

To appear in Cambridge Journal of Education, accepted 20/5/2022

How do teachers engage students in the lowest attaining English sets in high achieving schools? A mixed methods, multiple case study

Cathleen Halligan^a (Orcid ID **0000-0003-1720-8230**) and Ed Baines^b (Orcid ID **0000-0002-5643-7506**)

^a *London Borough of Camden, London, UK*

^b *Psychology and Human Development, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK*

Cathleen.halligan@camden.gov.uk

How do teachers engage students in the lowest attaining English sets in high achieving schools? A mixed methods, multiple case study

Abstract

Grouping students at secondary school based on attainment is a prevalent practice in English schools. Despite this, research has suggested that those placed in low attaining groups are disadvantaged by their placement. This study aimed to provide an account of student engagement, teacher interactions and pedagogical approaches employed by English teachers. A mixed method, multiple case study design was used to report on classroom practices and student engagement in three low attaining Year 10 English classes in two secondary schools. Information was gathered using semi-structured interviews with teachers and students and lesson observations. Findings suggest that teachers of these classes promoted engagement by developing positive student-teacher relationships through praise that encouraged learning, minimising negative reprimands and adapting teaching to respond to their students' needs. We suggest that strategic use of these practices allows teachers to develop positive relationships with students, providing the foundation for engagement in lessons.

Keywords: low attaining; attainment grouping; ability grouping; tracking; teaching practices; teacher-student relationships

Introduction

The practice of attainment grouping in secondary schools has been much debated within educational policy and practice literature (Francis et al., 2016; Hallam, 2002). The Department for Education (DfE) assert that organising students into classes based on prior attainment allows teachers to support lower attaining students and challenge those who are more able (DfES, 2005) by targeting resources and instruction to those working at a similar attainment level (Cahan et al., 1996). More recently, the UK government has reported that schools are using the practice of setting to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers (DfE, 2015). Conversely, there is substantial evidence highlighting the shortcomings of attainment grouping (Baines, 2012; Boaler et al., 2000; Francis et al., 2017; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). It has been suggested that, although the practice may enhance the attainment of a few high attaining students, low attaining pupils are disadvantaged in terms of GCSE attainment and access to effective teaching and learning opportunities (Boaler et al., 2000; Higgins et al., 2013; Solomon, 2007; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004).

There are a range of approaches to between class attainment grouping, sometimes referred to as ability grouping (see Baines, 2012; Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Attainment grouping is the process of grouping students according to a measure of prior attainment, such as examination results (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). In the UK, '*setting*' is the predominant approach used in secondary schools (Benn & Chitty, 1996; Taylor et al., 2020) and involves placing students in groups according to prior attainment in a particular curriculum area. This means that students could be placed in different sets depending on the subject (Connolly et al., 2017).

Since the 1960s, both UK and US based evaluation studies have found no overall effect of ability grouping on attainment for secondary age students (Ireson, Hallam & Hurley, 2005; Newbold, 1977; Slavin, 1990). However, some research has demonstrated a disparity between sets, concluding that setting tends to benefit students in higher sets while impairing the learning of students in lower sets (Higgins et al., 2013; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). Recent advice from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) suggests that setting is 'not an effective way to raise attainment for most pupils' (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018, p.1). A similar conclusion has been reported by large-scale Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies, suggesting that the earlier schools begin grouping children by attainment, the greater the disparity in attainment between students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds and their peers (see Baines, 2012). The studies conclude that increased attainment grouping creates more 'socially unequal performance' overall (OECD, 2010, p.13).

Research has questioned the equity of attainment grouping for over 50 years, including the impact of the practice on student attitudes towards school, teacher expectations and teaching approaches (Delamont & Galton, 1986; Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970). One of the main reasons suggested for unequal performance effects is the difference in teaching practices used within high and low attaining groups (Boaler et al., 2000; Francis et al., 2019). More recently, research by Francis et al. (2019) found that teachers with a high level of qualification in the taught subject were more likely to be allocated to a high set than a low set and that teachers with leadership roles within schools were more likely to teach high sets. It is plausible to speculate that teaching quality and pedagogic practices may differ across sets perhaps due to teacher expertise, experience and authority within the school system.

In a comparison of the teaching practices used in high, middle and low attaining Maths sets involving lesson observations, questionnaires and interviews with Year 9

students, Boaler et al. (2000) found that students in lower sets reported frequently having a change of teacher that they believed were not subject specialists. Students also reported feeling bored due to emphasis on activities with low levels of cognitive challenge, including copying, that were perceived to be too easy. Boaler et al., speculate that this is related to teachers' perceptions that students in low attaining sets cannot complete tasks, however teachers' views were not sought in this study, so it is difficult to confirm this.

Dunne et al. (2007) undertook a more comprehensive study of effective practices for the instruction of low attaining groups. Questionnaire and interview data were used to explore school practices for Year 8 and 10 students in 13 case study schools. Staff and students reported that creating a positive learning environment, customising the curriculum, providing individual support and differentiating learning were important for supporting low attaining students. Teachers felt that they created positivity in the classroom by taking a relaxed approach to behaviour management. Positive student-teacher relationships were fostered through praise, negotiation with students and rewards, such as the use of computers.

However, although this study set out to explore practices for classes of low attaining pupils in schools where students made progress, this was not achieved. Many of the classes involved were closer to the mid-point in terms of the attainment range. As such, there is currently little research that explores how teachers may effectively engage the lowest attaining students. Furthermore, although positive student-teacher relationships and flexibility in approaches to behaviour management emerged from interview and observation data, detailed information about the nature of teacher-pupil interactions was not reported. There is a substantial literature establishing that interactions and relationships between teachers and students are important for effective teaching and learning (Nash, Schlösser & Scarr, 2016). However, to date, little research has examined teacher-pupil interactions and classroom management approaches that teacher use to develop positive relationships with the lowest attaining students in low attaining sets. A further limitation common to both the Boaler et al. (2000) and Dunne et al.'s (2007) research is that neither were transparent about how lesson observations were carried out, analysed and used to draw conclusions. As detailed information was not reported in either study, it is impossible to ascertain the frequency of different instructional practices in the observed classrooms and conclusions drawn seem to be mainly based on interview data.

