

The persistent myth of ability is a barrier to educational change

A critical response to Zack Polanski's NEU speech

Rachel Marks

Abstract

This paper offers a critical response to Zack Polanski's keynote speech to the 2026 National Education Union conference. While welcoming his explicit recognition of structural pressures facing English schooling, such as underfunding, accountability regimes and social inequality, the paper argues that his intervention leaves unexamined some of the most powerful mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced. In particular, this paper identifies the persistence of an ability ideology, subtly reinforced through everyday language such as references to 'bright' children, as a significant conceptual blind spot. Drawing on long-standing critiques within comprehensive education, the paper shows how assumptions about fixed, measurable ability continue to legitimise practices such as grouping, selection and differential expectation, even within rhetorics of social justice. The analysis suggests that without challenging these deeply embedded beliefs and the assessment practices that sustain them, structural reforms to governance or inspection are insufficient. The paper concludes that a genuinely equitable educational project requires not only political will but a radical rethinking of ability, language and educational purpose.

Keywords: educational inequality; ability; ability label; ability discourse; learning-oriented; transformability

Introduction

In March 2026, the National Education Union (NEU) annual conference saw over 1500 delegates from districts across England and Wales come together in Brighton, England, to discuss key issues such as school funding, workload and educational change and improvement. In what might be considered a political shift for the union, the keynote speech was delivered by Zack Polanski, leader of the Green Party in England.¹

Polanski's keynote offered a passionate articulation of problems long identified by educators: chronic underfunding, narrowing curricula, excessive assessment and accountability, and growing inequality. His speech resonated with the experiences of teachers and leaders, many of whom feel exhausted by the cumulative pressures of austerity, marketisation and policy churn with little to be seen in the way of

improvement. His speech offered teachers in the room the rare experience of hearing their working conditions described plainly and sympathetically; the cheers and general ‘buzz’ at conference following the speech were hardly unexpected.

However, while Polanski recognises much that is wrong with the English education system, his intervention also contains conceptual silences, tensions and contradictions that require deeper analysis. When situated within research on schooling, discourse and inequality, Polanski’s speech reveals several blind spots, most notably the unexamined assumptions about ability that continue to underpin many of the injustices he identifies. This response takes his claims for change seriously, while situating them within a broader research literature and drawing attention to issues that remain underexplored, most notably the persistence of an ability ideology and the subtle ways in which everyday language, such as references to ‘bright’ children, reinforces unequal structures. It highlights how discourses of ability, institutional practices and everyday language remain some of the most persistent mechanisms through which English education reproduces inequality, even when policy rhetoric gestures toward social justice.

Beyond the externalisation of inequality

Polanski’s insistence that education cannot be separated from socioeconomic hardship aligns with extensive evidence showing how poverty, housing insecurity, food insufficiency and instability shape children’s capacity to learn. Studies repeatedly show that poverty affects early language development, executive functioning, access to enrichment and long-term attainment trajectories.² His framing echoes international bodies such as UNESCO and the OECD, which emphasise that education systems cannot succeed without addressing social determinants of learning.³

However, by casting these inequalities primarily as external pressures on schools, Polanski leaves unexplored the ways in which education itself reproduces, legitimates and amplifies structural inequalities. Repeatedly, sociologists and education commentators have demonstrated how schools often valorise middle-class cultural capital, normalise deficit discourses around working-class families, and reproduce social hierarchies through hidden curricula and obtuse assessment and qualification processes effectively acting as gatekeepers to particular types or levels of education.⁴ While Polanski was critical of the multiple years of political negligence of education, a discourse so commonly rehearsed by politicians of all persuasions, he did not engage with the deeper processes which really drive educational outcomes. Educational inequity, indeed, inequality more broadly, is not only a consequence of deprivation but also a product of institutionalised practices embedded within schooling.

Within his speech, Polanski made what we might consider as ‘simple’ or ‘classic’

calls for change, including abolishing Ofsted and returning school control from multi-academy trusts (MATs) to local authorities. These are not simple in the sense of easy to do, but simple in the sense of being easy to call for, without considering the implications of such changes given the ways in which schooling, as currently and historically set up, maintains and reinforces inequality. This is not to say that these are not important ideals to work for; indeed, *FORUM* has long campaigned for both issues.⁵

