

Let's lose the labels

Right from the start, New Labour made clear where they stood on the issue of pupil grouping. The white paper, *Excellence in Schools*, published within three months of David Blunkett's arrival as Secretary of State for Education, announced the intention to "modernise" the comprehensive principle. In a move that is entirely characteristic of New Labour's dismissive attitude to past social gains, the white paper represented mixed ability teaching as a failed experiment. The authors asserted that mixed ability had worked well in some schools but that it "required excellent teaching." This was, apparently, a criticism – albeit an odd one in a white paper whose title might have suggested some sort of commitment to, well, excellence. (In retrospect, with the rote teaching of the NLS and the promise of education on the cheap through workforce remodelling, New Labour's wariness of "excellent teaching" makes a great deal of sense.) "In too many cases," the white paper continued, mixed ability had "failed both to stretch the brightest and to respond to the needs of those who have fallen behind."

The white paper's stance involved a considerable re-writing of history. Mixed ability, far from being the only game in town when Blair, Blunkett and Barber rode in, had always been something of a minority pursuit. As Benn and Chitty's (1996) comprehensive research demonstrated, only a tiny handful of secondary schools – less than one per cent of their very large sample – had ever been committed to mixed ability grouping for all students in all years from 11 to 16. So if the new government had wanted to take a good look at the effects of different grouping arrangements on students, there was plenty of scope in the mixed economy that they inherited. In reality, New Labour's approach was utterly doctrinaire. There was no way that evidence was going to stand in the way of their prejudices:

*We do not believe that any single model of grouping pupils should be imposed on secondary schools, but unless a school can demonstrate that it is getting better than expected results through a different approach, we do make the presumption that setting should be the norm in secondary schools. In some cases, it is worth considering in primary schools. Schools should make clear in reports to parents the use they are making of different grouping approaches. OFSTED inspections will also report on this.*

Not an imposition, then, but hardly an open choice either. Setting was to be the norm, policed by parents and inspectors.

New Labour's position was – and remains – not just wrong-headed but topsy-turvy. Their attempt to make setting the default and mixed ability a wayward experiment has been largely effective in changing practice (and silencing opposition). But it needs to be sent back to the looking-glass world where it belongs. In real life, mixed ability grouping is everywhere. No-one demands to know if you achieved a level five in your KS3 SATs before they let you into the theatre; no-one quizzes you on the life and times of Tony Adams before you take your seat on the North Bank; no-one even asks you to define imperialism before you are allowed to join millions of others in demonstrating against George and Tony's latest excellent adventure.

Perhaps you think that these examples are irrelevant. After all, the events I have cited are not ones where the primary purpose of attendance is learning. What, then, is it about learning that means that it should happen in the specially segregated contexts of sets and streams? What models of learning – and of learners – are implicated in any move away from (normal) mixed ability groups? And what assumptions are being made about the purposes of education?

Underpinning the whole approach to pupil grouping is an entirely unexamined, commonsensical notion of fixed ability. In this view, each learner is in possession of a knowable, measurable quantity of ability, past performance is a reliable index of future attainment, and what is valuable about learning is what can be measured. Those who subscribe to such views might want to think carefully about the ideological company that they are keeping – for instance, about the origins of notions of fixed ability in the explicitly racist orientation and rationale of the development of the intelligence-measuring methods from the nineteenth century onwards (on which, see Stephen Jay Gould's [1983] *The Mismeasure of Man*). They might also want to think about the link between this history and the observable fact that lower sets and streams are populated by unrepresentatively large numbers of students from black and minority ethnic communities. Don't believe me that setting is a form of institutional racism, believe the Commission for Racial Equality (1992) – or take a look around at a school near you.

And what of the allocation of students to sets? What criteria are used? If setting is done on the basis of past performance, what account is taken of the different rates of progress of, say, newly-arrived bilingual students? What happens to the maths student whose understanding of the concepts involved in probability, say, is far in advance of their arithmetic accuracy? Or the student in English whose oral work is, generally speaking, much more assured than their writing? In practice, these significant anomalies tend to not to get a hearing: what counts is the headline level – so English is reduced to writing and maths becomes nothing more than sums. And in the real world, too, there's often more than a whiff of other, less openly articulated criteria at work in the placing of students – such shoddy proxy indicators of academic worth as attendance, homework or behaviour.

There is an idea, gestured at in the white paper's mention of "diverse abilities," that setting and streaming enable teachers to target support more effectively – that segregating students mean that their individual needs can be met. This theory is deeply problematic, though. It assumes that there is some straightforward correlation between "need" and "ability"; it assumes that students' needs are best met by the teacher (rather than by interactions with peers, say); it defines learners by deficit – by what they cannot do – and it implies a model of curriculum as a process of transmission. But it's not just the theory that is dodgy: it's the practice. In one of the most devastating pieces of research conducted into the effects of setting, Jo Boaler (1997) investigated how teachers taught maths to mixed ability and setted groups. What she found was that the same teachers behaved in very different ways in the two contexts – that the teachers constructed their students differently. With mixed ability groups, the teachers were attentive to individual differences and intervened to support the learning of each student in the group. But when the same teachers moved to setted groups, they operated from the assumption of homogeneity: they defined their students solely by their membership of the set in which they had been placed – so

they tended to teach the subject, not the students. What is so powerful about this research is that it shows that setting structures the experience of teaching and learning – it is simply not a question of the orientation, skill or sensitivity of the individual teacher.

What setting does, then, is to reinforce and to normalise the structural inequalities of power within the school, and to exclude still further the complex subjectivities, cultures and relationships of many of the learners.

The job of schools, under this government's standards agenda, is to improve output. Production figures are to be raised by boosters and catch-ups, by quotas and targets. In the state education farm, school students are not agents but little more than livestock. The classic defence of mixed ability grouping – advanced, for instance, by Benn and Chitty – runs something like this: there precious little solid research evidence to suggest that grouping policy has any appreciable effect on attainment, and plenty of evidence that mixed ability grouping has significant social benefits. So even by this government's performance measures, there is no case for setting, streaming or banding.

In a more rational system, one which recognised the inescapably social nature of learning, one where education was construed as a fully dialogic process, the decision to label and segregate students would be both monstrous and absurd. Maybe it's time we started arguing for such a system – and maybe the defence of mixed ability is a good place to start.

#### *References*

- Benn, Caroline, & Clyde Chitty (1996) *Thirty Years On: Is Comprehensive Education Alive and Well or Struggling to Survive?* London: David Fulton
- Boaler, Jo (1997) "Setting, Social Class and the Survival of the Quickest" *British Educational Research Journal*, 23.5, pp. 575-595
- Commission for Racial Equality (1992) *Set to Fail? Setting and Banding in Secondary Schools*
- DfEE (1997) *Excellence in Schools* London: HMSO
- Gould, Stephen Jay (1983) *The Mismeasure of Man* London: Penguin

#### *Highly recommended:*

- Hart, Susan, *et al.* (2004) *Learning without Limits*, Maidenhead: Open University Press