

Attainment grouping and equity in English schools

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Introduction

THE ENGLISH education system is highly inclusive when compared globally, with most children educated in comprehensive schools until age 16. By contrast, many countries employ some kind of between-school tracking, with children sorted into academic or vocational educational programmes. England, however, has the most within-school segregation in the world (Jerrim, 2019) and within-school grouping by ‘ability’¹ has been actively encouraged as ‘good practice’ by successive UK Governments (Dracup, 2014; Francis, Archer et al., 2017). However, grouping by attainment remains controversial, because of evidence of detrimental consequences for pupils.

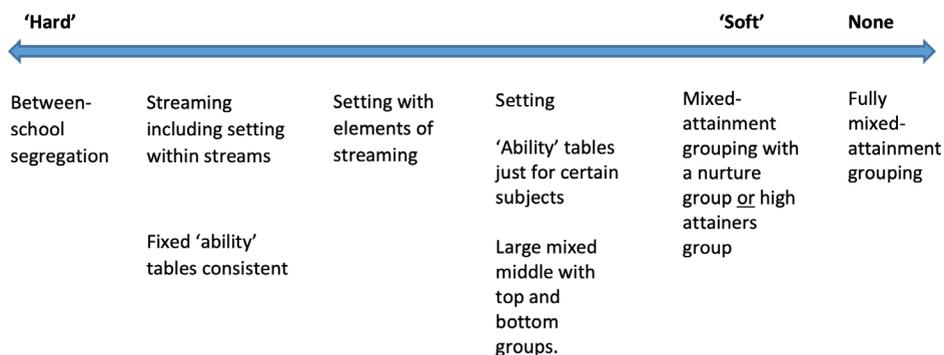
Four main types of attainment grouping are practised in English schools:

- Within-class grouping, where children sit at different tables according to their prior attainment
- Setting, where children are divided into classes by attainment in specific subjects
- Streaming, where children are grouped by ‘general ability’
- Mixed-attainment grouping, where groups include pupils with a wide range of prior attainment.

In practice schools may use variations on these approaches (see Francis, Taylor et al.,

¹ We do not subscribe to conceptions of ‘ability’ as ascribed and fixed. We see it as malleable, and prior attainment as reflecting a range of societal factors that impact educational progress and outcome.

Figure 1: Attainment grouping spectrum (Taylor et al., 2020).



2020 for a discussion). We therefore conceptualise attainment grouping in England as a continuum (see Figure 1).

Advocates of attainment grouping argue that it enables teachers to stretch 'able' learners, and to support those who are struggling (DFES, 2005). A study for the Department for Education found that one third of schools had 'introduced or improved' attainment grouping to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils (Macleod et al., 2015). However, research consistently shows that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and from certain minority ethnic groups are more likely to be placed in low-attaining groups (Muijs & Dunne, 2010).

Is attainment grouping effective?

The impact on pupil outcomes remains contested. Researchers face issues including the complexity of grouping practices and inconsistency in how they are described (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016) and dated and US-centric research literature. Most reviews of attainment grouping research have found that, on average, pupils in attainment-grouped classes make slightly less progress than pupils in mixed-attainment classes. The Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit concludes that:

Setting and streaming has a small negative impact on low attaining learners, and a small positive impact for higher attaining pupils. [...] it appears that setting or streaming is not an effective way to raise attainment for most pupils. (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021)

We argue that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are placed in 'low ability' groups face a double disadvantage and segregation by 'ability' within schools exacerbates wider social inequalities (Francis, Archer et al., 2017).

Best practice in grouping students

We identified seven factors that we postulated might underlie the detrimental effects of attainment grouping:

- Misallocation of pupils to attainment groups
- Lack of movement between groups

Table 1: Misallocation of students to maths and English sets by gender and ethnicity.

| Nature of misallocation | Difference in odds of being misallocated |
|-------------------------|---|
| To lower set in maths | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black students 2.54 times more likely than White students. • Asian students 1.77 times more likely than White students. • Girls 1.55 times more likely than boys. |
| To higher set in maths | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White students 1.79 times more likely than Black students. • White students 1.69 times more likely than Asian students. • Boys 1.42 times more likely than girls. |

- Lower quality of teaching for pupils in lower-attaining groups
- Lower expectations of pupils in low-attaining groups
- Restricted pedagogies and an impoverished curriculum and qualifications for low-attaining groups
- Impact of attainment grouping on pupils' learner identities
- These factors working together to cause a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We designed the 'Best Practice in Grouping Students' project to explore these issues. The study, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation, ran from 2014–2018 and investigated setting and mixed attainment grouping in 139 secondary schools in England. Full details of the study are reported elsewhere (Francis, Taylor et al., 2020). We summarise some key findings from the study here.

Pupils are misallocated to sets by ethnicity and gender

We found evidence that Black students were 2.54 times more likely to be placed in a lower mathematics set than was predicted from their KS2 score. Asian students were 1.77 times more likely than White students to be placed in a lower set, and girls were 1.55 times more likely than boys to be placed a lower set (Table 1). Conversely, White students and boys were more likely to be placed in a higher mathematics set than predicted by their KS2 score (Connolly et al., 2020).

Misallocation is highly likely to be exacerbating existing injustices around ethnicity and gender in English schools.

Pupils in lower sets get lower quality teaching

Teachers who were highly qualified in their subject were less likely to be allocated to low sets. Pupils told us that teachers of high sets had rigorous expectations and 'pushed' pupils to do their best. Pupils regarded this as signifying that teachers respected their pupils. Teachers of low sets were perceived to 'spoon-feed' pupils and provide slow-paced, undemanding lessons with fewer opportunities for independent study and skill development (Mazenod et al., 2019).

Setting widens gaps in self-confidence

Analysis of baseline survey data found that pupils in top sets had the highest subject-specific and general self-confidence scores, with pupils in the bottom sets having the lowest scores (Francis, Connolly et al., 2017). However, after controlling for prior attainment and prior self-confidence, and following two years in the top set for mathematics, pupils had

significantly higher general self-confidence compared to the middle set, while the bottom set had significantly lower general self-confidence. There was also a similar trend for pupils in the bottom set for mathematics and subject-specific self-confidence, although this did not reach statistical significance. After two years in the top set for English, pupils had significantly higher self-confidence in English, compared with pupils in the middle set (Francis, Craig et al., 2020). We conclude from these findings that being placed in a top set increases pupils' self-confidence, while being placed in a bottom set lowers it.

Conclusion

We conclude that attainment grouping perpetuates social injustice in English schools and doubly disadvantages those pupils most in need of support. We argue that teachers need to adopt more equitable approaches. However, we found that schools struggled to change their practices, despite a high level of school autonomy (Taylor et al., 2017, 2019). We therefore formulated guidance to assist schools with taking manageable, evidence-based steps toward more equitable practice, with our 'Dos and Don'ts of Attainment Grouping' (Francis et al., 2018).

We strongly believe that further research is needed to understand what works well in setting and in mixed attainment teaching, particularly in supporting the achievement of lower-attaining pupils and closing the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils. We hope that our ongoing Student Grouping Study (Hodgen et al., 2019) will provide answers to these questions.

The author

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