

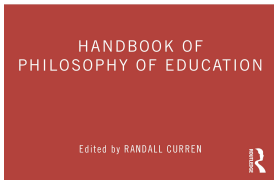
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ABILITY AND ABILITY GROUPING

Tammy Harel Ben Shahar

Introduction

The concept of ability is immensely important to educational theory and practice and permeates many of the fundamental philosophical discussions in the field. The definition of education (and learning), as well as the goals of education, almost always involve the development of certain abilities, and discussions of education policy and educational evaluation also build on the concept of ability and the ways in which ability can be developed. Ability is also an elementary concept in educational justice and plays a role in determining the allocation of resources and evaluation of education policy.

While ability is one of the key concepts of education, it also suffers from chronic ambiguity. For example, although people possess many kinds of learning-related abilities, the complexity of cognitive, behavioral, and social abilities that are instrumental in academic success are rarely appreciated. Discussions of student ability in the educational philosophy scholarship usually refer only to a narrow set of cognitive abilities.

Confusion regarding the concept of ability is caused also by the fact that “ability” is sometimes used interchangeably with other terms, including “intelligence,” “IQ,” “talent,” “aptitude,” “potential,” “capabilities,” “skills,” “knowledge,” “proficiency,” and more. All of these terms have slightly different meanings in different contexts. Additionally, there are often discrepancies between the various meanings of “ability” we use when theorizing about education and the possibility of measuring (or affecting) them, creating discord between theoretical discourse and educational practice. A further source of confusion is that “student ability” is both a precondition for learning and the end product of education, and abilities acquired through education are themselves preconditions for developing still further abilities (Bailey & Bridges 1983; McGeer 2018; Ryle 1949).

When discussing ability, therefore, careful work is required to delineate the various meanings of “ability” and define the meaning of “ability” used in each specific context. This chapter offers a discussion of student ability through an examination of one, prevalent educational practice – ability grouping. In this chapter, I examine two ways to understand the term “ability” and question whether either of them is suitable as a criterion for student assignment, concluding that neither of them supports the robust forms of ability grouping common in contemporary education systems. The conceptual analysis of “ability” thereby contributes a novel perspective on the debate surrounding ability grouping.

The chapter proceeds as follows: first, I introduce the practice of ability grouping and rehearse the main arguments in the traditional debate surrounding it. I then move on to distinguish two

possible categories of ability: performative ability, and ability as a property of an agent. I argue that neither of these constitutes a suitable criterion for student assignment in most cases; they can support only limited cases of ability grouping.

The Debate Concerning Ability Grouping

Teaching students together inevitably raises the challenge of teaching children with diverse abilities, different levels of knowledge, areas of interest, propensities, needs, and motivation. Ignoring these differences and teaching all of them the same content, using the same pedagogies will, presumably, be ineffective. This is the axiom that underlies practices of differentiating between students according to their abilities; differential treatment is also indispensable for obtaining just educational outcomes (Anderson 2007; Brighthouse 2011; Jencks 1988; Schouten 2012).

Differential treatment of children with different abilities, however, takes on more controversial forms that have been subject to extensive ethical and legal debate, including programs for gifted children (Merry 2008; Meyer 2014; Sapon-Shevin 1994), segregated special education (Norwich 2014), vocational education (Giesinger 2017), selective schools (Mason 2016; Mazie 2009), and ability grouping (Bailey & Bridges 1983; Brighthouse et al. 2018; Cantu 2019; Hart 1998). While the relevance of considering children's ability in the educational setting is undisputed, it is much less clear which practices are morally permissible (or required), and under what circumstances.

Ability grouping involves sorting students to different schools, classes, tracks, courses, or groups according to their perceived ability. Understood widely, it includes all cases of such separation, including special education, gifted and talented programs, tracking in comprehensive schools, and even grouping students temporarily for specific tasks. It is practiced, in one form or another, in all education systems.

Despite commonalities shared by different cases of ability grouping, the practices may differ in important ways, including the age at which sorting occurs, the criterion used for it, and the differences in curriculum between the tracks. These differences affect the desirability of the practice.

