

## **Grouping practices in the primary school: what influences change?**

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### **Abstract**

During the 1990s, there was considerable emphasis on promoting particular kinds of pupil grouping as a means of raising educational standards. This survey of 2000 primary schools explored the extent to which schools had changed their grouping practices in responses to this, the nature of the changes made and the reasons for those changes. Forty eight percent of responding schools reported that they had made no change. Twenty two percent reported changes because of the literacy hour, 2% because of the numeracy hour, 7% because of a combination of these and 21% for other reasons. Important influences on decisions about the types of grouping adopted were related to pupil learning and differentiation, teaching, the implementation of the national literacy strategy, practical issues and school self-evaluation.

# **Grouping practices in the primary school: what influences change?**

## **Introduction**

During the 1990s, there was considerable emphasis on promoting structured ability grouping in schools as a means of raising educational standards. This paper considers the extent to which primary schools changed their grouping practices during this period and analyses the rationales given for engendering such change.

There is a long tradition of selective education and structured ability grouping within schools in the UK. In the 1930s, following the separation of the old 'elementary' schools into primary and secondary schools, most large primary schools adopted the practice of streaming (allocating pupils to classes on the basis of their overall ability) as recommended by the Primary School Report (Hadow Report, 1930). In 1944, the Butler Education Act, reinforced the need for ability grouping in primary schools to ensure effective selection for different types of schooling at secondary level. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as pupils competed for grammar school places, streaming became commonplace in large primary schools. During the 1950s, its implementation increasingly was questioned as research showed that it had no significant effect on overall attainment, and had negative social consequences for certain pupils (Jackson, 1964; Barker Lunn, 1970).

The move towards a more child-centred approach with emphasis on the overall development of the individual rather than on academic achievement and on equality of opportunity rather than the pursuit of excellence reflected in the Plowden Report (1967) further encouraged schools towards 'unstreaming'. With the demise of the 11+ examination and the spread of comprehensive secondary education, mixed ability classes became the norm in primary schools with streaming becoming relatively uncommon (Lee and Croll, 1995). Within this educational climate, although a substantial proportion of head teachers perceived streaming as having educational value, they did not believe that they would receive strong support from parents, governors or LEA advisors to move towards it (Lee and Croll, 1995).

The Plowden Report suggested that mixed ability teaching would provide all pupils with equal access to a common curriculum and would promote the matching of individual learning programmes to the needs of individual pupils (DES, 1978). In these terms, the success of mixed ability teaching depended on the teacher moving away from whole class teaching to being able to cater for the whole ability range of the class through individualised learning programmes (Gregory, 1986). The Plowden Report recognised that it would be difficult to translate this ideal into practice. In fact, in most cases, it was not translated into practice (HMI, 1978; Kerry & Sands, 1984). Observation of teachers in the classroom showed that teachers tended to teach at a whole class level to an "imaginary average" child even though the range of abilities necessitated differentiation within the class (HMI, 1978; Wragg, 1984; Hacker & Rowe, 1993).

Group work offered possible solutions to the difficulties of individualising learning, ability groups to assist in the acquisition of basic skills through increasing interaction between teachers and pupils (DES, 1978; Barker-Lunn, 1984; Mortimore et al, 1988) and mixed ability groups to facilitate the completion of particular tasks (for reviews

see Yeomans (1983), Bennett (1985), Rogers and Kutnick, 1990; Galton & Williamson (1992) and Harwood (1995). Group work was shown to have a range of possible benefits, enhancing self-esteem and motivation (Galton and Williamson, 1992; Slavin, 1990), promoting increased social interaction between different groups of pupils (Slavin, 1990), developing the skills of high ability pupils who were key to successful mixed ability group functioning (Bennett and Cass, 1989; Swing and Peterson, 1982; Webb, 1991) and developing exploratory talk (Barnes et al, 1969; Barnes and Todd, 1977; Tough, 1977). Research also provided insights into the ways that group processes and performance differed depending on the nature of the task (Bennett and Dunne, 1989; Cohen, 1994; Dunne and Bennett, 1990; Bennett, 1985; Crozier and Kleinberg, 1987).

Despite the evidence indicating positive academic, personal and social benefits of group work, research in UK classrooms indicated that its implementation was limited. Galton et al, (1980) identified three kinds of group work; joint group work, where pupils engaged in specific tasks which contributed to an overall theme; seated group work, where children sat together but worked individually, albeit undertaking the same work; and co-operative group work where ideas were pooled as part of a joint piece of work. Observation revealed that 80% of group work was seated group work (Galton et al, 1980; 1987). Joint group work, while found in most classrooms (Galton, 1981) was generally used in art, craft, and general studies but not in relation to basic skills. Little collaborative work was observed. Overall, group work tended to be used as an organisational device (Galton et al., 1980; Alexander, 1997). Group composition was often based on decisions about classroom management and much working in groups was described as limited and impoverished, time being spent undertaking trivial tasks (HMI, 1978, 1979; Sands, 1981a, 1981b; Reid et al, 1982). The cognitive demands made on students in group work were often low as was the quality of the verbal interactions between pupils (Kerry, 1982a, 1982b; Sands & Kerry, 1982; Kerry & Sands, 1984).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the introduction of the National Curriculum followed by the development of national assessment procedures and the OFSTED school inspection system had a profound impact on the primary classroom. There was a move away from integrated topic work to timetabling of individual subjects, an increase in whole class teaching and considerable reduction in the extent of individual work (Pollard et al., 2000). The percentage of individual work observed fell from 72% of class time in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Galton et al, 1980) to about 50% of class time by 1996 (Galton et al., 1999; Pollard et al, 2000). Whole class teaching increased from 19% (Galton et al, 1980) to around 35% (Galton et al, 1999; Pollard et al, 2000). There was no systematic trend in the extent to which group work was implemented. It varied from 9% to 23%. Setting, where pupils are placed in ability groups on the basis of their attainment in a single subject, increased (Pollard et al, 2000).

