

## Unit 3, Section 2

# Pupil Grouping

### Key Issues

- There are more approaches to the grouping of pupils than the traditional mixed-ability, banding, or setting methods
- Grouping in itself does not ensure appropriate provision
- No one method of grouping suits all gifted and talented pupils
- Gifted and talented pupils frequently underachieve in mixed ability classes. Top sets do not always often consist of pupils with the greatest academic potential, but rather of well-behaved, well-motivated pupils with highly developed literacy skills.

### Background

When a school seeks to create the right kind of learning opportunities for gifted and talented children, grouping arrangements will be one of the key factors.

Schools currently adopt a variety of methods, which may include mixed-ability grouping, setting, banding, and fast-tracking, but evidence from inspections suggests that the first two of these are still the most widely employed. In secondary schools, the most common practice has been for pupils to be placed in mixed ability groups on entry, and for this pattern to be maintained for one, two, or perhaps three years. Thereafter, pupils are grouped according to ability, and the decisions are usually made on the basis of teachers' records of pupils' performance to date, some form of written test, and discussion of pupils' attainment (Ofsted, 1993). In a survey carried out by HMI, it was found that in almost all the schools there were more girls than boys in the upper ability groups. When pupils 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.' (Ofsted, 1993).

## Teacher Beliefs

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.'

All this strongly reinforces the argument proposed in Unit 1, Section 4, namely that teachers' assumptions, which indeed they may not be conscious they hold, relate not only to how children behave and learn but also to the nature and potential of certain groups of pupils. This has a particular bearing on the fact that gifted and talented pupils may also be underachieving pupils. In Section 3 of Unit 1 we listed 13 features which, according to Montgomery (1996), characterise such pupils. Among them were: poor attitude to school; poor execution of work; failure to complete daily school work; and dislike of drill and memorisation.

## Methods of Pupil Grouping

Streaming, which is becoming more common, is a 'school-based' decision, whereas setting allows more autonomy to subject departments. To operate properly it has to be organised with great care, for it is not necessarily a clear-cut process. Allocation to the wrong set is an obvious hazard, but it is not the only one. Other organisational factors within the school, notably timetabling, can sometimes result in a pupil being allocated to a set within one subject on the basis of performance in another.

Setting is commented upon by the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee in their report 'Highly Able Children' (1999). The Committee noted that the Government is encouraging greater use of setting, and it cited the views of teachers who had given evidence in support of the practice: '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 Committee also recorded the evidence it had received on mixed ability teaching. Opinion had been divided, but the weight of argument appeared to be that in too many mixed ability classes the most able were not stretched sufficiently. In their review of research into grouping, Hallam and Toutonji (1996) cite the finding of Reid et al (1981) that attitudes to mixed ability teaching differ from subject to subject. Where a subject is structured in such a way that learning builds on previous knowledge, e.g. mathematics, science, languages, teachers seem to favour setting. Doubt about the practicability of mixed ability teaching was particularly marked among the teachers of mathematics and languages.

Some advocates of mixed ability grouping argue that the needs of individual pupils can be met by differentiation, which might be by outcome or by work of differing levels of demand. Sukhnandan and Lee (1998) reviewed a number of research studies which focused for the most part on the effects of differentiation within ability sets, rather than in mixed ability groups. Kulik and Kulik (1982, 1987), for example, found that gifted pupils 'achieved significantly more when grouped by ability compared with those who were not, but *only* when they were provided with programmes that were designed specifically to meet their needs.' Similarly, Askew and William (1995) found that setting, without any change to curriculum material, had only a small positive effect on levels of achievement. When curriculum materials were specifically developed for pupils of high ability, setting produced the greatest positive effect.

Complex grouping arrangements *within* classes have come in for some criticism in recent years. Arnold (1995) refers to evidence given to an earlier enquiry by the House of Commons Education and Employment Committee in 1994. In oral evidence to the Committee, Prais and Luxton argued that teachers in England, in contrast to those on the Continent, 'attempt to meet so-called individual needs through classroom grouping arrangements of undue complexity. In our judgement, many - perhaps most - teachers find the complexity unmanageable', and 'in general, pupils' learning time is far from effectively deployed.' A similar judgement was made by Reynolds and Teddlie (1995), who studied practice in nine countries. They found that none of the other countries in the study spent as much time teaching children in groups as is the case in Britain. 'We are not talking about didactic whole-class instruction in Taiwan, but about high quality interaction between pupil and teacher during whole class teaching.' They went on to suggest that complex teaching arrangements 'of a kind used in British classrooms' could be put to good advantage only by the best teachers, and in the hands of the poorest they could result in 'educational chaos'. As Prais and Luxton have expressed it, 'much work still has to be done to construct detailed models of teaching and learning appropriate to our circumstances.' Perhaps the last word on this should go to Fullan (1990), who developed the influential Learning Consortium in Toronto. He set out to demonstrate that teachers can become reflective practitioners and become adept at employing 'an array of instructional models'.

In his view, teachers gradually internalise these attributes, which must become part and parcel of what it means to be a professional educator. A prerequisite of all this is that the school should nurture collegiality among the staff, establish norms of continuous improvement, and maintain to a high standard the organisation, planning, and development of policies.

It is presumably this kind of climate which has given rise to the innovative methods devised by some schools, recorded in a research report produced by Ireson for the DfEE (1999). An example is that of Brooke Weston CTC, Northamptonshire, which has contrived a four-tiered curriculum in every subject. All subject departments use the differentiated structure, plan for the tiers in their own ways, and explain to the students 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 students and teachers.' Another example is that of Sandringham School, Hertfordshire, which 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.

Ireson's report gives detailed descriptions of these innovative practices, and of those in other schools, with the implications for teaching, the impact of the practice, the perceived benefits and disadvantages, and teachers' views as to whether the practice would work in other schools.

In conclusion, we must emphasise that no matter what form of grouping is adopted, it does not in itself constitute provision. 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 (Sammons et al, 1995)

## Conclusion

## Activity 3.2

### Reflection

Reflect on some of the following questions

- φ Do gifted and talented pupils achieve better when 'segregated'?
- φ What are the effects upon them socially?
- φ What are the effects, both academic and social, on pupils from whom they are segregated?
- φ What advice would you give to senior management teams and departments on appropriate grouping arrangements for your gifted and talented pupils?
- φ What changes might be needed to bring about different grouping arrangements?

Consider what strategies you could use to ensure change takes place.

## Learning Outcomes

- Appreciate that pupil grouping does not constitute provision
- Understand the strengths and weaknesses of particular grouping arrangements in respect of G&T
- Form a view of appropriate advice for your school