Title Page

'The reality is complex': Teachers' and School Leaders' accounts and justifications of grouping practices in the English Key Stage 2 classroom.

Emma Towers*, Becky Taylor, Anna Mazenod, Antonina Tereshchenko

Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

* *The corresponding author has changed affiliation since this study was conducted to: School of Education, Communication and Society, King's College London, UK.*

Dr Emma Towers
 Room 1/14
 School of Education Communication and Society
 King's College London
 Waterloo Bridge Wing
 Franklin-Wilkins Building
 Waterloo Road
 London SE1 9NH

Email: emma.towers@kcl.ac.uk

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Abstract

Grouping pupils by attainment is frequently practised in primary schools yet is associated with detrimental effects for some children. Drawing on a mixed methods study, we find that attainment grouping practices at key stage 2 in primary schools are seldom straightforward. Although grouping by attainment appears to be the dominant form of grouping, the language used by teachers to talk about their classroom practice suggests a varied and sometimes complex picture. We explore how school leaders and teachers justify their grouping practices and conclude that primary school educators endeavour to strike a balance between their concern for the child and the need to respond to the demands of testing and assessment. In the wake of new reforms to primary education, the findings in this study are significant and timely in providing a picture of the types of grouping currently being carried out in primary schools across England.

Keywords: grouping practices; pupil grouping; primary school; key stage 2; attainment grouping; mixed attainment grouping

Introduction

The practice of grouping children with similar levels of attainment, often referred to as 'ability grouping', has been a long-standing subject of debate in education in England (Hallam and Parsons 2013; Marks 2013) and internationally (Anthony and Hunter 2017; Schofield 2010). To date most of the research on student grouping has taken place in secondary schools (Ireson & Hallam 2001; Schofield, 2010; Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004).

The practice of grouping pupils is an age-old concern for teachers everywhere but there are few recent empirical studies on grouping practices in primary schools in England, particularly since the introduction of key reforms in 2014 to the primary curriculum and assessment system. Revisiting these concerns is important at a time when primary schools in England are operating in a fast-changing and complex educational policy climate that significantly impacts on teachers' classroom practices, including the practice of grouping pupils by 'ability' as a means to improve test scores (Bradbury 2018; McGillicuddy and Devine, 2018). This study also speaks to educators internationally where the educational policy climate is characterised by similar aspects of accountability, standardisation and global competition and where the popularity of 'ability' grouping is on the rise (Loveless 2013; OECD, 2016). Therefore, the findings in this study are important in providing a current picture of the types of grouping being carried out in primary schools across England. Furthermore, it is novel taking a fine-grained approach to analysing the justifications given by primary leaders and teachers for adopting certain grouping practices.

The term 'ability grouping' is commonly used to describe the way in which pupils are grouped for different subjects in their classes. However, we reject the notion of 'ability' as fixed, preferring to see it as malleable, and student attainment reflecting the effects of a range of societal factors (Francis et al. 2017). We prefer to use the term 'attainment grouping' and use the term 'ability' in inverted commas.

Setting, attainment grouping across classes, is common practice in most English secondary schools, while streaming, the practice of attainment grouping as a whole class, happens in some schools (Hodgen 2011). As pupils move through primary school, they are increasingly likely to experience attainment-based sets for English and mathematics (Baines et al. 2003). For some time, policy-makers have advocated the use of grouping by attainment as part of the standards agenda (DfEE 2001; DfES 2005). Primary and secondary schools were encouraged to adopt such practices in order to 'build motivation, social skills and independence' (DfES 2005,58). During this time numerical national curriculum levels were used to grade children's attainment[1]. However, since the publication of the new national curriculum in 2013/2014 (DfE 2013), new forms of assessment have been developed and numerical levels have been replaced with a new grading system[2] for primary school children. The rationale for this shift is described in a report by the government's Commission on Assessment Without Levels (McIntosh 2015). National curriculum levels, intended for measuring attainment in national assessments only, were increasingly being used for assessments within school and between key stages to track pupils' progress (McIntosh 2015). The report asserts that if schools no longer group children 'according to levels', this would

[1] Until September 2015 the national curriculum was accompanied by a series of 8 levels that were used to measure the progress of children aged 5–14 years and compared to pupils of the same age across the country.
[2] Since September 2015, individual schools decide how they assess pupils' progress. Schools use statements such as these to describe pupil progress:
-Working at expected standard
-Working towards the standard
-Working at greater depth

remove the 'label' of levels and 'help to improve pupils' mind-sets about their own ability' (McIntosh 2015, 14).

Although the report does not rule out attainment grouping per se, it does suggest that an assessment system without levels could encourage teachers to increase flexibility in their classroom grouping practices. Similarly, an announcement by the Department of Education (DfE, 2017) on the subject did not explicitly endorse the use of 'ability' grouping. In response to a study by Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) highlighting the prevalence of attainment grouping in Early Years and key stage 1, the DfE announced: 'There is no statutory requirement within the framework that children should be grouped by ability' (DfE 2017, para 3). Nevertheless, as the research continues to show (Bradbury 2018; Marks 2016) attainment grouping has become an established form of practice in schools in England.