In 1993, all primary schools were encouraged to introduce setting by the Department for Education (DfE Report, 16/93). This was reinforced in 1997, by the Government White Paper 'Excellence in Schools' (1997) which suggested that setting could be beneficial in raising standards. In Ofsted's annual report for 1995/6, it was noted that National Curriculum assessment was having a beneficial influence on teaching; it led to a clearer focus on what was to be taught and there was more precise targeting of groups of pupils, sometimes through teaching groups based on ability (Ofsted, 1997).

By 1998, the organisation of pupils into sets was increasing, especially in years 5 and 6 for Maths and English (Ofsted, 1998). This trend was confirmed in a survey (Ofsted, 1999) which found that about 60% of junior schools set for at least one subject in some year groups, while over one third of infant schools and about one half of combined infant and junior schools did the same. Most schools used setting in Years 5 and 6 only, with the proportion of pupils setted for at least one subject falling steadily the younger the pupils were. Of those schools that adopted setting procedures, the proportions that set for particular subjects were: maths, 96%; English, 69%; Science, 9%. Very few schools set for other subjects.

Hallam et al. (2003), in a survey of 2000 schools designed to establish the nature of their ability grouping practices, found that within class ability grouping in mixed ability classrooms was the most prevalent arrangement in the core subjects of maths and English. In all other subjects the most prevalent practice was mixed ability groups within mixed ability classes. The incidence of setting was relatively low, (at most 24% in maths in year 6, in schools with same age classes) and streaming was negligible. The incidence of setting increased as the children became older. The study also explored the differences in practices between schools with predominantly same or mixed age classes. The incidence of cross-age setting was generally less than that of same-age setting, for example, 15% as opposed to 24% in year 6 in maths. In schools with mixed-age classes, there was more cross-age setting, for example, 18% in year 5/6 maths compared with 12% same age setting. Other subjects showed the same pattern (Hallam et al., 2003).

Historically, despite overall trends, not all schools have adopted the orthodox grouping practice of the time. When streaming was considered the norm, most primary schools were too small to implement it. Only where schools had an intake large enough to form two same age classes was it possible. Lee and Croll (1995) established that two thirds of head teachers stated that it would not be possible to implement streaming because of the small size of their schools. The recent surveys (Ofsted, 1999; Hallam et al., 2003) have also shown that school size is important in determining the adoption of setting. The higher the number of pupils on roll, the more likely the school is to use setting in one or more year groups. There are clearly constraints, at least in relation to size, on the extent to which schools can adopt particular systems of structured grouping.

The guidance provided for schools relating to the adoption of the National Literacy Strategy indicates clearly the way that pupils should be grouped for the different elements of the literacy hour (DfEE, 1998). While acknowledging the complexity of teaching pupils with different prior knowledge the guidance stresses that for 75% of the time all the children in the class should be taught together. Differentiation is justified in some circumstances, for instance, in classes with more than 2 year groups or where reception children are taught with years 1 and 2. Here, four organisational options are suggested:

- reducing the amount of whole class time to allow for more group time;
- increasing the group time while retaining the whole class teaching time (i.e. extending the hour);
- making use of an additional adult to provide simultaneous teaching or support;

- setting across a number of classes, although this should not be allowed to lower expectations.

The guidance suggests that schools should be flexible in adopting these different procedures. It further outlines how the curriculum programme has been planned to accommodate a two year rolling programme (often adopted with mixed age classes) with only minor adjustments being necessary. Schools are advised to avoid having classes split across key stages, wherever possible, or including children from the same year group in two different aged classes. Teachers might divide the class teaching times between two main groups in the class, to focus on older and younger pupils using an additional adult, or re-group through setting and co-operative teaching.

Given the extent of DfEE guidance regarding ability grouping, how effective has it been in changing practice and if schools have changed their grouping arrangements, what rationale do they give for the change? This study aimed to answer these questions. The research was part of the project described earlier (Hallam et al., 2003) which established the type of groupings currently adopted in primary schools for each curriculum subject in each year group. This paper reports the responses to questions regarding changes in grouping practices.

## **Methodology**

A questionnaire was sent to 2000 primary, junior, and infant schools in England and Wales randomly selected to be representative of the school population. The first part of the questionnaire requested information about: the type of LEA; whether the school was grant-maintained; the type of school, i.e. primary, junior or infant; the number of pupils on roll and the nature of grouping in and between classes for different year groups and subjects as considered earlier. The second part of the questionnaire posed questions about changes in practice. Schools were asked if they had changed their grouping practices since September 1997. This date was selected taking account of the government's white paper 'Excellence in Schools' which was published in 1997 and which suggested that setting procedures might be beneficial in raising standards. If there had been change schools were asked to respond to a closed question as to whether the change had been related to the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy strategies or for other reasons. An open question followed requesting a written rationale for why practices had been changed.

