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Knowing Your Mind: teachers, students and the language of ability

PATRICK YARKER

ABSTRACT This article considers how pervasive remains the idea of fixed innate ability in relation to state education, and criticises on ethical and other grounds the language of ability as currently heard.

> *Mind is primarily a verb.*
> (John Dewey)

For a few months immediately after I left full-time teaching I kept a scrapbook of cuttings from the *Times Educational Supplement* (*TES*), examples of the language of ability. My experience suggested it had become merely routine, an unconsidered practice, for a student (or a class, or even a whole cohort of students) to be designated within school as of high or average or low ability. This act of designation seemed to me to have lost any note of qualification, or acknowledgement of tentativeness, which might once have signalled between colleagues disquiet about the procedure of ability-labelling. After two decades of National Curriculum assessment and levelling, and the resurgence of IQ-style baseline testing, reservations seemed to have evaporated. To speak the language of ability now excited no concerns. On the contrary, to speak thus affirmed professional competence, while to question that language and the system of ability-labelling risked revealing oneself as pedagogically naïve.

From September 2004 until February 2005 I culled items found in the *TES* which categorised individuals or groups of students in terms of ability, or used language which stated, implied or grounded itself in the idea that students could be arranged straightforwardly and with precision along a presumed spectrum of ability. The existence of such a spectrum was not argued for or justified in any scrap I gathered; it was taken for granted. The 'ability range', the 'spread of ability': such things were too real, established and obvious to need explaining.

In the main I collected items written so far as I could tell by teachers, or which directly quoted teachers. Each item drew on the notion that a student or group of students is endowed with a given quantum of 'ability' (sometimes called 'potential'), variable from student to student but constructed in the

language as fixed in each individual. Some students are said to 'have' more, others less. This quantum, ability, is most commonly spoken of as a general characteristic of the student or group, though it can also be narrowed to become a judgement about ability in a particular subject area. The language of ability implies that the order of magnitude of this quantum in an individual or a group can be readily and accurately identified and agreed upon. It mobilises an understanding of ability as defining the student (or student group) any time, anywhere. Irrespective of context the student or group is said to *be* a certain ability. Each sustains their existence at this level; it is a hallmark of their being.

Towards an Ethical Practice?

This operative notion, and the language which expresses and perpetuates it, affords teachers a ready way (and one recommended by the Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted]) to classify and so prepare to encounter their many and various students. It provides teachers a way to understand each other as they talk about those students. It tenders an explanation for individual differences of attainment, or perhaps for differing attitudes towards or engagement with the curriculum, or aspects of it. It is the sheet anchor securing perceptions of under-achievement. It serves to justify decisions about which students are granted or denied certain sorts of educational experiences, and legitimises the hierarchical approach to student grouping (by ability stream, or set, or table) sanctioned by policy. It can also be heard declaring itself as a gesture towards ethical practice: an attempt to meet the individual needs of different students. Permeating the institution of state education, the language of ability inducts and conditions new teachers in how students are to be perceived and defined. Spoken at all levels within a school, validated by its materialisation in ability groupings and versions of in-class differentiation and hence integral to the way the school goes about its daily business, the language of ability is more than just a way of using words. It is an authorised public articulation of the student. The language of ability makes available how the student is known and can come to know herself.

Here are some of the examples I collected. They may serve to begin to illustrate how widely spoken, secure and unconsidered the language of ability seems to be.

The Head of English in a London school, reviewing a reading resource, said it was 'aimed at all KS3 abilities ... [with] much to appeal to both able and less keen readers' (*TES*, 24 September 2004). The Chair of HMC Conference (a gathering of heads of fee-paying schools) opined in October that 'highly-trained "academic teachers" should be given special contracts and be allowed to focus solely on top-set groups', prompting a university professor and member of the government's numeracy taskforce to comment, 'Where there is a shortage of maths and physics teachers, perhaps it would be better for higher-qualified teachers to teach the more able' (*TES*, 8 October 2004, pp.16-17). Later in the month, an item devoted to helping teachers find or change jobs included advice

from an Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) and also from a teacher-author. They advised applicants faced with the prospect of teaching a class as part of the selection process to 'get as much information about the students as you can ... Is the class mixed-ability or are students set? Ask for information on gifted and talented and special needs students – this should help you plan your lesson to meet students' needs'. Applicants are also prompted to: '[s]pread questions around, identify some of the more able students and ask them more complex questions which will provide evidence of your ability to differentiate' (*TES*, 22 October 2004). A report about the EPPI Centre's review of research into the impact of the Numeracy Hour and strategy on KS1 pupils quoted a university reader in maths education as saying: 'Most of the Government's claimed improvement in numeracy has come from teaching to the test and from improvements by pupils in the middle. The two ends of the ability range have been very badly served' (*TES*, 29 October 2004, p. 6).

