
Book Reviews

Ability-grouping in Primary Schools: case studies and critical debates

RACHEL MARKS, 2016

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Wynne: Their brain's bigger. And they're cleverer and better ... I don't know, it just happens. They were born like that. They were born clever.

Zackary: Some people are just not born clever.

Yolanda: Some people are really good at maths and some people aren't that good at maths. Probably it sometimes runs in the family.

(Year 4, Avenue Primary School, bottom set) (p. 23)

It is difficult to read this excellent and important book without getting very angry indeed. In a reasoned, matter-of-fact and non-polemical fashion, Rachel Marks lays bare the harm that is done, particularly to children, by the ability-grouping practices that are becoming endemic in mathematics lessons in primary schools in England, now spreading down even into the education of four-year-olds, and by the associated thinking about fixed ability which both is engendered by and supports such practices.

The book is part of a series *Critical Guides for Teacher Educators* designed to support teacher educators in helping their students to *unthink* their taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching and children. As well as being a mathematics education researcher, Marks is herself a teacher educator, and it is clear from the structure and accessibility of the text that she knows the field of practice well. Without over-simplifying the argument of the book, the language used is simple, clear and direct. The book is highly readable and organised into short chapters, each of which begins with the critical issues to be addressed. The text of the chapters is interspersed with moments for reflection and, after an *In a nutshell* summary, each chapter returns to the critical issues and poses reflective questions on them.

The book draws on research that Marks undertook as part of her doctoral studies. She spent a year observing in Year 4 (ages 8-9) and Year 6 (ages 10-11) classes in three case-study primary schools. She claims that, by being 'a constant

face in the schools' (p. 4), teachers and children alike began to take little notice of her presence; and the quality of her data suggests that this is true. She had previously taught in a primary school and clearly knows how to talk with children: the openness and honesty with which the children speak makes the text poignant and very telling.

After an introductory chapter, Marks moves on to summarise the key research findings. Inevitably, much of the relevant research has come from studies in secondary schools where ability-grouping practices for mathematics have had a much longer tradition. She notes that who gets allocated to which ability group is influenced by extraneous factors such as stereotyped expectations and behavioural (mis)conduct. Summer-born children and children from particular social and cultural groups are significantly over-represented in the lower groups. In addition, movement between sets is rare. Consequently, decisions taken early in children's lives frame their opportunities for attainment throughout schooling and continue to exert influence beyond school as a factor determining life chances.

Marks argues convincingly that both teachers and children espouse *fixed-ability thinking*. This thinking is used to justify ability groupings which otherwise might appear unjust and unfair and is also in turn constructed by those practices. We saw above that the children believe that mathematical ability is something you are born with: 'I don't think there's anything I could do to make myself better' (p. 23). Similar views are held by their teachers: '... some people are not as intelligent as other people' (p. 26). As has been pointed out elsewhere – for example, within the *Learning Without Limits* project (<https://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk/>) – such views breed a sense of hopelessness in both teachers and children.

The belief that children are of fixed ability, that they are stuck with what they are born with, leads to severely restricted learning opportunities for the lowest attainers. Teachers, acting out of a sense of care and compassion for their lower-attaining pupils, seek to protect them from encountering challenging mathematics and thus, unintentionally, deprive them of the mathematical experiences essential for progress. Marks provides vignettes of classroom practice that highlight the ways in which these limiting processes come about. She gives vivid accounts of classroom incidents in contexts of both within- and across-class ability grouping where fixed-ability thinking determines how children are perceived and therefore the learning experiences available to them.

With the advent of high-stakes testing, associated league tables and a punitive inspection regime, schools, in perfectly understandable if illegitimate ways, operate systems of educational triage: teachers who are considered to be the best in the school are allocated to those ability groups which are perceived as being on the cusp of attaining key test grades, and such classes may be also advantaged in other ways. Sometimes the triage disadvantages top sets in relatively marginal ways, but in general it is the lowest attainers who get the worst deal. They are 'beyond hope' of contributing to the school's league table position and consequently are often taught by teaching assistants rather than

teachers and may end up wandering around the school looking for a place in which the lesson can happen, perhaps ending up in an unsuitable and ill-equipped venue.