Another aspect of teaching and learning practice that has been examined in relation to attainment grouping is the nature and extent to which students are engaged (Francis et al., 2017; Solomon, 1997). Engagement has been conceptualised as having behavioural, cognitive and emotional elements (see Fredericks et al., 2004), and distinctions have been drawn between momentary and more enduring forms of engagement (Symonds et al., 2020). Solomon (1997) conducted interviews with students in Years 9 and 10 and found that those in high attaining groups reported high levels of participation in learning and therefore, high levels of active engagement. Students in low attaining groups felt that their learning consisted primarily of memorisation and little active involvement. In support of this, research has shown that teachers perceive students in low attaining groups to require a high level of monitoring and repetition (Francis et al., 2018). Francis et al. (2018) highlights a discourse of 'dependency' (p.64) surrounding these groups because teachers wish to protect students from the challenge of increased independence in learning. Solomon's (1997) and Francis et al.'s (2018) research suggests that students in low attaining groups demonstrate little active engagement and participation in lessons. However, research

has not yet examined how teachers can effectively engage young people in sets of low attaining pupils.

Although research has highlighted the inequalities in school experience for low attaining students compared to their higher attaining counterparts since the 1960s (Hargreaves, 1967; Jackson, 1964), surprisingly, ability grouping is still advocated for by politicians and the practice of setting continues to persist in secondary schools. Despite this, relatively little attention has been paid to how teachers *can* engage the lowest attaining pupils in school.

The Study

This study aimed to provide a detailed description of teacher-pupil interactions and student engagement in the lowest attaining English sets in schools where students, including those who are low attaining, typically make a high level of progress. The study also examined the nature of the practices teachers use to engage students in low attaining English sets. Subsidiary research questions centred on teachers' and students' views about classroom practices used to engage students and the extent and ways in which students in the lowest attaining English sets were engaged during English lessons.

Methods

Design

A multiple case study design involving both qualitative and quantitative methods was used to examine teacher and student experiences of English lessons. Each class was treated as a single case to explore practices within context, using multiple sources of evidence, as recommended by Yin (2009). A systematic observation schedule was used to collect numerical data about teacher-student interactions and student engagement. Further information was collected during lesson observations using a qualitative observation schedule. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with teachers and students. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the university ethics committee¹.

School recruitment and sample

Schools were recruited using purposive-criterion sampling. Schools in two local authorities in London, England, that met the inclusion criteria (see Table 1) were approached and agreed to participate in the research. These we refer to as School A and School B.

In order to be included in the study schools need to: be classed as comprehensive, be state-funded schools; set students by attainment in English throughout KS3 and 4; have a disadvantaged socio-economic demographic that had been consistently above the national average for 6 or more years (as indicated by the proportion of students eligible for free school meals, see Taylor, 2018); have consistently, over the past two years,

¹ Research Ethics Committee, Institute of Education, Data Protection Reference: Z6364106/2018/04/06

achieved a Progress 8² score within the ‘well above average’ range; have an Attainment 8³ score that was, over the two most recent years, consistently above the national average as evidenced on national databases; and, provide within school evidence that in previous years low attaining students in both schools had made a high level of progress.

***** *insert Table 1 about here* *****

In School A, students in the lowest attaining English sets achieved an average value-added score⁴ of +1.04 in English Language (in 2017/18). This score is within the highest 25% of value-added scores across the country. In School B, the lowest attaining 25% of students (based on KS2 data) achieved an overall Progress 8 score (across all subjects) of +0.52 on average in 2017/18. This score is considered to be ‘well above average’ according to national measures of progress.

To be selected as a case study class within schools, specific inclusion criteria were applied. The class had to be: a Year 10 group, studying for GCSE English Literature and Language; the lowest attaining class in the year group (e.g. set six of six sets); and be taught by a teacher who had at least two years’ teaching experience. Two classes were selected for case study in School A (10a1 and 10a2) and one class in School B (10b1)⁵.

Participants

Teachers and their classes of students that met the criteria for inclusion in the study were invited to participate. The three teachers involved had between two and six years’ teaching experience. Teachers of 10a1 and 10a2 were male. The teacher of 10b1 was female.

All students in the class were invited to participate in the research and parental consent was sought for their involvement. Of the students with parental consent, class teachers were asked to identify four students for interview and classroom observation (n=12). Teachers were asked to identify one student from the highest attaining third, two students from the middle attaining third and one student from the lowest attaining third of their class (based on their most recent attainment grades). One student in the sample had an Education, Health and Care Plan to support them with their special educational needs. Five students spoke English as an Additional Language (EAL). The student sample consisted of nine males and three females. This was broadly consistent with the proportion of males and females in the classes.

² ‘Progress 8’ measures the average level of progress pupils make from the start of primary school to the end of secondary school in 8 subjects.

³ ‘Attainment 8’ measures the achievement of pupils across 8 qualifications. Both English and Mathematics are double weighted in the calculation of this score (DfE, 2016)

⁴The residual effect that schools have on their students’ progress

⁵ Class names have been anonymised

Research tools

Lesson observations

Four students in each class were observed repeatedly by the lead author during a lesson on three separate occasions over three months. Prior to the first lesson observation, the researcher introduced herself to the class and explained that she was researching what students and teachers did in English lessons. During lesson observations, the observer was seated at the middle-side of the classroom. Lessons lasted 100 minutes in School A and 60 minutes in School B.

The researcher also recorded qualitative field notes for 10 minutes at the start and end of the observation; systematic observation schedules were used for the remainder of the lesson. The researcher alternated between a student focused observation schedule and a teacher focused observation schedule every 10 minutes.

Qualitative Observation Schedule

The qualitative observation schedule involved the collection of descriptive information about teaching practices, student engagement, and teacher interactions in observed lessons. The observer recorded notes under the following overarching headings:

- Learning outcome of the task: area of study related to; skills practiced;
- Task type: what students were asked to do in the task;
- Differentiation: strategies used to cater for different attainment levels or needs within the class; evidence of adaptations made to cater for individual needs and skills;
- Supporting resources: any additional physical resources provided;
- Adult support: evidence of additional adult support offered to an individual or small group;
- Behaviour management strategies: approaches used to reprimand or encourage student behaviours;
- Teacher interactions with students: details of any interactions between teachers and students that did not relate to student behaviour

The observation schedule also included a column for ‘student engagement’ which allowed the researcher to comment on behavioural engagement during different tasks.

