

Correlates of Low Academic Attainment in Three Countries: England, France and Japan (*)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Thouless (1953) lists and discusses 38 Kinds of illicit moves that can be made in arguments, but does not comment upon likely occasions of use or abuse. Cross-culturally based comparisons appear to be liable to evoke critical appeals to the influence of failures to cope with language differences in particular and of the operation of unknown uncontrolled variables in general. Both are cited as methodologically related reasons for any observed differences found between members of different cultures. In fact, however, exactly the same *logical* objections can be raised about any kind of

study, regardless of the apparent tightness of the experimental controls or of the means of communicating instructions. The precise meanings and emotional significance of words can vary within an individual from occasion to occasion. They can certainly vary from individual to individual and from sub-culture to sub-culture within the same language.

However, although the difficulties of moving across cultures may be both superficially more obvious and substantively more important than comparisons made within cultures, and objections about lack of equivalence have to be carefully weighed, in the end unspecified skepticism has no more force in cross-cultural than in any other kind of comparative work. And advantages are to be gained; systematic contrasts can be made in which differences are much greater than are to be found in a single society.

In the work to be reported we have tried to exploit this virtue of cross-cultural comparisons in line with Mill's (Nagel, 1950) argument from differences. If the same covariation between two variables can be found to hold constant across a wide diversity of contexts, then the covariation is likely to be real rather than accidental. To be specific, if pupils whose school attainments are relatively low differ in the same ways from those attainments are relatively high across three

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disparate cultures and school systems, then we can have more faith that the co-variations are causally linked with each other.

We had two major points of departure for our research. The first was educational and practical. The second was social psychological and theoretical. An argument commonly advanced about all educational systems that ration and restrict entry to tertiary education is as follows. The selection processes which limit entry to tertiary education have a backwash effect on secondary schooling. Those pupils who become defined as unlikely to achieve the standards necessary for entry to further or higher education will see themselves as academic failures and will consequently suffer from low self-esteem as pupils and persons. This in turn decreases the probability of success. This state of affairs is socially and morally undesirable.

Such an abbreviated form of the argument fails to do justice to its full possibilities, but suffices for us to expose certain difficulties with it. The first is that in these arguments «success» and «failure» are prone to be defined in apparently objective terms of not gaining entry to some institution or not passing certain examinations. It is often assumed that such entry and success is desired by all pupils. However the psychological significance of such «failures» could in fact be assessed only after several questions have been answered. To what standard of performance, if any, did the pupils aspire? What standard did the pupils reach? How did the pupils interpret and react to any discrepancy between the two? Perhaps they wanted to fail, so they could escape from the academic rat-race. Perhaps they were indifferent to the outcomes. Perhaps they were bitterly disappointed because although they did better than most others in their school, they nevertheless «failed» to get maximal marks.

Why is it «bad» for pupils to suffer from loss of self-esteem? What is a proper level of self-esteem? Should people not base their respect for themselves on a realistic appreciation of what they are and what they might reasonably become? This line of argument can lead rapidly into questions of what outcomes of secondary schooling are acceptable and desirable and why they in fact take the form they do.

All societies wrestle with the problem of

individual and socially based differences in academic achievement, and policy-makers and practitioners are prone to make errors of one kind or another. The first kind of error is to believe that there is no genetic variation in academically relevant capacities and dispositions in the human species. The second is to believe that the actual variation in attainments we can observe at present represents the operation of equal opportunities for all. Both errors seem to represent a triumph of wish over reality: the first seems to be an expression of a wish that educational achievements should be different from all other biological characteristics; the second seems to imagine that the practices in a society are already much more in line with its notions of justice than is in fact the case. Without being side-tracked into the debates around these issues, we can note that genetic sources of variation as contributory reasons for differences in school achievement appear to be currently unfashionable.

All three societies to be considered use variation in achievements in secondary school as a major filtering device for initial distribution of adolescents into the adult occupational structure, but they do so differently. In England, of the secondary age children within the state sector, the very great majority are in comprehensive schools (93%). There may be tracking for certain subjects from the second year, but even preliminary selection into classes for the national examinations taken at 16 is not made until children are rising 14. Prior to this, secondary school «reports» will have been sent to parents two or three times a year; in these, gradings are commonly given for achievement and/or effort in various subjects. The practice varies from school to school. Rumour has it that gradings are generally ill-defined and that the lower grades are generally not awarded. With no national curriculum and with automatic promotion from class to class, England offers the most diverse, informal, and discretionary system of the three. Progress referenced, criterion-referenced and norm-referenced criteria of achievement are not salient as records or incentives.

