidence and the absence of substantive critiques, suspect. At one point, she claims that with the aid of *Achievement for All*, Mead Primary School saw engagement of parents of students with special needs or disability increased from 55% to 100%, and parental engagement of students from low income backgrounds rose from 0% to 100% (p. 38). However, because Blandford fails to define engagement, explain metrics, or the methodology, her absolutist claims are fundamentally unsubstantiated.

Further limiting the reliability of their data, AFA conflated student needs, making it impossible to create a nuanced picture of their impact on specific groups within their target population. While the book title and charity reference special needs, the students targeted are those whose assessment scores rank in the bottom 20% (p. 7). AFA does not differentiate treatment or testing of the target group based on their background, amalgamating the diverse needs of students with various disabilities and those who live in poverty or foster care. The undifferentiated data of these broadly defined categories makes it impossible to determine program efficacy within the target population. Due to inconsistent methodology, lack of a scientific rigor, and potential for motivated data curation, test results provided in the book cannot be used to draw meaningful conclusions.

AFA’s 3 A’s approach considers Aspiration to be an essential student mindset. Staff must have clear and ambitious expectations of students and presume that all students have the capacity to “engage fully and positively in the learning process” (pp. 9-10). The second principle, Access, refers to the “removal of barriers preventing access to learning” (p. 10) and the approach promotes school’s efforts to ensure that all students are able attend non-compulsory and higher education. *Achievement* is primarily viewed as academic growth, but it also considers a student’s social, extracurricular, and behavioral

successes. The 3 A's work together in tandem to raise "Aspirations of all pupils, supported by parents, teachers, leaders and professionals... [and provide] Access to schools that inspire... Achievement for all" (pp. 16-17).

The 3 A's reliance on individualism poses the risk of assigning structural inequality to individual motivations. Their method for increasing Aspiration, in particular, creates a culture in which students and their families are often blamed for challenges beyond their control. According to AFA, the Aspiration mindset occurs when the pupil individually comes to the conclusion that they should aspire to greater things. Parental engagement, according to AFA, is the primary influence for students to make this 'decision'. Blandford asserts, without providing evidence or data, that "parents with low aspirations often unintentionally pass their beliefs and feelings onto their children" (p. 17). Suggesting, that underperformance is, in part, due to inherited low aspirations. According to Blandford, parents of children with disabilities limit their child's wider outcomes. She links the underperformance of these students to parents who lack vision for their child because they are still 'grieving' their child's diagnosis (p. 134). By claiming low-aspiration is passed down generationally from non-aspirational parent to underachieving student, Blandford presents Aspiration as an individualistic characteristic.

Although Blandford theorizes that low Aspiration can be addressed by student's deciding to change their goals and outlook, she paradoxically seems to assume that students are unable to independently form enduring aspirations. Throughout *Achievement for All in International Classrooms*, Blandford inadvertently renders her target group as passive non-actors. In contrast, school's institutions are characterized as the sole mechanism to prevent students from having "limited capacity to participate in the world community" (p. 134). Without supporting evidence, Blandford claims that unless schools intervene, students with special needs or students at risk will hold

decreased Aspirations due to their tendency to not "hold their future in high regard" (p. 17).

At times Blandford (2017) seems to go beyond disempowerment, and with her choice of language, potentially dehumanizes the very people AFA was founded to help. For example, she often uses the acronym SEND, Special Educational Need or Disability, to refer to students with disabilities. At times she calls them "SEND pupils" but more often just "SEND," referring to students as their disability, not as people. In addition, when discussing AFA's effect on one English school where the target population included Roma children, Blandford refers to them as "Gypsy Roma" (p. 41), a dated ethnic categorization generally recognized as a slur (*Why 'Gypsy' Is A Racial Slur*, 2016). Through such language, students are characterized as their disability or outdated ethnic categories.

Blandford portrays underachieving students as a homogeneous group classified by their ability and backgrounds entering schools with a predisposition for low-aspiration and limited cultural capital. The 3 A's are socialization tools that can be used to improve a student's cultural capital. Cultural deprivation theory is based on the idea that an individual's social capital or background will determine their success and that education is the primary form of socialization (Friedman, 1967). Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defined cultural capital as the social capital derived from a person's education, intelligence, and knowledge which permits greater social mobility (n.p). However, cultural capital is not equally distributed and is directly connected to wealth and power. Individuals who have less cultural capital are perceived as 'deprived,' and must be educated in such a way that mitigates and replaces their cultural deprivation.