One of the most painful chapters in the book relates to the way in which relationships between teachers and children and between children themselves are fractured by ability-grouping practices. Traditionally, a primary class teacher works with her children across all subjects and throughout the vast majority of their week. She therefore gets to know her children well, becoming aware of many aspects of their life outside school and the things that may be worrying them – and the things that are fascinating and delighting them. There is a heart-rending extract when Marks reports a conversation with one of the bottom-set Year 4 children. She asked him what he thought about in mathematics lessons. He initially replied, ‘What is the answer and how to get there.’ But he continued, ‘And then there’s this. I think about this all the time.’ He gave an extended and highly articulate account of his fascination with a robotic dinosaur, an account in which, as Marks points out, he engaged with some quite complex mathematical ideas involving ratio and proportion, time and measurement, and in which he used ideas and quantities in excess of those of which he was normally thought capable. Had he been learning mathematics with his class teacher, there is a chance she would have known about his passion and been able to incorporate this higher-level mathematical thinking into both his learning and his sense of self.

Marks argues that neither ‘top-set’ pedagogy nor ‘bottom-set’ pedagogy provide optimal learning spaces. For example, children in the top set are expected to work quickly and competitively without pausing to understand and make sense of their work; and children in the bottom set are expected to work with concrete materials even if they are clearly not appropriate, often in silence, in small class groups without any possibility of interacting with their peers. Both of these damage any sense of being in a learning community. Often a primary class teacher will prioritise enabling all the children in a classroom to work effectively together. However, in bottom sets children are typically not allowed to talk to each other; talking becomes equated with behaving badly:

I don’t really know, he thinks me and Saul are like always bad, but we’re not sometimes bad, like if I get stuck on a question I ask him, Saul, what’s this, and he’ll think we’re talking, he doesn’t even let us speak, we say ‘he’s trying to help me’, but he doesn’t let us speak.
(Year 6, Avenue Primary, bottom set) (p. 55)

Top-set children also struggle to help and support each other because of the fast pace demanded. Praise is allocated for being the fastest without regard to helping others (and sometimes without regard to whether or not the work is correct, much less understood).

If you say I’m stuck on this one they’re like oh my god it’s easy but they don’t help you or anything, they carry on with what they’re doing because it’s almost like, for them, a race ... and Miss Grundy

always gives them loads of praise and a team point. (Year 6, Avenue Primary, top set) (p. 52)

But top sets are unfriendly spaces in other ways too. Behaviours which would not be allowed in a typical primary class become permitted. When a peer makes a mistake or gives an incorrect answer, booing and jeering occur without penalty:

Megan: I think it's more embarrassing for the people who are, who know, who are good at maths and they get something wrong, like today because Martha was doing the maths the other way she got the answer wrong and because she's quite good at maths the class were going oohhhh and boooo.

Olivia: Yeah and like, especially if you get an answer wrong then everyone shouts no, no, no and they go yes, yes, yes, it's like a zoo in the classroom it's terrible. (Year 6, Avenue Primary, top set) (p. 53)

Marks, who is very careful throughout the book to be respectful towards the teachers who accepted her into their classrooms, points out that the same teachers would not normally allow such behaviour in their main classes. What was happening was that the teacher and the children were 'co-constructing a very particular top set culture where children ... mocking, rather than supporting, peers was essentially encouraged' (p. 53). Such a culture of humiliation is good for no one and should be anathema to anyone engaged in the business of education, whether as learner, a teacher or a school leader.