Underlying all cases of ability grouping is the assumption that since teaching is more effective in homogeneous groups, all students will benefit from it – those with low abilities as well as those with high abilities. It is also argued that ability grouping is necessary for ensuring development of educational excellence, because learning in mixed ability groups slows down the pace and prevents teaching high-level material, thus denying high achievers the experience of a challenging and stimulating education (Merry 2008). But the educational benefits of ability grouping are subject to heated empirical debate that questions whether ability grouping constitutes optimal and effective education policy, and whether it conforms with the dictates of educational justice.

Critics of ability grouping argue that empirical evidence does not support the belief that ability grouping improves average educational attainment (Gorard & Siddiqui 2018; Slavin 1990). Students with low ability perform worse when separated than they do in mixed-ability classes (Werblow et al. 2013), and tracking (especially when children are young) reinforces the effect of family background on educational outcomes (Krause & Schuller 2014). Some studies show benefits for high ability students, but these benefits are obtained at the expense of low ability students.

Several factors may offer causal explanations of these findings. Lower ability tracks are allocated inferior resources, are taught by less qualified teachers, and teach less academically challenging material. It is hardly surprising, then, that students attending them are less academically successful.

Being assigned to low-ability tracks can have negative effects even absent these disadvantageous circumstances, since the labeling of students as “low ability” affects the expectations teachers have of them, their expectations of themselves, their self-esteem, and their motivation. Students in lower tracks are also denied the beneficial peer effects available in mixed ability classrooms (Zimmer & Toma 2000) and the non-academic gains of studying in mixed ability settings, including

development of social and inter-personal skills needed for participation in the civic and professional spheres (but see Merry 2013).

These findings are especially worrying because many effects of ability grouping are quite irreversible (Gamoran 1992). Rejection from selective schools and gifted and talented programs is usually final, and assignment to special education or even tracking within comprehensive schools can be difficult to undo as students assigned to the less-demanding tracks study different curricula. The “failure to return” (Cartledge 2005) means that the stakes involved in ability grouping are very high (Mason 2016), and it discredits a stated aim of ability grouping, namely, to improve abilities of children with low abilities or disabilities so they can integrate easily in comprehensive schools.

Another source of criticism regarding ability grouping is consistent evidence that separating students according to their ability results in racial, ethnic, and class segregation. Gifted programs, selective schools, and high-ability tracks typically serve students from privileged backgrounds (Mickelson & Everett 2008; Mazie 2009; Solorzano & Ornelas 2002), and minority students and students from low-income families are overrepresented in low ability tracks and special education (Cipriano-Walter 2015), especially in restrictive educational environments (Graves & Ye 2017).

The correlation between academic performance and social categories can be explained by biases in educational evaluation (Ford 1998; Garda 2005), by unequal educational resources and opportunities (Erwin & Worrell 2012), and also by general social inequality and poverty that result in less nurturing environments for children from marginalized groups. Based on charges of indirect racial and ethnic discrimination, various jurisdictions have struck down policies involving ability grouping (Har-Carmel & Harel Ben Shahar 2017; Oakes 1995) and IQ testing (Wade 1980).

These problems are compounded by doubts concerning existing methods of measuring ability. In addition to the racial and ethnic biases already mentioned, measuring ability is, arguably, generally unreliable, resulting in arbitrary assignment of students to the wrong tracks. Thus, one-time, high stakes tests may misrepresent students’ abilities if they are having a bad day, and tests conducted in unfamiliar settings can make it difficult for some children to express their abilities. When performed on young children, high stakes tests are especially problematic because small variations in age and developmental pace may be significant (Lohman 2005; Mason 2016).

In light of these concerns, opponents argue that ability grouping is an ineffective and unfair education policy. They also argue that it disrupts community and contributes to social divisiveness and relations of domination, thereby undermining the democratic goals of education (Mazie 2009, Sapon-Shevin 1994).

