Moving beyond fixed 'ability' assumptions and practices

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Reassessing 'Ability' Grouping: improving practice for equity and attainment

Becky Francis, Becky Taylor and Antonina Tereshchenko, Oxford, Routledge, 2020. 180pp, paperback, £34.99, ISBN 978-1-138-34883-7

I'm told the Department for Education used to fund a summer school for students deemed especially gifted academically. Upon arrival, these young people were sorted at once into higher and lower 'ability' groups …

Government policy-makers are wedded to the notion of an 'ability' hierarchy, and convinced of the folly of educating anyone outside a framework founded on that idea. So it's a tiny triumph to find the word 'ability' quarantined by inverted commas in the title of this book, particularly since it is co-authored by a scholar who now runs the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Those inverted commas declare upfront the questionable nature of the notion of 'ability'. And not before time.

In their book, Becky Francis, Becky Taylor and Antonina Tereshchenko report on a large-scale research project, funded by the EEF, which they undertook (with others) over several years. 'Best practice in grouping students' investigated various effects on young people and their teachers of grouping by prior attainment, and of mixed attainment grouping. It focused particularly on outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The project involved a cohort of pupils in over 100 schools who were followed across year seven and then year eight. It comprised two strands: one looking at 'best practice in setting by attainment'; the other at 'best practice in mixed attainment grouping'. The latter strand involved a feasibility trial, and included provision for four twilight professional development sessions to support teachers in their work. The project's research methods included the use of randomised control trials, student focus groups, individual teacher interviews, and large-scale surveys of students and teachers. Failings in design and implementation are acknowledged. Some of these seem to have contributed to the significant dropout rate among participating schools over the course of the project.

The authors find, as have so many other researchers, that attainment grouping 'perpetuates social inequality in education, in relation to social background, "race", and gender' (p2). In light of this, they state directly that any school which groups students in bands or streams should desist, for such grouping is indefensible, being

'socially unjust and conceptually flawed' (p166). Furthermore, schools which set pupils by prior attainment are enjoined to reflect on the effects of doing so, and to minimise the prevalence of such grouping. In an ideal world, say the authors, setting would be phased out. They want research such as theirs to 'support the movement *towards* mixed attainment grouping' in schools which currently set or stream (p162, original emphasis) and to help such schools begin 'the journey away from "fixed ability" assumptions and associated practices' (p163).

To this end, their book lays out 'feasible "tweaks" … that can improve equity' in relation to setting by prior attainment (p166): practical guidance for refining the operation of setting in schools that use it, in order to lessen the educational and social injustice – and the emotional damage – this mode of grouping young people inevitably inflicts. As well as endorsing much previous research, the project reveals something new: how 'differences in [pupil] self-confidence between set-levels is exacerbated over time, with low-set pupils' self-confidence worsening … and those in high sets self-confidence significantly growing across the board' (p67).

Very clear evidence is offered that teachers in schools which group by attainment tend to teach low-attaining groups in different ways from high-attaining ones. Findings reconfirm that pupils with low prior attainment are routinely offered a narrow and limiting curriculum taught by less qualified and experienced staff in ways which undermine the pupils' self-confidence and retard their educational progress. Evidently, 'high attaining pupils are still more likely than their lower-attaining peers to be offered additional activities … [and] the opportunity to discuss their learning … [and] to show analytical thought … [whereas] lower attaining pupils were more likely to be offered repetition and rehearsal, and more structured tasks' (p110).

The authors note that such a divergence of approach could be read either as 'a teacher conscientiously and creatively tailoring her pedagogy and curriculum to the differing needs of different attainment groups … or … as risking privileging the top set and patronizing the bottom set … and depriving the bottom set of the opportunity to develop independent thinking and research skills' (p111). For this is the crux of the matter. An approach to teaching and learning based on a particular way of regarding each student collides with a particular conception of education's purpose. 'Ability'-informed differentiated practice collides with the imperative for social justice. The authors frame things thus: 'The logic of setting is that it addresses the different paces/needs of different student groups. But then the dilemma is that in that case it is hard to argue that there is an "equal" offer for all – or indeed that expectations are the same for all students (as patently they are not)' (p162).

