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## PUPIL GROUPING STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES AT KEY STAGE 2 AND 3: CASE STUDIES OF 24 SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

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### Introduction

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the University of Brighton (with partner universities Sussex, Cambridge and the Institute of Education, London) to undertake a two-part investigation into the effects of pupil grouping in schools at Key Stages (KS) 2 and 3. The two-part investigation provided: (1) an extended review of the literature that included an analysis and synthesis of current literature that would identify types of pupil grouping suited to particular pupils, the range of organisational policies regarding pupil grouping within schools that are related to different levels of performance, and subjects suited to particular types of grouping; and (2) comparative case studies that explored how grouping/organisational policy was implemented in classrooms and how this affected teaching and learning strategies, the impact of grouping on social pedagogy and learning, and planning for transition. The extended literature review (Kutnick, Sebba, Blatchford, Galton & Thorp, 2005) was published previously by the DfES (Research Report 688). This research brief reports on the comparative case studies.

### Key Findings

#### *Grouping and its impact on the attainment of pupils*

- Schools identified that the use of setting enabled them to tailor teaching for different ability pupils in order to impact on their understanding and achievement. However, the research did not find evidence to corroborate these expected achievement gains.
- In secondary schools that adopted mixed ability or part mixed ability grouping approaches, the rationale given by teachers and senior managers tended not to make reference to attainment but rather to focus on the benefits in terms of social awareness and inclusivity.
- In primary schools, which used mixed ability as the predominant organisational grouping, pupils were often seated around tables on the basis of ability and it was not possible to differentiate attainment outcomes that related directly to setting or mixed ability from these observations.

#### *Grouping best suited to particular pupils*

- In the secondary school case studies in which setting was prevalent, higher ability pupil groups tended to work for more of the time in smaller groups (of four to six pupils) and lower ability pupil groups tended to receive a much larger amount of whole class teaching.
- Pupils with special educational needs (identified by their schools) were often grouped together in lower sets or, in schools or subjects with mixed ability teaching, they were often concentrated in one or two groupings per class, and sometimes withdrawn for specific support sessions. These practices had consequences in terms of poor behaviour and disruption in the case study schools.

### *Classroom organisation and pupil grouping*

- The classroom organisation and working experience of low ability sets was distinctly different from other sets and mixed ability groups; these low ability pupils were rarely offered the opportunity to interact with peers in pairs or small groups.
- Pupils in secondary schools reported a preference for paired work but were rarely given paired work assignments.
- In primary schools, paired seating at tables was common, although pupils' assigned tasks tended to be individualised.
- In the primary schools, table-based small groups were the preferred arrangement across all subject areas, although this seating arrangement often conflicted with the focus of learning interactions and tasks.
- The case studies were unable to identify whether gender-based grouping was associated with attainment advantage, and teachers often regarded this practice in terms of behavioural/social control.

### *Subjects best suited to a particular type of grouping*

- There were clear subject-based preferences for setting or mixed ability expressed in the case study schools, especially with regard to mathematics, and to a lesser extent English, in which setting was the preferred organisational style. Humanities and Drama, on the other hand, preferred mixed ability organisational strategies. There was no evidence that either setting or mixed ability led to higher attainment in these subjects, as judged by the DfES School and College Achievement and Attainment Tables (2005).
- Whilst setting has a clear logic in terms of accelerating the understanding of higher achieving pupils and providing the opportunity to focus support and guidance for the lower achieving pupils, there remained a large and very diverse middle 'group' of pupils in all of the core subjects

within the case study schools that did not benefit from this differentiating practice.

### *Teaching and learning strategies suited to particular types of pupil grouping*

- In secondary schools, it was found that children in set classes were more likely to undertake 'application of existing knowledge tasks', whereas pupils in mixed ability classes were more likely to undertake 'new knowledge' and 'practice' tasks. This provided pupils in these classes with qualitatively different ranges of learning activities and experiences.
- In the primary school case studies, children mainly sat around tables in small groups, but tended to be assigned individual work; this strategy showed a stronger relationship to control of behaviour than learning.
- Teaching staff were cautious in their use of group work, regarding it as a potential threat to their control of the classroom.