Systematic Observation schedules

A similar approach to that developed by Blatchford, Baines, Rubie-Davies, Bassett & Chowne (2006) was adopted. A time sampling approach was used to record classroom behaviour for both the student and teacher focused systematic observation schedules. Each participant was observed 10 times over the course of 3 minutes and 20 seconds. The behaviour of the class teacher or one student was recorded within a 20 second observation window which involved a 5 second ‘tuning in’ period, followed by ‘observation’ for 10 seconds, leaving a further five seconds to ‘record’ the categories of behaviour observed, before starting the process again. Teachers were observed over 10 intervals once every 10 minutes, so 1 in 3 observations was of the teacher. Students were consecutively observed in the same order throughout the lesson observation. To avoid order effects, for the second lesson observation the second child on the list was observed first.

Coding of student behaviour: A systematic observation schedule used in previous research (see Blatchford, Baines, Rubie-Davies, Bassett & Chowne, 2006) to gather

information about student engagement during observed lessons was adapted for use in this study (for full information, including detailed descriptions and definitions of categories, see Halligan, 2019). The categories recorded instances of ‘on-task’ and ‘off-task’ behaviour when students were working either *independently*, *interacting with peers* and/or *interacting with adults*. Behaviours were recorded as: *On task*: engaging in the task set by the teacher; *Off task active*: engaging in an activity other than that set by the teacher; *Off task passive*: not engaging in the task set or another task; *Routine*: performing a classroom routine that the teacher has requested; *Other*: Any other activity. A count of ‘1’ was recorded for the behaviour observed in each observation window.

Coding of teacher behaviour: The teacher observation tool was used to record information about teacher interactions with others in the classroom and was piloted and developed for this particular study (see Halligan, 2019, date for further details). Observation categories consisted of 4 mutually exclusive sets of categories. Information was gathered about the ‘*Target of the teacher interaction*’ and the ‘*Type of interaction observed*’. Sub-categories of the Target of the teacher interaction included: *Individual student*; *Small group of students*; *Whole class*; *Another staff member*; *Students interacting with each other* (the teacher was not interacting with students because they had been given a task to work on together); and, *No interaction*.

Sub-categories of the ‘*Type of interaction observed*’ included: *Encouragement*: interaction aimed to get students to do something (e.g. praise); *Reprimand*: interaction attempting to prevent or stop behaviour; *Routine*: unrelated to learning but involving classroom management and organisation; *Work-based*: related to the learning content of the lesson; *Instruction*: providing instruction for a task; *Question/feedback*: asking questions or taking responses from students, related to content of lesson; *Social*: interaction with students that was not related to the content of the lesson; and, *Other interaction*.

If the interaction type was recorded as either ‘encouragement’ or ‘reprimand’, the researcher recorded further information about the ‘*reason*’ this feedback was given and the ‘*method of delivery*’. Categories that related to reason included: *Skill*: learning skill demonstrated; *Effort*: attempt student has made in learning task; *Outcome*: comment on the physical outcome of work produced; *Behaviour*: behaviour demonstrated; *Other reason*.

Categories that related to method of delivery included: *Direct*: Direct statement or action about the behaviour; *Indirect*: Attempt to modify behaviour without addressing it with a direct statement; *Using formal system*: Use of whole school behaviour policy; *Teacher directed consequence*: Any consequence not included within the school’s behaviour policy; *Other*.

A count of ‘1’ was recorded to describe the behaviour observed during each 10 second interval. For example, if the teacher was observed to verbally praise a student for their understanding of a concept, a count of 1 would be recorded under ‘*Individual*’, ‘*Encouragement*’, ‘*Skill*’ and ‘*Direct*’ for the relevant observation point.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Teachers were interviewed on one occasion, after all three lessons had been observed, in a quiet room on their own. Interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 36 and 44 minutes. The teacher interview schedule consisted of four preliminary, open-ended questions. Teachers were asked about the nature of their class, students’ responses to the current English curriculum and English lessons, and teaching practices employed in lessons. Three additional follow-up questions, relating to student engagement, barriers

to learning and student progress were also asked if teachers referred to them in their answers. Teachers were then asked six open questions about one of the observed lessons. Teachers were asked how they had planned and delivered the lesson, how students responded to the lesson and how they would evaluate the lesson.

Students were interviewed individually in a quiet room, following at least one classroom observation. Audio recorded student interviews were approximately 15 minutes in length. In all student interviews, students were asked to describe their English lessons, their teacher and what they liked and did not like about their lessons. Follow up questions that had not been pre-planned were also asked, based on student responses. Students were then asked to describe their own engagement in English lessons. Follow up questions about what supported or hindered their engagement were asked based on their responses. Students were also asked about the pedagogic practices that they found helpful and/ or enjoyable. This part of the interview was supported by visual examples and covered topics such as: practice exam questions, class discussions, rewards and praise, challenging tasks, working with a learning support assistant, teacher feedback, working with peers.

Data Analysis

Qualitative and quantitative data were analysed separately. Initially, frequency data from the systematic lesson observation schedules were analysed descriptively, using SPSS. Cross-tabulations were used to calculate the frequency of student and teacher behaviours. Data were analysed for each class separately to present frequency counts for individual cases.

The audio recorded interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and initial thoughts about the data were noted. Observation notes were collated into a word document for each lesson. 'NVivo' qualitative analysis software was used to code the transcripts, line-by-line. At each stage of analysis, the researcher followed the recommended processes undertaking thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The initial phase of the analysis involved separate analyses of data gathered from each research tool (i.e. teacher interview, student interviews and qualitative lesson observation notes), for each class. The second phase involved bringing together the key findings and patterns identified relative to the separate research tools to create main themes for each class and an overall case study description. The final stage of analysis involved an integration of analyses across the classes. At this stage, themes for each class were compared and contrasted to provide a more general view of the main themes that emerged across the cases and to present an overall picture of teaching practices and student engagement. Main themes for each class were combined under the same superordinate themes that had been used in previous stages. As a result of analysis at this stage, superordinate theme names were refined to best reflect the data. These themes were then organised into a visual map.

