

How fixed-ability thinking can limit learning

Pointers from research

Effects on teachers

- Ability labelling shapes teachers' attitudes towards children and limits their experience for some children's learning. Teachers vary their teaching and respond differently towards children viewed as 'bright', 'average' or 'less able' (e.g. Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Jackson 1964; Keddle 1971; Croll and Moses 1985; Good and Brophy 1991; Hacker et al 1991; Suknandan and Lee 1998).
- Fixed ability thinking reduces teachers' sense of their own power to promote learning and development through the use of their expertise and professional judgement. It therefore discourages creativity and inventiveness to overcome difficulties (e.g. Bloom 1976; Simon 1953; Kelly 1955; Dixon 1989; Drummond 2003; Hart 1996, 200).
- Fixed ability thinking encourages teachers to see differential performance as natural and inevitable, and so diverts attention from the part that school and classroom processes play in enabling or limiting learning for individuals and groups (e.g. Jackson 1964; Bourdieu 1976; Bernstein 1971; Tizard and Hughes 1984; Rist 1970; Coard 1971).

Effects on young people

- Young people learn how they are perceived by teachers and respond to that perception; they tend to live up to or down to expectations (e.g. Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Nash 1973; Good and Brophy 1991; Tizard et al 1988).
- Ability-labelling undermines many young people's dignity, their self-belief, their hopes and expectations for their own learning. It strips them of their sense of themselves as competent, creative human beings, leading them to adopt self-protective strategies that are inimical to learning (e.g. Dweck 2000; Hargreaves 1967, 1982; Lacey 1970, Ball 1981; Holt 1990; Jackson 1968; Pearl 1997).
- Fixed ability thinking and ability-led practices tend to disadvantage some groups of young people. Research has repeatedly drawn attention to social class and ethnicity-based inequalities in the processes of selection, grouping and differentiation of curricula (e.g. Jackson 1964; Douglas 1964; CACE 1967; Ford 1969; Heath 1983; Taylor 1993; Gillborn and Youdell 2000).

Effects on curriculum

- Fixed ability thinking encourages and legitimates a narrow view of curriculum, learning and achievement (e.g. Hargreaves 1980; Alexander 1984; Goldstein and Noss 1990).
- By naturalising explanations of differential achievement, fixed ability thinking perpetuates the limitations and biases built into existing curricula (e.g. Gardner, 1983; West 1991).
- Ability labelling and grouping by ability restrict the range of learning opportunities to which individual pupils are exposed (e.g. Jackson 1964; Nash 1973; Suknandan and Lee 1998; Hacker et al 1991; Oakes 1982, 1985; Boaler 1997a, b; Boaler et al 2000).
- Ability labelling and grouping encourage schools and teachers to privilege psychometric knowledge of young people over the knowledge acquired through day-to-day classroom interaction (e.g. Kelly 1955; Hull 1985; Hart et al 2004).

For detailed discussions and full list of references, see Hart, S, Dixon A, Drummond MJ and McIntyre D (2004)

Learning without Limits, Open University Press