So, how it is possible that caring and compassionate people, who are working very hard for what they believe to be the benefit of their children, can find themselves supporting such ways of being? There are two interconnected things going on here, each of which feeds off the other. Clearly, segregating children into differentiated ability groups is part of the problem. But, as Marks points out, this practice is both predicated on and productive of fixed-ability thinking. She suggests that it is not enough just to change organisational structures or the language we use to describe each other. These are essential prerequisites; but without a change in the way we think about human capacity, without a move to *unthink* the common-sense, taken-for-granted assumptions in which we are all drenched, less will be achieved than could be. Ability-based labelling and the associated stratification practices are endemic in our culture and it is not to be wondered at that parents, teachers and children follow fixed-ability thinking. Teachers in particular are in a very difficult position, 'not only immersed in this ability-dominated world but also facing surveillance and external scrutiny both formally through inspections and appraisal and informally through the media' (p. 65). Like Marks, I respect and sympathise with them.

What I find much harder to forgive – and this is why the book makes me angry – is that politicians and policy makers, who have highly educated assistants to sift through, examine and report on all the available evidence, allow their unthinking, unexamined fixed-ability beliefs to inform the policies they adopt. Thus, a shadow Secretary of State for Education, Tristram Hunt, is quoted in Marks' book:

Schools should use all the tools at their disposal, including streaming in English and maths where that is necessary. There is nothing wrong in recognising that *people are born with different skills and talents*. We need to develop all talents, but it is right to recognise that some talents can be stretched further. (p. 8, emphasis added)

But to end on a positive note: change is difficult but not impossible. This book is intended to make a contribution to helping all teachers, and especially initial teacher education students, challenge deeply embedded fixed-ability beliefs and question inconsistencies between research, policy and practice. Engaging with research, like that presented in this book, which clearly shows the social and psychological harm engendered by fixed-ability thinking and the segregation and stratification which it spawns, is an important part of that process. Teachers have so little time and space within which they might undertake such an enterprise, but it is essential that we all find a way to 're-story' (Stronach et al, 2002, p. 130) ourselves as educational professionals. I recommend this text as essential reading for anyone engaged in such an endeavour.

Hilary Povey

Reference

Stronach, I., Corbin, B., McNamara, O., Stark, S. & Warne, T. (2002) Towards an Uncertain Politics of Professionalism: teacher and nurse identities in flux, *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(1), 109-138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930110100081>

Children's Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC: past, present and future

JENNA GILLETT-SWAN & VICKI COPPOCK (Eds), 2016
Oxford: Symposium Books
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Jenna Gillett-Swan and Vicki Coppock have brought together a very comprehensive critical analysis of the United Nations Child Right Convention (UNCRC) from both conceptual and implementation perspectives. Writers of all seven chapters of this edited book have critically examined the main themes of the UNCRC with examples from educational practice. Examples from Australia,

Finland, Portugal and Sweden not only help readers understand the implementation process of the UNCRC, but they also problematize the UNCRC themes, which were considered to be fairly simple and to be relevant in all contexts.

In Chapter 1, while mainly discussing children's rights to voice and participation as convened by the UNCRC, John I'Anson very succinctly raises the issues related to children's voices presented in research works. Critical examination, he says, has begun to question such texts and raise issues regarding how such texts were produced and to what extent they represent the children's voices. He also asserts that the 'voice' in the UNCRC might be problematic as it appears to have been perceived as producing 'autonomous western individualism'. I'Anson also raises a pertinent issue that presenting a child as a competent actor has in fact begun to create competition with other right bearers such as parents and educators. Another relevant concern that he draws readers' attention to is about the tendency of much literature to associate children's rights with a 'western' lens that gives importance to autonomy and agency. Nevertheless, he also mentions that lately the research literature has been critical about the children's rights agenda. It is therefore very important to view children's rights from indigenous constructs that give importance to different values and relations, according to I'Anson.

In Chapter 2, Louise Gwenneth Phillips gives an overall picture of how Article 42, dedicated to educating both the young and adult about the UNCRC, has been implemented. She found that the initiatives are mostly undertaken by non-government organisations with limited coverage. Phillips has raised a number of important concerns in this chapter. Particularly thought-provoking and challenging is her investigation of discourse in relation to the established knowledge and theories about children and childhood that educators and educationists still admire and the rights perspective that the UNCRC has espoused. For example, Phillips juxtaposes John Locke's notion of the child as a blank slate and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of children as innocent with rights. With these notions, children are supposed to be protected from violence and corruption, moulded in a way that adults think right and taught to reason. In other words, children are innocent and their rights and capabilities need not be respected by adults. Emphasis on the implementation of the right to protection assumes that children are innocent. In this situation, children's right to participation is likely to be overshadowed. After reviewing some programmes, Phillips has identified the use of information technology, openness towards children as they are, their creativity, their lived experiences and their ability to create texts about themselves, as the way forward in educating children and young people on the UNCRC.