AFA's approach seems to be tied to the cultural deprivation theory. Their portrayal of deficiency goes beyond individual students and families and makes judgments on the educational systems of entire nations. In the book's discussion of specific AFA initiatives, Blandford asserts that Lithuania and Norway

have not been able to improve outcomes for their ‘weakest students’ because their countries do not have a culture of aspiration (p. 167). Blandford specifically attributes Lithuania’s underperforming schools to a culture that encourages obeying regulations over taking risks or assuming leadership roles (p. 66), and later she claims that Norway’s schools need to be “given new objectives” (p. 60) to ingrain into a new culture for any of AFA’s recommendations to have longitudinal success. The only school system/culture she praises outside of England is an international school in South Korea that uses the exported British schooling style. Whether intentional or not, Blandford presents the British system as superior.

The second principle of Access builds on the principle of Aspiration, and exposes a rejection of structural inequality in favor of a standardized exported program curricula. For example, part of Blandford’s definition of access concerns making non-compulsory education possible for “those who might not have previously perceived education as having any significance or value in their lives” (p. 9). Access and inclusion are directly related to a pupil’s environment, yet the approach taken by AFA seems to be a standardized method for all schools it serves. The default AFA, PEPP, TFL structures lack a comprehensive understanding or incorporation of inclusive practices. According to one head teacher’s definition, inclusive schools are places where “all pupils are making better than expected progress.” (p. 186). This narrow definition is not challenged or expanded on, leaving the reader with the impression that inclusive practices simply consist of improving standardized test scores and additional extracurricular opportunity for target student groups. According to these reviewers, it seems the Blandford’s representation of meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities has been simplified to performance.

As the AFA structures are replicated across schools internationally, so are its problematic components. Each school is

assigned a coach to guide them through the prescribed practices of the AFA program, so they may be integrated “into an overlapping set of communities of practice with thousands of other schools” (p. 7). Similar to blaming a parent for a child’s perceived lack of aspirations, Blandford blames individual schools for their flaws and failures rather than understanding the societal influences that may have affected the school’s performance. Along with placing blame on individual schools, Blandford extends this blame to teachers and other authority figures within the student’s life. AFA’s prescribed set of action-steps automatically assume that ineffective leadership and insufficient incorporation of the 3 A’s are the root problem. Their assumptions ignore, and at times reject, explicit structural inequalities. Blandford discusses a study of Latino youth dropping out of school due to financial struggles. Instead of exploring endemic problems or developing support systems that could help students complete high school, she claims the true cause is a leadership vacuum and insufficient parental engagement. Rather than seeing an issue within the scope of a larger system, Blandford (2017) sees a problem with the child and their family (p. 135). AFA’s structure reflexively blames individual’s motives without considering external factors.

The AFA charity was named for the third and final A: Achievement. The only statistically significant Achievement metrics offered by the book were measured by the APS exam in the UK. Yet, Blandford never defines the APS exam, what it measures, or the possible score range. The APS exam was conducted in the English schools, where Blandford reports that “Achievement for All exceeded national attainment targets,” by increasing APS by 4.8 in reading, 4.6 in writing, and 4.4 in math (p. 46). Blandford explains that results were used to modify teaching practices and encourage teachers to evaluate their pedagogies (p. 190). When the scores and outcomes are negative, Blandford places blame on the teachers rather provide

commentary about the possible failures of the AFA program as a whole.

If Blandford's claims are accurate, her charities have changed the educational experiences and outcomes of underperforming students around the world. However, her role as the CEO/founder and suspect methodology open her claims to scrutiny. At its theoretical core, Achievement for All defies clear categorizations of 'good' or 'bad'. The program presumes competency and teaches the Growth Mindset, but the implementation

of the 3 A's is grounded in an outdated and problematic cultural deprivation model. By minimizing the role of external structures on an individual, Blandford (2017) portrays the individual as singularly responsible for his or her own struggles, even when their circumstances are beyond their control. While the book is written in an accessible format, the reader must be prepared to unpack and critique the author's claims, which often sound more like marketing than analysis.

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