Japan likewise promotes children annually and automatically and has no tracking. However, its junior high schools do follow a

national curriculum which is specified in great detail and followed closely. There is no national examination at the end of junior high school (age 15), but at this point there is very strong selection, through very competitive entrance examinations set by the individual senior high schools. The most obvious categorical, division is between the, senior high school themselves and the others forms of senior school, but within the senior high schools there is a strong and well-known hierarchy which is based on rates of pupils gaining entry to the more prestigious universities (Shimahara, 1979). Not surprisingly then, junior high schools are also ranked, and there is therefore a kind of tracking where the whole school is a track. Some junior high schools move much faster through the national curriculum than others. In Japan, pupils are given frequent and regular tests which chart their achievements. These reports are also given in primary school. Pupils have therefore very precise information about their current and previous academic standing. Further, many pupils are receiving supplementary education in evening schools; typically over 50% of 12-14 year-old children in the larger cities are enrolled in these *juku*. Cummings (1980) and Lynn (1988) give clear and more detailed descriptions of the system. Kida, Shwalb and Shwalb (1985) report a series of recent studies.

Like Japan, France has a national curriculum and a comprehensive and initially untracked approach to its junior high schools (Collège). Lewis (1985) provides a neat summary in English. Testing is regular and frequent, and pupils have autobiographies of their marks from their entry into the system. Unlike either Japan or England, France does not promote children automatically. Specially constituted committees of teachers and parents can and do recommend «repeating the year» (redoublement). By the collège stage a substantial minority of children have repeated one year, and a smaller minority two years. In our sample of college classes IV and III approximately 30% of the pupils had repeated at least one year. In spite of what some academics write, and perhaps what vocal parents express, France does not seem to be so age-conscious as England. Fast early learning seems to be seen as peculiarly indicative of potential in England, and it is deemed

important to achieve standards precociously. Neither France nor Japan seem to see individual differences as so fixed or stable.

In its need to be brief and to highlight the major similarities and differences this summary necessarily over-simplifies each system. It necessarily precludes discussion of ways in which the systems narrow the range of achievement that could be present in 13 and 14 year-old children if they were given equal opportunity to proceed through some cumulative national curriculum at their own pace. For example, England narrows the range by not providing faster learners with challenging and matching material in the primary school (Bennett, 1984). Japan, for different reasons, seems to expect faster learners to be patient, to wait for and to help slower learners as materials in the syllabus are repeated, reformulated, practiced and revised to a much greater extent than we have seen in England or France. France uses redoublement.

Ideologically based intellectual commitments to and preferences for genetic and/or environmental accounts for the diversity of academic achievements in children will continue to dog societies, which on the one hand are quite properly concerned with justice and fairness, but on the other hand are possibly wrong-headed in their commitments to the cultural differential patterns of respect and reward related to variation in academic achievement. According to the symbolic interactionist perspective (Mead, 1934) it will be the patterns of respect and reward that are the likely determinants of self-esteem; in so far as «success» or «failure» at school enter into there then those experiences will be relevant to self-esteem. «Self-esteem» is now a strong candidate for explaining variations in school achievement (see Burns, 1982 for a review; Rosenberg, 1979).

We have shown elsewhere (Robinson, 1984; Robinson & Tayler, 1986) how the Tajfel and Turner (1979) theory of social identity can be elaborated to generate predictions about failing pupils and their self-esteem. In that account academic failure does not lead ultimately, to reduced general self-evaluation. The key assumptions of the theory are that:

1. Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity.
2. Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups: the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated from the relevant out-groups.
3. When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or make their existing group more positively distinct.

Tajfel and Turner (1979: 40-41) proceed to list a variety of reactions to negative or threatened social identity:

These propositions focus on situations involving inter-group relations where the groups already exist, but the ideas can be extended to the analysis of intra-group and inter-group phenomena and to the formation of social groups. If we apply them to chronically failing pupils, then individual mobility is not a viable escape for all; individuals may have tried this means but for many it is impossible — by definition. (We may remind ourselves that in an imposed norm-referenced system, the existence and extent of objective failure is fully determined by the organisers of the system; for every child changing category, another from elsewhere must take up that place.) Social competition is not a sociologically feasible possibility; a numerical minority of adolescents is unlike to organise itself to overthrow the social structure of the educational order.

