Grouping in Early Years and Key Stage 1

“A Necessary Evil”?

Final Report | Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes | October 2017
Theresa May’s failed attempt to introduce new Grammar schools turned the spotlight onto the controversial subject of ability grouping, setting and labelling. Much research has been done highlighting the negative impact of this practice on pupils in secondary school and Key Stage 2, but until now very little attention has been paid to the earliest school years. We commissioned this research to find out the prevalence of ability grouping practice and understand the impact on children and education professionals.

We asked the researchers to consider four themes in the report:

- The impact of grouping practices on children.
- The impact of grouping practices on education professionals.
- The role of private companies in defining appropriate pedagogy.
- The consequences for social mobility.

This Government intends to introduce Reception Baseline Assessment, a policy which will inevitably lead to the ability labelling of young children. As this report highlights, ability groups can have a damaging effect on children, with low ability labels becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy and achievement gaps widening between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. The findings make for challenging reading, and we hope will open a discussion into the underlying drivers of these practices and how they can be mitigated. High-stakes accountability testing and chronic workload are significant factors, which the National Education Union will work hard to address.

Dr Mary Bousted
Joint general secretary, National Education Union
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RESEARCH TEAM

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The research team was based at UCL Institute of Education, University College London. Dr Bradbury has a background in primary education and specialises in research in early years and primary schools, with a particular focus on issues of assessment and the impact on classroom practices. Her book Understanding Early Years Inequality (2013) explored the impact of the EYFS Profile on teachers and pupils, and she has also researched the introduction of Phonics Screening Check and the introduction of Baseline Assessment, working with the ATL and NUT in a BERA Award-winning project. Her latest book titled The Datafication of Primary and Early Years Education (2017, with Guy Roberts-Holmes) examines the role of data using Baseline as a case study.

DR GUY ROBERTS-HOLMES
Dr Guy Roberts-Holmes wrote the award-winning ‘Doing your Early Years Research Project’ (4th Edition, 2018) based upon his experience as an early years and primary teacher. His recent research has focused upon the pedagogical implications of the datafication and hyper-governance of early years and primary children and teachers, as discussed in his latest book The Datafication of Primary and Early Years Education (2017, with Alice Bradbury). He has researched the introduction of the revised EYFS (2012) and the Introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment (2015) which won the BERA Impact Award (2016). He is currently researching the impacts of School’s MHFA (Mental Health First Aid) teacher training.

DR MARY-CLAIRE TRAVERS
Dr Mary-Claire Travers worked as a research assistant on the project, analysing the survey data. She is currently involved, on a part time basis, in an Education Endowment Foundation-funded project on Best Practice in Setting headed by Professor Becky Francis at UCL IOE. Her book ‘White working class boys: Teachers matter’, published by UCL IOE Press, was published in September 2017.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The research team would like to thank the participants of the focus groups, the many respondents to the survey and particularly the staff at the case study schools for giving up their time for the project. We would also like to acknowledge a number of anonymous teachers who piloted the survey for us, and say thank to our colleagues at the UCL Institute of Education for their helpful advice, notably Peter Moss and Carol Vincent.

Note: This research was commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) section of the National Education Union (NEU); however, the analysis presented here is the authors’ and does not necessarily reflect the views of NEU.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Grouping by ‘ability’ or attainment is common in Early Years (Nursery and Reception) and Key Stage 1 in primary schools in England, and takes many forms: setting across classes in a year group, phase or even the school; within-class groups organised around where children sit; and interventions, where children are removed from the main class for a short period.

2. These practices – which vary by subject and age – continue despite the research evidence that ‘mixed ability’ teaching produces higher attainment overall. In our survey, 81% Reception teachers responded that they used grouping for Phonics; 58% of Nursery teachers used grouping for Phonics and 35% for Maths. By Year 2, 72% were grouping for Phonics, 60% for Literacy and 66% for Maths.

3. The core subjects of Literacy and Maths, and Reading and Phonics as separate activities, are the subjects where there is the most grouping. Phonics is seen as a discrete subject which is a special case, as the sequential nature of the government Letters and Sounds programme encourages grouping by ‘phase’ of phonics learning.

4. Reliance on private companies’ Phonics schemes, particularly the Read Write Inc scheme, encourages grouping by phase of phonics learning.