The response rate was marginally lower than that obtained in the Ofsted survey which was 44% (1998). Eight hundred and four schools responded representing a 40% response rate. Thirty four schools returned the questionnaires incomplete or telephoned the researchers indicating that they were under such pressure that they did not have time to complete them. To avoid increasing this burden, a decision was taken not to send out follow up letters to increase the number of returned questionnaires.

The responses included representation from all types of Local Education Authority and included primary, infant and junior schools. Sixteen percent of schools had under 100 pupils on roll, 30% under 200, 27% under 300, 13% under 400, 7% under 500, and 2% over 500. Of those schools with less than 100 on roll, only 9% had no mixed age classes. This percentage increased steadily. Of schools with over 400 on roll, 92% had no mixed-age classes. A substantial proportion of schools with between 100 and 400 pupils on roll had mixed age classes increasing to 91% with under 100 pupils.

A total of 187 schools (24% of the responding sample) gave responses to the open question asking why they had changed their grouping practices or responded to the opportunity to provide further information. 13 of these schools (7% of those giving qualitative responses) reported that they had made no changes to their grouping practices since 1997.

### **Data analysis**

The responses to the closed questions regarding changes in grouping practices were analysed using SPSS. The qualitative statements were analysed using an iterative process of categorisation based on a seven stage process developed by Cooper and McIntyre (1993). The process involved: 1. Reading a random sample of scripts; 2. Identifying points of similarity and difference among these transcripts in relation to the research questions; 3. Generating theories (on the basis of 2) describing emergent answers to the research questions; 4. Testing theories against a new set of transcripts; 5. Testing new theories against transcripts already dealt with; 6. Carrying all existing theories forward to new transcripts; 7. Repeating the above process until all data have been examined and all theories tested against all data. Two judges analysed the data independently. The initial categorisation into subcategories was undertaken adopting the procedures outlined above. As new sub-categories emerged the judges agreed their defining characteristics. There was total agreement between the judges in relation to all 28 sub-categorisations. Some schools made responses which fell into more than one category. Percentages presented can therefore be greater than 100%.

The second stage of the analysis required the sub-categories to be organised into a smaller number of higher level categories. The two judges agreed on 10 super-ordinate categories: Issues Relating to Differentiation, Raising Attainment, Developing Pupil Skills, Flexibility, Benefits to Teaching; Academic Subject Considerations, Introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, School or Cohort Size, Resources, School Self-evaluation. These are presented as five themes:

1. Learning (includes Issues Relating to Differentiation, Raising Attainment, Developing Pupil Skills, Flexibility)
2. Teaching and Curriculum (includes Benefits to Teaching; Academic Subject Considerations).
3. Introduction of the National Literacy Strategy
4. Practical issues (includes School or Cohort Size, Resource issues)
5. School self-evaluation

### **Findings**

48% of schools reported that they had made no recent change in grouping practices, 22% had made changes because of the literacy hour and 2% had made changes because of the numeracy hour, which at the time of the survey was in its pilot stage. 7% said they had made changes because of a combination of these. 21% reported changes for other reasons (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 about here**

## Themes and categories

The findings are reported separately for each category, although almost 70% of schools gave responses which were coded into more than one category.

### Learning

The learning theme includes the categories Differentiation, Raising Attainment, Developing Pupil Skills, and Flexibility. Most responses were made within this theme.

***Differentiation*** - Overall, 75 (40%) responding schools raised issues which related to the differentiation of work for students. Twenty two percent of responses were concerned with matching work to student needs in general and 11% with Special Educational Needs, 4% raised issues related to dealing with a wide spread of ability and 3% with providing for specific groups of pupils. Example quotations are given in Table I.

These findings support previous research at primary and secondary level in the UK which has demonstrated that both pupils and teachers report the key purpose of ability grouping as matching work to student needs (Hallam et al., 2002; Ireson and Hallam, 2001). This preoccupation with ability differences between pupils is not a universal phenomenon and may be related to the long tradition of intelligence testing and educational selection in the UK. Whatever the causes, assumptions about differences in ability are deeply embedded in our culture. Teachers in England and the USA identify more differences in ability between children than their counterparts in France, Russia and India where teachers attempt to progress classes together and place less importance on individual differences (Alexander, 2000). It also provides a marked contrast to cultures where the emphasis is on effort (Broadfoot et al., 2000). For instance, studies comparing the educational systems in Japan and Taiwan with those in the USA suggest that the stress on ability grouping minimises the importance of student, teacher and parental effort and sets a ceiling on what can be expected from a child. In Japan and Taiwan, pupils, with support from parents and teachers, are expected to put in additional effort if they are not successful (George, 1989, Stevenson and Lee, 1990). Pupils are not removed from the classroom for special interventions or to make it easier to move ahead and there is no ability grouping in state schools prior to 10th grade in Japanese schools. The school day is longer and people are encouraged to work hard. Success is attributed to effort, failure to lack of effort.