Any conclusive argument for or against ability grouping must consider further factors in addition to all the claims referred to so far, such as the various goals of education and the tradeoffs between them. For example, the democratic goals of education may preclude the practice of ability grouping altogether, whereas promoting excellence may lead us (given sufficient evidence) to favor gifted programs, all things considered. The theory of educational justice we favor would also affect our position regarding ability grouping. For example, as long as all students, including those directed to lower tracks obtain an adequate education, sufficientarians would be inclined to allow ability grouping on account of its possible advantages for high achievers. Egalitarians, on the other hand, would likely take issue with ability grouping even if all students reached the sufficientarian threshold.

A Conception of Ability for Student Assignment

So far, I have rehearsed the main claims in the ongoing debate concerning ability grouping. In the remainder of the chapter, I discuss ability grouping, by examining the possible conceptions of ability that might underlie the practice.

I distinguish between two main ways to understand the term “ability.” The first involves the possibility of performing an action, and the second involves a property of an agent. I examine how

these understandings of ability can be useful for theorizing about education in general and specifically whether they constitute suitable criteria for assigning students to classes or schools. The conclusion I draw is that neither of these concepts of ability can support the robust, institutional, and largely irreversible forms of ability grouping practiced today.

Current Performative Ability

One main way to understand the term “ability” is as a power of an agent. Ability is the current *possibility* of an agent performing a specified action. Various accounts of the nature of this possibility exist (e.g., ability could be understood as the lack of constraint on performing the action, or as the propensity to perform it (Scheffler 1985), the details of which are not crucial for our discussion. Following Thompson (2020), I call this conception of ability *performative ability*. Diverse human activities can be understood as performative abilities – riding a bicycle, baking a cake, or fishing – and in the educational context, it refers to a student’s possibility of performing concrete actions (e.g., reading, writing, solving equations) at the present time. It can also apply to more abstract, or general abilities, such as the ability to perform critical evaluation, to engage in self-directed learning, and more.

Performative abilities are, at once, preconditions for some types of learning, but also the desired outcomes or goals of education. Performative abilities that students currently manifest also constitute an important measure of educational justice. Comparing the performative abilities of different groups of students (for example, low-income versus high-income students, or students identified as belonging to different racial groups) can tell us if equal educational outcomes obtain, or whether students have attained the standards of educational adequacy. Performative abilities can be useful in evaluating specific educational practices or policies, too. For example, reforms introducing online platforms for learning mathematics can be evaluated by, among other things, their effect on gender differences in performative abilities in mathematics.

Ability in this sense is, I argue, the currency of justice in the educational domain (or at least one of its components). It is what egalitarians think should be equalized, what sufficientarians think there should be an adequate amount of, and what prioritarians aim to maximize for the worst off. Performative ability is also the way to recognize the “worst-off” in the educational domain – who is the one with the lowest current ability.

Is performative ability a suitable conception of ability for the practice of ability grouping? Students’ current performative abilities may seem, at first brush, an effective and fair criterion for assigning students. Certain performative abilities are preconditions for learning, so assigning students to a course who lack the necessary performative abilities for success in it would be wasteful, as would assigning students to it who already know what the course is meant to teach. Additionally, using performative abilities for assignment avoids essentializing students’ abilities, or making assumptions about their future trajectories.

Yet, despite its initial attractiveness, performative current ability is not a suitable conception of ability for ability grouping, especially when separation is institutional and permanent.

To see why, think of the rationale behind admission to selective schools or gifted programs (or special education schools). The lack of a specific performative ability (or even several performative abilities) would usually not be considered a good enough reason to reject a candidate, and displaying certain performative abilities would not necessarily suffice as a basis for accepting students. Selective schools, gifted programs, and even high-ability tracks purport to see beyond the mastery of any specific ability and to recognize students’ “raw” talent. Students who possess such ability, so it is thought, will be able to quickly pick up any missing performative abilities. Similarly, no reasonable educator would support assigning a student to special education or to a vocational track merely because she fails to demonstrate a specific performative ability.

Students may have unequal levels of performative abilities for the most mundane reasons – their teacher may have failed to complete all the required material in time, they may have been ill when

the specific topic was taught, and so on. So, separating students according to their performative ability would not decrease heterogeneity in student ability in the long run, and it does not realize the goal of ability grouping. Indeed, differences in performative abilities might warrant differential treatment aimed at helping students develop those abilities, including temporary and local separation performed to that end.