5. Teachers have concerns about the negative impact of grouping on children’s confidence, self-esteem and aspirations potentially leading to mental health problems. In our survey, 65% of teachers agreed with the statement that ‘Children are aware which group they are in’; 45% of teachers agreed with the statement ‘Ability grouping damages some children’s self-esteem’.

6. Teachers feel conflicted about the use of grouping and see group fluidity – moving children frequently between groups – as alleviating these concerns.

7. Grouping is seen as expected practice, encouraged by Senior Leadership Teams, and as a ‘necessary evil’ in preparation for high-stakes test such as the Phonics Screening Check and KS1 SATs.

8. Teachers have concerns about the role of grouping in widening gaps in attainment between different groups of children, and as exacerbating other inequalities in the system such as the underachievement of summer-born children.

9. If teachers’ concerns are reflected in practice, and thus grouping practices work to label children as ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ attainers – as suggested in the extensive literature in this area from older age groups – the fact that this happens early in their school lives and is often based on the child’s background means that grouping has a detrimental impact on social mobility and the government’s aim of a ‘Great Meritocracy’.
1. INTRODUCTION

Debate in education policy is currently dominated by concepts of meritocracy, selection by ‘ability’ and social mobility. These discussions relate to fundamental and often ideological conceptions of the purpose of education in society. Underlying much of this discussion is a long-standing debate about whether intelligence or aptitude is fixed and identifiable, and relatedly, the role of schools in reversing the attainment gap by socio-economic status. Meanwhile, schools continue to be dominated by a culture of testing (Hutchings 2015), teachers are increasing pressures of workload (ATL 2016), schools are under increasing financial pressure and there is a teacher recruitment crisis (Pells 2017). This research explored practices of grouping by ‘ability’ in this specific context of pressure on assessments and a renewed discourse of fixed ‘ability’1, in the early years and Key Stage 1 (age 3-7) in primary schools.

The rationale for this project was the claims made by Theresa May in 2016 of a ‘great meritocracy’, where ‘children will have a fair chance in life, the chance to go as far as their talents will take them’ (May 2016). The now-defunct policy of opening new grammar schools was based on a populist notion that ‘people understand that every child is different too, with different talents, different interests, different dreams’ (May 2016), and thus schools should provide differently for different children. This aim of a meritocracy is based on the assumption that schools allow every child to flourish, and that all children enter with an equal chance to succeed; therefore, a test at 11 would be a fair way of judging who was deserving of a grammar school place. This research aimed therefore to explore practices which divide and define children in their first years of school, to consider how whether these assumptions held true.

These practices take place within a policy context of increasing statutory assessment, with the introduction of the Phonics Screening Check in Year 1 in 2012, and the continued use of SATs in Year 2. Government plans, proposed during the research project and confirmed in September 2017, include introducing more formal assessment into Reception, in the form of a revised Baseline Assessment from 2018. Key Stage 1 SATs will become non-statutory, but only from 2023 when the Baseline system has become established (DfE 2017a). This research highlights particular concerns about the impact of assessment policies on classroom practices, and thus in our conclusion we discuss our concerns about how these future changes may exacerbate some of the issues raised here.

The project involved a large-scale national survey of teachers, focus groups with teachers and interviews at four case study primary schools.

We aimed to answer the following exploratory research questions:

1. When are children first labelled?
2. When and how are children grouped on ability?
3. What are the processes in which these judgements are made?
4. How fixed are ability groupings or streaming?

1 The term ‘ability’ is problematic and contested in the literature (see Marks 2016), however for ease of reading we do not use quotation marks for the remainder of the report.
5. Are some children more likely to be moved group?

As the project evolved, a number of key themes emerged, particularly in relation to the impact on children’s mental health\(^2\) of being placed in groups at a young age, and the impact of the Phonics Screening Check in Year 1 and schools’ use of private companies to provide Phonics schemes. Thus, our first section of the report looks at grouping practices in general, but the remainder is organised into four key areas: the impact on children, teachers’ views, the use of private companies, and social mobility and equality concerns. First, however, we set out the existing research in this field to provide some context, and then provide details of the study.

