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Constructing Ability in the Classroom: A Descriptive Analysis of Pedagogical Practices in Primary Education

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Abstract

In this article I explore how certain pedagogic practices construct students' ability as visible. The concept of ability is viewed as constructed, put into place by specific educational practices, rather than a fixed trait of the students. Conducted in two primary classrooms, this study employs observational methods complemented by audio-video recording. Through the analysis of the recordings and transcripts, I identify and thematize several pedagogical practices, used to organize learning activities. The analysis is framed by Basil Bernstein's concepts of visible pedagogy and framing, complemented by Rosenholtz and Simpson's (1984) view of ability as a socially constructed phenomenon. The findings are organized around two main themes that align with Bernstein's concepts of visible pedagogy: (1) Practices that make visible the means for ability development, and (2) Practices that make visible the rhythm of ability. The study aims to contribute to our understanding of how ability, a central concept in education, can be viewed as socially constructed by pedagogical practices, understood as an alternative to the developmentalist view that sees the same concept as fix, normally dispersed and linearly developed.

Keywords: Ability, Bernstein, social constructionism, primary education, pedagogic practices

Introduction

Over the past 50 years, different studies have explored the relationship between instructional contexts, teaching practices, and effective learning. This research has evolved from observational studies, such as those by Flanders (1970), to encompass sociological perspectives from Bossert (1979) and Rosenholtz & Simpson (1984), as well as sociocultural approaches by researchers like Ames (1992), Meyer & Turner (2000), and Turner & Nolen (2015). These studies collectively emphasize the critical role that the characteristics of

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instructional contexts, like organization of activities, and pedagogical practices in general, play in shaping not only educational outcomes, but also the way students and teachers define ability.

In the context of this research, the concept of "ability" within classroom settings continues to be viewed as significantly shaping the pedagogical practices and student experiences, influencing academic outcomes and perpetuating inequities that affect diverse student populations (Parekh, 2024). The prevailing methods of assessing and recognizing ability in educational settings often reinforce traditional hierarchies and exacerbate disparities among students. Practices such as standardized testing, streaming, and ability grouping underscore a rigid interpretation of ability that disproportionately impacts students with ethnic background, economically disadvantaged, or have limited access to resources. This approach to education raises critical questions about the effectiveness and fairness of pedagogical strategies that prioritize inherent abilities over equitable opportunities for learning and development.

This paper seeks to describe the pedagogical practices that teachers, in two primary classrooms use, from the perspective of visible pedagogy as theorized by Bernstein (1990) and Rosenholtz & Simpson's (1984) framework. By employing Bernstein's framework, this study explores how the concept of ability is made visible and enacted in everyday classroom interactions. Further, the analysis is enriched by incorporating Rosenholtz & Simpson's view of ability as a socially constructed phenomenon, allowing for a deeper understanding of how the representations of ability can be viewed as embedded in the organization of learning activities. Through detailed observations and thematic analysis of audio-video recordings, this study aims to provide a description of how ability is contextualized within the pedagogical practices observed.

1. The notion of ability

In recent educational discourse, the prevailing notion of "ability" has been examined for its role in perpetuating inequities within the classroom. Parekh (2017) critiques this concept, highlighting how ingrained practices such as grading and testing ensure that some students will inevitably fail, thereby reinforcing a hierarchy in educational settings. This interpretation of ability disproportionately affects some students, often directing them towards special education programs or lower academic tracks. Parekh suggests that ability is not only a narrowly defined construct, but is also interwoven with racial and socioeconomic biases. The same author, further develops the concept of ableism in educational settings which is deeply interwoven with the foundational structures and principles of contemporary schooling, influencing notions of meritocracy and competition based on ability (Parekh, 2024). As described by Goodley (2014 apud Parekh), ableism

shapes our intrinsic fears about adequacy and worthiness, driving the cultural fears of not measuring up or fitting in within societal and educational communities.

In schools, this manifests as a preference for rewarding demonstrable abilities, assigning the most stimulating opportunities and elite programs to those who exhibit higher abilities, and even placing the most skilled educators with the most capable students. Such practices promote an ability-based hierarchy that is both nonreflexive and rigid. Moreover, structural ableism, as detailed by Dolmage (2017), refers to the embedding of ableist norms within the very systems and policies of educational institutions, creating disparities in access to resources and opportunities. This structural aspect of ableism not only perpetuates ability-based hierarchies but also intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as racism and classism, further complicating the dynamics within educational settings. Thus, while ableism primarily concerns the privileging of ability, it is crucial to consider how educational structures, through programs and placements, formalize and perpetuate these biased notions of ability.