### Table I about here

***Raising attainment*** - Thirty two (17%) schools reported that raising attainment was an important factor in determining their grouping practices. Nineteen (10%) referred to raising standards in general terms, while thirteen (7%) referred to raising performance on Standard Attainment Tasks (SATs). Table II gives example quotations. Clearly, the political attention given to raising standards supported by the publication of school league tables and target setting has had an impact on school priorities. There is also considerable evidence that assessment itself has a profound influence on learning and teaching through the process of 'backwash' (Biggs and Moore, 1993). The introduction of national testing, of itself, may have impacted on



school practices without the necessity for political pressure to raise standards, although it is unlikely that the effects would have been so profound.

***Developing pupil skills and good behaviour*** - Thirteen schools (7%) gave reasons related to developing pupil skills and promoting good behaviour as determining their grouping structures (see Table II). Nine schools (5%) believed that the way in which they grouped pupils provided a means of developing a range of transferable skills. Group work was used as a means of giving additional responsibility to the more able children. It was also used to encourage independent learning in all students. Four schools (2%) raised pupil behaviour as being an important consideration in determining grouping practices. The use of mixed ability groupings to develop generic working skills and manage behaviour has been reported elsewhere at both primary and secondary levels (Hallam et al, 2002; Ireson and Hallam, 2001). The reason for the relatively low response rates in these categories may be because these concerns are normally addressed by the class teacher through within class groupings unless the school has identified behaviour improvement and positive pupil inter-relationships as a priority.

***Flexibility*** - Sixteen schools (8%) stressed that flexibility was important in relation to grouping pupils. Twelve (6%) indicated that it was necessary to satisfy different learning objectives, allow for changes in pupil progress and enable pupils to move between groups. Across responding schools the percentage raising this issue was very small. This lack of consideration of the importance of facilitating movement between groups reflects previous findings. Although in theory movement between streams, bands or sets is possible, in practice it is restricted (Barker Lunn, 1970; Douglas, 1964; Devine, 1993; Ofsted 1998). This is often the case even when teachers are aware that pupils are wrongly allocated to groups (Barker Lunn, 1970; Troyna, 1992). Where groupings are highly structured, one problem is that there is often a gap between work that has been undertaken and what is required for movement to the higher ability group (Jackson, 1964; Ireson and Hallam, 2001). A further problem is that in order to move some pupils to a higher set others have to move down (Ireson and Hallam, 2001). Within class groupings provide more flexibility and facilitate movement between groups.

Four schools (2%) mentioned gender issues as a consideration when arriving at grouping decisions reflecting national concerns with the underachievement of boys in some subjects. Example quotations are given in Table II. The relatively small number of responses in this category indicate that it is not a major school concern.

## **Table II about here**

### **Benefits to teaching**

Twenty five schools (13%) reported that they had changed their grouping practices to facilitate ease of teaching. Twenty schools (11%) indicated that this was to facilitate planning and delivery of the curriculum, while five schools (3%) specifically referred to changing practice to enable more whole class teaching to be undertaken (see Table III). As Pollard et al. (2000) have indicated, the introduction of the National Curriculum with its emphasis on teaching subjects rather than topic work combined with the introduction of national assessment and the inspection system has led to more

whole class teaching. Structured ability grouping further facilitates this as teachers feel that the level of differentiation required is considerably less (Hallam et al., 2002). Teachers report that teaching ability grouped pupils is easier and most have positive attitudes towards it (Daniels, 1961; Jackson, 1964, Barker-Lunn, 1970), although this is mediated by the subject that they teach and the extent to which the school they are working in adopts structured ability grouping (Hallam et al, in press).

The importance of the academic subject was further reflected by the eleven schools (6%) which indicated that grouping practices were related to issues concerned with the needs of different academic subjects and maximising the expertise of teachers in relation to them. Six schools (3%) reported taking account of different subjects when making decisions about grouping practices while five (3%) reported that making use of particular teacher expertise was a factor. Reid et al. (1982), researching the attitudes of secondary school teachers, indicated that where subjects were structured in such a way that learning built on previous knowledge, for example in mathematics and modern foreign languages, teachers seemed to favour streaming, while the humanities were perceived as particularly suitable for mixed ability teaching. Those subjects where mixed ability teaching was perceived as problematic tended to require correct answers and a grasp of abstract concepts. It would seem that these concerns are equally pertinent at primary level.

### **Table III about here**

#### **Change related to the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy**

Sixty of the schools responding to the open questions (32%) mentioned that they had changed their strategies in relation to the National Literacy Strategy. Twenty schools (11%) did not specify the nature of the changes that they had made but simply stated that they had made changes because of the national literacy strategy. Twenty two schools (12%) indicated that they were adopting the within class groupings suggested by the literacy strategy. In eight schools (4%) the introduction of the literacy hour and the guidance received during training had led to setting procedures being abandoned. However, in 12 schools (6%) setting had been introduced or increased as a result of the National Literacy Strategy despite the fact that the strategy discourages it. In some cases pupils were being setted across age groups while in others the setting was to enable pupils to be taught in same age classes. Table IV give example quotations.

