

## A question of sorts

Streaming, setting, mixed ability. We've heard it all before. We shouldn't stream, it's not fair to be put in a music class based on your results in maths and languages. We shouldn't set: it allows the bright children to get ahead. It should be mixed ability: this offers all pupils better opportunities. All sides of the debate make relevant points. But where does it leave schools and teachers. With a feeling that they are going round in circles perhaps?

While staff will have thought about and discussed why they adopt particular groupings, one study discovered that not many schools ask pupils. Primary and secondary pupils from across Scotland were asked about this as part of a study into classroom organisation (Smith and Sutherland, 2000). It became clear that pupils had some definite ideas.

Pupils reported that they could "work at their own pace" and that setting allowed the teacher to "stop if you don't understand and go over it again". There was a feeling that in class maths (not set maths) the teacher just "fired ahead". There was concern, however, about being in lower sets. Pupils reported being "slagged off" and indicated that this had a detrimental effect on their work and confidence.

Mixed ability was considered to offer opportunities. Being with your friends was identified as important and mixed ability was thought to facilitate this. Others felt it was important to stay in the same class as you get to know each other. Peer support was also considered easier to organise within mixed ability –or in the words of one primary seven pupil "the brainy pupils can help the others".

From discussion with pupils, related elements emerged. Regardless of the form of grouping, pupils' views about themselves, particularly self belief were important. Pupils reported that they give up if "people slag you off".

This negativity could affect their overall performance, with one pupil reporting that "someone slagged off the worksheet I was on and I couldn't do the maths after that. I couldn't do any of my work properly for the rest of the day.

Teachers were crucial. Pupils were clear that "teachers need to listen to you and understand you". They thought it important that teachers were enthusiastic about what they were doing. Whether pupils enjoyed a subject or not "depends on the teacher and whether they are fun or not".

Ability grouping has been associated with low self esteem and expectations. Anti school attitudes are thought to exist in the lower ability groups who can be stigmatised by staff and other pupils.

Streaming is thought to polarise attitudes into pro- and anti-school. There is no doubt from listening to pupils that they are sensitive to grouping, particularly how it highlights differences in ability. Pupils are well aware of how and why they are grouped. Two parallel cultures can develop, one held by teachers and shared by some pupils in which high attainment is valued, the other where pupils prefer the middle sets because "being average" offers a safe option from teasing and an opportunity to have fun in an enjoyable atmosphere.

How pupils are evaluated is one of the most important factors affecting their motivation. Poor progress is most likely to damage motivation where there is public evaluation of ability or an emphasis on comparison. Ability groupings may magnify pupils' initial level of engagement. Teachers naturally respond to motivated pupils with more involvement and positive feedback and to demotivated pupils with more coercion or neglect and negative feedback.

Thus pupils in high ability groups are more likely to be encouraged to work independently and allowed more choice and responsibility. Lower sets and ability groups tend to be more tightly structured and have fewer opportunities for self regulation and creativity. Here the priority is conformity and control.

Schools most successful at combating the negative effect of ability grouping in the Smith and Sutherland study were those who ensured that movement between sets was possible. If sets are too rigid they may signal fixed ability beliefs. They monitored pupils' views for signs of demotivation and found ways of addressing this. They considered carefully the "hidden messages" which might be transmitted through groupings about how pupils are valued.

The ethos and values of the school are crucial in mediating the effects of ability groupings. As streaming may communicate assumptions about global ability, it is imperative that schools ensure an emphasis on high attainment is not paramount and that the skills of all pupils are valued. Most importantly, schools need to find ways of checking how the group structures are affecting the key facets of self-motivation, which are pupils' ideas about ability, how they approach learning and their feelings of competence.

The report on Education for Citizenship notes the low response from pupils on the question regarding "meaningful consultation". Pupils felt they were successful in getting things changed in relation to for example, toilets and uniforms. While these changes are important, schools would do well to listen also to what pupils have to say about the organisation of their classrooms. They have relevant views and in our experience, they are more than willing to share them.

