

More pockets of resistance

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All-Attainment Teaching in Secondary Mathematics: philosophy, practice and social justice

Colin Jackson, Cham, Switzerland, Springer, 2022.

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In *FORUM* 64(2) we opened up stories of resistance from educators across sectors. These individuals opposed top-down control, government maintenance of the status quo, and the erosion of professionalism and autonomy within a system being moulded to fit a conforming, utilitarian view of education and education's purpose. Jackson's book – and the six stories within it – adds weight to these and earlier stories of resistance. We hear of individuals' struggles, joys, but above all care for *all* the young people they teach, as they attempt to introduce, develop and maintain all-attainment approaches to teaching mathematics in secondary schools across England. These stories – these pockets of resistance – are set within the context of a not always sympathetic system, one embedded in fixed-ability thinking.¹

Recently I was tasked with a change to the format of our initial teacher education (ITE) mathematics module. Rather than spend just one lecture exploring the 'knowns' in the research literature on ability/attainment-grouping, I was asked to develop an additional session exploring research-evidenced alternatives.² Given that two-thirds of Jackson's participants were spurred into all-attainment teaching through their Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses and placements, this seems, on the surface, an entirely worthwhile endeavour. After all, why set up future teachers with the knowledge that something is problematic if you can't also give them ways to bring about change? But therein lies the rub. Those familiar with the research literature on ability/attainment grouping will know that pulling together a lecture on the 'knowns' isn't problematic. There are attainment effects, attitudinal effects, and group(mis)allocation to examine, ethnic, gendered, month of birth and socio-economic status/class under/over-representation, differentiated group curricular and pedagogic diets to investigate, and assessment access and teacher expertise to consider. Each of these factors comes with copious evidence; quite enough material for a packed and stimulating lecture. The second lecture was somewhat more problematic to produce, at least in a research-informed manner. It is here that Jackson's book enters the discussion.

Jackson's text, and his research on which the text is based, aims to understand

why, despite a plethora of research evidence contradicting such approaches, mathematics education – particularly in secondary schools – continues to be structured through rigid ability-grouping practices (such as setting). This is not a new question. Taylor et al. asked just this, identifying a ‘vicious circle of avoidance of mixed attainment grouping’, perpetuated in part by few examples for teachers of approaches other than ability-grouping and, resultantly, limited research evidence into the effectiveness of alternatives.³ Beyond understanding of the issue, Jackson’s text begins to chip away at this lack of evidence. The reader is given exemplars and resources to ‘do it differently’ and – albeit through limited action research projects – we hear about positive school data emanating from these different practices, data which may go some way to convince others to change their practices. While Jackson rehearses, in an accessible and engaging discourse, the key literature around ability-grouping, it is his stories of alternative approaches that are the important constituent of this volume.

Jackson’s six teacher narratives (across three schools) aim to open out – to help us understand – the teachers and contexts in which there is a commitment to all-attainment teaching, and what allows this to be introduced, sustained, and extended. He asks three key questions:

- Who are the teachers who do this?
- How do they do it?
- How do they make all-attainment teaching work?

Through the individual responses and through the thematic drawing together across teachers and contexts, Jackson identifies the conditions required for all-attainment teaching to be feasible in state secondary schools in England (with a focus on mathematics teaching). For those working in this area, there is nothing earthshattering in these findings, but nonetheless it seems important to restate them.

Central to a lack of change – and arguably one of the hardest factors to address – is the ability-thinking mindset so pervasive in English education and society, a way of thinking that tells us that some individuals can do mathematics and that some can’t. That everyone has a ceiling to what they can achieve. And, ultimately, that this is okay. Jackson (p172) draws on Gadamer’s (1960/2003) writing to explain quite how problematic this mindset is, as ‘most mathematics teachers are so immersed in their situation that they have no horizon and cannot conceive of a different way of thinking, one in which “ability” is not fixed but variable’. With ability as a natural, normal discourse, within and beyond mathematics education, there is usually no catalyst to even identify the need for change, let alone begin to bring that change about. It is perhaps, therefore, no surprise that the impetus for change for many of the teachers featured in this volume

came early in their career at the initial teacher education stage, a period in their career as teachers where there is time, albeit limited time, to engage with lecturers and researchers who are passionate about the emancipatory potential of alternatives, who can steer trainees towards schools where something different is happening, and where debate is encouraged.

These stories remind us just how transformative higher education can be in developing alternative pathways and philosophies, and why providers must push back against ‘neoliberal policies [that] mean many teachers have been reduced from professionals exercising autonomy and making meaningful curriculum decisions into technicians merely following and implementing government policy’ (p172). Such policies are creeping into ITE.

While reading Jackson’s six teachers’ stories, I found myself making repeated comparisons with Learning without Limits (LwL) and their teacher stories.⁴ There are strong resonances between LwL’s central concept of *transformability* and Jackson’s notion of a *transformative pedagogy*. In Jackson’s transformative pedagogy we are apprised of the young people’s experiences as they encounter all-attainment teaching, a pedagogic approach far removed from a transmissionist, knowledge-rich, uniform approach to educating our young people which is currently promoted in some quarters. Jackson’s multiple tables and lists in his concluding chapter take us through what is required to introduce, develop and maintain all-attainment teaching, to make it work in the classroom, and the wider implications for practice. It is very clear that while the teachers in this book could make this work for themselves with the – at least partial – support of their colleagues, such educational cultures and practices are a million miles from the hegemony-sustaining practices experienced by so many young people in schools today.