In November an article drew attention to the way raising teacher expectations had helped boost attainment:

> Twenty-four pupils took GCSE religious studies and sociology in Yr 9 this summer, yielding a crop of A* and A grades ... But these children are not the most able pupils at a selective school. [Their school] is a state comprehensive with mixed-ability pupils, but skewed towards the lower end of the ability range, on a disadvantaged council estate ... Selected by baseline data, typically [these twenty-four students'] key stage 2 SATs English levels were 4b, 4a or 5c with one or two pupils at 5b. (*TES*, 5 November 2004)

Several assumptions converge here: that there is such a readily recognisable thing as 'the ability range' and that locating an entire school population 'towards the lower end' of it need give no one pause; that 'mixed-ability' pupils cannot also be the 'most able'; that relative positions in the class structure can operate as a proxy for levels of 'ability'. Furthermore, the piece is framed so that its impact derives in part from the surprise sure to be generated on discovering that pupils of the given background secured the grades they did. Everyday assumptions are here confounded by the evidence: supposedly 'low-ability' pupils secured A* and A grades at GCSE level, and in year 9. Yet somehow these assumptions escape unscathed. The article has nothing to say about how its own implications detonate the everyday way of thinking about ability.

A review in the same month considered three books whose titles indicated they were to do with 'able and talented' children, 'gifted children', and 'exceptionally gifted children', though the nicely nuanced pecking order implied was passed over in silence. The reviewer had no quarrel with the notions of 'giftedness' employed, and recommended at least one of the texts to 'teachers of able children' (*TES*, 12 November 2004).

In the first *TES* of 2005 a teacher was quoted thus: 'The exercise allowed for considerable differentiation. The most able attempted to fit their travel ambitions to their budgets – the farthest one went trekking in the Himalayas.

Less able students researched package holidays' (*TES*, 7 January 2005). A 12-page New Year supplement, *TES Extra*, gave advice and encouragement to new teachers. It counselled them to 'Keep parents onside. Involve parents in the process [of National Curriculum test preparation] ... Keep them feeling that their children are on course to reach their potential' (*TES Extra*, January 2005, p. 2). A teacher-author noted that 'It's incredibly frustrating when you encounter pupils who are achieving less than their personal best. You watch some of the least able children drag themselves to the finishing line ... while some more able pupils lounge around for most of the lesson ... Set extension tasks: you are probably differentiating for the weaker pupils ... but don't forget the more able' (*TES Extra*, January 2005, pp. 8-9). The Appointments section in mid January contained several model interview questions for would-be teachers, compiled by '*TES* experts'. One asked, 'How would you handle the most able children, and those who don't want to learn?' (*TES,* 14 January 2005, Appointments Section 1, p. 18) In a piece about how to help pupils revise, an English teacher wrote: 'Regardless of ability, students can at times fail to recognise that the focus of a question is something they are familiar with' (*TES*, 4 February 2005). In an article considering the impact of Black & Wiliam's study, *Inside the Black Box*, Professor David Hopkins, then the Education Secretary's chief advisor, was quoted as saying, 'There is a moral purpose behind testing children and helping them to fulfil their potential' (*TES*, 18 February 2005, p. 18).

Reducing the Student

How are teachers to know their students? And how are students to be known? The language of ability produces or makes public each student as endowed innately with a given quantum of 'ability', a 'potential' which can be 'reached' or 'fulfilled' though not exceeded. The broad designation of a student's general ability is assumed to be warranted by the results of various kinds of testing and teacher assessment translated into National Curriculum (NC) levels and sub-levels. Handed down for each level is a set of descriptions of what the student supposedly knows, understands and can do. (But how securely? Under what circumstances? To what extent? In whose company? Together with what else?) These descriptions are themselves an attempt at defining, in brief and yet authoritatively, the protean and dynamic state of agency, intention, past experience and present consciousness which is the individual student at a given moment.