Our failing secondary pupils have either to accept their status or become socially creative: The former is incompatible with their postulated need for positive self-esteem. Presumably they could individually contrive a re-definition of themselves in relation to their social world and maintain that construction. However, if Berger and Luckmann (1966), among many others, are correct, a definition of social reality is more readily maintained if supported by frequent confirmation in inter-action with like-minded others. Hence failing pupils will be more likely to construct and maintain a new reality if there are several of them in the same situation so that

a social group can be formed that will confer a social identity that does not yield unfavourable comparisons with out-groups. In turn this will be achieved more easily if readily available models are available. Once older failing pupils have emerged as a sub-culture in a school, they constitute such a model for younger pupils.

In these circumstances we may predict that failing pupils will seek to repair threats to self-esteem by:

either inverting the critical dimension of value so that academic incompetence becomes a source of high self-esteem; *or* finding and accepting alternative dimensions of value which yield favourable rather than unfavourable comparisons with out-groups; *or* both together.

Further, we would expect these to be achieved through the formation of social groups that can maintain the positive social and personal identity.

If the first derivation is true, academic failures should begin to deny the positive value of educational success and to assert its negative features, e.g. having to work hard in school and at homework, not having time for fun in or out of school, continuing to be treated as a child rather than as an adult, not being able to earn money, and lack of freedom. In so far as an out-group of academically successful pupils can be identified, its values and members should be derogated.

Correspondingly for the second derivation we might expect the advantages of emancipation to be stressed, namely the pleasures of behaviour associated with adult status, e.g. having fun, drinking alcohol, smoking, cross-sex relationships, wearing «smart» clothes, independent transport. This constellation could be called «precocious maturity». Within the school, such pupils should strive to convert the classroom situation to one in which they can have fun messing about and challenge the norms of the educational establishment. In so far as such pleasures are less enjoyable than those to be gained outside, truancy should increase. Leaving early should provide a welcome escape.

Individual self-esteem should become a matter of acceptance and admiration by the peer group of other academic failures and of rejection, fear

and hostility by other pupils and teachers. Motivation will be channelled into these pursuits.

Such an analysis is consistent with the data obtained in the case studies of particular secondary schools in England from Lumley Secondary Modern School (Hargreaves, 1967) to Beachside Comprehensive (Ball, 1981). It is consistent with analyses of adolescent deviance and delinquency (e.g. Hargreaves, Hester & Mellor, 1975). It is consistent with Brookover's (1979) results with Black secondary school children in Chicago.

Can the Tajfel and Turner theory be reconciled with the propositions that argue for a positive correlation between self-esteem and achievement (Coopersmith, 1967)? A first tactic would be to argue that the measures of self-esteem used are not pure. If we use James's notion of an increasing discrepancy between actual and ideal self as potential source of self-esteem, we have to remember that this potential becomes important only for *valued* dimensions. Further, «value» refers here to the individual and not to the culture. If an individual does not value academic success, then academic failure should be psychologically insignificant. (The idea that high self-esteem should be strongly correlated with high academic achievement is a neat example of a sub-cultural socio-centrism — itself an illustration of the Tajfel-Turner theory. Members of the academic establishment constitute a social group that presumably maintains its social identity and esteem by making comparisons with out-groups on dimensions that its members value and that yield comparisons favourable to itself and its members. Other groups in the society will behave similarly.)

Nevertheless, for theoretical purposes we may assume that all children initially value doing well in school. However as the differentials between pupils appear, so a correlation should emerge between perceived achievement and self-esteem. This will persist all the time the pupils continue to value school success. For some however their self-esteem becomes so low they have to reject the value of doing well. But how low is «so low»? At what point do the Tajfel and Turner comparisons come into operation?

The articulation of the two stories would yield

a double population in school: one group for whom school success remains a valued aspiration and among whom self-esteem will correlate positively with academic attainment and second group for whom school success is irrelevant or even undesirable and whose self-esteem will be uncorrelated with academic attainment. We were not concerned however to answer this particular form of the question. We wanted to take a different starting position, namely perceived academic attainment and contrast high and low achievers in terms of self-perception and self-evaluation and attitudes to school.

What proportion of pupils are low attainers for whom the Tajfel and Turner mechanisms might come into operation? We chose the *bottom quartile* for several reasons. There is a view among academic writers that becoming eligible for university entrance constitutes «success». In France gaining the baccalaureat (or perhaps sitting for it) may be the most general criterion. In England the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary level) was designed to be taken by 20% of the population at the age of 16. Japan has no national examinations, but has a higher proportion going to university.

These criteria might be used to mark off approximately 25% of the population as «successful». We therefore chose the complementary bottom 25% as «failures» on an objective definition. In France many of this group will not have proceeded beyond Collège. In England half that group will not have gained any certificates from their secondary schooling and the other half will have obtained only one or two low grade passes in «easy» subjects. In Japan about 6% will cease their education, and 30% will proceed to vocational or technical schools of whom two thirds embark on a three-year rather than five-year course. This 20% plus the 6% leaving school gives a lowest 26%.