The educational segregation which grouping by prior attainment reinforces is legitimised by the discourse of 'ability'. That discourse justifies an 'ability' hierarchy within which individual students are positioned depending on their scores in particular

tests. It validates organising students into discrete groups accordingly, and licenses offering these groups distinct curricular content. It provides the rationale for teaching these groups in ways likely to impede the educational progress of many students in them. Although the authors imply that they are alert to it, for example by preferring the term 'attainment grouping', the nature of the 'ability' discourse is underacknowledged. For example, the authors write: 'Underpinning the practice of attainment grouping ... is an assumption that students are naturally different from each other, and have different predispositions, including different ability levels, which their educational attainment reflects' (p 9). But students *are* 'naturally different' from each other. Difference between people is the norm. And students do have different predispositions. The issue is with the way the notion of 'ability' has been advanced as a salient element in human heterogeneity, and used in school to explain differences in student presentation and performance. In our education system, anyone's 'ability' continues to be thought about as if it were fixed and measurable, a thing amenable to disclosure through testing. It has become all-important to 'know' what any student's 'ability' is, as revealed by their test scores and track it regularly. Here is where 'attainment' becomes embroiled with 'ability'.

The power of the 'ability' discourse infuses all facets of assessment, curriculum and pedagogy, and its language consequently surfaces here and there in the quoted comments of teachers and students. The authors remain within its horizon, and so cannot offer a way to dissolve the clash between 'the logic of setting' and the equity/ social justice imperative. They delineate the different teaching approaches used for different attainment groups, but do not show how this divergence is rooted in an underlying unifying factor: allegiance to the discourse of 'ability'.

In those schools where young people are organised into mixed attainment groups, an aim of the project was to augment what the authors regard as the comparatively limited body of research evidence into mixed attainment practice. They rightly note that 'widespread exposure to hierarchical notions of "ability" also shape young people's experiences in mixed attainment classes' (p72) and that 'it is not inevitable that the elimination of ... detrimental effects associated with setting will lead to improved outcomes ... In fact, inequitable classroom practices may be reproduced in mixed attainment groups because ... fundamental changes to teaching practices and school structures are more difficult for teachers to achieve' (p144). As with their approach to setting by attainment, the authors draw on their findings to put forward 'recommendations for successful mixed attainment grouping' (p169) in areas such as differentiation, classroom management and teacher expectations. They distil from 'the experiences of our pilot school teachers, and from our review of the literature ... four principles of Best Practice in Mixed Attainment' (p144). The principles advanced include establishing in each teaching group 'a broad range of prior attainment'; using

subgroupings flexibly within a class and for specific activities; differentiating mainly 'by feedback … and by outcome'; ensuring teachers have 'high expectations of all pupils regardless of prior attainment'; and ensuring teachers take 'a flexible view' of 'ability' (see pages 144-147).

Governments have been hostile for decades to the idea of mixed attainment/'ability' teaching, and ministers and media vituperatively dismissive of those who work to make it a success. So there's something to cheer when that general approach begins again to find a little favour. But the outline of a better practice sketched for such teaching in this book falls far short of what teachers and young people need. Only broad-brush suggestions are offered, such as that '[a] mixed attainment class group, wherein all pupils are expected to engage in one common task, enables the same high expectations to be held for all pupils [and] permits the teacher to expect that all pupils, including those with low prior attainment, can achieve at the highest levels' (p147). These generalities are supplemented by faith in technical fixes such as grouping pupils randomly as they enter the classroom, or ensuring that a quartet of students engaged in small group talk will always contains a HAP, two MAPs and a LAP (p145). This last formulation gives an inkling of the way in which 'ability' thinking – under the guise of acknowledging and catering for differences of 'attainment'– retains its grip in a mixed class. It also suggests that only the teacher has a role in deciding how in-class groupings shall be constructed. Making such decisions available for the students to take, as well as the teacher, can begin to illuminate a route towards more adequate mixed attainment practice. So can replacing the nefarious idea that curriculum content must be matched to a student's need by an approach which looks instead to enable student and curriculum content to meet.