1.1 CONTEXT

The education system in the UK has a long history of dividing and defining children on the basis of variation on ‘ability’, attainment, or ‘aptitude’, most notably the practice of designating children as appropriate for an ‘academic’ grammar school education or a more practical secondary modern school in the post-war era. Different forms of grouping, ranging from different schools, to different ‘streams’, ‘sets’ and within-class groups have operated, together and independently, with varying levels of frequency throughout the era of compulsory schooling (see Box 1). Trends in grouping have depended on the social and economic content of the time, values dominating society, and the influence of psychological theories of intelligence (Ireson and Hallam 2001). Practices of grouping, labelling and relatedly, selection by schools, ‘arouse strong feelings’ (Ireson and Hallam 2001:1) because they are tied to ideological positions about the purposes and priorities of an education system.

Primary schools’ practices have been affected by these wider political discourses and policy decisions: in the 40s and 50s streaming in preparation for the 11+ test was commonplace, but the era of comprehensivisation brought a significant shift towards mixed-ability classes in the 60s and 70s. It was not until the marketisation era following the 1988 Education Reform Act that structured grouping regained popularity in primary schools, motivated by increased pressure to meet attainment targets (Ireson and Hallam 2001, Marks 2016).

\(^2\) In this Report, we use the World Health Authority’s positive interpretation of mental health: ‘Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community’ (WHO, 2014).
in the 2000s with both Labour and Coalition governments voicing their support for forms of grouping for younger children (Marks 2016). The most up-to-date data preceding this project comes from the Millennium Cohort Study of children born in 2000/01, which suggests that 37% of children experience streaming for Literacy or Maths in Year 2 (Hallam and Parsons 2013).

It is important to note that ‘it is well established that attainment-based grouping has little if any overall benefit in terms of student outcomes’ (Taylor et al. 2016:2); extensive research suggests that while there may be some modest gains for higher-set students, there is a negative impact in lower attaining groups, both in academic and social terms.

This continued use of grouping in various forms, despite the lack of evidence that it improves attainment, raises questions about teachers’ and schools’ reluctance to use mixed-ability teaching, and their motivations for decisions to use grouping (Taylor et al. 2016). It also raises questions about the influence of policy, and who is responsible for the decision to group: the teacher or senior leadership. We explore these issues below, in a brief summary of the existing research, and in our analysis.

**BOX 1: FORMS OF GROUPING**

**Streaming:** When children are placed in a class, usually for the entire year, based on a general view of their ‘ability’

**Setting:** When children are placed in groups for particular subjects, mainly Literacy and Maths, and move from their normal mixed-ability class for this subject.

**(Within-class) Ability grouping:** Where ability groups are used within a class, usually sat at different tables with different tasks and levels of support. This may occur in a mixed-ability class, or within a set.

**Interventions:** When specific children are targeted and removed from the class at regular times for additional support or extension activities; this is often for a fixed period of time and a specific purpose, such as ‘booster groups’ used before assessments.

Note that using grouping as an organised and regular practice should be distinguished from group work, where tasks are designed to be completed collectively (Kutnick et al. 2005).

**RESEARCH ON THE MOTIVATIONS FOR GROUPING**

Research with teachers and school leaders suggests that they have a preference for grouping children by ‘ability’ (Hallam and Ireson 2007) and choose to group children for a number of reasons, based on a wider range of factors than only attempts to improve attainment. There is a widespread belief that grouping allows students to learn at the right pace and level (Hallam and Ireson 2007), making teaching easier, while mixed ability teaching ‘places greater demands on the teacher’ (Ireson and Hallam 2001:12).

Furthermore, there is a strong perception among teachers that grouping allows the teacher to cater better for different children (Anthony et al. 2016); and ‘enables pupils’ curriculum
needs to be better met’ (Ireson and Hallam 2001:151). Grouping is seen as being beneficial for ‘higher’ attainers, as well as allowing the needs of ‘lower’ attainers to be catered for, and perceived as a useful strategy to improve attainment overall (Hamilton and O’Hara 2011). Research suggests decisions on grouping are based on a ‘concern to maximise adult-pupil interaction, teacher control and pupil on-task attention and efficiency’ (Baines et al. 2003:20), not only for academic reasons. Behaviour and classroom management are often cited as reasons for placing children in particular groups, while some teachers in a study based in Scotland, regarded setting as having a positive effect on pupil motivation, attitude and self-esteem (Hamilton and O’Hara 2011).