On the same line of thinking, Ladwig & McPherson (2017) challenge traditional views of ability as a fixed and innate attribute of students. Their empirical investigation into how teachers perceive and operationalize ability highlights systemic issues where ability is often misconstrued and misapplied, reinforcing educational inequities. By understanding the 'anatomy' of ability, educators and policymakers can begin to address the limitations imposed by traditional ability grouping and tracking systems, fostering more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

Taking the discussion even further, Hart (1998) contributes to the argument, by exploring the impact of fixed abilities on educational reform. Hart argues that many reforms aimed at raising standards inadvertently solidify beliefs in inherent intellectual limits without challenging these underlying assumptions. This manifests in practices like standardized testing and streaming, which can demotivate students and restrict their learning potential. Hart advocates for a shift towards more inclusive educational frameworks, such as mastery learning which focus on enhancing student engagement and accommodating diverse learning styles.

These ideas are in line with Rosenholtz & Simpson (1984) notion of dimensionality and the constructed nature of ability (Rosenholtz & Wilson, 1980; Rosenholtz & Rosenholtz, 1981; Simpson, 1981). They argue that schools shape students' perceptions of their own and others' intellectual abilities more through a social construction than developmental stages. The authors propose that rather than naturally maturing over time, children's understanding of ability is actively constructed through specific classroom interactions and organizational structures. This perspective can help us understand how teacher practices and classroom norms contribute to the formation of ability conceptions, emphasizing the educational environment's role in shaping how abilities are perceived and valued.

At the same time, very relevant are the ideas of Bernstein (1990), from a sociological perspective. He proposes a distinction between visible and invisible pedagogies based on how message systems and modes of control are regulated in the educational settings. Visible pedagogy is characterized by clear sequencing rules, and specific criteria for evaluation, focusing on external performance and differentiation among students. In contrast, invisible pedagogy presents these criteria implicitly, focusing on students' internal cognitive and linguistic development, viewing differences as unique rather than a basis for comparison. Bernstein emphasizes that these pedagogical types are influenced by social and economic structures, contributing to educational inequalities. Visible pedagogies create rigid hierarchies through explicit sequencing and pacing rules, often causing students who do not conform early to fall behind. These rules set clear benchmarks for knowledge acquisition and progression, contributing to stratification among students based on their ability to meet these criteria.

Educational codes, like the two types of pedagogies are structured by what he calls framing and classification processes. In this study, of interest is the concept of framing, that refers to the degree of control the teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organization, pacing, and timing of knowledge in the pedagogical relationship. Strong framing entails reduced pedagogical options, while weak framing provides a range of options. Visible pedagogies use strong framing to make explicit what must be learned and the pace of learning, contributing to a standardized but stratified educational experience. Visible pedagogy involves explicit sequencing rules that construct a clear and public temporal project for students. This approach ensures that both teachers and students understand the educational objectives and the pace at which these should be achieved. However, it also leads to stratification, as not all students can keep up with the pace, necessitating remedial programs, retention, or adjustments in content complexity.

The literature review has identified several central issues pivotal to current educational debates. Among them is the equity of ability-based educational practices, which critically examines the fairness of methods that prioritize inherent abilities over providing equal learning opportunities. These methods, including standardized testing, streaming, and ability grouping, often exacerbate disparities among students, especially impacting those who are racialized, economically disadvantaged, or have limited access to resources. Another significant debate revolves around the cultural construction of ability as a socially and culturally constructed identity rather than a fixed trait. This perspective highlights the influence of societal norms and educational practices on the perception of intelligence. Additionally, the social construction of ability, informed by theories such as Rosenholtz and Simpson's "dimensionality" and Bernstein's visible pedagogy, suggests that perceived abilities are can be understood in the context of educational environments.

Despite extensive scholarship, a significant gap remains in our comprehensive understanding of how pedagogical practices relate to ability construction in classroom settings, particularly within the Romanian educational context. In response to these scholarly discussions and recent developments in the Romanian educational system—including curricular reform and initiatives for continuous teacher training—this study is dedicated to describing and analyzing the specific pedagogical practices that teachers employ in classroom settings to emphasize ability as visible. Observational research into the instructional context will provide valuable details about pedagogical practices, representations of education, and the teaching process. Utilizing observational data from two primary classrooms, including audio-video recordings, the research focuses on thematizing pedagogical practices. Each identified practice is analyzed through the theoretical lenses provided by Basil Bernstein's concept of visible pedagogy and Rosenholtz and Simpson's perspective on ability as a socially constructed phenomenon. Importantly, the scope of this study is confined to the pedagogical practices themselves rather than their effects on students' perceptions or experiences of ability.