Such attainment grouping practices continue despite a significant body of evidence asserting that grouping children according to their perceived 'abilities' has little or no overall impact on pupil outcomes (e.g.EEF 2018; Hallam and Parsons 2013; Slavin 1990; Steenbergen-Hu et al. 2016). The detrimental effects of grouping children by attainment either within streams, sets or within-class 'ability' groups have been widely rehearsed in studies on grouping where such grouping in the primary classroom can exacerbate existing inequalities among children (e.g. Campbell 2013; Dunne et al. 2011; Hallam, Ireson and Davies 2004; Scherer 2016).

This paper begins by examining the literature pertaining to grouping practices in primary schools. It then presents the mixed methods research methodology and findings from a survey and interview data across English primary schools to show that grouping practices are varied. We explore headteachers' and teachers' accounts and justifications for fluid and flexible grouping practices. We consider the policy context in which primary schools operate and the accountability pressures which impact on teachers' grouping decisions. We suggest

that teachers are trying to balance the pressures of accountability with a concern for the wellbeing of children and engage with what they consider to be the best practice for their situation.

Dominant grouping practices in primary schools

Evidence suggests that the prevalence of grouping primary age children by their perceived 'ability' has increased in response to pressure to raise standards and meet attainment targets (Davies et al. 2003; Marks 2016; and see Francis et al. 2017 for commentary on the standards agenda). Incidences of structured 'ability' grouping practices appear to increase as children move up the school when the pressures to achieve success in the end of key stage 2 assessment tests become more acute (Hallam et al. 2003). However, a recent study involving a large-scale national survey of teachers revealed that attainment grouping is becoming increasingly common in the Early Years (ages 3–4) and in key stage 1 (ages 5–7) in response to the pressures of high stakes tests in this primary phase (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017).

The most common forms of grouping in primary schools consist of within-class 'ability' groups, usually for mathematics and English (Marks 2013; Hallam and Parsons 2013). This is where teachers organise children into groups within a mixed attainment classroom based on what their teachers consider to be their individual 'abilities'. Typically children are arranged in table groups which are generally demarcated by number, colour or animal and object names (Raveaud 2005). In many primary schools other types of intervention activities also occur such as one-to-one tuition, where pupils are given intensive individual support, and withdrawal groups for certain pupils or groups of pupils such as high attaining pupils and those with special educational needs (Preckel and Brull 2010).

Despite the evidence that grouping by attainment is on the increase in primary schools, it is difficult to gain a comprehensive picture of primary school practices of grouping. Much of this may have to do with the fact that in primary schools ongoing decisions are made, often on a daily basis, about how children are grouped. These decisions are generally dependent on different factors such as: the prior attainment of children, classroom and behaviour management, children's friendship groups, and ensuring a balance of the number of girls and boys in a group (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Other factors influencing grouping decisions are school and cohort size, timetabling, and the availability of resources including teaching assistants and available space (Blatchford et al. 2008). Indeed primary schools differ from secondary schools in that they can adopt a range of grouping practices (Kutnick et al. 2005) to fit the needs of their children. It is not uncommon for primary school children to be taught in attainment groups or mixed attainment groups for the entire day or they may be differently grouped for part of the day (Blatchford et al. 2008).

Do primary school teachers support attainment grouping?

The research literature suggests that some teachers and senior leaders in both primary and secondary schools have a preference for grouping by attainment (Hallam and Ireson 2007; Ireson and Hallam 1999). Some of the dominant views which teachers hold about attainment grouping practices centre on the claim that they are matching instruction to the level of the pupils' perceived abilities (Blatchford et al. 2008). A study by Anthony and Hunter (2017) on groupings in mathematics lessons in New Zealand primary schools revealed that teachers generally supported the dominant practice of attainment grouping claiming that 'it enabled them to target students with similar needs and abilities, and that the learners felt less intimated when working with peers with similar abilities' (Anthony and Hunter 2017,81). Teachers who express a preference for attainment grouping often say that this is in response

to the wide perceived range of needs in a class of 30 children (Ireson and Hallam, 1999) and that it raises levels of attainment (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017). Grouping children by attainment is allegedly one way to reduce the range of needs, thus making planning and managing resources easier (Macqueen 2012).

Lack of movement

However, teachers who express unease about the use of attainment grouping point to the practice of fluid grouping as a way to alleviate these concerns (Anthony and Hunter 2017). Other evidence shows that there is in fact a relative lack of fluidity between attainment sets and groups (Marks 2013; Gillborn and Youdell 1999). Schools and teachers may overestimate the extent of fluidity between groups (McGillicuddy and Devine 2017). For example Dunne et al.'s (2011, 502) research on grouping practices in primary and secondary schools found that while teachers often held the view it was possible for students to 'move up' to a higher 'ability' group or set, and that this 'served as an effective carrot to help raise pupil attainment in low sets', they found that in practice the movement between attainment sets was largely limited. This lack of movement between attainment groups and sets can reflect fixed views on children's 'ability' (Marks 2013). In Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes' (2017, 32) study, they noted a discourse of 'group fluidity' from the teachers surveyed and found that even teachers who expressed a preference for fluid grouping were limited by factors such as time, resources and the pressure of the tests, thus movement between groups did not happen as often as teachers would have liked.

