



“Turned off” or “ready to fly” – Ability grouping as an act of symbolic violence in primary school

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Ability grouping impacts teacher pedagogic practice and how they ‘do’ teaching.
- Learning frames shaped by teachers’ differing expectations across ability levels.
- Implications for boys, migrant children and those considered ‘low’ ability.
- Teachers implement ability grouping although they are aware of its implications.
- Ability grouping can be considered as an act of symbolic violence.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a mixed methodological study exploring teacher perspectives on the use of ability grouping in primary schools in Ireland. Results indicated that teachers were shown to ‘funnel and filter’ children into differentiated ability groups, conceptualised as acts of symbolic violence. This had particular implications for learners assigned to the ‘weaker’ groups, most especially boys, minority ethnic/migrant children and those with additional support needs. Factors related to length of teacher experience and engagement with continuous professional development were found to mediate the strength of framing of children’s learning in ability groups.

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1. Introduction

The practice of ability grouping is one which has been researched internationally with consistently negative impact noted, especially for those who most struggle with their learning (Francis et al., 2016; Hallam & Parsons, 2012; Hornby, Witte, & Mitchell, 2011; Marks, 2014). In this paper we argue that the landscape of international educational policy formation – most notably international comparative tests of performance (such as PISA and PIRLS), is contributing to the continued use of ability grouping. The setting of neo-liberal performance driven targets

reflects a seismic shift within the Irish education system, where the practice of how teachers ‘do’ teaching is evaluated by reductive measures of how pupils ‘do’ in their learning (Devine and McGillicuddy, 2016). What emerges is an intensification of teaching where teacher autonomy and agency becomes eroded by educational policy aimed at satisfying a neo liberal agenda of meeting targets, what Grek (2009) refers to as governing by numbers. Ireland’s earlier declining performance in reading and Mathematics (OECD, 2009, 2013) gave rise to the publication and implementation of a national policy on numeracy and literacy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Performance in numeracy and literacy among 15 year olds in the most recent wave of results (OECD, 2016) is improving. However, deeper examination of the practices being promoted at a policy level aimed at improving performance within the education system more broadly, but most specifically in DEIS schools serving the most

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disadvantaged communities (Department of Education and Science, 2009), raises concerns, given the stated emphasis and promotion of ability grouping as a panacea for underperformance. In line with others (Francis et al., 2016; Hornby & Witte, 2014) we argue that the use of ability grouping as a mechanism for improving target driven ‘scores’ has potentially longer term negative impacts on younger children in primary schools.

International research has explored the use and impact of ability grouping at both primary and secondary level (Alexander et al., 2009; Boaler, 2008; Hornby et al., 2011; Ireson et al., 1999; Ramberg, 2016; Smyth, 2016) reaffirming Delany’s (1991) earlier identification of the practice as ‘a sorting machine’. Ability grouping in primary school can be evident in a variety of guises occurring both within and between classes. The most prevalent forms of ability grouping at primary level are setting (where children are placed into ability groups across a grade for specific subjects such as numeracy and literacy), within-class ability grouping (where pupils are grouped in class by ability) and cross-grade grouping (where children are placed in groups across different class/year levels). The division of students into ability groups is perceived by both policy makers and practitioners as an effective means for matching both curricular and pace needs of pupils and pedagogical needs of teachers (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006; Hornby et al., 2011). Positive perceptions of ability grouping in international studies emphasise the benefits for students’ understanding and achievement in maths and reading when placed in homogenous groups and the related capacity to cater for a wide range of abilities (Gallagher, Smith, & Merrotsy, 2011; Hallam, Ireson, & Davies, 2004; Matthews, Ritchotte, & McBee, 2013; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016). Other research however queries the assumption around ‘fixed’ levels of ability (Boaler, William, & Brown, 2000; Hamilton & O’Hara, 2011) and argues that ability grouping merely widens the achievement gap between high and low ability pupils (Lleras & Rangel, 2009; Schofield, 2010). Further, ability grouping related policies in schools tend to be unwritten, with parents often left in the dark as to its use in the school (Hornby et al., 2011). Research has also highlighted the complex intertwining of dynamics between ability grouping, curriculum exposure, pedagogy, and teacher practices and perceptions (Ireson et al., 1999) as well as children’s own expectations of themselves as learners (Lee, 2014; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Rubin, 2007), carrying advantages for certain cohorts of pupils. This is especially the case for those assigned to the higher ability levels who are exposed to higher quality instruction, more content laden and challenging curriculum and more teaching time than pupils assigned to the lower ability groups (Ansalone, 2010; Hallam & Ireson, 2005; Harris, 2011, 2012; Vogl & Preckel, 2014). In contrast, pupils assigned to lower ability groups experience more volatile learning environments characterised by negative interaction with teachers and peers leading not only to negative self-image but also disaffection from school (Houtte, Demanet, & Stevens, 2012; Ireson & Hallam, 2009; Kim, 2012; Kususanto, Ismail, & Jamil, 2010). Indeed, research highlights the significance of ability grouping in the context of child cultures and the social space of schooling (Devine, 2007), framing comparisons between peers, with a subsequent impact on children’s self-image and well-being (Devine, 2003). This can be a deeply embodied and emotional process, playing an important role in the internalisation of identifications (Clarke, 2014; Jenkins, 2008; Reay, 2008).

