London Review of Education

LONDON REVIEW OF EDUCATION

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Book review

Book review: *Bottom Set Citizen: Ability grouping in schools – meritocracy's undeserving*, by Paula Ambrossi

David Pomeroy[1,*]

[1] Faculty of Education, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand
* Correspondence: david.pomeroy@canterbury.ac.nz

Publication date: 16 April 2025

How to cite
Pomeroy, D. (2025) 'Book review: *Bottom Set Citizen: Ability grouping in schools – meritocracy's undeserving*, by Paula Ambrossi'. *London Review of Education*, 23 (1), 9.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.23.1.09.

Peer review
This article has been through editorial review.

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London: Routledge, 2024, 134 pp.; ISBNs 978-10325-0364-6 (hbk), 978-10325-0368-4 (pbk), 978-10033-9820-2 (ebk)

In *Bottom Set Citizen*, Paula Ambrossi argues that 'ability' grouping within classes and schools has profound consequences for democracy. Being visibly positioned as lacking academic ability is humiliating, and it leads bottom set citizens into *epistemic revolt* against the knowledge and forms of knowledge validation promoted in schools. Having rejected the establishment that humiliated them, bottom set citizens find acceptance and worth where it is available, in social media 'non-communities' where their contributions are not ranked below anyone else's. Bottom set citizens also have a form of power against the establishment in the possibility of voting for 'outsiders', often themselves bottom set citizens who, despite wealth and social privilege, have nevertheless suffered the humiliation of being positioned as academic failures.

Bottom Set Citizen focuses mainly on ability grouping in British, American and other anglophone schools, although the implications of the argument are much broader than this. A key premise established early in the book is that being placed in a 'low ability' group (or bottom set) is *humiliating*, regardless of how teachers explain the group allocation or how the groups are named. 'It is this daily

experience of being *seen* as inferior; of being *identified* as in opposition to the "more able" peers, that makes ability grouping within class and within schools, a most objectionable and unethical practice' (10, italics in the original). Teachers, Ambrossi argues, cannot remove such humiliation because it is built into the practice of ability grouping itself – what Sayer (2005: 161) has called 'structural humiliation'.

Like previous scholars, Ambrossi outlines how ability grouping exacerbates social injustice by meting out humiliation (McGillicuddy and Devine, 2020; Pomeroy et al., 2024; Ramanathan and Nelsen, 2024) and withholding opportunities to learn from working-class, immigrant and ethnic minority children (Francis et al., 2019; Hirschl and Smith, 2023; Johnston et al., 2023). However, the book's key argument is not about social injustice but *epistemic injustice* or 'injustices that are caused by denying knowledge or ways of knowing' (66).

Ambrossi builds on Dewey's work on education and democracy, arguing that in school children learn about themselves as citizens – for example, where they have value and where they do not – and form dispositions towards school, which is their main personal experience of institutional knowledge. Citizenship, Ambrossi argues, is 'contextually learned through the way the teaching organization is taken up, which reflects the values of a society' (39). On this basis, ability grouping does not simply deprive bottom set children of academic knowledge, it teaches them to reject and distrust such knowledge. Ambrossi explains that 'when academic knowledge is weaponised by being used as the means of one's humiliation, the relationship between child and academic knowledge is warped' (72). Schools are often structured so as to put students in competition with each other, and then label them visibly as capable or not through formal assessment. Within meritocratic discourses that position assessment results as objective indicators of effort and ability, the unspoken implication of bottom set allocation is that these children *deserved to fail*. Ambrossi's argument resonates with Sayer's (2005: 154) claim that 'those who believe that society is basically meritocratic are most vulnerable to shame'.

Ambrossi argues that autocratic schooling teaches children that citizenship is individual and competitive, even when curriculum content or stated school values may endorse collaboration and common good. On this basis, Ambrossi makes the provocative claim that 'there is no democracy in childhood' (32). Rather than being democratic, schools tend towards autocracy, with children 'usually excluded from decisions pertaining to their education' (36). Autocracy not only excludes children from any say over how they are grouped for learning; it also influences their sense of their place in the world – their citizenship. Ambrossi argues that 'the sort of citizen that autocracy occasions is either an instrumentalist and ideologically aligned citizen, or a despondent or rebellious one, depending on how the child was able to navigate their experiences' (37). Moreover, children allocated to bottom sets are publicly identified as the losers of the information acquisition competition, those for whom 'knowledge does not pay' (78). In such a situation, it is not surprising that children in bottom sets 'begin to knit stories of their own that give them agency over their dignities, and where academic success is but an old story' (88).

Ambrossi characterises the rejection of academic knowledge by bottom set citizens as a form of *epistemic revolt*. At school, epistemic revolt can look like '(mis)behaviour', which is 'notoriously common' in bottom sets (88), and it can be a strategy to maintain a sense of dignity when one is dismissed academically. However, such behaviour is not Ambrossi's main concern. Epistemic revolt is more 'surreptitious' than social revolts, and it 'dwells within us', making us susceptible to conspiracy theories, closed-mindedness and 'indifference to truth' (89). Epistemic revolt finds a welcoming home in the 'dispersed non-community' (96) of social media.

A distinct and thought-provoking emphasis of the book is its exploration of bottom set citizenship among socially privileged students who may be in elite schools. Ambrossi argues that the consequences of ability grouping – epistemic injustice, humiliation, exclusion from academically successful identities and epistemic revolt – are not limited to any social background. Conversely 'when wealthy children encounter such treatment, they can become empowered bottom set citizens' (121). Ambrossi uses prominent political figures Nigel Farage and Donald Trump as exemplars of powerful, socially privileged bottom set citizens. Farage and Trump can mobilise anti-intellectual and anti-establishment narratives, positioning themselves as outsiders to the established institutions at whose hands less empowered bottom set citizens suffered humiliation. Like other bottom set citizens, Farage and Trump have a lack of epistemic virtue made even more dangerous by their level of influence.

Ambrossi raises a recurring challenge to readers, urging them to consider their own complicity in ability grouping and the warped relationship to knowledge that ability grouping can engender. Exploring Trump's narrative strategies, Ambrossi writes that 'it is difficult to quote Trump's words without feeling that

https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.23.1.09

we are in some way laughing at him; exposing his intellectual naivety and egotistical prowess, something I did not wish to do' (123). Furthermore, 'with every laugh from us their contempt increases. After all, they've been used to others' intellectual scorn since childhood' (117). Ability grouping, Ambrossi concludes, is 'a recipe for disaster in any democracy' (130), and it is within the power of educators to eliminate it.

However, research alone will not produce such a change. 'Schools' silent belief in imperial values around hierarchies and competition makes them embrace unjust meritocratic practices and disregard or belittle the mounting evidence against ability grouping' (131). This conclusion leaves readers to ponder how they might be complicit in perpetuating ability grouping, and what forms of solidarity might facilitate a shift towards more socially and epistemically just schooling.

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