The numerical NC level is the reduction of a reduction: a number signifying a set of written descriptions, signifying in turn the living student. Yet it overshadows the student to the extent that is may substitute for her, and even stand against her, in discussions of her educational development. How often during a parental consultation a teacher begins by telling me my child's NC level. She 'is' a level such and such. She 'is' of such-and-such ability. At best this might be the conclusion of a conversation detailing what the teacher had observed my child to do and be in the subject. But to embark like this on a

conversation about educational growth is to privilege the official codified way of knowing, and to diminish (if not deny) other ways my child's being in the lessons might be known. It is to shrink-wrap the student rather than to broaden, deepen or enrich what is known about her through other kinds of evidence or observation the teacher might gather, draw on and be informed by. These other ways of knowing, products of the teacher's unique brand of attention and thought, might tell me something distinctive. They might allow me and my child some footing in the conversation, and a means to begin to share and exchange understandings. Such dialogue is pre-empted, or made redundant, by the announcement of the NC level.

The language of ability has deep historical roots and enduring tenacity. Its practical expression, the grouping of students according to their 'ability', has been challenged by recourse to 'mixed-ability' grouping. Yet the way of knowing students which the language of ability constructs can also inform this approach and vitiate its oppositional thrust. A 'mixed-ability' class may gather together students still, however, understood to 'be' of various levels of 'ability'. Thus the argument is displaced from one focused on the validity and function of the very idea of 'ability' to become one concentrated on the relative merits of supposedly more homogeneous or more divergent groupings.

Interesting Byways

When the validity and function of the idea of ability is challenged, the common riposte is that ascertaining a student's ability is for the student's benefit. David Hopkins, erstwhile chief advisor to the Education Secretary, speaks in the *TES* of 'a moral purpose' to the public testing regime on the grounds that it helps students fulfil their potential. Those who take this view hold that calibre of mind must be correctly matched to curricular content otherwise the work will be too easy or too hard for the student to prosper. This view construes the mind not only as already of a certain calibre, but as continuing to be such. The mind, so seen, is static in its integrity, a light bulb of a given wattage. Such a view influences what is to be fairly expected in school of the mind in question, how bright or dim will be its lustre, and hence what is to be offered it and accepted from it. This way to know students emerges from psychometrics and mental (or 'intelligence') testing, whose original impulse and prime mission was the selection of students for matching to one of a number of supposedly appropriate curriculum offers:

> The main uses to which intelligence tests have been put are to select children for special instruction in schools for the defective, to assist in selecting children for admission to High Schools and Secondary Schools, and to grade classes into groups capable of undertaking various types of curricula. In schools in which the latter plan is followed, a threefold 'multiple track' is the common arrangement. There are three tracks through the school, one suited for children of high I.Q., one for the median group, one for those of low I.Q. In the

> intelligent group, there are two alternatives open, one being to go ahead at the rapid pace of which these children are quite capable, and finish the school curriculum at an earlier age … [or] to have … not an accelerated but an enriched programme, so that while traversing the same main route as the normal group, and at the same rate, they find time to deviate into numerous interesting byways of study. (Thomson, 1924, p. 190)

Contemporary models may be more refined than the triple-track approach of the 1920s, and discriminatory intentions more covert, but the underlying way of knowing students, and of presenting students to themselves to be known, still holds sway. The school where I first qualified to teach has gone so far as to rebuild itself in the image of the ability paradigm, becoming three segregated mini-schools on a single site, with each mini-school given over to a particular kind of student as defined by the school, or rather by that way of knowing students which the language of ability expresses:

> Ashdown is a school where students take pride in all their achievements gained through creativity, originality and perseverance. Students follow a highly personalised curriculum consisting of an exciting range of both academic and vocational qualifications. At KS3 learning will be skills-based with a core focus on literacy and numeracy … In Sherwood School students follow a highly personalised curriculum that is tailored to students' interests and strengths. This stimulating and innovative curriculum is designed to support both academic and vocational pathways in Key Stage 4 allowing students to reach their full potential and open a world of possibilities for their future … Students at Delamere School will achieve outstanding academic success and develop into highly ambitious, creative, confident and happy individuals.
> (Crown Woods College Prospectus, p. 6)