More broadly, grouping practices are facilitated by a discourse of ability as inherited and determined, which permeates the education system, based on the long history of psychometrics in the UK (White 2006, Ball 2013). This ‘fixed ability’ thinking, particularly in Maths, frequently determines the grouping practices of schools (Marks 2013). Maths is ‘the subject most tightly framed by tacking and performance measures’ (Brown 2017), because it is seen as inevitably sequential.

Within-class grouping, which is more common in primary schools (but may be used in combination with setting) is seen as less damaging to children; groups within the class are ‘often believed by teachers to be free of the iniquitous impacts of between-class ability grouping practices such as setting and streaming’ (Marks 2013:35). However, research suggests that in primary classrooms where this occurs there are still damaging effects on children’s self-esteem (Marks 2016). Classrooms which are organised with different tables for groups result in greater child awareness (with the attendant impact on their self-esteem) than those where children are given different tasks but can choose where they sit (Hamilton and O’Hara 2011).

Finally, alongside positive reasons for choosing groups, several factors deter teachers from ‘mixed-ability’ teaching. There are few examples of mixed ability teaching, which deters teachers from attempting it in fearful climate of pressure (Taylor et al. 2016), where teachers’ careers rest on their results. Attempting to differentiate within the mixed-attainment group is seen as ‘too hard’ and problematic for behaviour management (Jackson and Povey 2016). Furthermore, seeking out research on alternatives – such as getting involved in interventions to change practice – involves time and effort, which many teachers do not have capacity for.
A wide range of research, almost entirely based on Key Stage 2 children and secondary students, has found a number of problems associated with grouping, in its various forms, which can be loosely grouped into emotional, academic and social concerns.

**Emotional Impact**

Research suggests that grouping affects ‘pupils’ self-esteem, academic self-concept and their emotional responses to school’ (Ireson and Hallam 2001:61). As Pykett comments, students ‘quickly learn how the school, local authority or educational establishment perceive, pigeonhole and arguably limit their localised “aptitudes” or “aspirations’” (2012:34 cited in Brown 2017:403). Research in primary classrooms suggests (here in Year 4) ‘pupils took on, and saw themselves in terms of, group identifiers’ (Marks 2013:35), much like the research in the 1990s which found children labelled themselves as a ‘nothing’ compared to curriculum levels (Reay and Wiliam 1999). Children’s spatial orientations in school, particularly their sense of belonging in particular spaces, are affected by practices of grouping (Brown 2017). Lower groups may be taught in less attractive or well-resourced rooms, or rooms designed for another subject. Younger children may react in violent or disruptive ways to being labelled, to ‘avoid the stigma of being positioned at the bottom of the heap’ (Scherer 2016).

**Academic impact**

A major problem noted with grouping pupils is the potential for this to limit learning, by placing a cap on what children can achieve, both in formal terms (such as sitting different exam papers) and in informal terms, by restricting access to more difficult content (Kutnick et al. 2005). There can be a negative impact on results, including widening the gaps between ‘low’ and ‘high’ (Parsons and Hallam 2014), as those in higher groups are stretched further while those deemed to be ‘lower’ never access more complicated tasks. Research suggests grouping ‘entrenches variation between pupils’, and damages attainment for those in lower groups, thus reproducing the ‘spectrum’ of attainment they are intended to reduce (Campbell 2013:10, after Kutnick et al. 2005). International analysis of hundreds of studies suggests limited positive impact on learning, leading to grouping being described as ‘being amongst the educational intervention “disasters”’ (Mazzoli Smith and Campbell 2016:258, in reference to Hattie 2008).

Furthermore, a range of projects have examined the misplacement of children in the ‘wrong’ groups (MacIntyre and Ireson 2002, Muijs and Dunne 2010, Dunne et al. 2011), in terms of their prior attainment, which is particularly a problem if there is little fluidity between groups. The extent of mobility between groups has been established as a key factor which
determines the impact of grouping, as more fluidity reduces the problem of misplacement and setting children on set trajectories (Hallam and Parsons 2013). However, research suggests that there is often a lack of mobility, particularly where children are in ‘sets’, or whole class groups based on attainment (Hallam and Ireson 2007).

The practice of interventions, most commonly where lower-attaining children are removed for additional work in Literacy and Maths, can mean they are removed from other subjects and as such receive a narrowed curriculum (Dunne et al. 2011). Children may be taught by teaching assistants in inappropriate teaching spaces (Brown 2017). Significantly, grouping practices are affected by the need to focus on ‘borderline’ children in preparation for tests, in systems of educational ‘triage’ (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). Here more experienced teachers may be allocated to the ‘borderline’ children (Dunne et al. 2011), while some children are deemed ‘hopeless cases’; this grouping may exacerbate existing social inequalities by social background and ethnic group (Gillborn and Youdell 2000).