The policy context

English school practices have long been affected by a plethora of often paradoxical educational policies (Ball 2017). These have left primary teachers and school leaders to

contend with tensions of having to meet demands to raise attainment levels whilst ensuring all pupils receive an inclusive educational experience (Trigg-Smith 2011). In the case of contemporary primary schools, teachers are grappling with significant changes to the curriculum and to assessment procedures so teachers' decisions about grouping must be seen within a particular policy context (Marks 2013). Teachers are required to operate in often highly pressurised environments and they 'never have the time to engage with the practices they enact or to think about why they act' (Marks 2013,40). At the forefront of the primary school headteacher's concerns are the pressures placed on them by the ongoing standards agenda and demands to improve pupils' performance year on year. These pressures are exacerbated by the notion reflected in education policy that 'learning is predictable, measurable and controllable through teaching' (Pratt 2016, 902). The high stakes accountability and assessment processes in primary schools undoubtedly influences teachers' pedagogical practices in the classroom (Marks 2016). It follows therefore that such pressures on primary schools are likely to impact on grouping practices in primary schools.

We will next outline our research project and consider the data we gathered and analysed in the light of the themes discussed. The project's aims were to answer the following exploratory research questions:

1. How prevalent are different grouping practices in each year in English primary schools?

2. What rationale do teachers/senior leaders give for the grouping practices in their schools?

Methodology

The research relied on a mixed methods approach comprising a questionnaire survey of primary schools in England and semi-structured interviews with teachers and senior leaders in three English primary schools.

Survey

The aim of the survey was to provide a national picture of grouping practices in English primary schools. The survey was distributed via email to all state-funded primary schools in England, comprising approximately 16000 schools, using contact details from the Educational Database which is a register of schools and colleges in England. We invited one response only from each school with the intention of gaining a whole school overview of classroom grouping practices. As headteachers and their senior leadership teams understand 'the wider picture' of what is happening in their schools (Webb et al. 2012, 150), we invited headteachers or senior leaders from the schools to complete the survey. The short survey consisted of 14 questions and focused on the types of grouping practices adopted in each of the primary year groups from Reception to year 6. Questions relating to the Early Years and key stage 1 were included in order to gain a picture of what happens in all-through primary schools, from Reception to year 6. The first set of questions asked for details about the respondent's role and their school. The next set of questions asked which grouping practice best described what happened in each year group in the subjects of reading, writing and maths. To make the survey accessible and reflect the most commonly used term to describe attainment grouping, the term 'ability' was used in the questions. Respondents were asked to select one of the following grouping practices: 'fully mixed ability groups', 'within-class ability groups', 'setting', 'streaming' or 'not applicable'. These terms were clearly explained in the survey to avoid ambiguity about the grouping terminology used:

Fully mixed ability: mixed ability groups within a mixed ability class.

Within-class ability groups: ability groups (these could be arranged in table groups) within a mixed ability class.

Ability sets: ability 'sets' between classes in the same year group (e.g. children in all year 4 classes are placed into high, middle and low 'sets' in maths based on their ability).

Streams: children are assigned to a class according to their overall ability where they remain consistently for all subjects.

Respondents were then asked to indicate which grouping practice they felt would be the most appropriate for each year group in reading, writing and mathematics. An open question at the end of the survey was provided for respondents to include additional details about their school's grouping practices. In this paper we will discuss findings from questions relating to what grouping practices schools already adopt as well as responses to the open question.

As we were keen to collect as precise data as possible and minimize the time spent completing the survey, close attention was paid to the language used to describe the grouping practices. The survey was first piloted with 5 primary class teachers and 3 senior leaders. Amendments were made to ensure accessible terminology was used in relation to grouping practices and some questions were deleted to reduce the time taken to complete the survey. The survey was then piloted again in its modified version. The survey was administered using Bristol Online Surveys.[3]

Interviews

To gain a richer understanding of teachers' beliefs and practices relating to grouping, interviews were carried out in three state-maintained primary schools which represented

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[3] The Bristol Online Survey (BOS) *www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk*

different contexts and used different grouping practices (Table 1). The schools selected had two classes in each year group, which would allow a choice of grouping practice.

Table 1. **Description of Schools for Interviews**

	Hawthorn Primary Community School	**Parkfield Primary Community School**	**Elmwood Primary Voluntary Aided School[4]**
Location	Inner London borough	Inner London borough	Suburb of large regional city
Pupils on roll	460	481	490
%Pupils registered for FSM (Free School Meals)	31.7%	24.2%	3.2%
EAL	71%	66%	3%
Ofsted Rating	Good	Good	Good
School Type	Community school	Community School	Voluntary aided Church of England school part of a Multi Academy Trust

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[4] A voluntary aided school is a state-funded school in England and Wales in which a foundation or trust (usually a religious organisation), contributes to building costs and has a substantial influence in the running of the school.

A proforma was completed by a senior leader in each school about their grouping practices providing the researchers with an overall picture prior to conducting interviews. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in each school with a senior leader and two key stage 2 class teachers. Interviews, which typically lasted 30–40 minutes, were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. The nine in-depth interviews were designed to establish current practices in the participants' schools and consider in more detail the teachers' rationales for the practices they have adopted in their schools.