A subjective definition was preferred to an objective definition: the bottom 25% of pupils who see themselves as doing badly in ordinary work and tests were to be the low attainers. The focus of interest is their perception and evaluation of themselves and their attitudes to school.

2. METHOD

2.1. *Sampling*

The distributions of the sums of the scores on *two* items from the «What am I like» questionnaire were inspected: «I am awful at school work» (1) to «I am very good at school work» (7) and «I do badly in school tests» (1) to «I do very well in school tests» (7). It was found that a lower cut off of seven or less and higher cut off of 11 or greater gave very close to 25% of each of the three nationalities in each cell. Numbers were then reduced to 25 per cell while matching on the distributions of scores within each cell.

2.2. *Subjects*

The 50 English subjects were taken from a random sample of eligible 3rd and 4th year pupils at three comprehensive secondary schools around Bristol. The schools were such that, as a set, their national examination results at 16+ were at the national average. The pupils were either 13 or 14 years old at the beginning of the academic year in the previous September with equal numbers of each age group.

The French subjects comprised eligible Class Ivand Class III pupils from two Collèges in Aix-en-Provence. These two schools had proportions of pupils repeating years (redoublement) that were close to the national average and the proportions of pupils proceeding to Lycée were typical. Modally, the pupils were aged 13 and 14.

The Japanese subjects were taken from the eligible pupils from the appropriate two levels of class at a single Junior High School in the suburbs of Tokyo. This school sent a nationally typical percentage of pupils forward to the Senior High School. The pupils were 13 or 14 years old at the begining of the academic year.

Questionnaires were completed in the Spring term in each country so that ages were equivalent (except for France where necessarily, only the modal ages were). The achieved equal distribution of high (HA) and Low Attainers (LA), 25 for each national group, was arrived at by the sampling process described already.

2.3. *Materials*

The sets of questionnaires given to each group were not identical. For various reasons the French had the smallest set of questionnaires and the English the largest. Except for three «identity» items, which were originally in French, all items and instructions were translated from English into French and Japanese. Native speakers, bilingual in English, made the translations. Japanese and French psychologists checked and discussed all individual items with us. Psychological equivalence was the aim. All items used here were reported to be culturally appropriate and relevant without changing the semantic content of the statements.

The 16 7-point items from the «what you are like» Semantic Differential were eight pairs with related foci (e.g. damaging property) (see Appendix). The «what you would like to be» items were identical in content. The attitude to school scale comprised eight of the nine items used by Barker-Lunn (1970). The item omitted was «Do you think work will be more enjoyable than school?». The three items used originally in France were concerned with perceived change, perceived agentive power and overall evaluation (see Appendix).

In England names of pupils were included on the front sheet so that pupils' questionnaires could be linked up over the three occasions on which the children were seen. The questionnaires were anonymous so far as the school staff were concerned; all English data were collected by university personnel. In Japan and France class teachers collected the data, but they stressed that neither they nor anyone else in the school would be reading the answers. In France all questionnaires were anonymous. In Japan half the classes put their names and half did not. A separate analysis revealed no difference between the anonymous and identified pupils.

2.4. *Treatment of Results*

Two-way analyses of variance were applied to the individual items of perception and aspiration and to the attitude to School scale, but the theoretical position adopted requires some descriptives analysis that takes into account the direction of sentiments and

TABLE 1

Mean self-ratings of English, French and Japanese pupils from high and low attainment quartiles: what are you like

Attainment Nationality	Low			High			p's 2-way ANOVA		
	Eng	Fr	Jpn	Eng	Fr	Jpn	Nat	Att	Int
Item (7th scale)									
How good at work	3.5	2.8	2.4	6.2	6.0	5.2	00	00	47
How good at tests	5.6	4.1	6.9	5.9	6.1	6.8	00	00	00
Enjoyment of work	3.4	3.4	3.6	5.2	5.0	4.9	83	00	67
Interest in work	3.8	4.6	3.4	6.2	5.2	5.4	03	00	02
How hard working	4.7	5.4	5.3	6.1	5.8	5.9	72	00	28
Care about work	5.1	5.0	4.3	6.7	6.4	6.3	04	00	12
Not cheating in tests	5.6	4.1	6.7	5.9	6.1	6.8	00	00	00
Behave well in class	3.5	4.1	3.6	6.0	5.4	3.5	00	00	00
Not a vandal	5.6	6.2	5.8	6.6	6.5	6.2	31	00	34
Not a drawer on desks	4.0	4.9	3.8	5.3	5.2	4.3	05	02	47
How little alcohol	3.5	5.2	5.4	4.6	5.6	6.3	00	01	61
How little smoking	5.9	6.6	6.2	7.0	6.9	6.7	46	00	30
Satisfactions	4.9	4.6	4.1	5.6	6.0	5.2	07	00	70
People think well of me	4.6	4.7	3.5	5.8	5.2	4.6	00	00	40
Self confidence	3.8	5.0	3.3	4.6	5.2	4.2	00	02	50
Like self as I am	4.4	5.0	3.7	5.7	5.8	5.0	01	00	78