Proposals for change require deep engagement with a complex set of ideas. Polanski is right to cite the known wide-ranging detrimental impacts of current school governance and accountability systems: the distortion of pedagogical priorities, undermining of professional autonomy and exacerbation of inequalities, the fragmentation of our education system and the distancing of schools from community accountability.⁶ However, while important, laying bare these outcomes as ‘the problem’ fails to account for or offer any interrogation of the deeper ideological project that underpins reform: the quasi-market logics of competition, choice, performativity and managerialism.⁷ Polanski identifies what must end, but not how the system should be rebuilt to ensure coherence and equity. By focusing on organisational forms rather than the neoliberal assumptions that animate them, the speech risks implying that returning to local authority control and removing Ofsted oversight are sufficient to restore equity. Yet, decades of research suggest that unless market logics themselves are dismantled, structural inequalities persist regardless of governance structure. If Polanski is serious about change, there needs to be a deep understanding of the history of the mass education project, and the unspoken injustices education continues to confer and reproduce to ensure the powerful and influential continue to be more equal than others. It would be no bad thing for Polanski to begin by working through *FORUM*’s special issue, ‘Education: to what purpose?’.⁸

The problem of ‘bright’: normalising difference as inherent

A clear illustration of the underpinning forces and assumptions driving persistent inequalities in our education system came early on in Polanski’s speech:

We are not expanding opportunity in this country. We are shrinking it. And we are shrinking young people’s horizons. And I know I don’t need to tell you any of this. I’m looking out at a room of people who I’m sure are working to the bone to do the best with what you’ve got. Because you know that the kids you see every single day, the bright ones, the cheeky ones, the ones who struggle to keep up sometimes, the know-it-alls, you can guess which one I was. They’re the future.⁹

All too easy to miss, yet incredibly revealing, is Polanski’s reference to ‘the bright ones’.

Colloquially benign, this phrasing invokes a long and powerful ideological tradition within English education: the belief that ‘ability’ is a natural, measurable, stratifying attribute possessed by some children more than others. Indeed, Polanski further cements a discourse of stratified measurable difference in his later reference to the over-testing of pupils, claiming that our current assessment system ‘fails to properly measure students’ ability’, the assumption being that such measurement is possible and by extension, that the entity being measured is real. To be clear, this critique is not pedantic semantics. The language of brightness is a gateway into broader discourses of fixed ability that underpin the most enduring and inequitable features of the English system: setting, streaming, selective schooling, early differentiation, differential expectations and the valorisation of high-stakes assessment as a measure of innate talent.

Extensive scholarship demonstrates how everyday descriptors such as ‘bright’, ‘able’, or ‘gifted’ reproduce structural inequalities by naturalising difference as inherent and fixed rather than socially shaped.¹⁰ Schools, policy and everyday talk mobilise the idea of natural intelligence, reconceptualised as fixed ability, to rationalise unequal outcomes.¹¹ The concept of brightness is particularly problematic because it aligns with the longstanding English tradition of treating intelligence (or its reconceptualisation, ability) as something quantifiable and rankorderable. The history of the 11+ and grammar schools is rooted in precisely this assumption: that children can be sorted reliably into ability groups at young ages based on test performance. Decades of research in developmental psychology, sociology and education philosophy have dismantled this claim, demonstrating how intelligence has been moved from an outcome, and is instead reshaped as ‘a biological entity – a *cause* of behaviour – with which we are born and which does not change’ with educational assessments having the capacity to create, not just measure.¹² To invoke brightness inadvertently reinforces a scientifically outdated and socially harmful model of intelligence.

An ability ideology, and associated ability discourses, legitimise segregating practices within schools as well as between schools. Despite extensive evidence that ability grouping disproportionately harms working-class pupils, pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds, summer-born children and those with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), with group placement mapping on to existing social hierarchies, and widening attainment gaps, we continue to see such practices as run of the mill in our schools.¹³ Practices which categorise our youngest children on notions of potential allow us to effectively write-off some children even before they reach secondary school.¹⁴ These categories, and the labels used, whether these be explicit (set 1, set 2, etc.) or not (blue table, red table, etc.) are not purely descriptive. They shape access to opportunities, resources and teacher attention. Work by notable scholars on learner identities shows how young people experience ability-predicated language and labels

not as neutral descriptors but as moral judgements about their worth, class position and academic legitimacy.¹⁵ Brightness is not simply a measure, but an identity category laden with social meaning. Pupils internalise these labels and the underpinning assumption of fixed ability, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies.