Coding and Analysis

The numerical and qualitative data on the grouping practices in key stage 2 were analysed descriptively. Responses to the open question in the survey were analysed using a coding frame that was created by ascribing category labels to the data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2013). The analysis of the interviews initially underwent an open coding process where key themes were identified and noted (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Following, the research team constructed a coding frame using the key interview questions and areas of enquiry as categories. The interviews were analysed in detail with Nvivo software.

The research was conducted in accordance with BERA ethical guidelines and approved by University of London Research Ethics Committee. Participants were granted anonymity and pseudonyms have been used in the reporting of the findings to conceal the identity of schools and participants.

Results

The results examined in this paper focus on survey and interview responses on dominant forms of grouping practices in the participants' schools as well as explanations and rationales for their choice.

Quantitative data: Dominant grouping practices in key stage 2

In total we received 217 responses from 212 primary schools which represent approximately 1.5% of the total number of primary schools in England. Five of the survey responses were duplicates and these were discounted from the analysis. Although the response rate was lower than anticipated, the responding schools are representative of all areas of England and represent a mix of different types and size of primary schools. Headteachers comprised 65 of the respondents and the remaining respondents were either deputy heads or other members of the school's senior management team. Grouping practices for reading, writing and mathematics, across key stage 2 year groups are summarised in figures 1,2 and 3.

Figure 1 **Responses to the question 'Thinking about the teaching of Reading, please tick the statements which best describe grouping practices in your school'.**
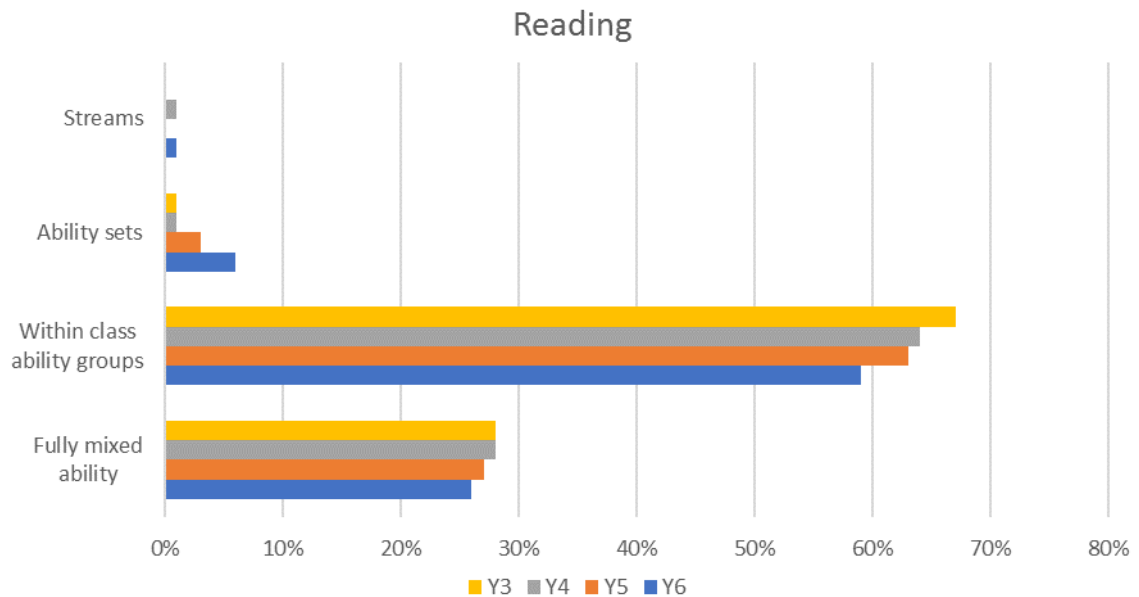