Results

Reported findings represent the final integrated analysis across the three case studies.

Teaching Approaches

Superordinate themes and subthemes relating to teaching practices are summarised in Figure 1.

***** Put Figure 1 about here *****

Fostering Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Across all classes, there was a sense that students and teachers liked each other. Almost all students in all classes spoke explicitly about the positive relationship they had with their teachers. Students discussed the importance of getting along with their teacher and used words such as ‘nice’ (10a2, Student), and ‘kind’ (10b1, Student) to describe them. All teachers spoke about their classes positively and indicated that they liked their classes:

‘It’s very easy to feel quite a lot of affection for them’ (10a1, Teacher)

‘I’ll be sad to say bye to them [at the end of Year 11].’ (10a2, Teacher)

Students in 10a2 and 10b1 spoke explicitly about the link between student-teacher relationships and engagement in lessons, explaining that they were more likely to want to complete tasks, answer questions and ultimately achieve more, if they liked their teacher:

‘I don’t want a teacher who’s really bad to be with and really rude because that...wouldn’t make me work hard’ (10a2, Student)

‘I’ve done two assessments in Year 10 and I’ve done well in both of them. Me and Miss do get on, that has a major impact on the grade.’ (10b1, Student)

A theme that emerged from student interviews across all classes was the different ways that teachers demonstrated that they cared about their students. For example, three students in 10a1 explained that their teacher had high expectations of what they were capable of achieving and understanding:

‘He expects me to do a lot of the creative writing as well because he knows I’m really good at that’ (10a1, Student)

Students thought that their teachers were skilled, planned enjoyable lessons and spent time preparing for their lessons:

‘My English teacher, he works very hard for the lesson’ (10a2, Student)

Some students commented that their teacher cared about their learning, was kind to them and tried to be fair:

‘She’s like ‘if you do this then you’ll get good grades and I want you to get good grades...’ (10b1, Student)

Use of Encouragement

A theme that emerged across all case study classes was how teachers used encouragement to acknowledge and promote student learning. In lessons across all classes, there was evidence of teachers praising students who demonstrated learning skills through enthusiastic tone and praise phrases. The teacher of 10a1 also provided specific praise to highlight the precise learning skill that had been demonstrated:

Lesson Observation: “What I love about that is how your structure is moving through the different steps. It’s really controlled” (10a1, Lesson 1)

Students in 10a2 and 10a1 explained that they enjoyed receiving praise from their English teachers as it made them feel proud and acknowledged that they were doing well in lessons. Encouragement was also used to promote behaviours that were conducive to learning across all classes. This was communicated through thanking or naming students who appeared engaged and praising the whole class for following instructions.

Findings from the systematic observations of teachers suggested that they used praise to primarily reinforce learning skills rather than to reinforce or acknowledge good behaviour. Of the 74 observed instances, encouragement was used most frequently (88% of instances) to acknowledge students’ learning skills, while 5% were used to praise student behaviour, 4% related to physical task outcome and 3% were used to praise effort.

All teachers spoke about using rewards that publicly recognised students’ behaviour and learning, including sharing success with parents (via phone calls and postcards), other staff members and peers (by recording achievement points on the whiteboard or reading examples of good work aloud).

Minimising Negative Reprimands

Teachers in all classes used indirect methods of reprimand most frequently, thus avoiding negative interactions with students (see Table 2).

*****insert Table 2 about here*****

In lesson observations, there was evidence that teachers used an ‘indirect stop’ method to communicate to students that they wanted them to modify their behaviour without explicitly asking them to stop. This was delivered by saying the student’s name, asking the student questions about the work they were completing, using non-verbal reprimands such as pauses and reducing potential distractions (such as removing extra pens). Teachers also attempted to remind students to engage in a task without explicitly telling them to do so, by providing reminders of other instructions given:

Lesson Observation: “Bags off, jackets off” to students who haven’t started writing yet (10a2, Lesson 2)

Another strategy that all teachers used to reprimand behaviours indirectly was to give reminders of the expectations for behaviour on a task. This was observed across all classes:

Lesson Observation: “Girls at the back, we’re listening to each other” [when students are talking during class feedback] (10b1, Lesson 1)

Teachers in all classes directly reprimanded and addressed students’ behaviour, on occasion. For example, in observations of classes 10a1 and 10b1, teachers asked students to stop engaging in the target behaviour using verbal reprimand:

Lesson Observation: Teacher: “Can you stop talking and listen to other people speaking in the class” (10b1, Lesson 3)

During lesson observations, teachers in all classes were sometimes observed to publicly reprimand behaviour using negative repercussions. These included teacher-directed consequences such as asking students to move seat or stand outside the classroom and use of the school's formal consequence system. Where formal consequences were given, teachers had warned students that this would happen if they engaged in the behaviour again and thus were used sparingly, as a last resort.

Quantitative results from lesson observations demonstrated that teachers primarily used indirect strategies when delivering reprimands. Of the 91 observed reprimands across the three case study classes, 71% were indirect, 19% used direct statements, 5% involved a teacher chosen consequence and 4% involved use of the school's formal consequence system.

Teaching Responds to Students' Needs

Making the Curriculum Accessible. Across lesson observations and interviews for all classes, there was evidence that teachers went to great lengths to make individual tasks and the curriculum, more accessible to students. In lesson observations across all classes, activities were broken down into smaller steps, allowing students to plan the elements they would need to attempt an extended task. Teachers in all classes also reflected on how they made tasks accessible and manageable. They spoke about needing to slow the pace of their lessons and break tasks into smaller steps:

'I broke down the [group] task so everyone knew what would be happening rather than "Here's 20 minutes, pull something out and go"' (10b1, Teacher 1)

Students in all classes also explained how their teachers supported them to access a task using: sentence starters, explicit teaching of new vocabulary and approaching a more complex task, gradually:

'Bit by bit. He doesn't go, here's something now go and do a sentence or a paragraph. He explains every step.' (10a1, Student)

Teachers in 10a2 and 10b1 used prompts to aid students' understanding during tasks. In lesson observations, both teachers ensured that prompts and reminders for tasks were clearly presented (on the interactive whiteboard or a worksheet) and used pictures both as stimuli for tasks and to support key vocabulary. The teacher of 10b1 also discussed the importance of linking learning to students' own experience, particularly when teaching 19th-century texts. This was also noted in lesson observations.