The data collected offers a perspective of teaching practices, which are interpreted by the researcher and organized into themes related to how ability is operationalized and highlighted within the classroom context. This thematic organization is an analytical categorization by the researcher, aimed at understanding how ability is pedagogically constructed. The findings of this study aim to enrich our theoretical understanding of how ability is represented and enacted in educational practices, offering insights that could inform more inclusive and equitable teaching strategies. This research addresses the overarching question: What pedagogical practices are employed by teachers in primary classrooms to construct and communicate the notion of ability?

Methodology

2.1. Research Design

For the study presented here I used a descriptive exploratory design, that is being part of a broader ethnographic research conducted my doctoral dissertation, between 2018-2019 (Clarke& Braun, 2013; Bloome et al, 2004). Data were collected based on classroom observations and audio-video recordings in two instructional contexts. The data thus obtained were analyzed thematically, in light of a constructivist approach (Burr, 2015). The design allowed me to document and understand specific pedagogical practices within instructional contexts, subsequently enabling an exploration of the the practices used to construct ability as visible.

2.2. Collection of the data

Throughout the 2017/2018 school year, bi-monthly observations and audio-video recordings were conducted during Romanian language communication classes at the preparatory level. In total, approximately 25 hours of audio and video material were collected from the 36 hours of class observed. These data were gathered from two general schools selected through convenience sampling: one located in Bucharest and the other in a rural, yet urbanized area near Bucharest, in Ilfov County. In each school, the principal recommended a primary education teacher to participate in the study. I did not consider the demographic or professional characteristics of the teachers, as the purpose of the study was not to explore correlations between the practices used and contextual or professional variables, but to describe and conceptualize a set of educational practices to create a useful inventory for subsequent correlational research.

Written consent was obtained from the students' parents. The camera was placed at the back of the classroom whenever possible to avoid capturing the children's faces. The video data collected are intended solely for research purposes and will not be published. The audio recordings were made using a mobile phone. The identifying details of the schools and their locations will remain confidential, with the data being anonymized in the reporting of the research results.

2.2. Data analysis

In my study, I employed a descriptive qualitative approach, conceptually based on the model proposed by Rosenholtz & Simpson (1984), to analyze classroom pedagogical practices using both deductive and inductive methods. This methodology allowed me to examine how differentiated instruction is defined and applied in the classroom, considering various aspects of classroom activity organization. I obtained the results - categories of pedagogical practices - through thematic analysis, according to the methodology proposed by Saldana (2009), which included successive stages of coding and thematizing the data, represented by audio-video recordings and their transcripts.

After collecting and familiarizing myself with the audio and video data, through listening, viewing, summarizing, and transcribing selected lessons, I began the coding process using the Dedoose software. I adopted a deductive-inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), initially developing a set of codes based on the Rosenholtz & Simpson model, which allowed me to classify classroom activities according to four dimensions: the structure of tasks and activities, student autonomy, grouping patterns of students, and the importance given to formal assessment. Based on these initial categories, I expanded the coding in an inductive manner to capture more detailed dynamics observed in the classroom. In the final phase of

analysis, I organized the codes into themes, considering the conceptual framework of the study, but allowing my interpretations to extend beyond this framework, towards Bernstein conceptualisations on visible pedagogies.

3. Results and discussions

I organized the identified practices into two general themes, each organized into subthemes: 1. Practices that make visible the pace of ability development: 1.1. Practices of Time Management; 1.2. Communication Practices, and 2. Practices that make visible the means of ability development: 2.1. Use of Texts; 2.2. Use of Classroom Space; 2.3. Communication and Interaction Practices.

Next, I will present each theme in relation to the theoretical concepts used: strong framing, visible pedagogy, and the perspective on the social construction of ability by Rosenholtz & Simpson (1984).