evaluations — which side of neutral are the pupils?

3. RESULTS

3.1. Means Overall

Inspection of the means in Tables 1, 2 and 3 shows that scores are mainly to the positive side of neutral. They do not drop below the neutral or average point at all for the High Attainers (HA) of any nationality, except for the Japanese assessment of how well they behave in class. For the Low Attainers (LA), none of the aspirational items has a mean below

the neutral point of H. (The French are below the mean only on the two defining items for low attainment and on enjoyment of school work.) The Japanese LA are below the mean on an assortment of items (enjoyment, interest, conduct, drawer on walls), but perhaps most significantly on people thinking well of them, liking self and the overall evaluation of self ($\bar{X} = 1.28$), which is dramatically below the average position of 2.0. The English are also below the mid-points on overall evaluation of self as well as self-confidence, and additionally on enjoyment, interest, conduct, drawer on walls, perceived ability to cope with problems and general attitude to school.

In terms of these perceptions and evaluations,

TABLE 2

Mean self-ratings of English, French and Japanese pupils from high and low attainment quartiles: what you would like to be

Attainment Nationality	Low			High			p's 2-way ANOVA		
	Eng	Fr	Jpn	Eng	Fr	Jpn	Nat	Att	Int
Item (7th scale)									
How good at work	6.0	6.8	6.1	6.9	6.8	6.8	13	00	03
How good at tests	5.6	6.0	6.5	6.8	5.9	6.8	05	04	07
Enjoyment of work	5.5	5.9	5.4	6.5	5.8	6.7	67	00	02
Interest in work	5.9	6.0	5.7	6.8	6.0	6.6	30	00	10
How hard working	4.9	6.2	5.1	6.6	5.9	6.3	00	91	00
Care about work	5.6	6.0	4.2	6.8	6.6	5.8	00	00	18
Not cheating in tests	5.6	6.0	6.5	6.8	5.9	6.8	05	04	07
Behave well in class	4.9	5.8	4.4	6.2	6.4	5.0	00	00	38
Not a vandal	5.8	6.7	6.2	6.6	6.4	6.3	27	30	12
Not a drawer on desks	5.1	5.7	5.2	6.0	6.3	5.1	08	12	37
How little alcohol	4.2	5.9	4.9	5.5	6.0	5.3	01	06	27
How little smoking	6.4	6.8	6.5	6.9	6.7	6.6	74	27	28
Satisfactions	4.2	5.0	5.1	5.7	6.0	6.7	01	00	64
People think well of me	5.7	6.0	5.1	6.7	6.6	6.3	08	00	62
Self confidence	4.5	6.5	5.3	6.5	6.4	6.2	01	00	01
Like self as I am	4.7	5.8	4.6	6.6	6.4	5.5	00	00	08

TABLE 3

Mean self-ratings of English, French and Japanese pupils from high and low attainment quartiles: attitudes and identity

Attainment Nationality	Low			High			p's 2-way ANOVA		
	Eng	Fr	Jpn	Eng	Fr	Jpn	Nat	Att	Int
Item (7 items 3pt scale)									
Attitude to school	6.4	7.6	8.4	8.6	8.6	9.6	07	00	62
Change in year	1.8	3.2	2.1	2.4	2.5	1.7	00	31	04
Coper with problems	1.7	2.8	2.2	3.1	3.2	3.0	03	00	09
Evaluation of self	1.8	2.7	1.3	2.9	3.4	1.8	00	00	42

the simplest conclusion would be that HA pupils are generally positive about themselves and school regardless of nationality and that on average LA pupils in France are neither anti-themeselves or their schools. The Japanese LA pupils are strongly self-deprecatory. The English LA pupils are self-deprecatory and on average just to the negative side on attitudes to school.

These absolute mean positions on the scales need to be taken into account as the overall frame of reference within which the inter-group differences are discussed.

