



3:GROUPING

What do we mean by setting, streaming, pupil grouping?

When embarking on any review of pupil grouping in your school, first ensure that colleagues are agreed on common definitions.

STREAMING

Streaming is a system of grouping pupils according to all-round ability, in ranked classes. By definition, this single system tends to be applied across all subjects, or at least a wide range of them. Once in place, it usually continues throughout pupils' school lives. Much streaming is based on assessment of pupils' verbal reasoning skills.

SETTING

Setting is a system of grouping pupils according to their abilities in specific subjects. That is to say, they may be grouped differently in different areas of the curriculum. Inevitably, such grouping tends to be based on current performance rather than potential. The pace of lessons is often faster in 'top' sets.

PUPIL GROUPING

Pupil grouping is the term used to describe any system of selecting pupils to be grouped together, whether within a school, a pupil cohort, a class, or a lesson. It therefore includes not only streaming and setting but also physically arranging pupils in lessons, for example at particular tables in the classroom, in different combinations for collaborative classwork, and in teams for games

WHY IS PUPIL GROUPING AN IMPORTANT FOCUS IN THE EDUCATION OF GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS?

- Grouping together pupils of high ability can be very motivating. Indeed, some would argue that it is necessary if the full potential of the more able is to be exploited. Certainly more able pupils, when interviewed, usually express a preference for

working with pupils of similar ability, for example because they may feel freer to excel without fear of ridicule.

- Grouping together pupils of high ability can enable teachers to choose a teaching approach or approaches more appropriate to at least the majority of the group. This might mean going at a faster pace than is possible with other pupils, or using more open-ended methods. In general, it means tackling learning in ways which, arguably, are not so appropriate with pupils of lower ability.
- Parents, pupils, teachers and others often express concerns that more able pupils may be 'held back' by pupils of lower ability in mixed ability classes.
- According to OFSTED's *Setting in Primary Schools* (1999), an increasing number of primary schools are using setting in some subjects. In effect, they are creating a context of ability grouping that is already familiar to many secondary school pupils.
- The Government is in favour of ability grouping. The White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (1997) made the case that setting in the teaching of mathematics, science and languages is effective. It went so far as to say: 'Unless a school can demonstrate that it is getting better than expected results through a different approach, we do make the presumption that setting should be the norm in secondary schools.'

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

- Pupils' abilities vary in different subjects, so it is not advisable to group pupils identically across the curriculum or even across several subjects.
- Pupils' abilities vary even within subjects, depending on the aspect of the subject taught and on the type of task set and the learning styles required. For example, are the pupils applying and using mathematics, or studying shape and space? Is the task set a written or an oral one? Does it call for a fast response or slow meticulous study, a problem-solving or a research-based approach, a collaborative or an individual exercise? Grouping identically within one subject may thus have limitations, too.
- There is a danger that crude, inappropriate, or inadequate criteria may be used for determining the makeup of 'more able' groups. For example, one result could be that only the most conscientious, well behaved, conformist, articulate or literate pupils are selected. Moreover, some pupils may, despite their ability, have special educational needs as listed under *The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs* (DfEE, 1994), e.g. dyslexia, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, or emotional or behavioural problems. If grouping is not considered with care, such pupils may be excluded from 'able' sets.
- 'More able' pupils tend to be grouped on the basis of current achievement, but ability is also a matter of potential and motivation. It is important to provide opportunities that encourage *all* pupils to succeed. Ability can also take time to manifest itself, e.g. in subjects such as history, where personal maturity is required, or in modern languages, which are generally only gradually introduced in secondary school. Once sets are established in a school, movement between them can often be difficult, and is rarely regularly reviewed, despite best intentions.
- There are likely to be significant differences in ability even within a 'high ability' cohort, class or other group. There is a tendency, however, for teachers to take a whole group or whole class approach once the more able pupils are grouped

together. The needs of individuals must still be borne in mind, and differentiation carefully considered and planned for.

- It is possible that any one method of grouping, if systematically and routinely applied, may be counter-productive in its effects on both the motivation and the achievement of pupils. Sukhnandan and Lee (1998) claim that streaming and setting 'reinforce social divisions'. While these systems may be beneficial for the more able, they can have demotivating effects on other groups, bringing about a self-fulfilling outcome of lower achievement.
- The recent research review by Sukhnandan and Lee (1998) suggests that 'Streaming and setting, compared with mixed ability teaching, have had no overall impact on pupil achievement.'
- **Cultural and gender issues** must play a part in considerations of grouping. For example, many schools who set pupils find that they have a preponderance of boys in 'lower sets'.
- Your school review of pupil grouping should not take place in isolation from the related matters of identification of the able, assessment of all pupils, **differentiation**, and target-setting. With regard to the latter, it is vital to establish a common agreement on what your school intends to gain from adapting its approach to the current grouping system.

WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

If you are reviewing pupil grouping in your school, it will be important to develop a common understanding and attitude amongst all staff, whatever the type of grouping finally agreed. You could therefore:

1. Set up staff discussions about current pupil grouping and improvements that could be made

Distribute the text above for staff to read before the discussion, then ask them to consider the issue under the following headings:

- Current methods of identification of the more able. Are they adequate and appropriate? Is there a regular review of lists of able pupils?
- Current methods of assessment of all pupils. Are they adequate and appropriate? Are they cyclical, thus taking account of pupils' changing abilities and achievements?
- Current methods of differentiation within lessons. Are they adequate and appropriate? What changes might be needed if pupil grouping systems are changed?
- The pros and cons of the current grouping system.
- The pros and cons of any revised grouping system.
- What would be the objectives of any revisions to the current grouping system? Some might be qualitative, and some quantitative. For example, in the case of the former, the objective might be to increase the motivation of pupils to work, in a given subject. In the case of the latter, it might be to increase the number of pupils who are able, in a particular year in a particular ability group in a particular subject, to achieve a particular target in a given time.

Discussion groups should be reminded that:

- No grouping system can solve all problems.
- Every grouping system has advantages and disadvantages.
- 'Low sets' should have as much access to expert teaching as 'top sets'.
- The facts, issues and evidence about grouping systems need to be considered as dispassionately as possible if pupils' best interests are to be served.

All staff should be made aware that there are more flexible and appropriate alternatives to wholesale change, for example:

- Temporary setting, e.g. during revision periods or for particular units of work.
- Part-time setting, e.g. two out of three lessons in a subject a week.
- Having a 'top set' but mixed ability grouping for the rest of the pupils.
- **Acceleration** of individuals or of some cohorts in some subjects
- Extraction, i.e. withdrawal of groups, in the same way that you may extract groups of pupils with special educational needs in order to give them extra support.

The following decisions may need to be made:

- With which cohort shall we trial any new or revised system of grouping before deciding whether to make change permanent or to extend the initiative?
- How shall we evaluate its effectiveness and its repercussions? What criteria shall we use?
- What steps will be taken to offset the disadvantages of the grouping system/s used in future?
- If some kind of setting is not adopted, what other mechanisms can be found to allow able pupils contact with other able people, e.g. peers, older pupils, adults? What are the timetabling implications of these, e.g. putting together older and younger able pupils?
- Should the school accept that in some cases it may be appropriate for pupils to bypass one or more years all together (acceleration)?

If you have reached the stage of a common understanding among staff and arrived at whole-school decisions, you should:

2. Write statements on grouping for inclusion in the school's policy for able pupils, and any other relevant policies.

Such statements should outline:

- The systems of grouping used throughout the curriculum, e.g. mixed ability, setting.
- The types of differentiation used within these, e.g. by resource, by task, by pace.

- The principles behind these systems, e.g. the recognition of potential as well as ability, the recognition that ability can change over time and vary within different contexts.
- The provision made to compensate for the drawbacks of the systems used, For example, if setting is not adopted, what opportunities are there for able pupils to work with other able people? If setting is adopted, what opportunities are there less able pupils to work with more able peers?
- The provision made for exceptional pupils, e.g. acceleration.
- The system of regular review of these grouping arrangements.
- The timescale on which the school's grouping policy is reviewed, and by whom.

It is essential that any statements about grouping policy in your school's documentation reflect current practice, not intent. This is why whole-school discussion and agreement are necessary at the outset, and why there should be regular reviews of the grouping systems used. No system of grouping will be as effective as it might be unless it is grounded in understanding and agreement on the part of the school staff.

RECOMMENDED READING

Eyre, D., 1997. *Able Children in Ordinary Schools*. London: David Fulton.

Freeman, J., 1998. *Educating the Very Able: Current International Research*. London: OFSTED.

Ireson, J. (1999). Innovative Grouping Practices in Secondary School [online], Research brief 166. Available from: www.dfes.gov.uk [accessed 10 February 2000].

Sukhmandan, L. with Lee, B., 1998. *Streaming, Setting and Grouping by Ability*. Slough: NFER.

Teare, J.B., 1997. *Effective Provision for Able & Talented Children*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

Teare, J.B., 1997. *A School Policy for Provision for Able Children*. Oxford: NACE.

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