Figure 2 **Responses to the question 'Thinking about the teaching of Writing, please tick the statements which best describe grouping practices in your school'.**
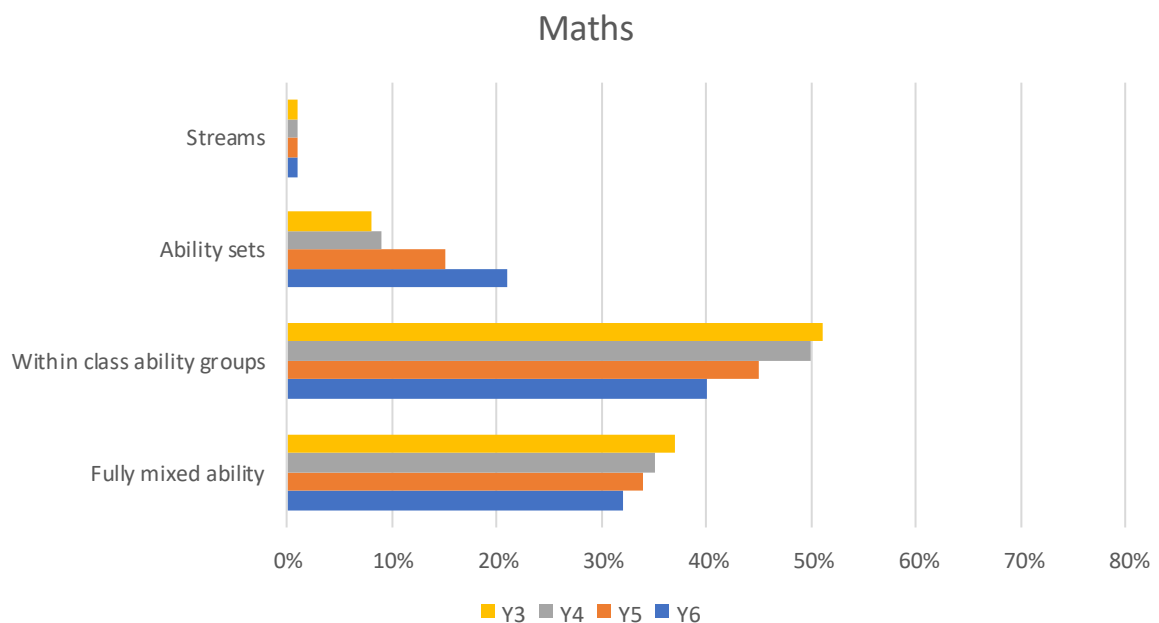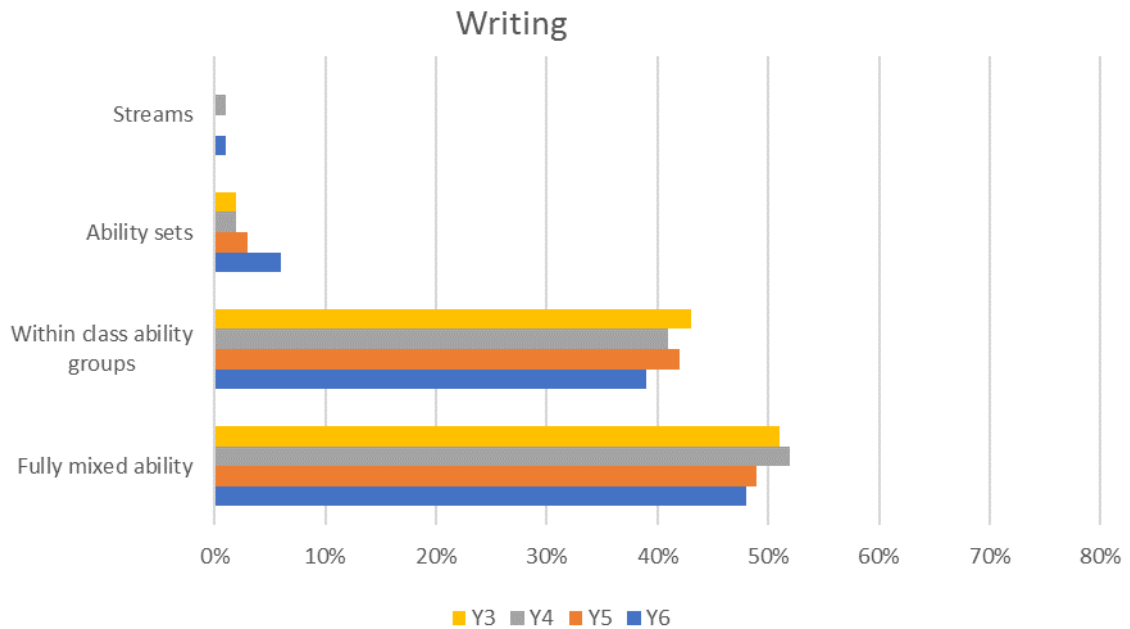
17

Figure 3 **Responses to the question 'Thinking about the teaching of Maths, please tick the statements which best describe grouping practices in your school'.**

The results from the survey are largely in line with other studies on primary school grouping (Hallam et al. 2003; Marks 2016). These survey results show that the dominant form of grouping in key stage 2 was by attainment, whether this be 'within-class ability groups', 'ability sets' or 'streams'. 'Within-class ability groups' was the most dominant form of attainment grouping in the schools. When examining these different forms of attainment grouping the survey shows that these grouping practices occurred in the majority of cases in reading and mathematics. A lower percentage of schools adopted some form of attainment grouping in writing. The data from our survey show that practices vary across the four key stage 2 year groups and children are more often grouped by attainment as they get older. The practice of grouping pupils in fully mixed attainment groups took place most frequently during the teaching of writing.

Written responses expanding on further details about grouping practices complemented this data. In the next section of the paper, we turn to the results of the qualitative data from the survey and participating schools. Excerpts from school interviews are identified as 'I' (interview data) and responses to the open question in the survey are identified as 'W' (written responses).

Qualitative data: a varied picture

There were 125 written responses to the open question in the survey, providing greater detail on schools' grouping practices. We examine these alongside the teacher and senior leader interviews from the three schools. While the majority of the written responses provided justifications for their grouping practices and details to the practicalities involved in grouping children in the classroom, a third of the written responses from the survey indicated that the answers they gave for the main part of the survey do not accurately reflect what happens in practice. These responses explained groupings are not 'set in stone'; and they may change depending on the subject, the task, the cohort or the resources available. Common responses included, 'It doesn't just follow one pattern'; 'Grouping is flexible'; 'We use a range of strategies for all subjects'; 'We vary the way that the children are grouped'. The following excerpt expanded on the answers a headteacher gave in the main part of the survey.

