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To cite this article: Gillian Parekh (2017) The tyranny of “ability”, Curriculum Inquiry, 47:4, 337-343, DOI: [10.1080/03626784.2017.1383755](https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2017.1383755)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2017.1383755>



Published online: 21 Nov 2017.



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EDITORIAL



The tyranny of “ability”

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Just about every process associated with academic-related pedagogy, evaluation, and programming is shaped, in part, by its relationship to the concept of student ability. In essence, the modern-day practice of schooling aims to develop, assess, and account for students’ ever accelerating growth and demonstration of new knowledge and skills. As James Ladwig and Amy McPherson (in this issue) suggest, the concept of ability is commonly used among educators and implies a knowing of the academic potential and limitations of students. At the same time, it is also elusive, difficult to define, and even more controversial to measure. The authors of the four articles in this issue of *Curriculum Inquiry* take up the challenge of conceptualizing, measuring, and confronting the familiar and oft-used notion of “ability.” While the authors critically identify the challenges in establishing a consensus around what ability is; how we know; and how it should be used, each article in this issue also underscores its oppressive presence in schools. Whether this is related to challenges in evaluation, methods of curriculum delivery, or selected pedagogical approaches, the notion of ability plays a significant role in shaping interactions between educators and students.

Commonly produced notions of ability have been at the heart of education inequity since formal schooling began. Historically, ability has been the marker of who belonged in public education and who did not, and more recently the determinant of who should and should not have access to education programmes, courses, or academic opportunities (Gaztambide-Fernández & Parekh, 2017). In most cases, ability is narrowly defined, reflective of dominant ideology, and closely tied to market metrics (Pring & Walford, 1997). “In fact, this quasi-Darwinian belief system is built into most schools through the existence of a largely unchallenged pedagogical system of grading and testing that by its very design guarantees failure for some” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 2).

Due to a commonly shared, yet flawed, notion of ability, students who experience racialization, students living in poverty, and students whose families have not had the opportunity to access post-secondary education are more likely to be recommended for placements in special education programmes or lower academic tracks (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Connor, 2017; De Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Gaymes San Vicente, 2016; Parekh, 2014; Reid & Knight, 2006). Despite a vast array of literature evidencing the detrimental effects of grouping students by ability (Mitchell, 2010), the practice continues throughout many school systems. Schools cannot arbitrarily exclude students from programming on the basis of racial identity or class. However,

schools are often allowed to employ medicalized measures of ability, mired in racist and classist histories (Gould, 1996) and allocate academic opportunities accordingly. Since ability plays such a crucial role in student outcomes and is so closely tied to constructions of race, class and other socio-demographic categorizations, it is critical that the power tethered to the construct of ability be examined and challenged.

The four articles in this issue of *Curriculum Inquiry* call into question how ability is conceived and measured, as well as how educators challenge or contribute to the reproduction of inequities in the classroom through assessment and pedagogical practices. The articles delve into the complexities, confluences and contradictions related to the tyrannical shadow ability casts across the pedagogical choices educators make and the methods through which educators choose to evaluate student learning. The authors of these four articles address practices that result in the disablement of students' academic success and inhibit future learning. In addition, authors offer insight into approaches educators can adopt to challenge such systems of oppression.

In their article, "The Anatomy of Ability," Ladwig and McPherson take up the notion of ability and its hegemonic use in schools and schooling. They discuss how the concept of ability is central to merit-based systems, often openly acknowledged and discussed, yet obscure in its definition. In their investigation into the construction of ability, Ladwig and McPherson note that ability is more frequently understood as it relates to intelligence, identifying a re-emergence of a biological and hereditary underpinning to intellectual expression. They note that the conflation of ability with other social or economic markers, such as race and poverty, serves to further stratify students' access to rigorous curriculum and opportunities, and contributes to the replication of future disadvantage.