In Chapter 3, Nina Thelander focuses on human rights education. Interesting and noteworthy in this chapter are the pedagogical practices designed to teach children's rights in a Swedish context. The first phase (2005-2009) of the Plan of Action of the World Programme for Human Rights Education was aimed at improving the school system by promoting a child-

friendly learning environment. According to Thelander, human rights education is inclusive of knowledge and skills; values, attitudes and behaviour; and action. In other words, human rights education aspires to develop knowledge and skills to practise the learned content and also to enable the learner to strengthen the values which underlie human rights and to take action to defend these rights. Against this backdrop, Thelander discusses the Swedish case. In 2011 Swedish education policy was amended. Along with the requirement of advanced-level knowledge in each subject and the introduction of a new student assessment system, the amended policy document stressed the knowledge of human rights, particularly the UNCRC, as underscored in the Plan of Action. Thelander then goes on to present the way two teachers from two different schools formulated a pedagogical plan for Year 5 and Year 6 students and their parents. The teachers named the project as 'Children's rights in school, children's rights within family, children's rights in different ages and children's rights to children's basic needs'. Although the policy required higher-level content knowledge which in some ways made it difficult to apply different approaches to teaching and learning, teaching through different activities, including group work and interactions, promoted skills and values related to human rights in the pupils. Although the teachers interpreted 'action' as also being able to express one's opinion and be listened to, Thelander observes that this is more about preparing children to defend human rights in the future should this be required. She also observes that in Swedish primary school, human rights education is limited to children's human rights instead of encompassing general human rights and wider content knowledge.

Chapter 4 presents a case of the Finnish classroom where the UNCRC has been turned into pedagogical practices. In this chapter, Reeta Niemi, Kristiina Kumpulainen and Lasse Limpponen begin by explaining the changes brought about by the Basic Education Act which ensures children's participation in curriculum planning. This right is further emphasised in the Finnish preschool and basic education curriculum. In addition to securing pupils' voices and participation in school processes, the national core curriculum emphasises the development of each student's 'investigative, reflective and communicative competencies' and the student's involvement in 'evaluating and developing classroom practices'. In this context, three action research cycles were implemented in a Finnish primary school. Through a 'diamond-ranking method' and 'building wing meeting', students' voices and participation were assured in pedagogical practices. For example, students were engaged in narrative writing, and in taking photographs of classroom practices, to use in evaluation of such practices. This initiative helped teachers and students engage in making decisions related to these classroom practices. The writers also raise a critical point related to the limitations created by the Act and the curriculum in enacting voice and participation through pedagogical practices. They present an example from a maths lesson where students were able to suggest how to improve the teaching and learning practices but not to decide whether or not to do maths. Nevertheless, in the 'building wing meeting' students made decisions

and implemented what they had decided and thus utilised their right to a voice and participation.

In Chapter 5, Joana Lucio and Fernando Ilidio Ferreira present a study on pre-service teachers' views on child rights, participation and the social role of the school in Portugal during a period of economic retrenchment. To set the scene, writers discuss the worsening economy of Portugal and its effect on families and children. They go on to introduce the teacher education programme. The writers have attempted to assess pre-service teacher education from a children's rights perspectives along with the situation of children's participation at school level. Pre-service teacher education participants were the main source of information in this study. As in many teacher-education programmes around the world, the beginner teachers from Portugal also found that pre-service teacher education tended more towards the theoretical. Moreover, implementation of children's right to participation is contingent upon their well-being. This issue is common to many developing countries. While families are suffering from economic hardship, children's motivation to come to school weakens and they come to school without the supplies necessary for learning. In this situation, ensuring children's participation is a great challenge.