> Actual groupings do not always fit this pattern, e.g. Writing may be two mixed ability groups plus a lower ability group within a year group. This depends on staff resources, space and perceived needs of a particular year group and can change from year to year (W: Headteacher, two-form entry community school)

Similarly another headteacher highlighted the varied nature of their practices including

how they adopt 'complementary' grouping practices by withdrawing certain children from the class.

> The reality is more complex. We tend towards full mixed ability for reading, writing and maths activities. We also have some out-class grouping, for example interventions for less able or most able students. (W: Headteacher, 2 form-entry voluntary aided school)

Withdrawing children for intervention groups is widely practiced in primary schools (Dunne et al. 2011) and is also reflected in the responses to the survey and two of the schools. Generally children from lower attaining groups are targeted with the intention of 'catching up' with the rest of the class. From this perspective such 'ability' based withdrawal groups are another variation of attainment grouping (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017). In a year 6 class where preparations for the end of key stage tests dominate the focus of teaching and learning for most of the year, interventions for both lower and higher attaining children can be seen as a solution to meet different attainment targets. For example, a year 6 teacher at Hawthorn Primary talked about how they had 'done the odd shuffle so that lower attainers can have the support of an adult'. In this case, the 'odd shuffle' of children were for those at either end of the attainment spectrum where 'higher attainers' could also be removed to receive some 'specialist' teaching.

The majority of responses in the survey and the interviews reveal that schools justify the use of a combination of approaches and strategies. Responses referred to how 'a number of strategies work best in combination', and how 'outstanding teachers will use a mixture of strategies'. One headteacher reported that, 'the picture is in fact [very] colourful in order to reach every child'. Teachers interviewed in the three schools adapted school-mandated grouping practices and revealed that even those practices

could be amended or changed depending on different circumstances. Parkfield Primary, a large urban primary school, which had recently adopted mixed attainment grouping throughout the school as a response to a 'dip in results' also indicated that practices could be fluid. The assistant headteacher reported that although there had been a whole school move towards mixed attainment grouping that in fact it 'isn't consistent across the whole school … it's happening more in some classes, in other classes less so'.

Teachers' rationales for fluid and flexible grouping

A quarter of survey respondents used terms such as 'fluid', 'flexible' or 'change' to explain how grouping practices can alter depending on the tasks, although there were different understandings of what respondents meant by these terms. When respondents referred to 'change' in their practices, this was generally used to mean that practices could change termly or yearly depending on cohort size, space and available resources. The terms 'flexibility' or 'flexible arrangements' were used to mean that classroom grouping practices may alter from lesson to lesson depending on task or subject. 'Fluidity' or 'fluid groupings' generally meant that teachers could decide when and what attainment groups pupils could move into.

> Ability groups within classrooms are fluid and children on the edges (just in or just about out) are closely monitored and pushed/supported in order to move them into a higher group. (W: Headteacher, two-form entry voluntary aided faith school).

A similar form of 'fluid grouping' was adopted by one school, Elmwood Primary. In this case, children are still grouped by attainment, but with the proviso that children are not 'stuck' in a particular group (Ford 2005). Most of the key stage 2 year groups at Elmwood Primary, have adopted fluid grouping where 'we group children according to

their ability for that particular topic or theme […] so it's fluid and they can move' (Grace, SLT, Elmwood). The fluid grouping practices described here by Grace and in some of the survey responses would suggest that groupings are still influenced by a child's prior attainment in the particular subject or topic but just with the possibility of being able to move to another group depending on the subject or task. In this way, as Grace explains, 'those children who are maybe lower attainers aren't working in the same group every time'. Respondents to the survey and teachers interviewed in Hawthorn and Elmwood described such fluid grouping practices in a positive way. Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) found that teachers adopted 'fluid' grouping practices – moving children regularly between groups – to minimise the negative effects of fixed 'ability' grouping. These findings from the survey and the interviews highlight the language teachers employ to explain their grouping practices, such as making 'the odd shuffle', or talking about 'children on the edges' and describing practices as 'colourful'. One deputy headteacher of a one-form entry school talked about how most classes had a 'flexi-table' where children go for additional support. This may indicate that there could be a preference by teachers and leaders to move towards more dynamic and shifting grouping practices in primary schools.

Moving towards mixed attainment grouping?

Although a number of the survey responses simply gave descriptions of their grouping practices, many other responses included justifications for the practices they had adopted. Over half of the responses described how their schools implemented some form of mixed attainment grouping and/or they are planning to move more towards mixed attainment grouping. Out of the 125 written responses, a range of reasons for implementing mixed attainment grouping was given. For example, 20 responses cited

children's self-esteem as a key concern, with 5 of the 6 interview participants referring to concerns for children's wellbeing. Ten respondents reported being influenced by research and 193 respondents from the wider survey agreed that it is important to have research evidence on mixed attainment grouping. Other respondents took a position on grouping in line with the school's philosophical approach to education and to fit with newly adopted pedagogical practices. A new headteacher of a two-form entry community school was concerned about the wellbeing of the children in his school and reported that he had 'changed the classes to mixed ability classes to eliminate lack of self-esteem and to gain high aspirations by seeing the good role modelling from others'

In Parkfield Primary, which had adopted a mixed attainment approach to grouping across the school, the teachers are very clear about the benefits of their approach to children's wellbeing:

> We need to be careful about children's mental health and their
> confidence. And how they feel at school. And mixed ability teaching,
> you know, it kind of helps children as well with their self-esteem (I:
> Fiona, Y5 teacher, Parkfield Primary).