Individualised Teacher Support. A theme that emerged across all classes was the availability of the teacher to support students during independent activities. Students in 10a1 and 10b1 valued their teachers' consistent availability and continued support when they were struggling with a task:

'Questions that we're stuck on, he'll help us and he'll never give up on us.'
(10a1, Teacher)

Qualitative observation data also indicated that all teachers supported students individually throughout independent tasks by circulating the classroom to read what students had written, answer questions and explain concepts.

Promoting Student Independence. Promoting student independence emerged as a theme for two classes (10a1 and 10b1). Teachers in both classes explained that they wanted to encourage students to think and work independently and, ultimately, be prepared for examinations:

'I think that's important for me to leave them because in the exam they're going to get information [and] they won't know what it means' (10b1, Teacher)

Both teachers explained that they encouraged independence by asking students to make choices in tasks, justify an opinion and take responsibility for their learning. Methods for encouraging independence also emerged as a theme from lesson observations in 10a1. On some occasions, the teacher encouraged students to attempt learning tasks themselves and not rely on him for individual support during the task:

Lesson Observation: 'I'll come over and help you when I see you trying yourself.'
(10a1, Lesson 2)

In lesson observations of 10a1, students seemed to need feedback during independent writing tasks, frequently asking their teacher for reassurance about their work and what they were 'allowed' to write. There was evidence that students engaged in writing tasks more readily after receiving individual support.

Indeed, all teachers spoke about the high level of support that their students needed which included providing scaffolds for writing tasks, structures for answering exam questions and explicit guidance about how to approach a task or present an activity:

'Lots of very explicit guidance...for example... saying, I want you to give yourselves half a page and, in the middle, draw a circle...' (10a1, Teacher)

Teachers across all classes described the challenge of developing student independence and autonomy in the context of the GCSE curriculum which they felt had been challenging for their low attaining students to access:

'I think the changes with the exam are almost setting them up to fail if they're a bottom set' (10b1, Teacher)

Teachers of both 10a1 and 10a2 commented on the difficulty of texts that students were expected to access, particularly those that they will read and interpret for the first time in the examination:

'The difficulty and density and speed of the unseen text element of the language exam is going to be very difficult for them...they'll feel quite overwhelmed' (10a1, Teacher)

Teachers of 10a2 and 10b1 reflected that the pace and nature of the GCSE curriculum made it very difficult to incorporate opportunities for more independent learning, such as peer collaborative work, into lessons which they felt was a disadvantage of the system.

Student Engagement

Students in all classes discussed their ability to focus their attention, explaining that, for the most part, they focused during English lessons. In all classes, students were recorded as engaging in on task behaviours for the majority of the observation periods, suggesting that students were behaviourally engaged for the majority of the time observed (see Table 3). However it is notable that students were predominantly on task when working independently or as part of a class listening to the teacher; they were much less likely to be on task when interacting with peers. This was largely because work was not set up to be undertaken in a collaborative manner.

*****insert Table 3 about here*****

In qualitative lesson observation data gathered for 10a1 and 10a2, there was evidence of all students engaging in copying tasks such as recording the title and learning objective. During independent tasks, qualitative data from all classes suggested that most or all students began activities when they were asked by the teacher and sustained their engagement throughout the task. Some variation in engagement was recorded for certain activities in all classes, however. For example, in 10a1, although most students engaged during an extended writing task, some students began talking to each other off task and stopped writing, particularly when the teacher was in a different part of the classroom. Although students were generally engaged in tasks, engagement sometimes varied when tasks required sustained, independent work.

Discussion

This study aimed to provide a detailed description of teacher interactions, classroom practices and student engagement in low attaining classes in schools where students, including those who are low attaining, typically make high levels of progress.

Research questions sought to understand: teachers' and students' views about classroom practices used to engage students in low attaining English sets; the nature of classroom practices teachers use during lessons to engage low attaining students in English; the extent and the ways in which students in the lowest attaining English sets were engaged in English lessons.

Findings highlight that supporting low attaining classes is challenging, requiring skilful use of encouragement and sensitive approaches when reprimanding students to minimise the negative impact of these interactions. Teachers involved in this study were required to balance a structured, supportive approach that students needed to access the curriculum whilst encouraging autonomous and independent engagement. The restrictions and demands of the current GCSE curriculum seemed to exacerbate dependence on teachers and lack of independence in students' approach to learning. It is also suggested that the practice of supporting lower attaining sets provides an additional challenge for teachers. Although this study highlights the positive practice within these classes, grouping low attaining students together seemed to provide additional barriers that teachers are required to overcome. There was a very clear sense that success in managing these challenges was enhanced by, and dependent on, the fostering of positive relationships with students.

Approaches to Teaching

A key finding of the current study was the importance of positive, respectful relationships between teachers and students which were central to other teaching approaches identified. It seemed to be the case that positive approaches to behaviour management and student support not only helped to develop student-teacher relationships but that these relationships underpinned the approaches and practices that teachers used, ensuring that they were successful. This is consistent with previous research that emphasises the importance of relationships for effective behaviour management and teaching (Nash, Schlösser & Scarr, 2016; Youell, 2006).

Students explicitly spoke about the link between having a positive relationship with their teacher, engagement in lessons and motivation to achieve in English. A further theme that emerged from student interview data was the importance of teachers demonstrating that they cared about their pupils. Teachers achieved this by communicating high expectations for what they felt students could achieve, communicating that they thought students were capable of doing well and by being kind and fair. The unifying feature of the methods described was that teachers communicated that they were interested and invested in student progress.

The current study findings are also consistent with Dunne et al.'s (2007) research which suggested that, in successful low attaining sets, there was a sense of mutual respect between teachers and students and student-teacher relationships 'came across as positive in the general atmosphere of the school and in the observations' (p.65). The current study has provided additional evidence about possible means that teachers used to help create these positive relationships and the attributes that students valued in their teachers. Positive relationships between teachers and students seemed to be central to other practices employed by teachers of the case study classes.

