



BOOK REVIEW

## Ability Grouping in Primary Schools: case studies and critical debates

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## **Book Review**

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### **Ability Grouping in Primary Schools: case studies and critical debates**

**Author: Rachel Marks**

**Northwich: Critical Publishing (2016) pp. 80**

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**Reviewer: Dr. Jennifer Spratt, Senior Lecturer, University of Aberdeen**

Three and a half decades after Ball (1981) identified the role of ability labelling in perpetuating societal inequalities, this book shows that policy imperatives in England are still placing pressure on schools to segregate children by 'ability' for core subjects and that the practice is widespread in primary schools. Rachel Marks draws from her own doctoral studies to examine in detail how ability grouping operated in three primary schools, providing evidence from observations and interviews with staff and pupils to identify some of the implications of these practices.

She shows how the discursive conflation of attainment with the concept of innate ability gives rise to uncritical acceptance by both teachers and children of a taken-for-granted concept of ability as an individualised, immutable characteristic. This in turn leads to deterministic assumptions of future performance. Interview data demonstrate how children themselves use the language of ability, and how they form their identities as learners within this way of thinking. There is a strong message in this book that children view their own future learning, and that of their peers, as determined by where they have learnt that they belong in the spectrum of 'ability'. The research findings also demonstrate pedagogical differences in the way that 'high ability' classes and 'low ability' classes are taught and the expectations that teachers have of their attainments. Moreover, the book shows how the practice of regrouping children for certain subjects interrupts the normal pastoral care routines of the school and can potentially damage the holistic ethos of the primary classroom. This disruptive effect is particularly felt by the most vulnerable children.

Overall the book offers a very compelling, evidence-based critique of the use of ability grouping in schools. It is aimed at student teachers and practicing teachers, inviting reflection and critique of the issues raised in each chapter. I found the book to be very clearly written and I would wholeheartedly recommend it as a core text for initial teacher education courses. The book does not suggest other approaches that teachers might take, instead it invites reflection by the reader. Teachers who are convinced of the folly of ability labelling may want to turn to Hart et al (2004) to explore the alternatives.

Rather depressingly, much of what is reported in this book is not new; it echoes, and refers to, the classic texts of the 1980s where the self-fulfilling prophesy of ability labelling was

shown to limit the opportunities and expectations of some groups of children. However, this is a very important contemporary book, written in the current climate of accountability, that points out that these practices are still happening, encouraged by government, and that children's present and future opportunities continue to be curtailed by ungrounded assumptions of innate ability.

### References

BALL, S., (1981). *Beachside Comprehensive: A case study of secondary schooling*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

HART, S., DIXON, A., DRUMMOND, M.J. and MCINTYRE, D., (2004). *Learning without limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.