The implication is that if children are not labelled by their abilities, they are less likely to have fixed notions of their intelligence and general ability which may lower their self-confidence (Marks 2013). Fiona in Parkfield Primary gave examples of how children who were previously struggling when placed in low attaining groups were now achieving much better in mixed attainment groups and suggested that 'it's just a more inclusive way of teaching'.

A number of responses articulated their school's philosophy of learning such as adopting a 'growth mindset' approach which they suggested is incompatible with

grouping by attainment. With the popularity of Dweck's (2015) 'Growth Mindset' approach to learning, many schools appear to be applying this philosophy to their teaching practice such as a headteacher from a one-form entry school who explained,'our school philosophy and ethos is based on our belief that pupils can grow their intelligence'.. Other responses referred to the problems and limitations of 'labelling' children from an early age:

> We embrace the growth mindset and as the school grows, we have adopted the 'low entry high ceiling' approach for all so as not to put a lid on children's learning. (W: Headteacher, two-form entry Free School).

Other respondents suggested that the new mathematics curriculum lent itself to more mixed attainment grouping practices particularly those who have adopted a mastery[5] approach to teaching and learning.

However, schools adopting mixed attainment practices wholesale are still in the minority in our sample. Comments made by teachers in Hawthorn and Elmwood acknowledged the potential benefits of mixed attainment teaching but highlighted what were perceived to be unworkable aspects of teaching in mixed attainment groups. For example Grace in Elmwood, who strongly advocated the fluid grouping structure which her school had adopted, raised doubts about how effective mixed attainment grouping would be suggesting, 'I don't know how you would support children in a mixed group […] because you can only work with one group really at a time'. Similarly Ben at Hawthorn expressed reservations about how this type of grouping would meet the demands of the curriculum.

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[5] A mastery approach to teaching and learning involves understanding a subject in greater depth and for children to be able to represent their knowledge in multiple ways.

> I have read the research that says setting doesn't work and it shouldn't
> be happening. I've read all of that and I understand the logic behind it
> but the practicality in the classroom is the demands on me to get
> through that Year 5 curriculum (I: Ben, Y5 teacher, Hawthorn).

Amy, a senior leader in Hawthorn, expressed positive views on mixed attainment grouping and explained: 'I think it's the fairest on the most children it feels to me because I think that when you do set, it's usually at the cost somewhere'. Nevertheless when it came to grouping for maths she felt it would not necessarily cater for the diverse range of needs: 'with setting it just feels like across the board you can tackle all the children's needs just with really good planning and really good teaching'. Amy's comment highlights the fact that regardless of whatever grouping structure is in place, it is 'really good teaching' which makes all the difference (Coe et al. 2014).

Accountability pressures

As discussed earlier, primary school practices must be seen in an ever-present accountability agenda where pressures to raise standards have become increasingly prevalent in teachers' discourse about their pedagogy and practice. Although only six survey responses explicitly referred to primary school testing regimes and accountability pressures to justify their grouping practices, the subtext was that assessment pressures influenced schools' grouping decisions. This was evident from comments which referred specifically to how different practices, usually attainment grouping, were deployed for year 2 and year 6 children and in year 1 for phonics lessons. Pupils in their final year of primary school in year 6 are required to undertake national curriculum tests in English and mathematics at the end of the academic year. The results of these high-stakes tests are used by the Department of Education and

Local Authorities to rank schools regionally and nationally and results are published by the government. The responses from the survey as well as the interviews indicate that the tests have an influence on how children are grouped. This can be seen in a response by a headteacher of a two-form entry community school:

> We use ability sets in Y5 and Y6 for maths and English. We use ability sets in maths only in Y3 and Y4. We review if this is the most effective way by considering the cohort and the status of the school. (W: Headteacher, two-form entry community school).

This headteacher explains that grouping practices are also dependent on the 'status' of the school; this is likely to refer to how the school is ranked according to Ofsted[6] grading measurements. In high achieving schools the pressure to achieve beyond the expected level of attainment was evident in their practices. For example, year 5 teacher, Helen in Elmwood talked about the need to 'push, push, push, we've got to be better than actually the expected'. The urgency to 'push, push, push' children to achieve better than expected results reflects the notion of 'educational triage' (Marks 2014) where resources for specific groups of children are provided based on the requirements of a high-stakes testing regime. The survey results revealed that the general pattern was that the larger the school, the more likely they were to practice some forms of ability setting, with this practice increasing in year 6 classes when children are required to take national assessment tests. Decisions for grouping practices in primary schools in key stage 2 cannot be viewed as distinct from the policy climate in which they operate.