It could be argued that even if performative ability is not what schools try to identify, it can serve as an indication of raw talent. Indeed, student achievement can indicate general ability, and I discuss this further below. For now suffice it to say that specific performative abilities are a coarse measure with limited predictive value, especially when comparing students from different environments and schools.

There is one case in which separation according to performative ability does seem reasonable, namely when the lack of a specific performative ability makes the student unable to benefit from participation in an educational activity. However, this does not justify complete separation of schools or tracks, in most cases. Students do not need to be able to benefit fully from every single activity or task for us to say that they are able to benefit from participation. Moreover, students also experience non-academic gains (social, civic, psychological) from attending schools (Meyer 2014), and they would have to obtain no academic or non-academic benefit for exclusion to be justified. Such cases would, likely, be limited to ability grouping such as advanced placement courses within comprehensive schools, rather than extensive separation. Generally speaking, all students who can benefit from learning in a school or class should be granted access, and when limited resources require it, prioritization should follow one's preferred principle of justice (Clayton 2012; Kotzee & Martin 2013).

Ability as a Property of an Agent

The second possible way to conceive of ability is as a property of an agent. To see what this signifies, think of physical ability. When we say that a person is physically able, we might mean that she has the ability to engage in various sports, such as swimming, even if she does not, as of yet, know how to swim. Ability as a property of an agent does not imply that the agent can currently perform any specific action (performative ability); it precedes performative ability and is a precondition for obtaining it. Further, ability as a property involves a relatively stable attribute of the individual. For example, fragility is an enduring property of glass. If glass were only likely to break in extraordinary occasions, we would not say that it is fragile.

Abilities in the educational domain are often understood as a property of students, meaning that students possess certain cognitive abilities that can be assessed, regardless of the specific tasks they are able to perform at any given time (Curry 2021). Various forms of ability grouping, especially those that entail robust and extended separation, seem to be based on this conception of ability. Educators try to identify students' "native ability," assuming that this accurately predicts performance in more specific educational tasks.

Ability as a property of the agent is used not only in the context of student assignment; it is also implicitly assumed in other discussions in the philosophy of education, such as in the debate between meritocratic and luck egalitarian theories of justice. Unequal educational outcomes are just, according to meritocracy, if they are caused by differences in students' "talent" and effort (Brighouse 2011; Brighouse & Swift 2014; Swift 2003). Luck egalitarian approaches, on the other hand, claim that talent cannot justify educational inequality because students have no control over it (Brighouse 2011). While the two theories offer different responses to unequal student ability, both use the term in this sense, namely as a property of students.

Figuring out what "native ability" might mean is tricky, however. Scientists dispute almost everything about cognitive abilities: how they develop and what affects them; how stable they are over time; whether different abilities are interrelated aspects of "general intelligence" ("g") or there are types of intelligences that derive from separate mechanisms; how ability should be measured. In discussing these matters I will try to rely on the things that scientists largely agree upon.

There is overwhelming evidence to the effect that our cognitive and other abilities are affected to some extent by genes. I am unaware of any theorist or scientist who argues that genes have no role *at all* in determining ability. On the other hand, even the most avid supporters of the thesis that genetic factors determine ability do not claim that genes account for 100% of people's ability, and all agree that environmental factors also affect ability (Carroll 1993). So while the disputes in the field are as fierce as ever, they lie elsewhere – for example, in describing the mechanisms through which ability is affected, the exact forms of interaction between genes and environment, and in the appropriate social and educational responses to the mechanisms that affect ability.

The fact that abilities are affected by both genes and the environment and are not biologically fixed, entails that any argument regarding natural talent or environmental circumstances of individuals apply only to the relevant component of ability. For example, theories of educational justice that require the neutralization of social influences on individual's educational trajectory need to be able to distinguish between the two components. This is more difficult than it may seem because nature and nurture are not only factors that shape ability; they also constantly affect one another, in a “dynamic interplay between genes and experience” (Sweatt 2013: 624). Environmental factors shape various physical dimensions of ability, such as the development of neural networks and the epigenetic alteration of gene functions (the process through which environmental circumstances affect the activation or deactivation of genes) (Bueno 2019; Payne 2021; Perry 2002; Sweatt 2013). In turn, the physical dimensions of an individual's ability shape the environment she is exposed to through her choices and through feedback loops (Jensen 1997). Figuring out the relative role of nature and nurture in people's ability therefore requires discerning and controlling for an endless set of variables, an endeavor fraught with severe methodological (and ethical) difficulties (Payne 2021). Practical difficulties in evaluating the relative role of each contributor does not make the theoretical discussion of its implications unimportant, however, and imprecise approximations may suffice for solving at least some of the practical problems.