Social impact

In terms of the social impact, we note that ‘continued research reinforces the view that ability grouping frequently leads to inequity and deepening disadvantage’ (Hamilton and O’Hara 2011:714); for some, grouping children by ability is ‘a social justice issue’ (Jackson and Povey 2016:1). Group allocation is not based solely on prior attainment; instead, a ‘wide range of social factors come into play which privileges those with greater cultural power and systematically disadvantages others’ (Jackson and Povey 2016:2, see also Muijs and Dunne 2010). Indeed, recent Social Mobility Commission (SMC) reports have highlighted the overwhelming evidence that poorer pupils make less progress in schools when they are grouped by ability from an early age (SMC 2017). The SMC (2016) has warned that ‘early setting (for example at primary school) is shown to reduce progress by pupils who begin primary school in lower ability groups’ at all key stages…Setting can therefore have a profound negative impact on pupils’ future social mobility’ (SMC 2016:37).

Disadvantaged children are more likely to be in lower sets and experience less well qualified staff (Hallam and Ireson 2007, Dunne et al. 2011, Francis et al. 2017). However, it has been noted that some schools strategically deploy staff in ways to reduce the size of ‘lower’ sets or rotate staff around different groups (Dunne et al. 2011).

A Department for Education and Skills research report commented in 2005 that boys and pupils designated as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) are also more likely to be placed in lower groups, where teachers find it more difficult to motivate pupils:
The difficulties of developing and sustaining an achievement culture in lower sets in which boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds identified as having special educational needs and with lower prior attainment predominate, is a major challenge to schools in adopting a system of setting (Kutnick et al. 2005:29).

For young children, allocation of sets is also affected by their month of birth (and thus their age on entry to school): data from the Millennium Cohort Study indicated that by Year 2, ‘Children born in September are more than twice as likely to be in the highest stream as those born in August’ (Campbell 2013:3). Thus, ability grouping may cause or exacerbate issues such as the underachievement of summer-born children. Nevertheless, there remains a strong cultural belief in English primary schools for the need to put children into ability groups. This makes England an international outlier as regards its penchant for grouping children; for example, in Sweden, ‘ability [grouping] is illegal because it is known to produce inequities’ (Boaler, 2005, 136).

**Positives about mixed ability grouping:**

Finally, in contrast to the points above, there are many positive arguments in favour of mixed ability grouping, including that it provides role models for lower-attaining children (Ireson and Hallam 2001:126). Research where teachers took a different approach suggests children in mixed-ability groups talk differently about themselves and others (Anthony et al. 2016). In one study from New Zealand, in reference to Maths, teachers saw changes in children’s ‘expectations and understandings of what children know and can do, revelling in the newly revealed richness of children’s responses to problems’ (Anthony et al. 2016:123). However, it is also noted that this take effort and time on the teacher’s part, and to some extent a shift in their role in the classroom.

To conclude, we note that the vast majority of this research is based on secondary-age or Key Stage 2 students; there is a scarcity of research on current grouping practices in Key Stage 1 and early years. However, the limited research that has been conducted has confirmed the main conclusions discussed more widely: that grouping does not improve attainment overall (Parsons and Hallam 2014); and that children are aware of and affected by the hierarchies imposed by grouping (Scherer 2016). As one child, aged six, put it in Scherer’s study, ‘I am not clever, they are cleverer than us’ (2016:389).

**CURRENT RESEARCH**

The problem of the preponderance of disadvantaged children in lower sets and the lower progress of children in these sets provided the rationale for the Best Practice in Grouping study at UCL IoE, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation, which is currently in its
final stages. Based on secondary education, this study explores best practice within setting – avoiding some of the detrimental practices identified in research – and within mixed ability settings (Taylor et al. 2016, Francis et al. 2017). Clearly the issue of grouping continues to be a political and academic concern; it is part of an unresolved debate within the field of education relating to the role of education in social mobility.

1.2 THE RESEARCH STUDY

The research was carried out in the period April – June 2017, using a mixed methods approach involving a nationwide survey and interviews at four case study primary schools.