3.2. *Nationality versus Level of Attainment*

It may prove hazardous to draw conclusions about the relative importance of variables which are not of the same kind, but we can at least ask which of the variables yields the most significant differences. Of the 36 possible two-way interactions eight are significant, for nationality 22 are, and for attainment 30.

3.2. *Interactions*

The simplest generalisation accounting for the majority of the interactions would be of the form: the differences between HA and LA are greater for the English than for either the French or the Japanese. In terms of the school systems, this means that the system in which regular and formal assessment is minimal in fact gives rise to a higher differential between pupils who perceive themselves as strong or weak academically. This applies particularly to the aspirational items: wanting to be involved in school work and wanting to be good at it, not wanting to be «macho» and wanting to be satisfied with oneself. Only two of the aspirational items did not have a significant interaction. It might seem that to see yourself as a low achiever in England reduces aspiration. The only other significant interaction shows English LA's to see themselves as relatively badly behaved in class.

3.4. *Nationality*

The 22 variables showing significant differences do not immediately present obvious and clear qualitative clusters, but when examined in terms of highest and lowest nations,

a pattern begins to emerge. Neither enjoyment nor application to school work discriminated between the groups, and interest in and care about school work did so only at low levels of significance. With the scores on the «Attitudes to School» scale likewise failing to differentiate, the simplest conclusion would be that, at least for this combined sample of top and bottom quartiles, the three nationalities do not differ importantly in their feelings about or attitudes towards school.

Their perceived conduct in school does differ. The Japanese are least prone to cheat, the French the most so. Generally the Japanese report themselves as the worst behaved(!), the French the best. Drawing on walls does not differentiate. Neither does public vandalism or smoking. Drinking alcohol appears to be mainly an English form of misdemeanour.

In relation to self, very clear contrasts appear. The French have the strongest liking for themselves, the highest opinion of themselves, are the most self-confident, and feel most competent to cope with problems. Whether this is *amour propre* or *amour improprie* is discussed later. The Japanese are the lowest group on each of these items. The differences between groups are less pronounced for their aspirations than they are for perceptions.

3.5. *Attainment*

All 16 «What I am like» items yielded substantial differences, with nine of these being significant beyond the 0.000 level. «What I would like to be like» gave 12 differences, the four exceptions being smoking, alcohol drinking, vandalising public property, and drawing on walls. Paradoxically it is the potentially delinquency-related items that did *not* discriminate between HA and LA pupils. The aspirations of LA pupils for involvement with and success in school work are depressed in all three societies.

LA pupils like themselves less and have lower aspirations to like themselves. They make lower evaluations of themselves and do not think they can cope with problems as well as HA pupils. Except for the LA English pupils, they remain just positive in their attitudes to school, but significantly less so than HA pupils.

4. DISCUSSION

Whilst doubts could be cast on the status of any one of the individual results, the fact that a consistent and coherent pattern can be discerned encourages an acceptance of the results as sincere and valid perceptions. The status of the differences between nationalities is contestable. Whilst various objective precautions were taken to make sure that the schools were «typical» of their nations, no one Japanese or French school can be presented to stand for the thousands of its colleagues and be defended on statistical grounds. In so far as the differences and similarities reported are consistent with other accounts, we can be reassured, and this they do seem to be.

If we begin with the educational question of whether or not the bottom quartile of pupils in the three countries are victims of the Tajfel and Turner theory, the answer has to be «No». The mean scores of the «What you would like to be» items of the LA pupils overall remain positive: they want to succeed, they want to enjoy school, they want to be like HA pupils. Their aspirations are lower than those of HA pupils, except in respect of the avoidance of the four items indicative of general rebellion or precocious adulthood (smoking and drinking). They have not become strongly anti-school, but they are less committed than their HA peers.

The English LA pupils are however in a potentially dissonant situation. While their aspirations may still be just positive in respect of school, their feelings about and attitudes toward school are negative. Further their evaluations of themselves are not low positive, they are low negative. Either these pupils are in a transitional state and due to raise their self-esteem by the processes referred to in Tajfel and Turner's theory *or* the theory is misleading.

If then the Tajfel and Turner theory has application to school pupils, it is to a smaller percentage than the bottom 25% in France and Japan. With our numbers we would have had too few cell entries to examine the perceptions and evaluations of the bottom 10%, 5% or 1%. It would appear from these data that generally speaking the bottom 25% do not see themselves as «failures» to such an extent that they are in a state of revolt or rebellion against the system.

Plausible as the theory is, its relevance does not constitute a mass phenomenon in any of the three countries.