Environmental influences on ability raise another challenge for ability as a property. Recall that for ability to be a property of agents it must be a relatively stable characteristic that can be depended upon to predict future performance better than current performative abilities do. Yet, if the environment constantly affects ability, ability is flexible and prone to constant change. Indeed, cognitive abilities are extremely flexible – they develop dramatically in childhood, and they continue to change (developing or stagnating) over the course of one's lifetime (Scheffler 1985; Walton 2013), depending on environment and education. If people's abilities change so dramatically over time, what is the stable property we are thinking of when we talk of people as possessing high ability?

The most plausible possibility is that what is relatively stable is comparative cognitive ability. Young children are, generally speaking, less cognitively able than adults, but we still often observe that a specific child is especially bright. What we mean by this is that the child has high ability compared to what we expect of children her age (Carroll 1993). Performance in school is measured relatively, and is a good predictor of future school performance, although its predictive power declines over time (Lohman 2005).

The stability of relative ability depends on stability of environmental conditions, however. Severe deterioration in education services, a sudden family crisis or accident, or conversely, exchanging a neglectful environment with a nurturing one, or receiving educational reinforcement, have dramatic influence on individuals' relative ability (Perry 2002). Importantly, educational decisions such as ability grouping are likely to significantly influence ability, since they create the environmental circumstances that contribute to the development (or stagnation) of cognitive abilities. Ability grouping is, therefore, not merely a response to preexisting differences in ability but rather a constitutive factor in recreating them. Relying on antecedent ability for assigning students is therefore problematic, in that it does not indicate a pre-existing, fixed trait.

It is worth noting at this point that the malleability of human ability has ramifications beyond the issue of ability grouping. For example, meritocratic theories of educational justice assume that students possess a constant “core” ability that can be discerned separately from the abilities demonstrated in school. Inequality that tracks students’ core ability is not unfair, according to meritocracy. On the other hand, underachievement that cannot be explained by a low “core” ability (or by students’ lack of effort) and is caused by environmental circumstances (lack of nurture by families, inadequate schools, etc.) constitutes an injustice. Underperformance in such cases gives rise to justice-based claims for additional resource allocation or other measures that can compensate students for their environmental disadvantage and improve their achievement so that it aligns with their “core” ability. Given the challenge described above, ability in this sense is not a useful yardstick for meritocratic educational justice (Harel Ben Shahr under review-b).

There are two further interpretations of ability as a property that might be suitable for ability grouping. The first involves intelligence, as measured by IQ tests. Intelligence, or *g*, is sometime referred to as the general ability to solve problems comparatively successfully. Abundant research demonstrates correlations between IQ test scores and various success measures in life including educational attainment, income, job security and others (Curry 2021). There are various objections to IQ tests, including that they may be culturally biased and that preparation improves scores (Steinberg 2003), but they are still considered a well verified measure of cognitive ability that measures a relatively stable and robust trait of individuals (Neisser et al. 1996).

IQ is sometimes used as a criterion for assignment to gifted programs and special education. Some experts argue, however, that IQ is not fine grained enough for the purpose of school assignment. Lohman, an educational psychologist, described the problem as follows: “selecting students for advanced instruction in science or literature using a measure of *g* is like selecting athletes for advanced training in gymnastics or basketball using a measure of general physical fitness” (Lohman 2005: 339; cf. Steinberg 2003). For selection to be effective and to avoid misclassifying students, schools must define the abilities they seek much more specifically. On the other hand, like physical ability, IQ might be an effective indication of people’s general ability. General physical ability is needed to develop specific abilities such as swimming, and IQ might also be understood as a threshold needed for more specific cognitive abilities.