To help navigate this historically murky terrain, the authors suggest that we think of ability as having its own anatomical structure. As they explain,

The importance of recognizing the anatomy of ability, as it is used in schooling, lies in its capacity to survive within a broader ecology of schooling designed to limit learning and legitimate its consequent social exclusions – at least as much as that system is designed to promote learning and social inclusion. (p. 345)

Ladwig and McPherson interviewed 236 primary and secondary school teachers from New South Wales, Australia, asking them to reflect upon their professional practice, aspirations, goals, and pedagogy. Although unprompted to explicitly discuss ability, Ladwig and McPherson extracted teachers' understanding of the concept from their answers. Even though they were not asked to do so, roughly half of the teachers interviewed discussed the role students' ability played in shaping their pedagogical approaches and strategies in the classroom. Results demonstrated that teachers often shared similar notions as to the construction of ability as well as its functional use in schools. Ladwig and Chapman argue that ability was used to sort and rank students within schools and that judgements of ability were internalized by students. In addition, the static nature of ability appeared to vary across students. For example, ability was often discussed as a fixed state when attributed to students with perceived lower ability. In contrast, for students deemed to have higher ability, educators were more likely to discuss their potential or malleable intellect. Regardless of whether students performed well or not, teachers felt strongly that ability was produced largely as a result of students' inherent capacities and efforts. However, ability was also contextualized within a realm of morality where "an institution's conceptions of

ability are based on the ubiquitous Protestant ethic of hard work" (p. 355), whereby inability could be a product of laziness.

Ladwig and McPherson conclude that the "anatomy of ability" is, in fact, institutionally embedded, and reified through praxis. Therefore, in order for this "anatomy" to be enacted in schools, there must be a singular agreed upon attribute that has the potential to be quantifiably measured (e.g. intelligence) and considered to be relatively fixed within the student. However, this "anatomy" must also resonate with the aims of the institution and serve a functional role. In the case of education, ability takes on a regulating function, offering justification for the inequitable distribution of related resources and post-school opportunities.

The construct of ability is also central to the production and enactment of a deficit lens. In a school setting, a deficit lens diminishes the perception of students' ability, often drawing conclusions based on erroneous or irrelevant student characteristics. In addition to seeking out deficits or deviations in students' ability, the perception of a deficit in one identified area risks prompting a generalization in other areas of students' capabilities. As illustrated in the premise of Zandra de Araujo's article, "Connections Between Secondary Mathematics Teachers' Beliefs and their Selection of Tasks for English Language Learners," the capabilities of students who are English Language Learners (ELL) were often perceived through a deficit lens. Their inability to engage in the English language was conflated with their capacity to perform well in other academic areas (e.g. mathematics).

The research literature concurs that learning mathematics requires activities and exercises that demand a high degree of cognitive engagement. In addition, learning mathematics in a vacuum, removed from contextual and cultural meanings, can be a barrier to deeper learning (see Stein, Smith, Henningsen, & Silver, 2009). Research also supports the idea that waiting for students to become more proficient in English before assigning complex and contextual mathematics problems is ineffective and can result in negative outcomes for mathematics achievement (see Sigley & Wilkinson, 2015). As de Araujo supports, citing Lager's (2006) work, to deepen students' learning, ELL students should engage in demanding activities in language and mathematics simultaneously.

Consistent with the arguments laid out by Ladwig and McPherson, de Araujo notes that teachers' beliefs around students' abilities often determine the types of curricular activities conducted in class. Studies have shown how students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are often given less demanding curriculum (see Means & Knapp, 1991). Not only do some educators seem to conflate economic disadvantage with lower ability, but there are also incidences when cultural background appears to shape teachers' perceptions of student capacity (see Chval & Pinnow, 2010).