That said, LA pupils are very clearly less committed to school than are HA pupils and their general evaluations of themselves are lower. These results are consistent with those reported by Bell and Perret-Clermont (1985). The simplest conclusion would be that it is their experiences in school that has lowered their satisfaction with themselves but with these data only, the direction of causality is not determinable.

The depressed level of self-esteem is most pronounced for the English, as is shown both by the significant interactions between nationality and attainment and by the below average English means.

We have already referred to the potential irony of this national difference. The system which explicitly claims to be child-centred rather than curriculum led and which is concerned «to meet the needs of individual children» and to match the subject, level and methods to these needs is in fact the system which shows the greatest gradient in general self-esteem and in commitment to school.

The explanations to be offered here are speculative and stand in need of much more evidence, but they are sufficiently important to warrant exposition. They are important because they imply that a whole system in a modern society can establish an approach to schooling which has the opposite effects to those intended. This state of affairs can happen because the society consistently fails to collect and evaluate evidence relevant to its ideological commitment: the danger is that a government and its ministry (in London) can define what is true in terms of its beliefs rather than in terms of the experience of the children in school. This is not to imply that government is hypocritical in that it is saying «equal opportunity for all» whilst taking steps to be selective. It could be quite different. The Plowden Report (Advisory Council for Education, 1967) developed a romantic neoPiagetian view of children and their development that in extreme form presumes that the child's innate (?) interests and curiosity will suffice to select and motivate its learning; each child is best left to re-discover

the history and knowledge of its culture, supported by its schooling but relying on its own initiative. While such forces may be one component of the nature of children, it is not the only one. If children also benefit from structured learning tasks, staged so that they see their own progress, if they need knowledge of results as rewards and incentives, if they can learn to enjoy learning through groups and in groups, if they can learn to discipline themselves to learn what they have no wish to learn, then any system must take both, sets of aspects into account, it has to specify its aims in terms compatible with the psychology of children and evaluate whether its means are compatible with those aims. Whilst we have no evidence on the extent to which English children develop «individuality», they do not appear to have such a clear cultural identity as French or Japanese pupils, and the evidence here is that the English LA pupils see themselves as the least competent at solving problems they encounter.

Why are French LA pupils not more self-deprecatory and more antischool? Why do they continue to see themselves as more capable of solving problems? Paradoxically, the French curriculum-led Collège system leaves the responsibility for keeping up and learning with pupils; within the limits of their capacities and dispositions, it is up to them whether they learn what is required. The frequent testing gives clear indications of their learning. Unlike England, with its expressed concern for the development of the whole child, French schools appear to concentrate on the child as pupil. A clear separation of the sub-role of pupil from that of person means that any evaluations of the sub-role need not extend beyond that. In school pupils are expected to behave themselves and to apply themselves to their learning. What is to be taught is not negotiable and tailored to interest the pupils lest they become bored and misbehave. From our data, neither LA or HA French pupils were in fact less interested or more bored than their English peers, and they behaved as well. (The schools we have seen were certainly less vandalised than their English equivalents.) The emphasis on the learning role of pupils in French schools is consistent with the complementary data on primary teachers reported by Broadfoot and Osborn (in press).

The notion that the main job of French teachers is to teach emerges clearly from their results. (Teaching is only one of 12 aspects in the role that the British government wishes to incorporate into its contract for teachers in England and Wales.) It would appear that not doing well in school need not result in pupils becoming anti-school and developing compensatory behaviour to re-enhance their self-esteem. We suspect that French parents, peers, and significant others show a respect for LA pupils as persons to an extent that is not true in England; such LA pupils may make lower evaluations of themselves than their HA peers, but they are still French persons with all that this implies for their *amour propre*.

Japan appears to share with France the strength of its culture, something to be experienced only by participating in it in some measure. It may be appropriate to make four main points about Japanese «failures» not forming minority sub-cultures in junior high school. First, the 15+ selection has still not been made and even poorly performing pupils may still hope to do well at the transition. Second, the formation of a minority sub-culture is almost unthinkable in the Japanese culture. The teachers, the parents, the neighbours, the peers and even the press present a unified front of a strong and positive value for «education». Any 13 or 14 year old who dropped out would be on his or her own; the options would be suicide or to join the underworld. There are no semi-delinquent sub-cultures to join. The third reason is particularly speculative. So far as we know there is no study that explores Japanese beliefs about the determinants of differential academic performance. All one heard about during a brief visit was «effort». Pupils could be reprimanded for lack of effort. No mention was made of ability. This may mean that pupils need not be ashamed of not doing well provided they have invested large amounts of time in study. Fourth, since Japanese culture is so strongly integrative and concerned to maintain cooperative values, pupils who do not gain entry to senior high schools remain valued and appreciated members of the group. There is a sense in which every Japanese remains a member of the in-group by virtue of being Japanese.