ONLINE SURVEY

The online survey was produced using the Opinio software and was distributed via the NUT and ATL email databases and on social media. There were 1373 respondents in total, with a spread across Reception, Year 1 and Year 2, and fewer Nursery teachers (and would be expected given there are fewer Nursery classes).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nursery Teacher</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception Teacher</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 Teacher</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 Teacher</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Teacher</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EY or KS1 Phase leader</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy or Headteacher</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support staff</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1A: Survey participants by role

Respondents were asked about the size and status of their school, in order to analyse in more depth, the relationship between these factors and grouping practices. Most respondents worked in one- or two-form-entry schools (31% and 39% respectively), 17% in three-form-entry schools, 4% in four-form-entry schools, and 7% in split-year group schools.
This is relevant as there are fewer options in terms of grouping open to schools with fewer pupils and teachers. In terms of status, half of respondents worked in community primary schools, with 20% in Faith schools and 22% in Academies, thus representing the main forms of primary school in England.

The survey was piloted with existing teachers before distribution and adjusted accordingly. One issue that was raised at this point was the problem of using ‘ability’ as a recognisable term, but without appearing to legitimise it in the survey. This was discussed and it was decided that for the purpose of the survey it should be used where necessary as it is the most commonly-used term and the survey needed to be accessible.

The survey involved a number of questions for teachers about grouping practices in different subjects and generated further questions for those subjects they indicated they used grouping practices for. This lengthened the survey and many have contributed to the non-completion of over 200 respondents. In cases where there were non-responses, percentages are reported as a proportion of those that answered the question, rather than of the whole number. Respondents were also asked about their views and experiences of using grouping through direct questions with comment boxes and through statements where they were required to ‘agree a lot’, ‘agree a little’, ‘disagree a little’ or ‘disagree a lot’. Quotes generated from the written comments are labelled W.

**FOCUS GROUPS**

Four focus groups were held with currently serving and recently retired teachers, predominantly from Key Stage 1 and Early Years, but with some Key Stage 2 and Secondary teachers present. These were conducted at the ATL Annual National Conference, and each lasted approximately 45 minutes. Participants were asked about grouping practices in their schools, different subjects, the impact on the children and the opinions on grouping. Key themes emerging from the data informed the selection of case study schools and the interview schedules for teachers. Individuals were not identified from these discussions so quotes are labelled as FG1-4.

**INTERVIEWS AT CASE STUDY SCHOOLS**

Interviews were conducted at four primary schools in different regions of England (see Table 2). These schools were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a range of different areas and school demographics, and a range of different grouping practices (although we found practices varied within schools). Our intention was to interview all Key Stage 1 and Early Years teachers at each school, but issues of availability meant that at two schools we were only able to conduct one interview with a teacher in a leadership position, but these interviews were far longer than individual teacher interviews. All the schools were community primary schools, and some had nursery provision. To ensure anonymity within the sample, the headteachers and phase leaders interviewed are all referred to as School Leaders.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally for analysis. Qualitative data was analysed using NVivo software, based on the themes generated by the focus groups and the research questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 Teacher A</td>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Inner London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2 Teacher B</td>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Inner London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 Teacher A</td>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Inner London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1 Teacher B</td>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Inner London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception Teacher</td>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>Inner London</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Leader</td>
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<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception Teacher</td>
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<td>North</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Leader</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Leader</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1B: Interviews at Case Study Schools**

The sample is obviously limited in that we were unable to gain access to Academy schools, and schools in areas which have selection. Schools are referred to by a letter.

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The research was conducted within the ethical guidelines provided by the British Education Research Association and the UCL Institute of Education. Care has been taken to ensure anonymity of all respondents and the security of data. For ethical reasons relating to maintaining anonymity, the case study schools are identified only by letters. Schools were recompensed with funding for either a half day or full day of teaching cover (depending on the number of interviews) in order to reduce the impact of the research on the children.
2. GROUPING PRACTICES

2.1 VARIETIES OF GROUPING PRACTICES

As suggested in previous research, there are numerous forms of grouping in operation in Early Years and Key Stage 1, which vary by age, subject and the time of year and size of school. The survey data suggests that grouping is most common in Phonics (76%), Maths (62%), Reading (57%) and Literacy (54%), as one might expect given the dominance of these subjects in the curriculum and assessments.