1. Practices that make visible the pace of ability development

I conceptualized this theme starting from the idea of learning rhythm (Bernstein, 1990), in the form of the sequencing rules of pedagogical practices within what he calls visible pedagogy. In this case, the sequencing of pedagogical practices is explicit, meaning that not only the teacher but also the student knows the educational temporal project they need to follow. The explicit sequencing rules "construct the child's temporal project" (p. 59), a project that is known and public. It is very clearly stipulated what the child needs to know and be able to do at certain ages, and the development rhythm of the expected competencies is very clear. Within visible pedagogy, what is called framing is strong. This refers to the degree of control the teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organization, pacing, and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship, which in this case is limited. At the same time, in Rosenholtz & Simpson (1984) terms, we are talking about specific classroom structures that can facilitate the formation of the institutionalised ability conception, which the authors describe as being normally dispersed, general, stable, and consensual. In their view, as students try to make sense of the school experience, their interpretations will be influenced by the structure of their daily classroom activities, indicators from the pedagogic context like using of time, uniformity of activities, visibility of the results.

1.1. Practices of Time Management

The subtheme of time management refers to those practices through which teachers in the study contexts managed the time allocated to tasks in the classroom, thereby contributing to the construction of the rhythm of students' skill development. These practices range from imposing a uniform work rhythm to adapting the pace to the individual needs of student, limiting thinking time and requiring all students to start and complete tasks simultaneously. This practices observed in the study contexts, not only standardize the learning process but also makes performance visible, creating a common rhythm that students are expected to follow. Another practice involves having a functional clock on the wall, which allows for a certain degree of student autonomy and the public measurement of time, thus maintaining the rhythm. In our case, time management practices can be understood from the perspective of visible pedagogy, where there is strong framing, which mwans that in general students do not have control on teh pacing of activities, but they are made aware of the pedagogic temporal project, which reinforces and help teachers maintain, again the pace.

1.2. Communication Practices

The subtheme of communication practices includes practices such as chain reading and public praise of students. Through such practices, teachers not only recognize and validate individual performance but also construct a social context in which learning rhythms are publicly evaluated and standardized. These interactions, by their visible and explicit nature, exemplify the application of visible pedagogies where the rhythm of skill development is clear and constantly under observation. From the perspective of rhythm, chain reading makes the reading pace of students visible, against the background of pressure from other students who hear the reading rhythm and await their turn. Public feedback—in the form of praise—provides explicit public information about student performance. In this regard, the conceptual model proposed by Rosenholtz & Simpson (1984) is relevant, showing that schools shape students' perceptions of their own and others' intellectual abilities through specific classroom interactions and organizational structures that make relevant information public.

2. Practices that make visible the means of ability development

This theme refers to how the pedagogical context allows abilities to be acquired and developed through strong framing, specific to visible pedagogy. Again, frame refers to the degree of control the teacher and pupil possess over the selection, organization, pacing, and

timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship. In the case of the pedagogical contexts I studied, the teacher is the one that controls the selection and organization of the knowledge. In this theme, I included practices that make visible the means for ability development, including interaction patterns, individually assisting children with learning tasks, and proposing content and learning activities.

2.1. Use of the text

To make the development of ability and progress visible and valid, the pedagogical context provides certain resources and tools, controlled by the teacher. These are generally the same for all students, but when they differ, they are used to visibly highlight the developmental differences among students. This characteristic, of the uniformity of resources, can be also understood in relation to strong framing and visible pedagogy, because strong framing entails lack of options. Bernstein explains that frame “refers us to the range of options available to teacher and taught. Strong framing entails reduced options” (p.20). The use of text in the classroom, broadly understood, entails that the teacher proposes the types of text-related activities, from exercises to activities, which are the same for all students. This also means that the discussion topics are often those found in textbooks or other materials provided by the teacher. Additionally, the teacher always explains the requirements. There are also categories of texts that are memorized individually or collectively, but they are always the same for all the students. When referring to identical tasks, I mean tasks involving text in various forms, whether written, verbal, drawn, on paper, or on the board.

In the studied contexts, the practice of using identical study materials and tasks for all students was used, except when they finish early. Practices varied: sometimes the teacher provided a different task prepared for students, while other times, the teacher asked students to rest with their head on the desk until everyone finished. In the same context, the student's body becomes a text interpreted by the teacher, who imposes attention/physical exercises to help students relax or, at times, as a form of punishment.

The practice of using the same resources for all students can also be understood from the perspective of Rosenholtz & Simpson (1984). In their terms we can talk of a unidimensional organization of classrooms, where tasks and evaluations are standardized and consistent, tends to create a more stratified perception of ability among students. In such environments, students are more likely to internalize their abilities in a manner consistent with institutionalized norms, seeing ability as stable and general.

