

## Reconceiving Epistemic Agency for Educational Inclusion

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Intellectually disabled students are subject to diminished expectations and bias as a result of cognitive ableism, both historically and in today's schools, educational policies, and in philosophical discourses. Understanding the epistemic dimensions of inclusion, and in general the connection between epistemic respect and educational justice, is thus an important endeavor. In "Safeguarding the Epistemic Agency of Intellectually Disabled Learners," Ashley Taylor and Kevin McDonough explore how intellectually disabled learners are subjected to educational injustice and harms in virtue of being positioned as diminished knowers. Their essay presents important and thought-provoking work, and here I hope to continue that work by encouraging further thinking about two conceptual tools used in their main argument: the presumption of epistemic competence, and the conception of epistemic agency.

Foundational to the project of teaching is the presumption that students have epistemic potential. Intellectually disabled students, however, are often assumed to have global incompetence as a result of their disability label and cognitive ableism. Taylor and McDonough argue that this assumption is empirically suspect and in opposition to the normative, developmental goal of education. In response they advocate for a presumption of epistemic competence: a good teacher will regard all students as epistemically opaque, attributing epistemic potential and agency to them.

But an openness to potential exists in tension with meeting students where they are, or at least where they seem to be. Teachers must form beliefs regarding students' capacities to set educational

goals and develop curricula: concluding that a student should be given this material and not that, be grouped with these students and not those, be accountable for completing this assignment and not that, and so on. Relatedly, drafting a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP)—setting concrete goals for outcomes at the end of an educational period—demands taking a stand on what counts as a successful academic experience. In setting the goals to which teachers and their schools will be held accountable to parents and their children, educators cannot simply remain open to unknowable, and thus unlimited, potential. They must instead formulate aspirational, but also reasonably achievable, targets for their students.

Precisely because different environmental conditions can enable different types and levels of educational outcomes for different students, designing and providing educational programs has to be responsive to the powers that (we think) children bring to their educational activities. Very often teachers appeal to past student behaviors, information from parents and previous teachers, and general knowledge about childhood development, to develop educational approaches and goals appropriate to individual students. Taylor and McDonough are surely right to impugn the practices through which bias and cognitive ableism so often infuse the process of making judgments about appropriate educational goals and activities. Nevertheless, a full account of the presumption of competence would indicate how to responsibly balance a presumption of competence, which applies equally to all, with a concrete responsiveness to particular students.

Let me now turn to the presumption of epistemic agency principle. The authors write that the presumption of epistemic opacity “entails the attribution of epistemic potential and agency”; because educators don't know the epistemic potential of intellectually disabled

students, they must presume that their students are epistemic agents. The authors do not provide an account of epistemic agency, however. Mainstream accounts require that agents have the capacities *to take responsible action* with respect to epistemic things like knowledge, belief, and evidence. The capacity for responsible epistemic action would distinguish an agent from an epistemic subject, who *has* beliefs and *makes* knowledge claims (implicitly or explicitly) and the like, but who would not appropriately be held accountable for doing so. Thus, at least on a standard kind of view, one is an epistemic agent when one can entertain and synthesize beliefs, take stances toward beliefs, and generate reasons for or against belief, for instance. Catherine Elgin, for example, gives a quite robust theory of epistemic agency and the responsibility it implies. For Elgin, an agent does not believe  $p$  just because it strikes her that  $p$  (as delivered to her by her perceptions or the like), but because believing  $p$  is in accordance with the rules, methods, and standards that she reflectively endorses along with others in her epistemic community. The presence of responsibility, and its partner, accountability, is implicated in the concept of epistemic agency.

I take it that Taylor and McDonough do not have this sort of conception of epistemic agency at work in their essay. Rather, they spend a lot of time discussing Eva Feder Kittay's ethical reflections on her intellectually disabled daughter Sesha, who has communicative limitations that make it difficult to discern her wants and needs from her own perspective. Though, she does apparently exhibit preferences for certain people, particular pieces of music, and touch. Taylor and McDonough are critical of Kittay's ethical understanding of Sesha on the grounds that she does not make clear how Sesha *is* an independent epistemic agent, and does not clearly tie giving Sesha epistemic respect to affording her ethical respect. Kittay herself is ambivalent about whether Sesha actively participates in the social project of knowl-

edge-making, and does not clarify how an educator should treat Sesha as a knower in her own right. Taylor and McDonough appreciate the difficulties here while remaining critical of Kittay on these grounds.

So, what conception of epistemic agency is at work in their argument, and is responsibility a component? In thinking about Sesha, Taylor and McDonough muse that “perhaps, then, epistemic agency is best understood on a spectrum wherein one’s ability to participate in epistemic projects may be heavily structured by caregiving—or teaching—practices, but where one’s separateness is nonetheless assured.” At one point in this discussion, they also describe epistemic agency as relational, though the structure and nature of agency on such a model is not clarified.

I want to suggest the possibility that epistemic agency is not binary, such that one is either an epistemic agent or not. One might be an epistemic agent in only some ways, only in some domains, or only at certain times. This seems particularly possible in the case of children, who are learning how to understand and take an informed stance on the world. (Though it is worth mentioning that all of us experience limitations in our abilities to clearly see all of our beliefs, desires, and preferences, to understand how our beliefs hang together or not, and to reflect clearly on our reasons for believing.) I am reminded here of feminist arguments that construe the related concept of autonomy as non-binary and relational. Diana Meyers, for instance, has argued that autonomy can be *fragmentary* in that it can be confined to a domain of life (it can be narrow or partial), or episodic. Could the presumption of epistemic agency involve the presumption that students are fragmented agents, and that part of the educator’s task is to integrate those fragments? The concept of a “budding” epistemic agent, along with associated norms of expectation and accountability as development

progresses, helps paint the relevant sort of picture here.

The presumption of “budding” agency would exist in tension with the presumption of epistemic competence; teaching a child to develop epistemic agency would demand both an openness to her potential and an engagement with her current capacities. However, this kind of tension is inherent to any conception of educational development. Focusing on the formation of epistemic agency thus strikes me as fruitful conceptual space to explore in developing an account of epistemic inclusion that is responsive to the intellectual heterogeneity across students.

Taylor and McDonough conclude their essay with the observation that educators “lack adequate interpretive frames for stimulating and perceiving expressions of epistemic agency.” I wonder whether the project of conceptualizing epistemic agency must itself be similarly impoverished, because it is usually only informed by the norms and understandings of able-mindedness. Some first-hand accounts of living with intellectual disability are available, even from children, and we should certainly consider those accounts as we think through what it means to be a knower. Yet, we are unlikely to collect first-hand accounts from every kind of knower, and thus unlikely to acquire the kind of insight we would want in order to develop a fully inclusive account. In this regard, we should follow Taylor and McDonough’s lead in sustaining our curiosity about the epistemic capabilities of others and cultivate a degree of humility with regard to our interpretive frameworks.