What do their low scores on self-evaluation mean? Clearly LA Japanese pupils were towards the negative pole of the scale and HA pupils were lower than their foreign peers. We are inclined to interpret this as modesty rather than shame, even for LA pupils. It is for other people to comment favourably about you; it is quite improper to do so on your own behalf.

Japanese education clearly is concerned with the whole person. Japanese values are explicitly referred to, both in the moral education component of the curriculum, and in the discourse of the teachers. They are built into the running of the school via the various pupil committees and groups that are responsible for the domestic running of the school and the extra-curricular activities; every pupil is included into such organising, decision making and execution. Relative academic incompetence is no barrier to being a good pupil in this wider sense.

Doubtless both French and Japanese junior high schools could be improved educationally, and life could be better for the pupils, but relevant suggestions are best left to insiders. Foreigners can best serve to highlight the strengths. Low attainers in France and Japan clearly have difficulties and their experiences of school are less satisfying than those of their high attaining peers, but perhaps the systems act to minimise the ill consequences of the selection and differentiation that occurs. Both appear to avoid blaming the child or the family. Any normative system that rations success decides its own rates of success and failure. What is not pre-determined is who succeeds and who fails, but for every child who changes from failure to success another must come down. If there is to be rationing and selection, what is important is that no more harm is done to the successful or unsuccessful than is necessary.

From our data the English are creating more unnecessary difficulties for their unsuccessful pupils than the French or the Japanese.

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APPENDIX

PERCEPTION AND ASPIRATION

The two questionnaires «What you are like» and «What you would like to be» included the following items, each as a 7-point Semantic Differential. Written explanatory instructions prefaced each questionnaire. The second set generally substituted «I would like to...» for «I...» Hence item 1 became «I would like to enjoy school work — I would not want to enjoy school work».

1. I enjoy school work — I do not like school work
2. I cheat a lot in tests — I never cheat in tests
3. There is nothing that really gives me great satisfaction — There are events, people and things that make me feel very satisfied
4. Most people think well of me — Most people do not think well of me
5. I never drink alcohol — I drink a lot of alcohol
6. I do very well in school tests — I do badly in school tests
7. I am not very self-confident — I have lots of confidence in myself
8. I enjoy vandalising public property — I never vandalise public property
9. I try to do as little work as possible in school — I try to do as much work as possible in school
10. I am interested in my school work — I am not interested in my school work
11. I am awful at school work — I am very good at school work
12. I behave well in class — I mess about a lot in class
13. I smoke heavily — I do not smoke
14. I do not care at all about my school work — I care about my work at school
15. I draw on the walls or on the tables — I never draw on the walls or on the tables at school
16. I like myself as I am — I do not like myself as I am

IDENTITY: STABILITY, AGENCY, EVALUATION

1. When you think about you are now compared with this time last year, what would you say about yourself?
I haven't changed: I am much the same
I have changed a bit, but not in respect of things which are important to me
I have changed a bit in respect of things which are important to me
I really have changed a lot and feel I am quite different
2. When you think about the problems that come your way and how you react to them, what do you say to yourself most often?
It's not worth trying to sort that out—I'm almost sure I won't be able to
I could try to do something, but I doubt if I'll succeed
I shall try to sort it out and I should be able to manage it
I want to sort that out and I'm sure I can
3. Taking into account everything you are capable of doing both in and out of school, and taking into account all that you are, good points and faults, how do you see yourself at present?

1. On the whole, I do not think highly of myself, I find almost nothing goes right for me, and often I am fed up with myself.
2. On the whole, I do not think very highly of myself. Not a lot goes right for me and at times I get fed up with myself.
3. A lot goes right for me and at times I'm pleased with myself.
4. On the whole, I think highly of myself. I find almost everything goes right for me and generally I'm pleased with myself.

ATTITUDE TO SCHOOL: ANSWERS: YES, NO, DON'T KNOW

1. Do you look forward to going to school most days?
2. Do you get fed up with teachers telling you what you can and can't do?
3. Do your teachers take an interest in teaching you?
4. Are there many interesting things to do in school?
5. Do some of your teachers take an interest in you as a person?
6. Do you think most of what you are learning will be useful to you?
7. Do your teachers forget you are growing up and treat you like kids?
8. Are you bored much of the time at school?