The interim evaluation of the national literacy strategy (Ofsted, 1999) indicated that schools were unsure how to deal with pupils with Special Educational Needs within the strategy. Some withdrew them from the class, others adopted setting and had a set specifically for SEN pupils. Ofsted reported that the quality of teaching in these sets was overall satisfactory but not as good as that in higher sets. Some schools included SEN pupils in the literacy hour with support from classroom assistants. Similar issues arose in relation to pupils with English as an additional language (EAL). The evaluation undertaken at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the implementation of the strategy indicated that most SEN and EAL pupils were being integrated into the literacy hour (Ofsted, 2000). Neither the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year evaluations of the National Literacy Project mention the issue of setting (Ofsted, 2000, 2001). This suggests that the practice was no longer adopted in those schools involved in the evaluations. Whether this also

applied to those schools under less scrutiny is not known. This is important because the evidence in relation to attainment in the literacy hour, for instance, evaluation of the first National Literacy Project cohort showed that schools that taught English in sets at the outset of the project made less progress than others (Sainsbury et al., 1998). Recent findings in mathematics where pupils taught in mixed ability groups outperformed those that were setted when the teaching materials were the same supports this (Whitburn, 2001). The evidence does not support structured ability grouping as a means of raising standards.

Ten schools (5%) reported that the implementation of the literacy hour had led to changes in grouping practices in other curriculum areas. In one case a form of within class streaming was developing. Given the evidence from the 1960s and 1970s regarding the lack of effects of streaming on attainment and its negative effects on pupils' personal and social development (Jackson, 1964; Barker Lunn, 1970) this cannot be viewed positively. However, in other cases the implementation of the literacy hour had led to greater flexibility with pupils being grouped differently for different activities.

#### **Table IV about here**

#### **Practical issues**

*Cohort and school size issues* - Forty seven schools (25%) of those responding to the open questions raised issues relating to ability grouping as it was influenced by the size of year cohort or the size of their school. Fifteen schools (8%) indicated that the size of year groups affected their grouping practices. Intake to reception classes during the course of the year was sometimes a factor. Thirteen schools (7%) reported that their grouping practices were concerned with enabling at least some teaching to be undertaken in same age classes or sets. In contrast, eight schools (4%) had decided to use ability rather than age to determine set membership. Seven schools (4%) indicated that the size of their school was a factor in determining grouping practices. For them, the organisation of classes to provide optimal learning opportunities for children was a constant cause for concern. One small school reported that flexibility was the key to ability grouping (see Table V). Four schools (2%) mentioned specific difficulties because of mixed age classes. They posed particular problems because the National Curriculum and systems of testing were perceived as largely year group based. Overall, schools seemed to prefer same age classes. Teaching and planning work for single year classes was perceived as easier.

Previous research (Ofsted, 1998; Hallam et al., 2003) has established that the higher the number of pupils on roll, the more likely the school is to adopt setting in one or more year groups. It is unusual to find a school of one-form entry or below using setting (Ofsted, 1998). There is also evidence that cross age classes are the norm in many schools regardless of size because of changes in pupil cohort from year to year (Hallam et al., 2003). The findings reported here indicate that schools adopt structured groupings to ameliorate what they perceive as the problems created by cohort or school size. This may occur through the creation of same age year groups or cross age ability groups. Where, in the past, the benefits of vertical grouping may have been celebrated, the introduction of targets for each key stage have led schools to focus on

pupil attainment in national tests. Grouping structures are perceived as enabling pupils to be prepared for the tests as thoroughly as possible.

The increasing pressure which teachers have found themselves under may also be a factor. Reviews of the effects of vertical grouping (Pratt, 1986, Miller, 1990, Veenman, 1995) have concluded that there are no significant differences between cross age and single age groupings on pupils' academic achievement or social and personal development. However, teachers' attitudes towards vertical grouping are generally negative. They find that it increases their work load, that the management of the class is more difficult because they perceive that they are trying to teach two or more classes simultaneously, there is less opportunity for oral instruction because teaching one group may disrupt the other; there are more interruptions in the learning process; pupils receive less individual attention; and it is harder for pupils to concentrate on their work (Veenman, 1995). The pressure to raise standards and the increased work loads of teachers make vertical grouping an unattractive option in England at the moment.

**Resources** - Thirty six schools (19%) raised issues relating to resources. These were chiefly concerned with the availability of teaching staff but timetabling, space, and additional help from teaching assistants or parents were also raised. Twenty five schools (13%) reported that staffing was a key factor in enabling them to adopt particular grouping strategies. Increased funding often meant that schools could reorganise their grouping structures while in some cases loss of funding meant that particular grouping policies could no longer be maintained. Five schools (3%) reported that the practicalities of timetabling were important in determining their groupings. Four schools (2%) mentioned accommodation difficulties. Two schools (1%) indicated the importance of additional support within the classroom. Table V provides illustrative quotations. It is clear that the policies that schools wish to adopt cannot always be achieved because of a variety of resource constraints.

#### **Table V about here**

#### **Evaluation of effects**

22 schools (12%) suggested that their analysis of the success of different kinds of ability grouping influenced the decisions that they had made. Seventeen schools (12%) cited previous experiences of the adoption of particular strategies and their evaluations of them, usually in relation to attainment. Three schools (2%) stated that increased use of setting had reduced the amount of time that the class teacher spent with their class, while two schools (1%) reported that setting had wasted time as children moved between classes (see Table VI for example quotations).

Overall, the extent of reported self-evaluation was relatively small. This may be due to the changes brought about by the work of Ofsted and the increasing public accountability of schools. As Osborn et al. (2000) describe 'The many changes have centred on a progressive loss of professional freedom to determine what and how to teach, which has resulted in a perceived loss of creativity and more or less grudging compliance on the part of teachers. The climate of increased managerialism, based on targets and performance indicators served to reinforce this compliance and to encourage a sense of commodification in the pursuit and judgement of learning

outcomes' (p. 232). Increasingly what is important is not what teachers and head teachers believe is successful but evidence from performance indicators and Ofsted reports.