The appeal of brightness aligns with England's broader cultural investment in meritocracy. Michael Young's satirical warning from 1958 about a meritocratic elite, ironically later adopted by politicians as a desirable ideal, remains prescient.¹⁶ Contemporary research shows how meritocratic rhetoric masks structural advantage by framing success as the outcome of personal talent and effort.¹⁷ In this sense, language such as 'the bright ones' subtly reinforces the belief that educational outcomes reflect individual gifts rather than systemic patterns. Polanski's speech strongly critiques structural funding and school governance inequalities, correctly identifying workload, class size and insufficient SEND provision as major barriers to effective teaching. However, he does not extend this structural critique to the domains really structuring what happens in school and the outcomes of school: poorly understood assessment, ability-grouping and the persistent language of and belief in intelligence/ability as cause. As a result, a conceptual contradiction emerges: he denounces structural injustice while drawing on the lexical tools that help reproduce it. When political leaders casually refer to 'bright' children, they legitimise the very categories that enable such inequitable practices. In a speech otherwise attentive to social justice, this is a notable conceptual fissure.

Towards an alternative language and practice

How might we begin to construct something different, avoiding the trap befalling Polanski, that is, failing to account for the persistent and pervasive ideology of ability and ability-predicated practices? A little over a year ago the *FORUM* editorial board submitted a response to the Curriculum Review call for evidence in which we noted that what was needed was a 'thoroughgoing overhaul of the current curriculum and assessment provisions ... [and that] to supersede the "ability" discourse will be extremely difficult, but only bold action can hope to progress change'.¹⁸ Unfortunately, we know now that such 'bold action' is not to be forthcoming, and that, in fact, further standardised assessment is to be introduced with a mandatory reading test for Year 8 pupils (aged 13) in England from 2028.¹⁹

We might take some solace from Polanski's call for a broad, future-oriented curriculum, given this aligns closely with research advocating creative, interdisciplinary, critically informed learning that prepares young people for uncertain futures.²⁰ His emphasis on media literacy, environmental understanding and creative thinking is well-founded. However, there is still a sense that Polanski positions the aim(s) of education

as of being a benefit to national productivity, subordinating human flourishing to economic imperatives. Developing imagination, creativity and democratic agency is not only valuable because it produces economically productive citizens, but because these capacities are intrinsic to human dignity, autonomy and justice. A richer educational philosophy would have strengthened the speech's ethical grounding.

If policymakers wish to promote equity, they must adopt, *and enact*, language and practices that foreground potential (as open, not a measurable limit), opportunity and context rather than fixed ability. Scholars have argued for 'learning-oriented' rather than 'ability-oriented' talk: emphasising what children can do, how they can grow and which supports learning.²¹ This is not only a linguistic shift; it is a pedagogical and ethical stance. We know this is possible. The seminal work, *Learning Without Limits*, shows that when schools reject fixed notions of ability, students across backgrounds achieve more highly, experience greater engagement and report more positive learner identities.²² This influential work should be added to Polanski's reading list.

Importantly, the comprehensive ideal, championed for decades in *FORUM*, has consistently argued that intelligence is multifaceted, growth-oriented and socially shaped. *FORUM*'s scholarship has long critiqued selective practices, labelling systems and hierarchical curricula that privilege the already advantaged. This journal's persistent advocacy for democratically grounded, community-responsive schooling provides a powerful counterpoint to the fixed-ability thinking embedded in terms like 'bright.' A political vision genuinely committed to equity must avoid ability-predicated classifications altogether. Instead, language should foreground opportunity and learning capacity. It must, in the words of *Learning Without Limits*, embrace 'transformability', that is: 'a firm and unswerving conviction that there is the potential for change in current patterns of achievement and response, that things can change and be changed for the better, sometimes even dramatically, as a result of what happens and what people do in the present'.²³

Doing so is not merely semantic; it is a necessary step in dismantling the subtle but pervasive discourses that reproduce educational inequality. A transformative agenda must address not only funding and governance but also the beliefs, classifications and structures through which the system sorts, labels and marginalises children. It must not only critique political choices but also challenge the everyday language and assumptions that naturalise inequality. Only then can England move toward the equitable, imaginative and humane education system Polanski calls for.

Rachel Marks is an Associate Professor in Mathematics Education at the Institute of Education (IOE), UCL where she leads the MA in Mathematics Education. She was previously a primary school teacher in both inner city and rural schools. Her research interests include equity issues and the social context of schooling, and she has

extensively examined ability grouping in primary schools. She is chair of the *FORUM* editorial board.