Jackson identifies the ‘support of/from others’ as central in the successful implementation and sustaining of all-attainment teaching. Working with colleague/s to instigate change provides a supportive environment and, importantly, a sharing of the early workload brought about through the pedagogic changes needed. There is also a need to have the support of parents/carers, although Jackson pleasingly presents stories of schools expecting a ‘backlash’ from parents but instead receiving positive comments about the ‘mixed ability’ structures (e.g. on p64 and p115). Where support falls down – but where it is absolutely crucial – is in that coming from management, both the senior leadership team and the head. We hear of heads who, at best, gave tacit support, but whom, in many cases were, or were replaced by, heads who were openly unsympathetic to all-attainment teaching. We learn too that such a lack of support is nothing new. In his stirring autobiographical opening to this book, Jackson recalls, through recourse to his experience as a mathematics teacher, how, without a radical change in mindset and full buy-in, change is rarely sustained: ‘[w]hen I left, the school reintroduced “ability”

grouping in mathematics' (p14).

Change is clearly hard, and as with many of the stories in *FORUM* 64(2), it requires individual perseverance and a staunch willingness to go against the grain. We hear this clearly in Pete's narrative as Jackson explores with him the purpose of schooling:

You can't wave a wand and wish away all the structure and all the other pressures, the social realities, that's not possible. But what you can do is to struggle and fight to push back a little bit against that, to create little bits of space ... Is it worth it? Yes, I think. Because the alternative is to surrender and sell your soul. (p95.)

While Jackson's book cannot provide us with an easy answer, it could be argued that through providing an alternative, through identifying the components of change and, importantly, through recalling successful accounts of change, this text tells us that we need to look beyond the individual teachers and individual schools to identify the block to change. Change is not impossible. In October 2022, New Zealand announced an end to ability-grouping in all primary and state schools.⁵ Its tactics for change are not dissimilar to many of the practices that the teachers in Jackson's book (and teachers in the Learning without Limits network) employ, but with two striking differences. New Zealand recognises the need to embed change over time (with ability-grouping fully removed by 2030), and pushes the need for leadership and government investment in change. As we settled down to our third prime minister and our fifth education secretary in 2022, in an education landscape so tightly embroiled with political whim, we could only look on wistfully.

In reflecting on Jackson's text, I am reminded of John White's provocative contribution to *FORUM* 64(2): perhaps pockets aren't enough, and we need systemic change? We know *how* to develop a strong and unique approach to education for all. But how do we 'turn' the doubters, the naysayers, the Twitter edu-trads and the academy CEOs monitoring school data? On the one hand, Jackson adds an important set of stories to the debate. His book could give a further push for change to those practitioners already on the turn or beginning to find their values at the start of their initial teacher education or their career. On the other hand, unless we use the hardback edition to metaphorically knock some sense into what appears to be a growing group avowing a return to tradition (read streaming and intelligence testing), I do worry that this book – while helping those at the centre of change feel less alone – may still fail to break Taylor et al.'s vicious circle.

I finish with two recommendations. This book's value extends well beyond the phase of secondary education specified in its title. As primary schools become more subject focused I will be suggesting this book to my primary trainees to support their exploration of alternatives. And finally, to the publishers: this review was a little delayed as I awaited my new reading glasses. Unfortunately, I still struggled to read the tables on pp174-6,

tables which are crucial to the book's thesis and which each deserve a (landscape) page of their own. I hope this can be rectified in future editions.

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Notes

1. P. Yarker, 'Knowing your mind: teachers, students and the language of ability', *FORUM*, 53(2), 2011; P. Yarker, 'Ability', in S. Themelis (ed.), *Critical Reflections on the Language of Neoliberalism in Education: dangerous words and discourses of possibility*, New York, Routledge, 2020.
2. I fuse ability and attainment grouping here and do not debate either term as space is limited. For a full discussion see copious other texts, including: P. Yarker, 2011, *op. cit.*; R. Marks, *Ability-grouping in primary schools: Case studies and critical debates*, Northwich, Critical Publishing, 2016.
3. Quotation from p.340 of B. Taylor, B. Francis, L. Archer, J. Hodgen, D. Pepper, A. Tereshchenko and M. Travers, 'Factors deterring schools from mixed attainment teaching practice', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 25(3), 2017.
4. S. Hart, A. Dixon, M. Drummond and D. McIntyre, *Learning Without Limits*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2004.
5. D. Pomeroy, 'NZ's key teacher unions now reject classroom streaming. So what's wrong with grouping kids by perceived ability?', *The Conversation (online)*, 7 October 2022: <https://theconversation.com/nzs-key-teacher-unions-now-reject-classroom-streaming-so-whats-wrong-with-grouping-kids-by-perceived-ability-192007>.