Ability as a property, therefore, seems to be useful for ability grouping mainly when understood as a threshold. I discuss this now through the concept of potential.

“Potential” signifies that an agent does not currently have a certain ability, but that she is likely to be able to develop it given the realization of certain conditions (Scheffler 1985). Ability, whichever way it is understood, is hypothetical in the sense that being able to *x* is not the same as actually doing *x*; but potential takes another step toward the hypothetical, since it involves the possibility of *developing an ability to x*.

Potential also signifies the limitations of agents’ possible abilities by defining which abilities cannot be acquired under certain conditions. While people can and do develop their abilities, there are inescapable limitations to our abilities as a species. For example, humans do not have the ability to outrun an antelope or to calculate faster than a computer. More controversially, there are certain limitations on specific individuals’ abilities. Although people’s abilities can change and develop, often beyond expectations, each and every person has limitations – skills and abilities they will not be able to develop, although it may be impossible to know for sure what the limit is (as I discuss further below). Potential ability is a property of agents, because it is an enduring characteristic, however it is also a very limited descriptor of agents, because it stands at the very boundary of each individual’s ability.

Students’ potential is, like other types of ability, an intertwined product of both nature and nurture. It can also be altered, so that severe neglect or injury can impose new limitations on one’s ability, and effective nurturing can expand what one is able to learn and do. If potential, like “talent” is also affected by nature and nurture and is also flexible, doesn’t it encounter the same problems? Can it help us in our search for a conception of ability that can be useful for the practice of ability grouping?

I think that potential can indeed be a useful conception of ability for ability grouping. It cannot, however, tell us a whole lot about the agent. It indicates what abilities the agent is incapable of obtaining, at the present time, but because potential can be altered, what is currently impossible for a student may be possible in the future. Using potential as the conception of ability for ability grouping entails that instead of trying to find out students' (core) abilities, when assigning students to tracks or courses, we should ask "will this student be able to develop the relevant ability given suitable resources and effort?" Framed this way, the distinction between natural and environmental causes of ability is inconsequential (although causality and blame may retain moral significance in other contexts such as prevention or compensation). Additionally, asking whether students possess the potential to develop an ability does not give undue moral weight to measured ability at a specific point in time, and therefore is compatible with the malleability of ability – the fact that it can be altered. The evaluation of whether the student possesses the threshold ability applies only to the specific moment in which a resource is being distributed. If, at that time, limitations of the student's potential entail that she is unable to benefit from participating in a certain activity, withholding the resource is not unfair. Limitations of students' potential may similarly limit what we owe them in other contexts, excusing us from otherwise binding requirements of justice (Anderson 2007; Howe 2011; Mason 2016; Wilson 1991).

In the context of ability grouping, examining only present limitations on students' abilities implies that evaluations of ability should not result in long term, robust separation, as is the case in many of the forms of ability grouping practiced today. It also suggests that assignment policy should take the form of inclusion of all except those whose ability fall short of the threshold (assignment to special education typically follows this pattern), rather than choosing those with the highest abilities, as typically performed by selective schools (Clayton 2012; Terzi 2020). Remaining prioritization in assignment should follow one's preferred principle of justice (Clayton 2012; Kotzee & Martin 2013).

These conclusions align with the implications of the performative conception of ability described above. I argued that performative ability is an unsuitable criterion for ability grouping, but performative ability could serve as a threshold meant to prevent waste caused by assigning students to courses they cannot benefit from (either academically or non-academically). The conception of ability as potential leads to the same conclusion: separating students according to their abilities might be justified when students' abilities are limited so that they are unable to successfully participate in an academic activity (and if participation does not have other, non-academic benefits).

References to potential in any educational context, however, are cause for concern, given that evaluations of limitations of potential are self-fulfilling prophecies and may lead to denial of resources and opportunities (Books 1998; Hart 1998). The dangers are aggravated by the problems with current methods of evaluation. So, many of the traditional arguments against ability grouping described previously, would apply to evaluations of potential with equal force. Importantly for our discussion, however, the understanding of potential I outline above, and the limited role I suggest it can play in educational decision making, supports only short-term decisions of grouping that acknowledge the malleability of potential. It does not justify the kind of robust ability grouping accepted today. As a result, the dangers noted above are slightly less pressing.