Only one school reported consideration of the empirical research evidence in making a decision. This despite extended debate in the research community about the importance of making research relevant to the concerns of teachers and disseminating findings more widely (Hargreaves, 1996a, 1996b; Gray et al, 1997; Hillage et al., 1998) and the efforts of those involved in research in this field to publicise their findings in the educational media and publish in forms easily accessible to teachers.

### **Table VI about here**

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study suggest that major changes in pupil grouping policies in primary schools in the UK have occurred since 1997. Over 50% of the schools in the survey reported having made changes. The most prevalent practice in mathematics and English is within class ability grouping while for other subjects mixed ability groupings are dominant. While the practice of setting has been introduced into primary schools it is not the dominant grouping practice (Hallam et al, 2003).

The nature of change in individual schools depended on their concerns for pupil learning particularly as it related to raising attainment, the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy, facilitating ease of teaching, school size and resource issues and, in some cases, depended on self-evaluation. Schools were primarily concerned with matching work to pupils' needs and raising standards. Grouping arrangements reflected this need and the success of particular arrangements was generally assessed in relation to test results. Some schools did report adopting grouping structures to satisfy other academic and non-academic priorities, e.g. independent learning, improved behaviour, development of social skills, but these were relatively few.

The introduction of the National Literacy Strategy was an important influence on the grouping procedures adopted. Its effects were varied. Schools adopted grouping procedures in order to make the strategy workable in their school. In most cases this involved following the detailed guidance given, e.g. mixed ability whole class teaching for 75% of the time with within class ability grouping for the guided small group elements. In some cases schools had ceased setting in order to comply with the guidance. However, some schools had adopted setting to reduce the range of prior attainment in the whole class teaching element. In schools with mixed age classes, grouping practices, in the main, were developed to facilitate teaching to single year groups, although in some cases cross age setting was being adopted.

Overall, the findings support the view that there is no simple recipe for taking decisions about how to group pupils. In addition to resource constraints, the size of yearly cohort intakes change over time and cohorts differ markedly in their makeup in relation to prior attainment, the number of children with SEN, language skills, and behaviour. The nature of particular subject domains and tasks within them require the adoption of different strategies and the patterns of social interchange between pupils in any single class may require the teacher to manipulate groupings to maximise on task behaviour. The particular expertise of individual teachers and the support they

may have from teaching assistants or parents will also play a part. Given this level of complexity, only those who have extensive knowledge of the particular circumstances prevailing in a school, i.e. the staff, are in a position to take account of all the information and make informed decisions. This involves extensive monitoring of pupil progress and social and personal development. While national tests provide a vehicle for assessing the former, they neglect to address the latter. While an agenda for social inclusion parallels that of raising standards this is an important omission.

The research demonstrates that schools have interpreted and implemented DfEE guidance about ability grouping sensitively in relation to the needs of their pupils, their own concerns about raising standards and practical and resource issues. Despite this variability between schools, the guidance provided by the DfEE and Ofsted in the last decade, has been a powerful influence in changing practice leading to the greater adoption of ability grouping within and between classes in UK primary schools. To address the social inclusion agenda, guidance from the DfEE about using group work to facilitate the development of social skills and team work, in addition to the provision of easily administered ways of monitoring progress towards these aims could have an equally great impact.

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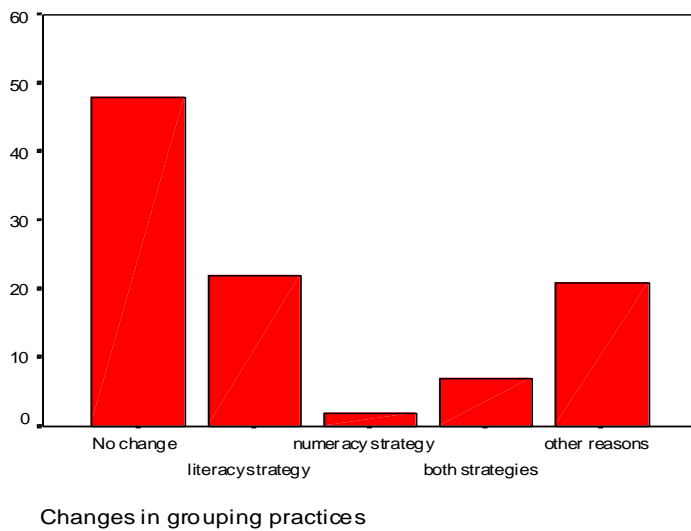
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**Figure 1**  
**Reported reasons for changing grouping practices**