The ‘sorting machine’ (Delany, 1991), i.e. the way children are assigned to ability group levels, particularly misassignment into and lack of movement between group levels, has also been identified as problematic. It results in the ‘fixing of ability’ with implications not only on future educational and curricular choices, but also on life chances (Barker Lunn, 1970; Devine, 2003; Hallam &

Parsons, 2012; Hallinan, 2003; Smyth & Calvert, 2011). As such, a child’s educational trajectory is potentially determined at a very early age by the practice of ability grouping (Hallam & Parsons, 2012; Hamilton & O’Hara, 2011). While this sorting process may be defined as objective, in reality it is a subjective undertaking, with non-academic factors playing a significant role in determining ability group level assignment (Hallinan, 2003; Kutnick et al., 2006; Muijs & Dunne, 2010). Studies have indicated that ability grouping is most prevalent in schools where there is a large population of minority ethnic children, a diverse range in terms of achievement levels and in schools serving more impoverished communities (Gillborn, 2010; Hallam & Parsons, 2012; Hamilton & O’Hara, 2011). Indeed, previous studies have highlighted particular concern for working class children in terms of both disproportionalities in ability group placement and group learning experiences. In such contexts, it is argued, ability grouping contributes to the perpetuation of the cycle of poverty, thus reinforcing disadvantage (Ansalone, 2003; Dunne et al., 2011; Hallam & Parsons, 2012; Muijs & Dunne, 2010).

Much of the research in this area has been done in secondary schools, with an absence of in-depth research at primary level noted (Devine, 2003; Hallam & Parsons, 2012; Mulryan Kyne, 2005). This paper seeks to address this gap, highlighting the incidence and impact of ability grouping in the earlier stages of children’s education. It does so drawing on a national sample of teachers in DEIS primary schools across Ireland as well as intensive analysis of practice across three case study schools.

2. Ability grouping as a form of symbolic violence

The work of Bourdieu and Bernstein provides a wider contextualisation of the socially reproductive nature of ability grouping. Classification of knowledge, i.e. the defining and strengthening of boundaries between what may or may not be transmitted in the pedagogical relationship between teacher and pupil (Bernstein, 1973) when filtered through the use of ability grouping, creates a hierarchy between learners. This positions some pupils as ignorant and having little rights or status, particularly when classification and framing is strong (Bernstein, 1973, 1975). Teachers, through their pedagogical work, have a key role to play. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1996) note, they are “specialised agents” (p. 57) who, through their engagement with the pedagogic device (Bernstein, 1990), ‘funnel and filter’ students into set social spaces (ability groups) based on perceptions and expectations for different learners (Harris, 2012; Muijs & Dunne, 2010; Vogl & Preckel, 2014). Applied to the wider societal context, social order (and inequality) is mediated through the distribution of different forms of knowledge and consciousness to diverse social groups in schools (Apple, 2002). Such ‘fixing’ positions learners in particular ways – classifies and defines them, exposing them to different knowledge forms and differing consciousness that shapes their view of their place and existence in the world (Bourdieu, 1973, 1995, 2002). As Devine (2013) notes, the personal intersects with the structural as learner identities and dispositions evolve impacting on children’s capacities and orientations to learn. The subtlety of this process of social reproduction is evident when Bourdieu (1973) states that;

By converting social hierarchies into academic hierarchies, the educational system fulfils a function of legitimation which is more and more necessary to the perpetuation of the ‘social order’ as the evolution of the power relationship between classes tends more completely to exclude the imposition of a hierarchy based upon the crude and ruthless affirmation of the power relationship (p.84).

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