An immense task, to be sure, to describe the lineaments of an educationally enabling and socially just pedagogy which can discharge the commitment to equity and attainment that propels this book. And unsurprising to see the authors struggle in the face of it. More than once they lament 'the scarcity of existing research closely focused on pedagogic practice in mixed attainment grouping' (p144) and the lack of exemplars and resources. Those generations of teachers and educationalists who pioneered 'mixed ability' approaches in secondary schools in the 1970s and 80s … where are they now?

But seek, and ye shall find.

To enjoin teachers to take a 'flexible' view of 'ability' won't meet the case. Only by dismissing any notion of 'ability', and rejecting all that goes with it, can a teacher – and a school – begin to construct what is required, and what this book seems to be in search of: an anti-determinist pedagogy. A way of teaching and learning in accordance with the conviction that human educability is unlimited. Only on this ground may a wholly enabling educative practice be pursued for all, and the demand for what the authors call recognitive and distributive justice in the education system, as well as social justice, be

measured up to.

By anatomising the discourse of 'ability' and its workings, and by re-conceptualising essential issues confronting those who try to teach without recourse to it, two books in recent years have staked out that ground, and have begun to put the necessary praxis on a footing. They are *Learning without Limits* and *Creating Learning without Limits.*[1] One of these is not cited at all in the book under review. The other is cited three times, and mis-cited a fourth (on page 147; subsequently mis-referenced on page 154). All but the first of these four citations are made in connection with basic ideas about 'ability' labelling and pupil identity. The substantive line of thought which the book pursues is never engaged with. Yet both these books are academic research studies of practice which directly address, in a sustained manner, central concerns facing teachers of mixed attainment groups of the kind Francis, Taylor and Tereshchenko investigate. As those authors discover, the necessary starting point turns out to be consideration not of discrete pedagogic practices, but of the pedagogical principles which inform practice, or in whose light practice must be scrutinised.

In their attempt to advance the use of mixed attainment grouping in schools, and to develop a pedagogy commensurate with the challenges this brings, Francis, Taylor and Tereshchenko rightly point to the need for a more 'supportive policy climate, with reduced pressures on teachers' (p130). In its absence, the authors offer their dos and don'ts for setting and for mixed attainment grouping. They avoid characterising grouping by attainment in the same words with which they robustly and rightly characterise streaming: as a conceptually flawed, socially unjust and indefensible practice. It is hard to reconcile evidence presented across their book of the damage done by such grouping with the authors' willingness to countenance its continuation.

The authors say that 'without evidence and exemplars of high quality alternatives, it is not reasonable to expect that practitioners will have confidence to experiment' (p25). Well, yes and no. Teachers still have agency, and prize it. Many 'experiment' all the time, developing as practitioners in ways that matter to them, and which help them live up to the felt requirement to be a good teacher in every sense. Some actively pursue anti-determinist pedagogy. It may be that 'teachers are anxious and fearful of mixed attainment teaching' (p149). Hyper-accountability, a hostile policy environment of long standing and a self-reinforcing 'ability' discourse will tend to inspire those feelings. And yet, in individual classrooms and departments, teachers find they cannot be true to themselves, their educational beliefs and their sense of social justice while also obeying the injunctions of the 'ability' discourse in relation to how young people are recognised, organised and treated as learners. Did I glimpse one such teacher in this book? She is reported as saying (on page 148) that her approach to teaching 'meant that there was no ceiling on what might be achieved by any of her pupils'. More power to her, and to those like her who, though isolated, unsupported, at odds with 'ability' and its discourse – the

current common sense of the profession – and all too often overlooked by researchers, still strive to teach unfettered by that pernicious notion.

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Notes

1. S. Hart, A. Dixon, M. J. Drummond and D. McIntyre, *Learning without Limits*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2004; M. Swann, A. Peacock, S. Hart and M. J. Drummond, *Creating Learning without Limits*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2012.