Undoing ‘ability’

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Ability, Inequality and Post-Pandemic Schools: re-thinking contemporary myths of meritocracy

Alice Bradbury, Bristol, Policy Press, 2021.
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In her book’s final lines, Alice Bradbury urges that ‘ability’ be recognised in two related ways: as a constructed notion, and as central to the way the education system works to reproduce social inequality. Across the book she explores how ‘ability’, an apparently natural and self-evident human quality, has been constructed historically within formal education and variously reconfigured in order to fulfil functions which remain essential to the system. Most notably, the discourse of ‘ability’ justifies practices which label, sort, group and compare young people, and thus serve to entrench educational inequalities. She argues that the ‘ability discourse’ is reinvigorated by the tide of datafication swamping schools and by (mis)conceptions seeping into education from the field of cognitive neuroscience. ‘Ability’ continues to underpin the ‘myths of meritocracy’ announced in her book’s subtitle. These myths help mask the unjust reality of an education system which continues to reproduce social inequalities as well as educational ones. How else explain the phenomenon David Gillborn and others noted in 2017: namely that: ‘Black students have been one and a half times less likely to achieve the expected standard at GCSE than white students *for the last 25 years’* (cited p120, my emphasis)?

As her use of the term ‘discourse’ might signal, Bradbury approaches discussion of ‘ability’ from a position informed by Foucault. A discourse, Foucault argued, is another name for practices which systematically form the object of which they speak. ‘Ability’ might qualify as the classic example. Half a century before Foucault’s discursiveness, Alfred Binet, father of the IQ test, was asked ‘what is intelligence?’. He is reputed to have replied: ‘Intelligence? It’s what my tests measure’.

Recourse to Foucault allows Bradbury to engage with questions about the circumstances of knowledge-production, especially in relation to ‘knowing’ pupils and students. Power in all its varieties shapes the circumstances and legitimises the knowledge. In Stephen Ball’s pithy words (which Bradbury quotes), power not only grinds you down but makes you up. The act of labelling a pupil by ‘ability’ precisely ‘makes up’ the pupil. Labelled, each pupil is invented as a subject intelligible within the grids of classification, normalisation, separation and distribution which operate in school, and so is made available for the host of prefabricated educational processes the school exists appropriately to mobilise. Bradley’s Foucaultian lens is given a final

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polish by critical race theory. This helps her pinpoint and expose injustices inherent in, but all too often hidden by, currently dominant and supposedly common-sense ways of thinking in schools.

Drawing on her own research, Bradbury quotes what teachers say ‘ability’ means to them. It’s a slippery notion. ‘Ability’ is understood variously to be an innate and perhaps inherited quality. It is a fixed quantum, and relatively stable over time. It is readily measurable, and generalisable: ‘the “able” are assumed to be superior in all high status curricular areas’ (p30). It is a marker of developmental progress or of ‘readiness’. It is the means by which any individual can be positioned on the ‘ability-spectrum’ or within the ‘range of ability’. It is ‘potential’. Made conscious of it, the student is burdened with the responsibility to live up to it: to fulfil it or fail to do so. This aspect of the meaning of ‘ability’ intersects with meritocratic beliefs about the rewards available to those who work hard, and, Bradbury suggests, allows a moralistic note to sound: those deemed ‘less able’ can legitimately be deemed indolent as well.

Bradbury believes the long-running operation of the ‘ability’ discourse within education has been revitalised by two contemporary educational trends: intensified datafication in schools, and the rise of ideas and practices supposedly validated by insights from cognitive neuroscience. She gives accounts of each trend. In relation to neuroscience, she is alert to the continuing salience of eugenicist lines of thought, and the persistence in that quarter of implacably determinist views about the heritability of ‘intelligence’. She is alive to ambiguities which attend epigenetic perspectives in connection with notions of ‘ability’. She points to the nonsense of VAK (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) learning styles and ‘Brain Gym’, and to the damage done when the brain comes to stand in for the person in educational discussions. She detects not only bad science but class-based bias behind the current vogue for ‘trauma-informed practice’, a way of thinking about children and young people which erodes a more properly holistic understanding. She warns that accounts of children from impoverished backgrounds now focus on brains rather than on poverty. Impoverishment is coming to be viewed as a biological phenomenon rather than a social consequence in need of remedy.

Bradbury has written extensively on datafication, the rendering-down of people into numbers and the elevation of what can be quantified. Here she criticises the determinism embodied in a student’s projected ‘flight path’ and in conceptions of ‘expected development’, and the inherent pessimism about human educability which lies behind them. She deprecates datafication’s imposition of norms and the spurious ‘objectivity’ conjured by practices of standardisation. She is alert to the way digital technologies fuel the spread of datafication and its ways of making pupils ‘known’, and to the mis-recognition of pupils and students that results.

The all-pervasive practice of ‘ability’ labelling is the first and most important of these mis-recognitions. Labelling by ‘ability’ enables the gamut of sorting and grouping practices which characterise contemporary schooling. Bradbury highlights the way the practice of targeted 'intervention' in primary schools is in effect yet another kind of 'ability'-based grouping. The process of intervention exemplifies the same set of values which are at work in such everyday segregationist arrangements as 'ability' streams, sets or tables. Bradbury calls interventions 'a more brutal form of "the bottom group" … demarcating the "abnormal" from the normal' (p42), with all the harms which follow: a narrowed curriculum; attenuated teacher-pupil inter-actions; an injured sense of self; a disrespected learner-identity. She quotes a teacher's acknowledgement that administering formal interventions has been justified not because the child will benefit but because the school will avoid censure from inspectors: 'Even if you think it's not going to have an impact, we have to have something on this bit of paper so that when it doesn't, we can show that we at least did something' (p43).

The array of coercive constraints under which schools operate is eroding educational values. So is the discourse of 'ability', for it licenses and approves those symbolically violent practices which reveal the pupil according to predetermined categories and scripts. Such 'knowing' negates the essentially ethical relationship between teacher and taught. The pupil, the unique individual, the other person, has no 'whatness' and, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, is 'refractory to every typology … to every classification'. In an important sense, the pupil is not to be known. Rather, the pupil is to be replied to.

Bradbury's final chapter looks for hopeful signs. She thinks the break from high-stakes public testing which the pandemic required might serve as a reference point for alternative approaches to assessment. The general crisis which engulfed schools during the Covid pandemic (the period when this book was written) could prompt rethinking about the purposes of formal education. The role schools found themselves required to play in supporting children's welfare might resurrect a more holistic way of recognising pupils and students, and boost more collaborative practices.

The apparent explanatory power of any discourse isn't unconnected with the political and economic power of those who advance it through policy and look to ensure its dominance. If an alternative is ever to overthrow the 'ability' discourse, it will have to mobilise its own powerful constituencies. Bradbury suggests that teachers today have no frame of reference other than that of 'ability' by which to recognise and understand children and young people. Even so, her book offers snippets of evidence that some teachers do bring other ways of thinking to bear. (Her evidence can also be found in *FORUM* 61.1, pages 41-52.)

Graduates looking to become teachers still reject the 'ability' discourse or articulate their resistance to it, not least because they were labelled and grouped by 'ability' in school. Our task is to continue to validate their revulsion and rejection, and to foster and support the development of that principled practice – an anti-determinist pedagogy – which finds ways around and beyond notions of 'ability' and its attendant thinking and practice. Bradbury's work, along with the work of Susan Hart, Mary Jane Drummond, Mandy Swann, Rachel Marks, Holly Linklater, Hilary Povey, Colin Jackson and others, can help us here.

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