De Araujo's observations and interviews with three teachers revealed that they held a clear and persistent view that students who were ELL were also unable to engage with rigorous mathematics activities. In fact, her findings demonstrate that teachers perceived ELL students as having a deficit in language, which they then assumed permeated across their other capacities. To exemplify this point, teachers frequently avoided using text books and instead created their own activities, resulting in "teacher-selected tasks [that] were consistently decontextualized and low in cognitive demand" (p. 373). In addition, teachers described looking for simplified mathematics material for their ELL students. Selected activities often ended up being repetitive, low in both context and cognitive rigour, requiring little writing, processing or engagement with language.

De Araujo argues that the label of being of a language learner was partly to blame for teachers' deficit perceptions of ELL students' overall ability. Consistent with findings related to the generalization of low ability, de Araujo concludes that "teachers seemed to correlate ELLs' limited proficiency in English with limited mathematical abilities" (p. 382). Her conclusions reaffirm the danger in perceiving student differences as deficits. Moreover, de Araujo's work shows how students are further disadvantaged when teachers consider ELL as a deficit condition, one that not only specifically impacts students' ability to engage with language activities, but also rigorous cognitive activities in general. When they are denied opportunities to deepen their understanding in both mathematics and language simultaneously, ELL students run the risk of being unable to meet curricular expectations, further reifying teachers' negative beliefs.

Despite its ambiguity, measuring ability continues to be an established practice within education. In their article, "Swedish Students' Experiences of National Testing in Science: A Narrative Approach," Ragnhild Löfgren and Håkan Löfgren investigate how sixth-grade students living in Sweden experienced the process of undergoing national testing in science. As they discussed, tests in science and mathematics are considered by many to be among the more objective forms of assessment (see also Smith, 2014). However, their study illustrated many challenges in the authentic measurement of students' competency in a particular subject area. Despite the implied objectivity associated with math and science, Löfgren and Löfgren pointed to several examples of how social and material experiences as well as contextual settings can impact students' engagement with and understanding of formalized and standardized assessment questions. To better understand this, Löfgren and Löfgren examined students' identity performances through interviews. Interviews were conducted in groups, ranging from 2 to 5 students, for a total of 64 student participants from seven different schools. Drawing from Mishler's (1999) work, Löfgren and Löfgren adopted a concept of identity performance that is relational, contextually and socially located, and open to contradiction depending on the stories students opted to share.

Reading through students' transcribed responses to their testing experiences, there seemed to almost be a hint of betrayal. Students articulated many concerns they had around the testing process. They discussed the barriers they encountered, such as not having enough time to perform well, being unable to contextualize the questions on the test in relation to what they had learned in class, struggling with the content, and finding the "help boxes" unclear. They also discussed their anxiety around the seriousness of the testing implications as further emphasized by the changes to the classroom structure and furniture as well as how teachers' own behaviour shifted from one of caring to surveillance and suspicion. Personal implications were also described in terms of how the test results would impact students' final grades.

Students articulated the pressure they felt to perform well on the examinations and, despite the lack of clear relationship between national testing outcomes and students' final grades, the perception students held was that the implications were significant. Some students described feeling ill during the test and felt mistrusted by their teachers. They often expressed their frustration and referred to complications with the test material. Their sense of frustration and inability to answer test questions was perceived as collective experience shared also by their peers.

Given all the barriers, constraints, and concerns raised by students around the preparation and process of testing, Löfgren and Löfgren rightfully question whether national test scores accurately reflect students' ability in the area of science. This query draws into question the process through which students' ability is evaluated across a number of measurements. In addition, as implemented through national testing schemes, Löfgren and Löfgren's findings raise serious concerns around teaching and assessment using scripted and systematic approaches to content.

