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Ability, inequality and post-pandemic schools: Rethinking contemporary myths of meritocracy

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In *Ability, Inequality, and Post-Pandemic Schools: Rethinking Contemporary Myths of Meritocracy*, Alice Bradbury argues that the idea of “ability” in schools reproduces broader social inequalities. Using poststructuralism and Critical Race Theory (CRT) frameworks, the author analyzes the production and maintenance of inequalities in the education system's day-to-day operation, highlights the importance of examining preconceived notions of children’s abilities in the classroom, and discusses how seemingly objective scientific interpretations reproduce social inequalities. In this review, I address how ability is linked with inequality, how new scientific endeavors—such as genetics, neuroscience, and datafication—risk naturalizing these differences in ability, and how this is significant for feminist pedagogues.

The first two chapters examine how ability relates to key concepts such as inequality. Bradbury explores how the ability discourse operates on a classroom level. She continues to explain how classifying students on a range of ability is an increasingly large part of a teacher’s job. Since the idea of intelligence is highly linked to the idea of ability, and intelligence is inseparable from its history of classism and racism, ability must also be seen through this critical lens. Constructing this critical lens is valuable for feminist pedagogues to deconstruct preconceived notions of student intelligence and ability as innate or unchanging traits.

Bradbury also discusses the foundational neoliberal idea of meritocracy: Those with enough ability and effort will gain power and wealth. The author posits that schools serve to find this intellectual elite and provide more resources for their success. Only those considered able are nurtured, while those seen as unable are not given the same opportunities. This leads to starker gaps between students, providing even more “proof” of the superiority of those seen as able. Those engaged in feminist pedagogy should evaluate classroom policies through the lens of Bradbury’s analysis to evaluate policies for the potential to reproduce hierarchies amongst students.

The author touches on how new fields of science—such as epigenetics and neuroscience—and new ways to collect data have affected how we view ability. She highlights the shift from an overt eugenicist focus on genetics to a more covert form of categorization that focuses on epigenetics—the study of how the environment affects gene expression. Instead of blaming distinct genes for specific characteristics, policymakers and others in power misinterpret modern science to blame a student’s lack of ability on their household environment. Bradbury asserts that the same eugenics thinking about good and bad genes has
shifted towards epigenetics, simply using a different framework for separating people into categories.

Neuroscience similarly has shifted how we view students and masks inequalities with neutral, scientific language. Bradbury is concerned about educators and administrators misapplying neuroscientific findings to suit preconceived ideas of student ability. Flawed understandings of neuroscience lead to flawed implementation in the classroom and can uphold old beliefs of ability and merit. One example is the myth of the “first three years” of a child’s life, after which the brain is mostly fixed. This oversimplifies neuroscientific findings of optimal learning periods. Its usage positions children—mainly from low-income families—as neurologically damaged and justifies removing them from their families. Policies and standards based on simplified and misunderstood neuroscience become another way students can be classified as lacking due to race, class, or disability. Feminist educators need to keep in mind how neuroscientific findings can seem to naturalize differences in student ability.

The chapter about the rise of datafication in classrooms discusses the increased importance of collecting data and how that has affected views of students’ abilities. The data collected in classrooms reinforce the previously discussed ideas of ability. This focus on data can also lead to an increased focus on monitoring students and ensuring their compliance rather than supporting their learning. Bradbury emphasizes that data, like neuroscience, can also give policies an air of objectivity and “common sense” (p. 101). For example, educators sometimes use progress data to separate particular children for additional interventions, physically separating them from their peers. An increased focus on data by school policies also means teachers must devote more and more of their attention to student data rather than students as individual human beings. Feminist educators must evaluate how they track classroom data to ensure they are not placing the importance of collecting data over the importance of students’ education.

*Ability, Inequality, and Post-Pandemic Schools* is an important reminder that “objective” measures of ability perpetuate inequalities rather than consider the entirety of the student. Though the author speaks about the English school system, this book is a valuable addition to feminist pedagogy anywhere. It expands upon a framework for critiquing the educational “normal” and encourages us to question how education works, including its oppressiveness. Though maybe too advanced for undergraduates, *Ability, Inequality, and Post-Pandemic Schools* would be at home in a graduate syllabus alongside authors such as bell hooks and Allison Kafer and texts such as *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique Couvson. Bradbury’s work discussing how education standards and policies negatively affect marginalized students adds another layer
of understanding to Couvson’s book exploring how Black girls are impacted by school policies and complements hooks’s theories of feminist pedagogy found in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

Relevant courses include courses in education, pedagogy, sociology, critical theory, and disability studies. It can be included in units about educational inequalities, disability and racism in schools, oppressive everyday institutions, or the evolution of eugenic thought in education. It is also helpful for those looking to work in school administration. Vitally, this book shows feminist pedagogues the importance of questioning the “normal” workings of the education system. When conversations about conceptualizing ability are absent, we risk hiding how the education system—or an individual class—can perpetuate existing inequalities.