Another important factor in easing some of these concerns is how educators would evaluate student potential. We might say that despite the inescapability of limitations on human ability, there is no reliable way to ascertain what these limitations are in individual cases, and therefore teachers are never allowed to act according to their assessments of potential. This argument, I think, is too strong. We may find ways to assess potential that do not have negative consequences. For example, after repeatedly trying, unsuccessfully, to teach a child how to read, using different methods, and along extended periods of time, it would be reasonable to say that the child is *currently* unable to learn how to read. Two things are crucial here. First, that the assessment was made retrospectively, rather than in advance, and second, that we regard it as valid only at that point in time, rather than

describing the child's potential in general. As a result, resources are not denied children, and low expectations do not undermine her abilities. On the contrary, teachers are required, as a pedagogical strategy, to assume that a child's abilities are greater than their achievements suggest.

So one way to determine the limitations of potential is by repeatedly trying. The practical implications for practices of ability grouping would be that students can only be excluded after being included with suitable support, and that attempts at developing the required abilities must be conducted repeatedly and periodically.

This approach is very demanding in terms of the evidence needed for exclusion. I concede there may be cases in which a lower threshold may suffice for assessments of limited abilities. If we go back to the previous example, given the failed attempts to learn how to read, teachers may be allowed to assume the student is also unable to acquire other similar abilities. This would depend on various factors such as the type of ability, its importance, how difficult the ability is in relation to the student's existing performative abilities, and more. We might also concede that evidence concerning certain types of impairments can serve as an indication of limited potential, as well as exceptionally high or low IQ. This evidence, however, attributes abilities to an individual student on the basis of general statistical evidence concerning people similar to her, and it may underestimate her ability. Therefore, educators are required to take such evidence with a grain of salt, and to try to push students beyond what may be expected of them.

The conclusion is that potential can be used as a criterion for student assignment, however it can support only limited forms of separation, mostly temporary and only in extreme cases in which students are unable to gain academic and non-academic benefits from the course or class.

It should be noted, at this point, that the level of ability needed to perform in schools depends on the educational content that schools choose to teach. For example, some programs for extremely high achievers, such as college level science or accelerated math, are in fact beyond the abilities of most students. Although the conceptual discussion can support separation in this case, there may be convincing normative arguments against such separation, and moreover, against creating programs that require separating students. The fact that gifted programs or advanced courses are common practice does not mean we should take them as a given. It can be argued, for example, that schools are not the appropriate place for college level teaching (save that for college), or that enrichment for gifted children should be provided privately in the afternoon rather than in schools. The conceptual discussion performed here, therefore, does not exhaust all there is to say about ability grouping, but it sheds light on the nature of student ability and consequently examines which forms of ability grouping offer an appropriate reaction to it.

To conclude, the various available conceptions of ability do not offer a solid basis for robust and irreversible forms of ability grouping commonly practiced in schools today. They can, however, support temporary separation on the basis of student ability when a student cannot obtain any benefit (academic or non-academic) from participating in the educational program or activity. This conclusion, derived from a conceptual analysis of ability supports the various arguments against ability grouping presented earlier in the chapter.

None of the above entails that teachers are not allowed to treat children differently on account of their different abilities, for example by offering them additional support and resources. Such differential treatment does not raise any of the moral or conceptual objections that ability grouping creates and is indispensable for teaching inclusive classes.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the practice of ability grouping in light of various conceptions of student ability, concluding that although ability might seem a rational way to assign students to classes, none

of these conceptions sit easily with most practices of ability grouping, especially when separation is robust and irreversible.

The analysis of the concept of ability offers a novel point of view in the debate concerning ability grouping. It invites all sides in the debate to engage in a meaningful discussion about human ability in all its variety, value and limits, and the consequences of these for educational theory and practice. The chapter also demonstrates that thinking about ability, and considering what science tells us about it, can offer new insights concerning some long-standing debates in the philosophy of education.¹

(Related Chapters: 4, 5, 6, 15, 22, 34.)

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