The concern raised by Löfgren and Löfgren is also raised by Maren Aukerman and Lorian Chambers Schuldt in their article "Bucking the Authoritative Script of a Mandated Curriculum." Aukerman and Schuldt studied the intentional pedagogical approach of a teacher who sought to challenge the authoritative nature of his state-adopted curriculum. Authoritative curriculum denotes prescriptive approaches to teaching through the explicit instruction of specified skills. The authors note that the literature has shown this approach to be ineffective and more likely to be employed in schools that have higher proportions of ELL students and students who come from lower income families. Echoing the work of de Araujo, they argue that underlying the relationship between authoritative curriculum and marginalized students is the assumption that particular groups of students do not have the ability to contribute to their own learning and therefore must be approached with explicit direction. In authoritative approaches to pedagogy, teachers insist that students reach "a single predetermined understanding...or way of speaking/thinking" that involves "posing questions with a single acceptable answer or a limited range of answers, and through evaluating student responses as correct or incorrect" (p. 413). However, dialogic approaches to pedagogy ensure that students' perspectives are honoured, respected and invited to be shared.

As noted by Aukerman and Schuldt, most teachers are obligated to teach to a specific and often regimented curriculum. They seldom have the authority to deviate from prescriptive content. However, the authors outline the pursuit of one teacher who sought to engage his students in a dialogic pedagogy that continued to adhere to the curricular goals. The research literature demonstrates that the practice of dialogic teaching is linked to improved academic outcomes and, due to its relational nature, students engage and grapple with one another's thinking and understanding of the curriculum. Aukerman and Schuldt follow one teacher, Max, who attempts to implement a dialogic approach to teaching within his grade two transitional bilingual (Spanish/English) classroom. Through the implementation of dialogic pedagogy, students take an active role in engaging with content as opposed to being passive actors within the transference of knowledge. Max's work in the classroom highlighted the strategies he employed to connect with his students, bolster their interaction and collective production of knowledge. Max took liberties and taught outside the prescribed curriculum, often rejecting the recommended activities and strategies. Instead, he engaged in deep discussions with his students, facilitating opportunities for their thoughts, perspectives, questions, and ideas to be articulated and taken up by their peers.

Throughout the interviews, Max details his approach in his classroom, but also acknowledges the professional risk involved with teaching in a way that challenges the authoritative nature of mandatory curriculum. Max addresses the isolation he experienced from his colleagues and notes that the support of his administrator and his tenure within

the profession enabled him to pursue his pedagogical commitments without the risk to his employment.

The authors in this issue of *Curriculum Inquiry* courageously explore one of the most commonly employed and oppressive forces in education, the construction and reproduction of ability. Through different entry points, the articles contribute to the exploration of the hegemonic relationship between schooling practices and students' perceived ability. Ladwig and McPherson's article expanded upon the theoretical literature by offering readers the opportunity to engage with the construct of ability through an examination of its anatomy and institutional function. Exploring how the notion of ability is enacted in the teaching of mathematics to ELL students, de Araujo's contribution explored the extent and dangers of deficit thinking and its application on minority language learners. Identifying further barriers to authentic assessment of ability, Löfgren and Löfgren queried oft-employed methods in evaluating and measuring knowledge acquisition and identified key systemic constraints that problematize outcomes of national testing schemes. Offering a glimmer of hope, Aukerman and Schuldt detail the journey of one educator, Max, who provides insight into the importance of adopting a dialogic pedagogy for all students.

A deep investigation of what constitutes ability can also ignite further discussions on what constitutes "disability," including how institutions disable and respond to a diversity of bodies/minds. As much as ability is privileged and promoted in schools and in schooling practices, disability is often rejected and excluded. In schools, as in other realms of society, the power afforded to the "able" is significantly restricted from those perceived as "disabled." In an upcoming special issue of *Curriculum Inquiry*, titled "Disability as Meta Curriculum: Epistemologies, Ontologies, and Transformative Praxis," articles will investigate "the epistemological, ontological, and pedagogical claims of the normative curriculum from the critical standpoint of disability" (see <http://www.curriculuminquiry.org/disability/>). Together with the articles in this issue, the special issue will offer readers and scholars the opportunity to re-visit the foundations of education and curriculum, and query their role in the production and reproduction of social relations beyond the boundaries of the school. By engaging with these questions and ideas, educators can continue the work of deconstructing notions of ability and challenging the practices that continue to replicate broader societal divisions.

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