2.2. Use of Classroom Space

Another practice included in this theme is the use of resources within the classroom space. The practices gathered in this category center around the concept of autonomy (Rosenholts & Simpson, 1984), or in Bernstein's terms, the presence of options in pedagogical contexts. For example, the teacher allows students to sit where they want, alongside the practice of moving students from their seats as a form of punishment during lessons. Additionally, I added the practice of displaying educational materials on the classroom walls, selected by the teacher, which students use during activities.

2.3. Communication and Interaction Practices

The communication and interaction practices form another subtheme included under the umbrella of practices that make visible the means for ability development. This subtheme is organized around the concept of strong framing specific to visible pedagogy. With strong framing, there is a clear and well-maintained boundary between what may and may not be transmitted, a boundary maintained by the teacher. The practices in this category refer to the direction of interactions by the teacher, the establishment of groups and pairs by the teacher, and the use of certain participation structures.

The use of certain participation structures by the teacher to communicate with students can be understood as pedagogical means through which students develop their abilities. The communication means made visible by the participation structures in the studied contexts highlight the teacher's monologue. This means that what is permitted to be transmitted generally has to come from the teacher. So, the classroom discourse is dominated by the teacher's interaction with the whole class or with a single student, interactions between students being absent, or not ratified - they are considered as disturbing. This dominance of teacher-led interactions can be interpreted in terms of the teacher's epistemic authority. Participation structures used include:

1. The teacher addresses all students, allowing free interventions without raising hands or waiting to be called.
2. The teacher addresses all students or a single student, allowing interventions only if they raise their hand and/or are called.
3. The teacher addresses a single student, with free interventions allowed for requesting help during individual practice activities.
4. The teacher addresses all students, with no interventions allowed during reading.
5. The teacher addresses students or a single student, allowing participation if they are called or if they raise their hand and are called.
6. Students address the teacher, individually or in unison, without being called or raising

hands during teaching.

7. Students address the teacher individually, raising their hand and/or waiting to be called during practice and verification.

3. Conclusions

This study underscores the importance of further research on concepts related to ability, such as intelligence, smartness, and competence, and their embeddedness in pedagogical contexts. It aims to broaden the definition of these traits beyond their narrow, intrinsic characteristics.

The study highlights the pedagogical practices employed by teachers in primary classrooms to construct and communicate the notion of ability. These practices were categorized into two main themes: those that make visible the pace of ability development and those that make visible the means of ability development. This categorization addresses the question of what specific pedagogical practices are used by teachers to shape and convey the concept of ability.

From a theoretical perspective, the practices reflect a visible pedagogy characterized by strong framing, where explicit guidelines and expectations are established by the teacher. This structured approach to teaching and learning shapes students' perceptions of their abilities, contributing to the construction and communication of ability within primary classrooms. Bernstein's framework provides insight into how these practices influence the construction of experience, identity, and relationships within the educational context. The explicit sequencing and pacing rules in visible pedagogy often lead to stratification among students, with some falling behind if they cannot keep up with the set pace. Strategies to address this include remedial programs, relaxation of sequencing rules, or adjustments in content complexity.

Visible pedagogy with strong framing often compensates for differences in student outcomes across various categories, especially between rural and urban areas. However, the standardization of tasks and assessments tends to create a stratified perception of ability among students, reinforcing social inequalities. Differences between students are often seen as problems to be remedied, focusing on homogenizing the classroom to avoid challenges to social equity.

The study emphasizes the importance of understanding how educational practices and the theoretical concepts of framing and visible pedagogy shape students' educational experiences and outcomes, potentially perpetuating social stratifications and inequalities. By describing these practices, we can better address Bernstein's question: How are forms of experience, identity, and relation evoked, maintained, and changed by the formal transmission of educational knowledge and sensitivities? The practices identified situate us

within a visible pedagogy with strong framing, impacting students' perceptions of their abilities and educational trajectories.

This study was limited to two specific pedagogical contexts in the early years of primary school. Expanding this perspective to include higher grades, even beyond primary education, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ability is socially constructed through various pedagogical practices across different educational levels. Additionally, the study could be enriched by further developing the themes through an analysis of curricular materials and interviews with teachers, a research endeavor currently in progress. Future studies might also explore the interactional analysis of the practices discussed here to better highlight the social processes that construct ability.

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