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[6] Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) is a non-ministerial department responsible for inspecting educational institutions in England. Inspectors use a 4 point grading scale to make judgements during inspections: 1 Outstanding; 2 Good; 3 Requires Improvement; 4 Inadequate

Discussion

This paper has drawn from both the survey and the interviews to explore what grouping practices are deployed in primary schools and why. The data from the schools surveyed revealed that grouping by attainment in maths and English is the dominant form of grouping in key stage 2. However, the open-ended answers in the survey also revealed that the grouping practices are more varied and complex than the simple picture that the numerical data might suggest. Teachers from the case-study schools, which were in part selected on the basis of their grouping practices in key stage 2, claimed that practices could alter and change depending on subject, cohort and availability of resources. Our findings suggest that grouping practices in a school seldom follow one pattern but differ from year group to year group and class to class, and moreover that there can be a range of grouping strategies within one class. Many of the respondents to the survey and the teachers interviewed were keen to point out that practices are not rigid and are subject to change if needed. Our findings are novel in that, unlike previous studies that found a range of grouping practices in primary schools (Blatchford 2008; Kutnick et al. 2005), this study has taken a fine-grained approach to the analysis of the data. The study provides rich descriptions of how groups are set up in English primary classrooms and detailed descriptions of teachers' and school leaders' justifications for the grouping practices they have adopted. The small-scale explorative nature of this study meant that it had certain limitations. The survey targeted senior leaders in primary schools, whose perspectives may, in some cases, differ from those of teachers who are daily engaged in teaching in their classrooms. However, primary school headteachers and senior leadership teams work in a high stakes accountability climate where they are required to have a thorough knowledge of children's progress and teachers' professional practice in their schools (DfE, 2016). Although arguably senior leaders may not have

knowledge of the minutiae of what occurs in classroom, they are best placed to have an overview of teaching practices in their schools. We must, however, be cautious about potential differences of data gathered in interviews and a survey as opposed to data collected from observations of teaching practices. Thus there may potentially be a number of issues arising of what a teacher reports they do and the reality of what they do (Dimitriadis 2012). Despite the limitations of this small-scale study, we suggest that we have found evidence of a complex picture of grouping in the key stage 2 classroom.

The language respondents employed to account for and justify their grouping practices varied. The responses emphasised the fact that they adopt flexible and fluid practices, perhaps mindful of avoiding a 'fixed mindset' approach to teaching and learning. However, there appeared to be different understandings of what constitutes 'fluid' or 'flexible' grouping. In some cases, groups are based on attainment but children may move in and out of these groups depending on the particular task or subject. In other cases, groups are fully mixed but tasks are differentiated where children may self-select their level of 'challenge'. Furthermore, teachers' accounts of the extent to which pupils move in and out of groups may be overestimated (McGillicuddy and Devine, 2018).

In their study on mathematics groupings in primary schools Anthony and Hunter (2017) noted that teachers often supported the notion of flexible grouping, seeing it as an alternative to 'ability' grouping. However the authors cautioned that in practice flexible grouping did not necessarily adopt similar practices as mixed-ability grouping but rather it was 'in effect [a] pseudo ability grouping with the possibility of students moving in or out of groups depending on the topic' (Anthony and Hunter 2017,83). This suggests there is scope for further investigation into what teachers understand by 'ability' and 'mixed ability' grouping and how this is organised in the classroom.

Some of the data showed schools either committed to the idea of mixed attainment grouping or moving towards it, with those in favour articulating the benefits to the children in terms of their wellbeing and self-esteem. For example, with the arrival of a new headteacher, Parkfield Primary adopted fully mixed attainment teaching across the school (although interview comments revealed that not all teachers in the school were convinced by this change in pedagogy). Other responses, such as the teachers interviewed at Elmwood Primary and particularly in Hawthorn Primary, expressed positive attitudes about the notion of mixed attainment grouping and deployed this in some subjects. However, teachers' main reservation for not adopting the practice wholesale was their concern about meeting the needs of their lower attaining children (including those on the SEND register) or extending the high attaining children, tensions also reflected in research in secondary schools (Taylor et al. 2017). This was closely linked with the need to keep pace with curriculum demands and focus on improving standards.

Accountability concerns play a key role in how primary school classrooms are organised (Bradbury 2014). Primary school grouping practices may seem complex but responses indicate that primary schools are required to make regular changes to practice in response to recent policy initiatives such as the new curriculum, to assessment and changes to pedagogical practices. Headteachers and teachers are operating in highly pressured environments where teachers and schools are judged and measured against prescriptive performance targets. There is an ever-present focus on improving pupil performance, not just to provide the best educational experience for each child, but as a measurement against which judgments are made about how a school is competing (Ball 2017). These responses suggest that, in the main, primary school teachers and leaders reflect critically about the best way to organise teaching and learning.

Wilkins' (2011) concept of the 'post-performative teacher' is particularly helpful here to understand the tensions experienced by teachers and school leaders. Post-performative teachers find a way to balance the conflict between the desire to exercise autonomy in the classroom and the demands of accountability. The results from our study show that primary school teachers take a range of factors into consideration when considering their grouping practices, including accountability pressures and the desire to maximise the wellbeing of the children in their care. As Hallam and Parsons (2013) found, primary schools' decisions are often based on the need to raise pupil attainment and meet policy demands. These data also suggest that schools' decision making can be based on ideology, values and beliefs and in some cases on pedagogical research.

Declaration of Interest Statement

None

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