**ESREA LHBN 2017 Abstract Submission, University of Aarhus, Copenhagen, Denmark**

**‘Discourses we live by’ (How) Do they benefit the world we live in?**

**Title: Differing Discourses of Ability We Live By**

In the light of English government plans to re-introduce grammar schools for academically able children, this paper will evaluate discourses of ability, particularly academic ability, which we live by. The paper will begin from an examination of these public discourses, looking at the political perspective in England and how cultural discourses align with political discourses to code and enact conceptualisations of academic ability as innate, individual and measurable. The rhetorical persuasiveness of such discourses has led to much normative educational theory and practice, despite abiding concerns about the research and beliefs upon which they are based and divergent discourses.

Questions about dominant discourses of ability depend not just on their epistemological status, but are empirical questions depending on an analysis of historical context, political climate, economic and cultural conditions. A Foucauldian genealogy of Western, particularly Anglo-Saxon, discourses of ability and intelligence is useful to explore these particular circumstances that enabled their rise e.g. White 2006. The paper will argue that epistemic norms and standards that structured and were structured by such discourses, are now inter-twined with discourses of neoliberalism, individual ‘needs’ and meritocracy.

However many individuals/groups live by different - and arguably broader and more diverse - understandings of ability, whilst also having been impacted by essentialist, reductive understandings and themselves being drawn into the discourse of psychometrics. A counter-discourse is revealed in the double bind those having to label and enact the resulting policies are caught in, whilst explicitly resisting these through discourses based on the politics of recognition and inclusivity. The paper will therefore also evaluate some of the current, explicit, counter-discourses in the UK, of how essentialist labelling at age 11, based on the ideas of ability described above, has profoundly shaped identity through the life course for instance e.g. by the author Michael Morpurgo. Such narratives, which hold up these discourses for critique through personal life history, also draw on different discourses of ability to live by.

A deconstructive analysis of dominant discourses of ability and psychometrics itself opens up a space for new options/territory, and more diverse discourses. As Corbett (1993) has suggested for ‘special needs’, the potential value of deconstructing the positivist discourses on which ability is built, is that multiple realities and narratives must be attended to, listened to, sought. The paper will also use a post-foundationalist critique of research practices in the field, to argue for how research could support the diversification of discourses of ability, and enable what some have referred to as a necessary paradigm shift in the field. A psychosocial narrative analysis of the discourses of ability that are relevant to the real life contexts that adults live by will be used to evaluate how discourses of ability can – or could better – benefit us, particularly in the political climate described above.

**References**

Corbett, J. (1993) Postmodernism and the ‘Special Needs’ Metaphor, Oxford Review of Education 19, 4; 547-554.

White, J. (2006). *Intelligence, destiny and education: The ideological roots of intelligence testing*. Routledge.

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