**Table I**  
**Issues relating to differentiation**

Categories and subcategories	Percentage and Number of schools responding in category	Example quotations
<b>Differentiation</b>	<b>40% (75)</b>	
Matching work to student needs	22% (41)	<p>More defined smaller ability groups for literacy and numeracy within each class to ensure work closely matches ability of each child and that children with learning difficulties and gifted children in particular access a curriculum more suited to their needs (less than 100, mixed age classes)</p> <p>Setting provides a narrower band of intellectual ability to cope with, making differentiation more manageable. (200-300, same age classes)</p>
Special Educational Needs	11% (20)	<p>There are groups of SEN pupils withdrawn in the Yr 2/3, Yr 3/4, and Yr 5/6 classes at different times of the week. (100-200, mixed age classes)</p> <p>The literacy hour has made substantial differences in the area of SEN. Where as this lowest ability group was once withdrawn from English/Maths lessons to work on IEP related maths/language skills this can no longer take place in the same format. LSAs now support that group with independent tasks but the work is still beyond them in many cases as their language skills are so poor (200-300, mixed age classes)</p>
Wide ability spread	4% (8)	<p>We have setting in Yrs 3/4/5 for numeracy hour each day across classes to cater for the wide range of ability - large number of SEN students. (200-300, mixed age classes)</p> <p>Due to the wide range of abilities in our school, ability grouping is a necessity in all activities with written outcomes. Class teaching is generally used followed by teaching of target groups to stretch the most able and reinforce the least. (200-300, mixed age).</p>
Special groups of children	3% (6)	<p>Targeted children (i.e. just below average as identified in tests) are given extra support and taught in a year group so they may come from one more than one class in years 5 and 6. Yr 3 children identified as needing support are grouped for catch up programmes. Year 2 and 4 Stage 2 SEN children are taught as a group. (200-300, mixed age)</p> <p>We have a significant minority of travelling pupils whose attendance is seasonal and sporadic. These pupils are often ability grouped and may be accommodated out of year group if pupil numbers in a particular class are too high. ( 100-200, mixed age classes)</p>

**Table II**  
**Raising attainment, developing pupils skills and flexibility**

Categories and subcategories	Percentage and Number of schools responding in category	Example quotations
<b>Raising attainment</b>	<b>17% (32)</b>	
Raising standards	10% (19)	The reasons we changed were the desire to raise standards generally. The ability groups allow the more able children to achieve full potential and allow for the targeting of additional classroom support towards children with SEN. (300-400, same age classes)
Improving SATs	7% (13)	The change to setting was to try to raise our SATs levels and attainment generally (400+, same aged classes)  Each year from January until the SATs tests for yr 6, children are ability grouped for weekly sessions in English (writing) maths and science to give them the best opportunity in the SATs and to provide revision. (300-400, same age classes)
<b>Developing pupil skills and good behaviour</b>	<b>7% (13)</b>	
Improving skills	5% (9)	Children are grouped in various ways so that they have the opportunity to develop skills of negotiation, co-operation and adaptability. They need to work in different groups to develop these skills (less than 100, mixed age classes)  Sometimes in English and maths the groups may be put together in mixed ability groups if the teacher wants children to work together without adult support, e.g. a capable child taking the role of scribe in a literacy group activity (200-300, mixed age classes)
Improving behaviour	2% (4)	All groupings are influenced by personal/social factors and occasionally almost exclusively by them so there may be situations when five challenging pupils will be in five separate groups regardless of their personal ability. (100-200, mixed age classes)  Although groupings are mainly by ability some groups are chosen to help positive behaviour management. (less than 100, mixed age classes)
<b>Flexibility</b>	<b>8% (16)</b>	
Flexible in meeting pupil needs	6% (12)	We use a mixture of practices depending on the lesson and its purpose from ability grouped, mixed ability grouped, whole school to individual. Being a small school we can have the best of all worlds. Our aim is to extend each child to its full potential and we will choose the best approach to suit this purpose (less than 100, mixed age classes)  Our groupings are flexible in that there is the possibility of movement between groups and classes (less than 100, mixed age classes)
Gender	2% (4)	The grouping arrangements vary somewhat in the foundation subjects, sometimes friendship, sometimes ability, sometimes gender mixes. We're concerned about boys' standards and the feminisation of the national curriculum. We're looking at more gender mixing and encouraging reflective thinking (200-300, mixed age classes)

**Table III**  
**Benefits to teaching and academic subject concerns**

<b>Categories and subcategories</b>	<b>Percentage and Number of schools responding in category</b>	<b>Example quotations</b>
<b>Benefits to teaching</b>	<b>13% (25)</b>	
Staff planning and delivery of the curriculum	11% (20)	From year 2 all pupils are set according to ability and age. This system has aided staff in their planning and delivery. The ability span is not as broad and staff are able to differentiate tasks and questions more effectively (200-300, same age classes).
To facilitate whole class teaching	3% (5)	There is more whole class teaching. Groups are carefully formed according to ability (100-200, same age classes)  It is difficult to adopt a whole class approach when you have more than one year group together (less than 100, mixed age classes)
<b>Academic subject concerns</b>	<b>6% (11)</b>	
Groupings for different subjects	3% (6)	Some subjects like music, the children are set for skill/concept development for part of a lesson as appropriate. Some subjects for this age group, the benefits gained in the 'hidden curriculum' demand mixed ability even though the skills/thinking may be accelerated by not doing so. (200-300, mixed age classes)  There are times when alternative group patterns are used for a specific purpose (e.g. PE, swimming towards gaining certificates), Other arrangements have to be made for RE as some children are of religious groups and the curriculum has to be dealt with differently for them in some circumstances (200-300, same age classes)
Making use of teacher expertise	3% (5)	Setting was extended to all year groups. We found that in a three form entry junior school, it was the best use of staff expertise and time ( 300-400, same age classes)

