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Supporting Schools with Mixed-Attainment Teaching Practice

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Research evidence suggests that students with lower prior attainment (often students from disadvantaged backgrounds) may do better if taught in mixed-attainment settings (Ireson et al, 2002). However, we know less about why this is, or what characterises successful practice in mixed-attainment classes. We were awarded the BERA BCF Routledge *Curriculum Journal* Prize in 2016 for work carried out in developing our intervention 'Best Practice in Mixed Attainment', which aims to ensure good practice in mixed-attainment teaching contexts.

The Education Endowment Foundation¹ hosts the *Teaching and Learning Toolkit* (Higgins et al, 2015) to provide teachers and school leaders with summaries of the research evidence in relation to a broad range of possible school practices. One such practice is 'Setting and streaming', where there is 'moderate' evidence to support a claim of '-1 month progress' – in other words, on average, 'ability' grouping has a small, negative impact on student outcomes. Research also suggests that where ability grouping is used, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately concentrated in lower sets and streams, and that students in lower sets make less progress (Francis et al, 2016). Despite this inauspicious evidence, setting by 'ability' remains a very common practice in English secondary schools and schools are reluctant to take up mixed-attainment teaching (Kutnick et al, 2005; Taylor et al, 2016).

The Best Practice in Grouping Students project² is funded by the Education Endowment Foundation and based at UCL Institute of Education. Our project aims to improve the educational attainment of all students, by ensuring that low attainers' progress is not detrimentally affected by poor practice, and to assess the relative effectiveness of different methods of grouping students. The project

¹ www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk

² www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-groupingstudents

includes two interventions that ensure all students are equally able to access high quality teaching and a rich curriculum. One intervention is Best Practice in Mixed Attainment, currently in its second year and due to report in January 2018.

Prior to the start of the intervention, we spent a year working with three schools (Plashet School, Hinchley Wood School and Kings Norton Girls' School) exploring Best Practice in Mixed Attainment. Our aim was to work collaboratively with teachers to develop curriculum materials that would then be used to support schools participating in the intervention. We drew on published research evidence and on pilot teachers' prior practice and experience, working in genuine partnership together.

The schools were selected on the basis that they used mixed-attainment grouping in Maths and English in Year 7, and that they were judged Good or Outstanding by Ofsted. Two maths teachers and two English teachers participated from each school (with the exception of one school, which only participated for maths). These teachers participated in a series of six workshops hosted at King's College London (where the project was initially based), and also facilitated research visits to their schools.

Together with the teachers, we established Best Practice Principles for mixed-attainment. Students should be grouped into classes so that there is a broad range of prior attainment in each class. Teachers should have high expectations of all students, regardless of prior attainment. 'Ability' is regarded to be flexible rather than fixed. Differentiation should be achieved principally by outcome and by questioning and feedback, rather than through the provision of different tasks. Where teachers choose to group students within the class, groups should be flexible and not by 'ability'. Teachers provided curriculum exemplars to illustrate these principles in action.

Involvement in the pilot phase of the project made a positive contribution to teaching and learning in the participating schools. This can be illustrated by the results of an evaluation conducted by

Margaret Anthony, maths Lead Practitioner at Plashet School. She found that following the introduction of mixed-attainment grouping, student attainment improved and feedback was positive. Furthermore:

'Since embarking on the mixed-attainment project, specific pedagogy meetings have become the norm. The aims of these meetings are to ensure the mathematics department keep abreast of best practice and the development of new pedagogies in mathematics. [...] an effective mechanism of co-planning encourages teachers to work together, to talk and to share experiences.'

At the final pilot workshop, we asked teachers for their feedback:

'I became an even better teacher: my resources are interesting, my students are developing skills that they will have for life rather than learning for an exam. And of course it is a system of greater equality.'

'The mixed-attainment requirements developed our skills as maths teachers in differentiation by outcome. The involvement in the project gave us a chance to explore best practice in teaching mathematics in mixed ability.'

'Benefits of mixed-attainment teaching include students supporting each other and challenging themselves as there are high expectations for all.'

The materials and intervention strategies developed with teacher colleagues during the pilot are now being used in the intervention study with six further secondary schools. At the end of the two-year trial these materials will be made freely available to all schools. We are optimistic that our model of Best Practice in Mixed Attainment, developed collaboratively with teachers, indicates the feasibility of raising attainment through the teaching of mixed groups.

References

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