



## PUPIL GROUPING

**What do we mean by setting, streaming, and other forms of pupil grouping?**

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

No matter what form of grouping is adopted, it does not in itself constitute provision to match pupils' needs. This can be guaranteed only by the sensitivity and professional competence of the teacher, working within a climate in which the school sees itself as a learning organisation, where teachers and management, as well as pupils, continue to be learners and to improve their practice. Such a climate is an essential condition if we are to ensure that the grouping methods adopted are flexible, regularly evaluated, and modified as necessary to meet every pupil's needs

### **DEFINITIONS**

The following definitions are widely known, but they are reproduced here to establish a common understanding for discussion.

#### **Streaming**

This 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, streaming usually continues throughout pupils' school lives. Much streaming is based on assessment of pupils' verbal reasoning skills.

#### **Setting**

This is a system of grouping pupils according to their abilities in specific subjects, i.e. they may be grouped differently in different areas of the curriculum. Inevitably, such grouping tends to be based on current performance rather than on potential.

### **Mixed ability**

Mixed ability grouping can be total, in the sense that the pupils are together for every subject and every activity, or it can be 'alloyed', with the pupils together for most of the time but in sets for certain subjects.

### **'Within-class' grouping**

This form of grouping can operate in various ways, usually involving small groups of pupils engaged in differentiated work. At its most complex it can take the form of a programme of personalised learning for all or most pupils in the class.

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

The grouping of pupils according to ability has many supporters. The House of Commons Education and Employment Committee, in its report *Highly Able Children* (1999), recorded the views of teachers who had given evidence in support of the grouping of pupils of high ability: 'Teachers told us that there could be great benefits for the more able pupils in doing so. One obvious one is that it allows the more able to work together with other children of similar ability. This, it was argued by some, is a necessary condition for bringing out the potential of the highly able.' The government's White Paper *Excellence in Schools*, published in the same year, asserted the value of setting in the teaching of mathematics, science and languages, stating that: '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.' Since then the government has again endorsed the grouping of pupils of high ability, this time in its material on Education Improvement Partnerships (2006). It argues that these 'would allow schools to improve through collaboration the support for gifted and talented pupils. As well as working together to meet the new quality standards now under development, they could ...pool the expertise of their teaching staff or create more sustainable teaching groups by drawing together pupils from several schools.' Research by Hallam and Ireson (2006) finds conclusively that able pupils prefer to learn in ability sets.

Sukhnandan and Lee (1998) maintain that streaming and setting 'reinforce social divisions' and that they have had 'no overall impact on pupil achievement.' It cannot be concluded, however, that setting should be abandoned in the interests not only of equity but also of overall attainment. For example, Kutnick et al (2005), in a wide-ranging review of research into pupil grouping, record the fact that 'the evidence is patchy on the impact of grouping strategies on pupils with specific characteristics'. They go on to say that 'for pupils identified as gifted and talented, full-time specialist programmes and constructing separate groups within a mixed class taught by someone specifically trained are effective in academic gains with these pupils, but the effect on the other pupils in the school remains unknown.'

Grouping together pupils of high ability can enable teachers to choose teaching approaches more appropriate to at least the majority of the group. This might include a faster pace, more innovative or open-ended methods, or a range of challenges which this form of grouping can best serve.

In *Setting in Primary Schools* (1999), Ofsted reported that an increasing number of primary schools were using setting in some subjects. In other words, they were creating a context of ability grouping which is consequently already familiar to many pupils once they enter secondary schools. It might be argued that primary pupils already used to this way of working could be at a disadvantage if they encountered full mixed ability teaching on entering Key Stage 3.

## **WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER?**

Pupils' abilities vary in different subjects, so it is inadvisable 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, the type of task set, and their learning style preferences. For example, is the task a written or an oral one? Does it require a fast response or slow, meticulous study? Does it involve a problem-solving or research-based approach? Is it a collaborative or an individual exercise? Pupils will differ in their capacity to cope with these various demands. It follows that grouping identically within one subject may also have its limitations.

The essential features of a successful system of ability grouping are meticulous selection, flexibility, evaluation, and a readiness to make changes where these are in the interest of the pupils. It is all too easy to leave sets unchanged once they have been established, and for movement between them to be difficult to manage.