The language of ability would categorise and normalise; it works always to distinguish and then divide. Its impulse is to separate out. My *TES* examples show as much: weaker students distinguished from those more able; the most able from those who (at least in the given context) apparently don't want to learn. Any given population of students is conceived as a set of discrete self-consistent sub-groups ('students of all abilities') ready to be sorted. Members of one sub-group cannot also belong to another: the most able cannot also be the least able. There are no hybrids. Given the hybrid nature of reality this may make for difficulties. That reading resource with 'much to appeal to both able and less keen readers': would it have worked for my 'unable' but keen reader, or my 'able' reader who nonetheless was less than keen on reading? That 'more complex question' which will provide evidence of an ability on my part to differentiate: should I ask it in order (how straightforward!) to identify which students are more able, or should I identify those students another way and then

direct the question solely at them? And should one of the less able interrupt with an answer, am I and my ability schema in the wrong, or is she?

The Joy of the Discoverer

Early on in his book about trying to train a goshawk, T.H. White outlines the traditional technique he thought was needed to teach so wild and unmasterable a raptor. The hawk must be deprived of sleep, or 'watched', by the likewise sleepless trainer, perhaps for three or four nights together and 'all the time … treated with more than every courtesy, more than every kindness and consideration' until it ceased trying to fly from the fist and consented to perch there and sleep. White sets out on this course, and finds: 'there was much interest and joy – the joy of the discoverer – much to think about, and very much to observe' (White, 1951, pp. 16-17). Now, training is not the same as teaching, and hawks are not humans, but it seems to me that White is on to something when he speaks, in the context of a kind of educational commitment, about 'the joy of the discoverer'. Teachers may recognise this joy as through observation and thought they 'discover' their students, a process which seems to me intrinsic to the work, and implicit in the act of teaching a class over time. I would have it part of a teacher's teacherhood to be always open to this joy, for it reminds that the student remains unknown despite the ability label, and hence to be discovered. The ability label, and the language of ability, foreclose the student's future (or strive to do so). They sum up what a teacher can expect to find. They displace discovery with confirmation.

The outlook expressed in the language of ability has been found unlawful, though not in Britain. Judge Skelly Wright, a US court circuit judge, handed down the following remarkable opinion over forty years ago in a civil action to do with student grouping by ability:

> [A] system that presumes to tell a student what his ability is and what he can successfully learn incurs an obligation to take account of the psychological damage that can come from such an encounter between the student and the school; and to be certain that it is in a position to decide whether the student's deficiencies are true, or only apparent. (Block & Dworkin, 1977, p. 359)

For however neutrally intended, ability labels are received as summative judgements on the whole mind's whole powers, and hence on the self. They carry authority. Expressed as numbers and related to definitions of skill, knowledge, understanding and performance bearing the imprimatur of government and hence the social order, NC levels seem beyond challenge. By quantifying, they purport to assay the mind's capacities and faculties, making public and available for comparison its quality in a society which particularly prizes this aspect of the person. A weighing of the mind, such labels weigh on the heart. A recent analysis of the assessment system in this country took a similar view to that of Judge Skelly:

> The impact of assessment on the lives of individuals is becoming more widespread and serious with its growing importance in the world … Thus there is arguably as strong a moral imperative on educators to satisfy themselves that the techniques being used are 'safe' and beneficial as there is on a nuclear scientist, or a biologist working on genetically-modified crops. (Broadfoot & Black, 2004, p. 16)

The techniques of assessment validated by and articulated through the language of ability remain, in my view, neither safe nor beneficial. 'Ability' as a discourse establishes one of the conditions for learning, as surely as do the discrete buildings of each separated school within Crown Woods College. These conditions would determine how the student learns who she is, and in the case especially of those deemed 'low ability' are, in the resonant phrase Jo Boaler repeated, 'psychological prisons' from which some students never escape (Boaler, 2005). The effects of the ability discourse are social as well as psychological, and work to reproduce social inequalities, most notably of class. Such discursive power needs challenging from both sides at once: with the evidence of how it docks and whittles educational growth, and with its failure to account for all those who exceeded what the discourse decreed was possible for someone of their (dis)'ability'.