rachel.marks@ucl.ac.uk

Notes

1. Zack Polanski, Full speech at NEU conference 2026:: https://www.reddit.com/r/UKGreens/comments/1sbfxt0/zack_polanski_full_speech_at_neu_conference_2026/ (accessed 21 April 2026).
2. Carl Cullinane and Rebecca Montacute, *Life lessons: improving essential life skills for young people*, London, Sutton Trust, 2017: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Life-Lessons-Report_FINAL.pdf; Steve Strand, 'Ethnicity, gender, social class and achievement gaps at age 16: intersectionality and "getting it" for the white working class', *Research Papers in Education*, 29 (2), 2014, pp131-171: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2013.767370>.
3. UNESCO, *Rethinking education: towards a global common good?*, Paris, UNESCO Publishing, 2015: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232555>; OECD, 'Future of education and skills 2030/2040': <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/future-of-education-and-skills-2030.html> (accessed 21 April 2026).
4. Pierre Bourdieu, 'The forms of capital', in *The sociology of economic life*, London, Routledge, 1986/2018, pp78-92; Annette Lareau, *Unequal childhoods: class, race, and family life* (2nd edn), Berkeley, California, University of California Press, Ltd, 2011; Diane Reay, *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes* (2nd edn), Bristol, Policy Press, 2026.
5. See, for example: 'Educational inspection: coercive or responsive?', *FORUM*, 65 (3), 2023: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-65-issue-3/>; and 'A fully trust-led system?', *FORUM*, 64 (3), 2022: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-64-issue-3/>.
6. For example: Alice Bradbury, Jane Perryman, Graham Calvert and Katie Kilian, 'Primary teachers' experiences of Ofsted inspections: "driving the joy out of education"', *Journal of Education Policy*, 40 (5), 2025, pp848-868: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2025.2474941>; Emma Walker, Andrew Pennington and Feng Su, 'Lived experiences of educators and leaders in multi-academy trusts in England: The colonisation of schools, the erosion of community engagement and the need for alternative futures', *Research in Education*, 121 (3), 2025, pp250-264: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00345237231196779>; Richard Hatcher, 'The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government's "free schools" in England', *Educational Review*, 63 (4), 2011, pp485-503: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2011.616635>.
7. Stephen J. Ball, *Class strategies and the education market: the middle classes and social advantage*, London, RoutledgeFalmer, 2003; Stephen J. Ball, *The education debate* (3rd edn), Bristol, Policy Press, 2017.

8. *FORUM* 67(3), 'Education: to what purpose?' 67 (3), 2025: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-67-issue-3/>.
9. Polanski, 2026, *op. cit.*
10. Rachel Marks, "The blue table means you don't have a clue": The persistence of fixed-ability thinking and practices in primary mathematics in English schools', *FORUM*, 55 (1), 2013, pp31-44: DOI: 10.2304/forum.2013.55.1.31; Patrick Yarker, 'Knowing your mind: teachers, students and the language of ability', *FORUM*, 53 (2), 2011, pp225-234: DOI: 10.2304/forum.2011.53.2.225.
11. David Gillborn and Deborah Youdell, *Rationing education: policy, practice, reform and equity*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2000.
12. Gordon Stobart, *Testing times: the uses and abuses of assessment*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2008, p30; see also: Michael Howe, *IQ in question: the truth about intelligence*, London, Sage, 1997.
13. Becky Francis, Louise Archer, Jeremy Hodgen, David Pepper, Becky Taylor and Mary-Clare Travers, 'Exploring the relative lack of impact of research on "ability grouping" in England: A discourse analytic account', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 49 (5), 2019, pp587-604: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2015.1093095>.
14. Rachel Marks, 'Educational triage and ability-grouping in primary mathematics: a case-study of the impacts on low-attaining pupils', *Research in Mathematics Education*, 16 (1), 2014, pp38-53: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14794802.2013.874095>.
15. For example, Reay, 2026, *op. cit.*
16. Michael Young, *The rise of the meritocracy*, London, Routledge, 1958/2017.
17. Jo Littler, *Against meritocracy: culture, power and myths of mobility*, London, Routledge, 2018.
18. The *FORUM* editorial board, 'Rich assessment and an aims-based curriculum, not high-stakes testing and the 'ability' discourse: *FORUM's* submission to the Curriculum and Assessment Review', *FORUM*, 67 (1), 2025, pp114-116: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-67-issue-1/abstract-10075/>.
19. Department for Education, 'Focus on reading in secondary years to drive up standards', 15 October 2025: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/focus-on-reading-in-secondary-years-to-drive-up-standards>.
20. OECD; UNESCO, *op. cit.*
21. Jo Boaler, *Mathematical mindsets: unleashing students' potential through creative math, inspiring messages and innovative teaching*, San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2016.
22. Susan Hart, Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond and Donald McIntyre, *Learning without limits*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2004.
23. *Ibid.*, p166.