Although there was evidence that praise was used to promote behavioural engagement (i.e., focus and concentration), quantitative data suggested that teachers in all classes used praise primarily to celebrate cognitive engagement in the content of the lesson and to recognise student success in learning. This may in turn lead to more positive emotional engagement. Teachers may have used encouragement to primarily acknowledge learning as opposed to behaviour because they expected students to be focused and attentive. Thus, teachers communicated that they had high expectations of students and used this to encourage learning. As one teacher stated: *'I want them to start being more intrinsically motivated...I want them to get to that point...where they're motivated because they're producing something really good'* (10a1, Teacher 3).

A further theme that emerged was the use of rewards that publicly recognised students' achievements and, to a lesser extent, behaviour. These included the use of achievement points which were publicly recorded so that other students could see who had received them, positive communication with parents and reading examples of good work to the whole class. This is in contrast with Dunne et al.'s (2007) study which did not report that teachers used rewards to publicly recognise achievement. Rewards cited seemed to be more extrinsic in nature, such as allowing students to work on computers after completing a task. The rewards identified in the current study seemed to celebrate and recognise student engagement and success. Students valued and enjoyed this acknowledgement. These positive experiences may have helped further develop the relationship between teachers and students.

Across classes, there was some evidence that teachers gave direct reprimands to address students' behaviour when other strategies had been exhausted. Despite this, systematic observation data suggested that teachers in all classes used indirect

reprimands most frequently. This approach seems to communicate to students that the teacher wants them to modify their behaviour without directly asking them to stop thus avoiding a direct, public and potentially humiliating conflict. Teachers seemed to use these methods to avoid negative interactions with students while still communicating their expectations. By using indirect reprimands, teachers in this study seemed to take a positive, relational approach to their interactions with students as opposed to an authoritarian-confrontational style (Nash, Schlösser & Scarr, 2016). Gilbert and Proctor (2006) argue that a compassionate response to reprimanding undesirable behaviours is considered more successful than punitive approaches for students who are disengaged. Using reprimands in this way may have helped teachers to develop positive relationships with their students.

Additionally, the respectful relationship between students and teachers highlighted in the current study may have facilitated the success of less direct reprimands. This finding is supported, in part, by Dunne et al.'s (2007) research which suggested that teachers of low attaining students took a more relaxed approach to managing behaviour that involved negotiation, flexibility and avoiding directly asking students to stop what they were doing. The findings of the current study elaborate on how teachers achieved this and provide specific examples of how teachers approached student behaviour in case study classes.

Teachers also provided individualised and consistent support. Students reported that they could rely on their teachers to help them if they were struggling. They discussed that their teachers had a good understanding of how they learnt and could help them when they found tasks challenging. Students felt confident that their teachers would do as much as they could to help them make progress and this may have developed positive student-teacher relationships. It could also be argued that the relationships between teachers and students facilitated the positive manner in which students reflected on and engaged with teacher support.

In contrast to this, the issue of student independence also arose as a theme across two classes. Teachers expressed their desire for students to engage in learning more independently with less reliance on their support. Although there was a small amount of evidence in lesson observations that teachers were attempting to promote independent learning, teachers felt that students were generally reluctant to work independently and often sought reassurance from them, similar to findings by Francis et al. (2018). There was also evidence that student engagement was more variable during tasks that required sustained effort, cognitive engagement and independent thought (such as reading a challenging text or writing at length).

Although students valued the support provided by teachers, a question around whether this facilitates independence or reinforces dependence remains. Teachers commented that this was a difficult balance to strike particularly in the context of a demanding, fast paced curriculum focused on teaching strategies for examinations. Although teachers attempted to raise student confidence through the approaches discussed, the demands of the curriculum and perhaps the students' placement within a group of peers working at similarly low levels of attainment did not seem to result in the development of independent learning skills, such as those used during peer collaboration.

Student Engagement

Quantitative data suggested that students in all classes demonstrated behavioural engagement for more than 77% of the observations. Qualitative lesson observation data also suggested that students were generally focused and worked on the tasks set in lessons. However, there was a sense that engagement was predominantly passive and

dependent on teacher support and positive feedback to be sustained. There was relatively little evidence of students working together with peers, one way in which low attaining sets differ from middle and high attaining sets (Warrington, 2017). Students struggled to sustain attention and engagement during more demanding, independent tasks and teachers spoke of the difficulty in developing student independence.

Study findings have implications for classroom practices that could support the lowest attaining students. As many of the approaches discussed are not subject or context specific, they could be applied in other subjects and to low attainers in different systems (i.e., mixed attainment groups). This is perhaps just one approach to supporting the lowest attaining students to make progress in English. There are no doubt alternative ways in which teachers can stimulate interest amongst these students.

This study provides insights into positive ways teachers can support students in the lowest attaining sets to engage with learning in the context of the current English GCSE curriculum. While this serves the relatively short-term purpose of preparing students for exams, it perhaps falls short of providing longer term enjoyment and appreciation of English and supporting students' development into independent, autonomous learners. It is important to consider that low attaining students may not be able to fully engage in a GCSE curriculum so focused on retention and performance in exams, thus impacting on interest in the subject beyond formal education.

Educational policymakers should consider that, although this study has identified ways in which teachers can positively support students in low attaining groups, research has shown that attainment grouping is an inequitable practice which disadvantages low attainers (Boaler et al., 2000; Higgins et al., 2013). Students in the current study demonstrated dependency on their teachers and were afforded little opportunity to work with peers. This supports previous research that has suggested inequalities in practice between higher and lower attaining groups (e.g. Baines, 2012; Boaler et al., 2000; Warrington, 2017). Policy makers should carefully consider whether grouping students based on prior attainment is an effective and equitable practice for all students or whether an alternative approach could be adopted, possibly involving mixed attainment grouping (Francis et al., 2017), that better supports lower attaining students. This may enable teachers to implement more innovative and engaging practices that encourage greater participation, independence and enjoyment.

There are a number of study limitations that must be acknowledged. First, although use was made of a number of research tools to provide a detailed understanding of experiences within low attaining sets, these are case studies. Although similar findings may be evident in similar classroom contexts taught by teachers with similar experience, it is also likely that practices will vary. Nevertheless, findings provide insight into the aspects of interactions, relationships and behavioural practices that seem to be important for successfully engaging and supporting low attaining pupils.