**Table IV**  
**Changes due to the National Literacy Strategy**

Categories and subcategories	Percentage and Number of schools responding in category	Example quotations
<b>The National Literacy Strategy</b>	<b>39% (72)</b>	
Not specified	11% (20)	We changed our practices because of the literacy hour (200-300, same age classes)
Within class groupings	12% (22)	Yes, we have changed our practices. We have more careful English groupings - introduction of guided reading groups based on reading ages and ability ( 100-200, mixed age classes)
Setting	11% (20)	<p>More able children are now working with Years 3 – 4 for literacy and numeracy and the more able Year 4 children are now working in the Year 5-6 class for literacy and numeracy. (less than 100, mixed age classes)</p> <p>We changed because it was difficult to teach the literacy hour to two year groups and impossible for three (less than 100, mixed age classes)</p> <p>We have stopped setting in Yrs 4, 5 and 6. The guidance suggests that mixed ability whole class teaching is more appropriate. (400+, mixed age).</p>
Influence on grouping in other curriculum areas	5% (10)	<p>For the first time ever grouping is now by ability. Grouping for the literacy hour has in turn affected grouping for numeracy. It can simplify class management to keep groups the same for both. (100-200, mixed age classes)</p> <p>Seating arrangements used to be based on maths ability groups. Since introducing the literacy hour there has been increased flexibility – children move from maths group to English group to mixed ability groups during any one day (300-400, same age classes)</p>



**Table V**

**Cohort and school size issues**

<b>Categories and subcategories</b>	<b>Percentage and number of schools responding in category</b>	<b>Example quotations</b>
<b>School and cohort size</b>	<b>25% (47)</b>	
Size of current year group cohorts	8% (15)	<p>Due to falling rolls the organisation of classes will change next year to mixed age throughout KS2. Class size legislation will require a similar organisation at KS1. This will undoubtedly be reflected in the groupings of children for core-subject teaching, although details have not yet been discussed. (200-300, same aged classes)</p> <p>We often have to change our groupings - more to do with the number of children in particular age groups, rather than being curriculum led. (100-200, mixed age classes)</p>
Enabling same age class or year cohorts	7% (13)	We have changed our practice. Support is given by the Head Teacher by taking one-year group in each KS2 class in order to teach the literacy hour to a straight year group. (100-200, mixed age).
Setting across age groups	4% (8)	<p>We have to move children between classes during the year due to a termly intake. Previously we have done this on age. Now we are doing this by ability groups (less than 100, mixed age classes)</p> <p>Within our 4 classes in school, children are grouped in ability groups regardless of the national curriculum year groups. Often brighter children of the younger age group of a class will work with older children (100-200, mixed age classes)</p>
Small schools	4% (7)	Apart from the literacy hour where we have targeted groups reaching about 35% of the school, we continue to use mixed ability teaching across the school. We believe overall this is the most effective approach but in any case it is difficult to avoid in a small school. (100-200, mixed age classes)
Mixed age classes	2% (4)	<p>Until two years ago we had two vertically grouped reception yr1 classes. This was not working. We changed it to one aged group classes. It's much better in terms of pupil attainment and achievement. (200-300, same age classes)</p> <p>Staff requested to have year based groups in order that planning and organisation is easier. (less than 100, mixed age classes)</p>
<b>Resources</b>	<b>19% (36)</b>	
Staffing	13% (25)	<p>We would like to consider more setting and streaming but limited funds prevent flexibility in staffing (100-200, mixed age classes)</p> <p>The budget increase allowed us to increase staffing so that for some of the time some classes can be split into year groups (less than 100, mixed age classes)</p>
Timetabling	3% (5)	Setting was considered for this year in maths but the timetabling strictures of the literacy hour were a major factor in deciding against it. (200-300, same age classes)
Space	2% (4)	The year 3/4 classes are mixed ability due to disparity of numbers between the two year groups and lack of space which prevents the creation of another class full time (300-400, mixed age classes).
Teaching assistants/parents	1% (2)	We enjoy a lot of voluntary support for in class help and we are able to target time for SEN support (less than 100, mixed age classes)

**Table VI**

**Evaluation of the effects of different types of pupil grouping**

Categories and subcategories	Percentage and Number of schools responding in category	Example quotations
<b>Evaluation of effects</b>	<b>12% (22)</b>	
Perceived success	9% (17)	<p>We set during 1996-98 for maths and English in years 5 and 6 but found that it was not justified in relation to the time taken and children's progress especially SEN whose scores seemed to be depressed. (300-400, same age classes)</p> <p>We used to set across the year groups in KS2 for maths, English and science. The results did not improve and the lowest ability groups were very difficult to manage. (300-400, mixed age classes)</p>
Reduction in class teacher contact time	2% (3)	<p>We did try setting at KS2 in maths, English and science but found that children didn't have sufficient contact with their own class teacher. (400+, same age classes)</p> <p>Staff would like to group for literacy across the year group but feel they would not 'know' their class. As it is they lose half their class for maths. (100-200, same age classes)</p>
Time lost in movement	1% (2)	<p>We have found that focussing on set work has had a beneficial affect on children's attainment but there are problems and issues associated with this; movement of pupils between sets; time slippage between one lesson starting and another; loss of some other areas of the curriculum. (200-300, mixed age classes)</p>