In Chapter 6, Gordon Tait and Mallihat Tambyah have presented interesting arguments related to child rights with particular reference to the UNCRC. Their disclosure of the fact that the international instruments of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights of 1948 and the UNCRC were built upon domestic legislation which existed in western industrial countries during the nineteenth century provides enough evidence to examine the UNCRC's applicability in developing countries and/or indigenous communities. Tait and Tambyah argue that ratification of the UNCRC does not necessarily transform societies into an ideal place in terms of children's rights. They have presented Australia as a case in point. However, the three reasons that they think are responsible for slow progress are applicable to other developing countries as well. The first reason is related to the gap between statutory provision and practice, which they call 'governmental'. The government enforced acts, regulations and policies with good intentions but this did not guarantee the result. The second reason is legal. Signing the international instrument does not immediately incorporate the contents of the instrument into domestic laws. The third reason, which is more serious, is 'definitional'. Tait and Tambyah very rightly argue that the sets of rights extended over 54 articles of the UNCRC are not clear enough and need explanations. And even where they seemed self-evident, their 'intention may be subject to debate'. In this respect the writers specifically refer to Article 12 and Article 16, devoted to right to voice and right to privacy respectively. In this chapter, Tait and Tambyah further critically discuss the complexities related to Article 16. Critiquing Rengel's (2013) assertion that 'the right to privacy is grounded in humans' intrinsic and natural needs and is necessary for the orderly functioning of the society' (p. 127), Tait and Tambyah aptly argue that the concept of privacy as such is relevant to a

very western way of thinking and behaviour and draws on western history. They argue that this concept may not be applicable to indigenous communities where, for example, family structures are different. The writers also very convincingly present the contradiction between the notion of privacy and notions of good parenting, which are generally understood as watching their children to find out if they are involved in any wrongdoing and/or to protect them from danger. The same applies to school disciplinary measures. Student surveillance and surveillance through educational data relating to achievement are practised by teachers in order to be considered good teachers. These practices run counter to the children's right to privacy. Tait and Tambyah's observation that children's right to privacy can operate counter to the government's needs compels one to rethink the significance of right to privacy (UNCRC Article 16). On a positive note, the writers conclude that the UNCRC certainly 'serves an important purpose' but not necessarily a legal one.

Chapter 7 focuses on the future of children's rights and educational research in a digital world with the backdrop of the UNCRC. Jenna Gillett-Swan and Vicki Coppock critically discuss the changes brought about by digital development in children's lives and in education, which the people who inscribed the UNCRC had not imagined. These days children have access to the huge pool of information and learning materials on the Internet, so they are likely to be frustrated with the conventional curriculum. Gillett-Swan and Coppock also talk about children's access to and utilisation of social media and the tension with teachers and parents who wish to protect them from the harm that they may consequently be exposed to. The authors very briefly touch upon the digital divide as well and its different implication for the lives of children in developing countries where access to technology is limited. Nevertheless, given its capabilities, the writers believe that despite ethical issues and concern regarding children's protection, the Internet can be an effective tool in educational research as well as a means to encourage children's involvement in research.

As the editors of the book, Gillett-Swan and Coppock also refer back to other chapters while presenting their own arguments. However, their claim that the book 'has drawn on contributions from around the world to represent the global context, relevance and implications of child rights, education research and CRC' (p. 154) is not quite convincing. Some writers certainly talk about the global initiatives to teach the young and adults about children's human rights and human rights in general. But almost all the specific cases and examples in the book are drawn exclusively from European and Australian contexts. The important discourses presented in the book would have been enriched had they drawn on examples from developing and indigenous cultures where child rights visibly collide with traditional values and social systems.

Overall the book is a very useful resource for those who are interested in educational research that involves children. It presents valid discourses and critical insights into the UNCRC and its implementation in education and children's lives. The writers have unearthed contradictions and challenges

associated with definitions of children's rights, specifically 'voice', 'privacy' and 'participation' and how these rights collide with the right to 'protection'.

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