The current research presents a picture of the experiences in case study classes in schools where students typically make good progress, but it is not possible to draw firm connections between, or conclusions about, the pedagogical practices observed and students' academic engagement, attainment or progress. Since practices in high, middle and low attaining groups were not compared in this study, it is not possible to conclude that findings are exclusive to supporting low attaining groups.

Future research should explore how pedagogic practices interconnect with the learning, engagement and achievement of pupils of different attainment levels and within different classroom contexts. This study also did not explicitly explore how teachers used their subject knowledge as part of teaching practice (e.g., to motivate

students) which may have been a component that students valued, and teachers considered as part of their planning for low attaining groups. This may be important in low attaining groups as research suggests that frequently less experienced teachers are placed with the lowest attaining classes. Future research should explore how subject knowledge is utilised between high, middle and low sets.

The findings of this study demonstrate that low attaining students can be engaged in English lessons, but highlights that engagement is also dependent on students' confidence in their ability to master the curriculum and opportunity to work independently. Fostering positive relationships with students seemed to underpin and facilitate other approaches such as skilful use of reprimands to reduce negative interactions, encouragement that celebrates achievement in learning and consistent teacher support and care.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the staff and students who participated in and helped to set up this research.

References

- Baines, E. (2012). *Grouping pupils by ability in schools*. In Adey, P., & Dillon, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Bad education: Debunking myths in education*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Blatchford, P., Baines, E., Rubie-Davies, C., Bassett, P., & Chowne, A. (2006). The effect of a new approach to group work on pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil interactions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 98(4), 750.
- Benn, C., & Chitty, C. (1996). *Alive and Well and Destined to Survive in Forum for promoting 3-19 comprehensive education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Boaler, J., Wiliam, D. & Brown. M. (2000). Students' Experiences of Ability Grouping-disaffection, Polarisation and the Construction of Failure. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26(5), 631–648.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Cahan, S., Linchevski, L. Ygra. N. & I. Danziger. (1996). 'The Cumulative Effect of Ability Grouping on Mathematical Achievement: A Longitudinal Perspective.' *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 22(1), 29–40.
- Connolly, P., Craig, N., Miller, S., Archer, L., Francis, B., Hodgen, J., Mazenod, A., Taylor, B. & Tereshchenko, A. (2017). *The effects of grouping students by academic attainment on educational outcomes in secondary schools*. https://www.campbellcollaboration.org/media/k2/attachments/ECG_Connolly_Title.pdf on 4/11/17.

- Delamont, S., & Galton, M. (1986). *Inside the Secondary Classroom*. London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul.
- Department for Education. (2015). *Supporting the Attainment of Disadvantaged Pupils: Articulating Success and Good Practice*.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/473974/DFE-RR411_Supporting_the_attainment_of_disadvantaged_pupils
- Department for Education. (2016). *Progress 8: How progress 8 and Attainment 8 are calculated*.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/561021/Progress_8_and_Attainment_8_how_measures_are_calculated.pdf
- Department for Education and Skills. (2005). *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More Choice for Parents and Pupils*. London: HMSO.
- Dunne, M., Humphreys, S., Sebba, J., Dyson, A., Gallannaugh, F. & Muijs, D. (2007). *Effective teaching and learning for pupils in low attaining groups*.
<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6622/1/DCSF-RR011.pdf>
- Education Endowment Foundation. (2018). *Setting or streaming*.
<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/pdf/generate/?u=https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/pdf/toolkit/?id=127&t=Teaching%20and%20Learning%20Toolkit&e=127&s=>
- Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Pepper, D., Taylor, B. & Travers, M. C. (2016). Exploring the relative lack of impact of research on ‘ability grouping’ in England: A discourse analytic account. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 47(1), 1-17.
- Francis, B., Taylor, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Pepper, D., Tereshchenko A. & Travers, M. (2017). Factors deterring schools from mixed attainment teaching practice. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 25(3), 327-345.
- Francis, B., Mazenod, A., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Taylor, B., Tereshchenko, A., & Pepper, D. (2018). Nurturing learning or encouraging dependency? Teacher constructions of students in lower attainment groups in English secondary schools. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 1-16.
- Francis, B., Hodgen, J., Craig, N., Taylor, B., Archer, L., Mazenod, A., & Connolly, P. (2019). Teacher ‘quality’ and attainment grouping: The role of within-school teacher deployment in social and educational inequality. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 77, 183-192.
- Fredericks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74, 59–109.
- Gilbert, P., & S. Procter. (2006). Compassionate Mind Training for People with High Shame and Self-Criticism: Overview and Pilot Study of a Group Therapy Approach. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 13, 353–379.

- Hallam, S. (2002). *Ability Grouping in Schools*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.
- Halligan, C. (2019). *An investigation into the practices teachers use to engage students in the lowest attaining GCSE English sets*. Doctoral Dissertation. UCL.
- Hargreaves, D. (1967). *Social relations in a secondary school*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Higgins, S., Katsipataki, M., Kokotsaki, D., Coe, R., Major, L. E. & Coleman, R. (2013). *The Sutton Trust-Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit: Technical Appendices*. Education Endowment Foundation, London.
[http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Technical_Appendices_\(June_2013\).Pdf](http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Technical_Appendices_(June_2013).Pdf)
- Ireson, J. & Hallam, S. (2001). *Ability grouping in education*. London, UK: Paul Chapman.
- Ireson, J., Hallam, S. & Hurley, C. (2005). What are the effects of ability grouping on GCSE attainment?. *British Educational Research Journal*, 31(4), 443-458.
- Nash, P., Schlösser, A & Scarr, T. (2016). Teachers' perceptions of disruptive behaviour in schools: a psychological perspective. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 21(2), 167-180.
- Lacey, C. (1970). *Hightown grammar*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Newbold, D. (1977). *Ability grouping: The Banbury enquiry*, Slough: NFER.
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2010). *PISA 2009 Results: What Makes a School Successful? – Resources, Policies and Practices (Vol. IV)*. Accessed at www.dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264091559-en (accessed 12 January 2012).
- Slavin, R. E. (1990). Achievement effects of ability grouping in secondary schools: a best evidence synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 60, 471-490.
- Solomon, Y. (2007). Experiencing mathematics classes: Ability grouping, gender and the selective development of participative identities. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 46(1-2), 8-19.
- Symonds, J. E., Kaplan, A., Upadyaya, K., Salmela Aro, K., Torsney, B. M., Skinner, E., & Eccles, J. S. (2020). Momentary student engagement as a dynamic developmental system. *Faculty/Researcher Works*.
- Taylor, C. (2018). The reliability of free school meal eligibility as a measure of socio-economic disadvantage: Evidence from the millennium cohort study in Wales. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 66(1), 29-51.