'More able' pupils tend to be grouped on the basis of current achievement, but ability is also a matter of potential and motivation, and it can also take time to manifest itself. There needs to be a common understanding, shared by all the staff, of the criteria which are to be used when determining the makeup of 'more able' groups. There is a natural tendency to select the most conscientious, well behaved, articulate or literate pupils. Arnold (1997) reviews the evidence for the effect of teachers' attitudes on pupils' performance, including the perceptions of pupils themselves. For example, he cites the findings of Graham, who in 1994 interviewed a large number of pupils from Hampshire schools. The general consensus among them was that teachers were influenced largely by pupils' behaviour and attitudes, such as the effort they put into their work and their commitment to homework. In summarising the evidence, Arnold commented, 'It is not unnatural that teachers should respond more warmly to pupils who are co-operative in furthering their own learning and take some responsibility for it. The important thing is for teachers to be explicitly aware of the nature of their responses and how far they are likely to lead to a solution or get in the way of one.'

Hallam and Toutonji (1996) made a similar point when they remarked: 'Pupils from high streams exhibit pro-social behaviour and it may be this, rather than their academic accomplishments, that shapes teachers' behaviour towards them.' In a survey carried out by Ofsted in 1993, it was found that in almost all the schools there were more girls than boys in the upper ability groups. When students were being allocated to groups, their perceived achievements in written work and reading played a very large part in the decision, and those of girls were generally better. This prompted HMI to comment: 'The general absence of clearly thought-out and well-defined criteria for placing pupils in

different groups suggests that the degree of differentiation may owe as much to teachers' expectations as to contrasts in boys' and girls' abilities in English.'

Gifted and talented pupils may, of course, also be underachieving pupils. Montgomery (1996) lists 13 features which characterise such students. Among them are: poor attitude to school; poor execution of work; failure to complete daily school work; and dislike of drill and memorisation. It must also be remembered that some pupils, despite their ability, may 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 does not take account of this, such pupils may be excluded from 'able' sets.

There are likely to be significant differences in ability even within a 'high ability' cohort, class or other group. The evidence suggests there is a tendency for teachers to take a whole-group or whole-class approach once the more able pupils are grouped together. Williams and Bartholomew, in a study of setting in mathematics, observed that 'the top sets tended to be allocated to well-qualified teachers, who tended to go too fast for many students (particularly girls). Most importantly, teachers teaching setted classes tended to treat the whole class as being of identical 'ability' and made little or no provision for differentiation.' The needs of individuals take priority, and differentiation must be carefully considered and planned for.

## WHAT MIGHT WE DO IN SCHOOL?

Any review of pupil grouping in a school should not, of course, be carried out in isolation from the related matters of the policy and practice of assessment, differentiation, and target-setting. It should also take as its starting point a common understanding of the intended outcomes of the system, and a shared attitude towards it. The school could therefore:

### **Set up departmental/staff discussions about current pupil grouping and improvements that could be made**

Distribute this Launchpad for staff to read before discussion, then ask them to consider the issues 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 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, for example with the aim of increasing pupils' motivation to produce good work. Some might be quantitative, for example with the object of enabling more pupils in a particular ability group in a particular subject in a particular year 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 need to be aware that there may be more flexible and appropriate alternatives to wholesale change. Examples include:

- temporary setting, for instance during revision periods or for particular units of work
- part-time setting, such as 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 groups in some subjects
- the withdrawal of groups, on the same principle that pupils with special educational needs are extracted in order to give them extra support
- one or more of the kinds of systems illustrated by the case studies below, taken from Ireson's (1999) research in the late 1990s.

### **A four-tiered curriculum in every subject**

*Brooke Weston CTC, Northamptonshire*

This is a system of curriculum differentiation used in Brooke Weston CTC, Northamptonshire, based on a philosophy of accommodating pupils' differing abilities. Work in all subjects in years 7 to 13 is based on a four-tier system. All departments use the differentiated structure and plan for the four tiers in their own ways. In lessons, the teachers explain what is required at each of the levels. The students are responsible for selecting the level at which they will work, with advice and guidance from their teachers. When setting is introduced, the sets never contain only those students attempting the least difficult tier; the higher levels will always be on offer. Placement in sets is negotiated between teachers and students.