What Needs Tending

But more than this, the language of ability and the system of ability-labelling are an affront to that which should most fundamentally concern teachers, namely the mind itself – at least if the mind be understood in the way the American philosopher and educationalist John Dewey would have us understand it:

> For in its non-technical use, 'mind' denotes every mode and variety of interest in, and concern for, things: practical, intellectual and emotional …. Consider its inclusiveness. It signifies memory. We are reminded of this and that. Mind also signifies attention. We not only keep things in mind, but we bring mind to bear on our problems and perplexities. Mind also signifies purpose; we have a mind to do this and that. Nor is mind in these operations something purely intellectual. The mother minds her baby; she cares for it with affection. Mind is care in the sense of solicitude, anxiety, as well as of active looking after things that need to be tended … Mind is primarily a verb. It denotes all the ways in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves. (Dewey, 1934, p. 263)

By reminding that 'mind is primarily a verb' Dewey asserts a truth about our inborn human nature: our intentionality towards the world and resolve to make

sense. In this, it seems to me, mind will elude the language of ability, though not the social consequences such language is employed to validate. The student who 'is' a level 4, or averagely able or whatever, is better understood as really not. The use in school of the language of ability, the practice of ability-labelling and all that follows, needs eradicating because the language of ability would pretend to determine authoritatively and, for certain central purposes of the institution quite adequately, the calibre of each mind. It would proclaim how well and how far a mind can make sense, rendering the mind more noun than verb. In doing so it mutes the conversation teachers might want to be more concerned with in relation to students and their educational growth, one marked by careful discrimination of 'ability' from particular attainments; by more tentative, partial (and so, paradoxically, more accurate), context-bound offers of knowledge about what a student may know, understand and be able to do; and by an ethics radically different from that enunciated by the current language of 'ability'.

A foundational element of the ethical thought of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is the argument he makes about the relationship with the other person. For Levinas, an ethical relationship requires not knowing the other person, or rather recognising the other person as infinitely unknowable, as always 'exceeding the idea of the other in me' (Levinas, 1961, p. 50). The language of ability attempts to define a student's Otherness. It would, in Levinas's language, 'thematise' her and so enable her to be considered in the way a known object is considered. In this light the language of ability appears not as helpful diagnosis, but as a species of appropriation (which is to say of violence), and as such unethical, even before the political questions arise which expose how ability-labelling works to reproduce class and other social inequalities in schools:

> Our relation with [the other] certainly consists in wanting to understand him, but this relation exceeds the confines of understanding. Not only because, besides curiosity, knowledge of the other also demands sympathy or love, ways of being that are different from impassive contemplation, but also because, in our relation to the other, the latter does not affect us by means of a concept. The other is a being and counts as such … The other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor. The two relations are merged. In other words, addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other. To understand a person is already to speak to him … Speech delineates an original relation. (Levinas, 2006, p. 5)

A Levinasian ethics reveals the dialogic nature of all attempts at knowing the other person. But when the school rises to meet the student by speaking the language of ability dialogue is precluded. The language of ability asserts school students as finally intelligible according to the calibrations of NC levels, psychometric tests and normative statistical curves. It assimilates Otherness to a

version of what is the Same. This move forestalls a conversation on other terms and baulks rather than uncovers my ethical responsibility as teacher to the student-as-Other.

To honour that responsibility and attempt to meet it, what is needed of teachers, it has been argued (by, among others, Sharon Todd, 2001), is the ability to create relationships in class which retain susceptibility to the absolute otherness which denotes each student. The maintenance of that alterity, along with the joy of discovery which is always partial, might be the basis for a more ethical system than currently pertains. Though amid all the talk of setting and testing, predicted grades, league table positions and RAISEonline data, who speaks of ethics and is heard?

Yet the discourse of ethics exists, to disquiet all other discourses with its unevadable and well-nigh-impossible requirements.

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PATRICK YARKER is Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia, and a researcher at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts. *Correspondence*: Patrick Yarker, Dols Hole Cottage, Hall Road, Beetley, Dereham NR20 4DE, United Kingdom (patyarker@aol.com).