- Taylor, B., Hodgen, J., Tereshchenko, A., & Gutiérrez, G. (2020). Attainment grouping in English secondary schools: A national survey of current practices, *Research Papers in Education*, DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2020.1836517
- Warrington, P. (2017). *Teaching and learning practices and reported experiences of teachers and students in high, middle and low ability maths classes* (Doctoral dissertation, UCL Institute of Education).
- William, D. & Bartholomew, H. (2004). It's not which school but which set you're in that matters: The influence of ability grouping practices on student progress in mathematics. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 279-293.
- Yin, R. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods / Robert K. Yin*. (4th ed., Applied social research methods series; v.5). Thousand Oaks, Calif.; London: Sage.
- Youell, B. (2018). *The learning relationship: Psychoanalytic thinking in education*. Routledge.

Table 1. School outcomes information (2016/17, 2017/18)

School	Year	% of pupils eligible for FSM	Progress 8	Attainment 8	Progress 8 in English
School A	2016/17	41%	‘Well above average’	Above average	+0.93
School A	2017/18	41%	‘Well above average’	Above average	+1.13
School B	2016/17	37%	‘Well above average’	Above average	+0.91
School B	2017/18	36%	‘Well above average’	Above average	+0.67

Table 2. Frequency counts (C) and percentages (%) showing the method teachers used for reprimand in 10a1, 10a2 and 10b1

		Direct	Indirect	Formal System	Consequence	Total
10a1	C	3	15	3	2	23
	%	13%	65.2%	13%	8.7%	100%
10a2	C	9	31	1	1	42
	%	21.4%	73.8%	2.4%	2.4%	100%
10b1	C	5	19	0	2	26
	%	19.2%	73.1%	0%	7.7%	100%

Table 3. Frequency counts (C) and percentages (%) of ‘on task’ and ‘off task’ behaviours recorded overall in relation to work context⁶

		Independent Work	Peer Interaction	Student Interacting with Teacher	Total
On task	C	476	35	85	596
	%	66.4%	4.9%	11.9%	83.2%
Off task	C	67	50	3	120
	%	9.4%	7%	0.4%	16.8%

Note. Percentages do not reflect the actual patterns of pedagogic practices since the first and final 10 minutes of lessons were not captured by the systematic observation schedule, times where most whole class teaching and plenary work takes place

List of Figures

⁶ Only values related to ‘on-task’ and ‘off-task’ behaviours have been included. Categories that related to classroom routines or social interactions between teachers and students have been omitted.

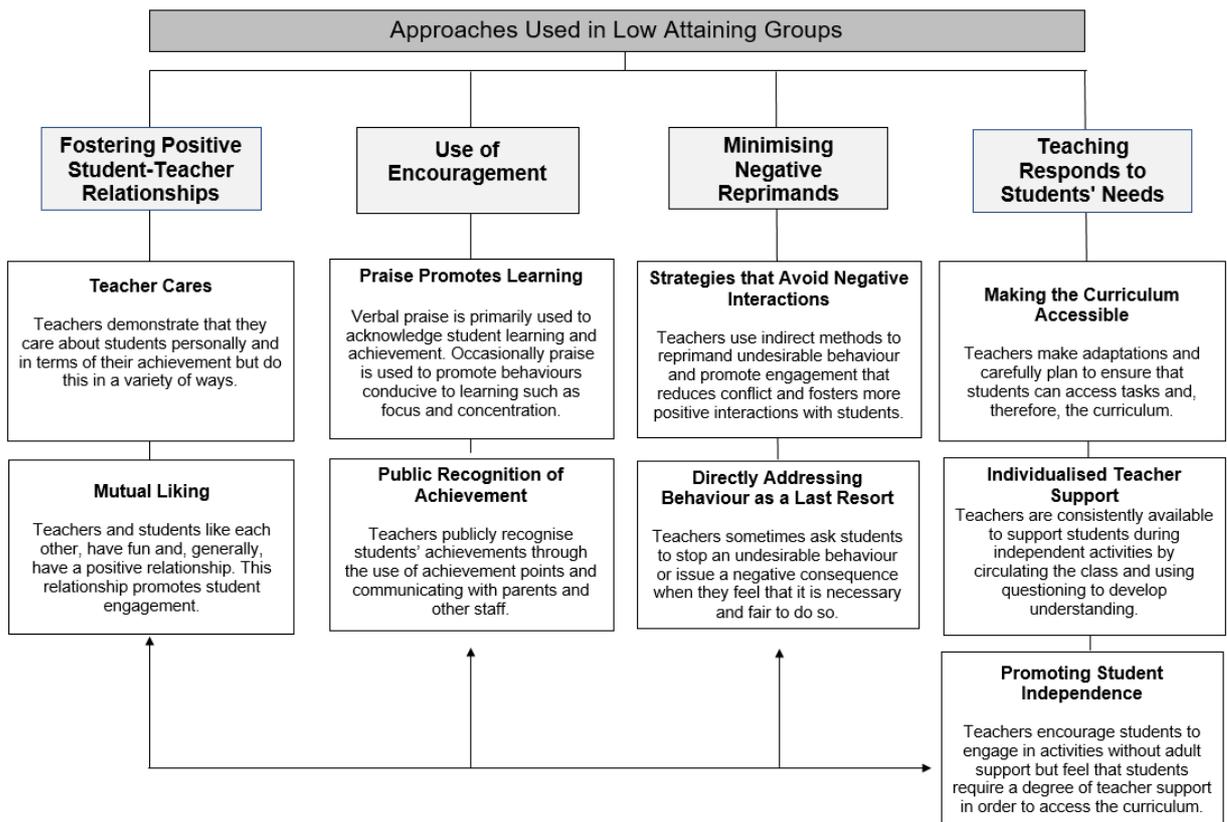


Figure 1. Thematic map showing practices used in case study classes