### **Student choice within a modular curriculum**

*Sandringham School, Hertfordshire*

The school offers a modular curriculum in years 9, 10 and 11, alongside the core curriculum. The modular curriculum allows students choice, and the opportunity to specialise or to take additional modules to consolidate or extend work in core subjects. The aim of the modular system is to motivate students by giving them greater ownership of their learning. It has proved to be very popular with parents and with students, who enjoyed the autonomy associated with making choices.

### **Intensive literacy (year 7) and study skills programmes**

*Langley School, West Midlands*

The school is constantly looking for ways of improving achievement through literacy, and the intensive literacy programme was introduced as a response to declining levels of literacy among pupils arriving in year 7. Pupils are withdrawn from English lessons and follow customised, intensive programmes in small groups, returning to mainstream lessons as soon as possible. The school also runs a study skills programme which concentrates mainly on writing skills, for pupils in years 8 and 9. This programme is taught in mixed ability classes. The school recognises that particular grouping arrangements may be needed to achieve different learning outcomes.

### **Inclusive grouping**

*Langdon School, London Borough of Newham*

The school is unusual in the extent to which it embraces inclusive grouping. Pupils with special educational needs are taught in inclusive groups throughout the school. This is achieved through a combination of classroom support, partnership teaching, and limited use of withdrawal groups. The school has a well-developed support structure, and time is set aside for collaborative lesson planning. A set of guidelines for differentiation has been developed, and systematic evaluation of inclusion is carried out on a regular basis.

### **Single sex groups for English**

*George Spencer School and Technology College, Nottingham*

The decision to teach some boys and girls separately for English was part of an attempt to improve the attainment of boys. The school decided to set up new groupings in English in year 9, including one class of boys and one of girls. The classes were carefully selected so that a balance of mixed ability was maintained in the groups. Several ways of evaluating the impact of gender grouping on attainment were introduced and, at the time the research was conducted, there were plans to continue to evaluate single sex groupings through to GCSE, when more quantitative comparisons could be made.

### **'Vertical' grouping**

*Bridgemary Community Sports College, Gosport, Hampshire*

The approach by Bridgemary Community Sports College provides a more recent example of innovative pupil grouping. Since 2005, the school has operated a 'vertical' pupil grouping system in which traditional year-group teaching has been replaced by groups organised according to progress and aptitude in each subject area. Groups may contain pupils from several different year groups in the same key stage.

### **Plan for, pilot and evaluate new grouping approaches**

In secondary schools, it is likely that the introduction of personalised learning, and the demands of Key Stage 3 curriculum compacting, may have an impact on pupil grouping arrangements. In any move to revise grouping approaches, the following decisions may need to be made:

- In which subject department, or with which pupils, 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 to interact with other able people, for example peers, older pupils, or adults? What are the timetabling implications of these contacts, 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 altogether (acceleration)?

If a common understanding has been agreed among staff and different departments, and whole-school decisions have been made, the next step is to write statements on grouping policy for inclusion in the school's policy for gifted and talented pupils and any

other relevant policies. These statements, which ideally should be written collaboratively, will need to outline:

- the systems of grouping used throughout the school curriculum, such as setting, mixed ability, or other forms of grouping
- the types of differentiation used within these systems, for example by resources, by task, by pace
- the principles behind these systems, for example the recognition of potential as well as ability, the acceptance that ability can change over time and vary within different contexts, etc.
- the provision made to compensate for the drawbacks of the systems used: this might include opportunities for able pupils to work with other able pupils if setting is not adopted; opportunities for less able pupils to work with more able peers if setting *is* adopted; and opportunities for 'late bloomers' to move from lower to upper sets if their abilities in a given curriculum area become apparent.
- the provision made for exceptional pupils, for example acceleration
- the system of regular review and evaluation 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 the school's documentation reflect current practice, not intent. The foundation for this is whole-school discussion and agreement at the outset, and regular evaluation of grouping systems in use. No system of grouping will be fully effective unless it is grounded in a shared exploration of the issues and the agreement of the school staff.

## REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

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