### *Grouping and transfer/transition*

- Where planning for transition to secondary school did take place, social considerations were prioritised over academic ones.
- There was no consistent pattern of strategic planning or provision for transfer found in the case schools.

### *Training for group work*

- Teachers seemed aware that effective grouping practices in classrooms required training and application of specific skills by children, but this was not included in their planned work.

### *Background*

Pupil grouping has been the source of debate for many years. This debate has not been helped by the range and variety of terms associated with the discussion of pupil grouping, and by the expectation that organisational types of grouping (especially seen in school and subject/departmental responses to the range of pupil ability) could be associated with particular patterns of attainment within classrooms.

The extended literature review found that the combination of school, year group and subject differences in pupil organisational grouping means that there are significant variations in practices and no clear relationship to school-based achievement at either KS2 or 3. It should also be noted that even within classes that are set by attainment, there will be variations in pupil ability in each class; thus it is a questionable assumption that setting allows these pupils to be taught as a homogeneous group. Further, as identified in the extended literature review, within-class pupil groups may vary in relation to size, composition, learning and interactive tasks assigned and whether pupils and teachers receive training that will allow pupils to engage more effectively as groups that promote learning in the classroom.

### Methodology

The project aimed to investigate the nature and impact of different grouping strategies and practices on the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Seven research questions were linked to a number of themes that included: purposes of organisational and within-class grouping of pupils; grouping to promote inclusion and diversity among pupils; pedagogic strategies that may relate to particular types of within-class pupil grouping; learning tasks that may be assigned to particular within-class pupil groups; organisational and within-class grouping that may be related to particular curriculum subjects; the role and relationship of pupil grouping with regard to transfer from primary to secondary school; and whether teachers or pupils have been trained to participate more effectively in within-class grouping. While a number of the research questions were addressed in the extended review of the literature, the themes were focused upon in 24 integrated, comparative case studies (12 primary and 12 secondary schools). Selection of the case schools was based on a geographical spread across England. A range of innovative grouping practices in schools and a number of comparative primary and secondary schools were included in the study. Data collected with regard to the themes in each of the case schools included:

- DfES statistics (2005) on KS2 and 3 performance in core curriculum subjects;
- interviews with school management to identify pupil grouping policies;

- interviews with teachers to examine beliefs and experiences about the effects of different forms of pupil grouping;
- interviews with pupils to examine beliefs and experiences about the effects of different forms of pupil grouping;
- observation and mapping of classrooms to establish the range of within-class grouping practices used in relation to the teacher's pedagogic approach; and
- interviews with transition managers to identify school-based plans and actions to facilitate the transition of their pupils.

### Conclusion

Arguments that there are distinct attainment differences that may be explained by organisational grouping strategies in departments and schools are not supported by these case studies. This finding in this study, and in the existing research literature, has led to the consideration of the importance of within-class use of pupil groups and the social pedagogic contexts of classroom learning that may promote or inhibit the academic process. This study found that pupils in the case study schools were always found to be seated/working in some form of grouping within their classrooms. The case studies also indicated that the effective use of pupil groupings within classrooms was often limited by conflicts between pupil group size/composition, assigned learning tasks and interpersonal interactions. There was only limited evidence that pupils or teachers had received training or support to work effectively within their classroom groups. Implications for school achievement are considered in light of the organisational grouping and classroom processes that characterised the case study schools.

### Reference

Kutnick, P., Sebba, J., Blatchford, P., Galton, M. and Thorp, J. (2005b) *The effects of pupil grouping: Literature review*. Nottingham: DfES Publications.

Note: Since completing this study, Prof. Peter Kutnick has joined King's College, University of London.

## Additional Information

*Copies of the full report (RR796) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

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