![Figure 2A: Responses to the question ‘In your year group, do you regularly group children by ability for the following?’ (n=1365)]

Where grouping occurs in Literacy and Maths, it is most likely to happen within the class, whereas grouping for Phonics is more likely to be across the year group. Grouping in Phonics, which we discuss in more detail in Box 2, takes place within class (31%), across the year group (39%), and unusually, across the age phase or the entire school (28%). There was also some evidence of streaming (where children are allocated a class based on their attainment for the entire year) in the focus group data, and the survey showed that in a small proportion of cases (3%), Maths and Literacy groups remain fixed for the year. This was less likely to be the case with Phonics groups.

The interview and focus group data suggested that the model of grouping within class based on tables where children sit is the dominant model, with five groups of six being the norm. However, variations of this occur, particularly with younger children: practices such as having a teacher ‘focus group’ for each day of the week were noted in Year 1 and Reception; these were still based on ‘ability’. Similarly reading was usually taught in guided reading groups based on the level of book, with the teacher working with one group each day of the week.

2.2 PRACTICES BY AGE

A key question for this research was the issue of first grouping and labelling. There is limited research on the use and forms of grouping with this age group; existing research suggests a
growing use of setting in Year 2 and a general increase in the use of grouping with age (Baines et al. 2003, Hallam and Parsons 2013) but this is based on data collected in the 2000s and mainly focused on Year 2.

Looking first at the youngest children, our focus group and interview data suggest some forms of grouping in Nursery classes, including those for two-year-olds:

> So, last year I taught nursery and we grouped the children in nursery as well but it's done in a way that they don't realise they're being grouped or anything [...] you have some children who already know all their sounds and everything like that, where you have other children who still can't hear a sound so it's very difficult to teach those children together. (School Leader, School 3)

> In the nursery [...] we do have a little gifted and talented (I hate using that phrase), but I have a little group that I'm doing a bit more of a push with that are ready for it but only because they're absolutely ready. They have no idea (FG3)

In our survey, of the 118 Nursery teachers who responded, 58% reported using grouping for Phonics and 35% for Maths (see Table 3 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nursery</th>
<th>Reception</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonics</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>Maths</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2A: Responses to the question ‘In your year group, do you regularly group children by ability for the following?’ by percentage of teacher year group

In Reception, the majority of respondents reported grouping for Phonics, Reading and Maths, and in Key Stage 1 the proportions remained high and in addition the proportion grouping for Literacy increased. As one might expect, there is limited grouping for Reading in Nursery, as children are at the early stages of learning to read, but there is more grouping for Phonics. This grouping for Phonics declines in Year 2 as children become more fluent readers and the Phonics Screening Check has been completed.
2.3 HOW GROUPS ARE DECIDED

Teachers use a number of different sources of information to organise children into groups, with comments from the previous teacher, assessments and their own observation being the most commonly cited sources in our survey. There was no significant variation in sources for different subjects.
This passing on of information means that children’s identities as ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ group children can potentially become ‘sedimented’ (Scherer, 2016) as they move up the school. However, as suggested in previous research (Marks 2016), our findings suggest that grouping decisions are not made solely on the basis of attainment or perceived ability: issues such as classroom management, the need to balance the number of boys and girls and friendships were also key to grouping decisions. For example:

Yes, I'd say personalities and behaviours feed it into it as well just because, I guess, guided reading in many ways, a lot of it is sustaining their focus and attention.
(Reception teacher, School 1)

This is important given the research and our findings which suggest that group placement affects expectations, self-esteem and attainment, which we discuss in the following section.

2.4 JUSTIFICATIONS FOR GROUPING PRACTICES

There were a wide range of reasons given why teachers used grouping by ‘ability’, which mirrored the findings in the literature. In brief, teachers saw grouping as helpful in terms of classroom management and for making differentiation obvious. 71% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘Grouping by ability is easier for the teacher’. This was linked by some to children’s age and varying backgrounds:

I don't particularly like grouping phonics that much but because the children have got such different levels here... we had a cohort of children that started school after Christmas here and then after April as well and they didn't do any phonics in nursery so that means they're not even phase one. That means they're way behind. So we've been playing a big catch up game with them. (School Leader, School 4)

Many teachers also thought that grouping improved results: 52% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘Grouping raises attainment overall’. For instance, the teacher above argued:

I personally think it's better for the children because otherwise your more able children get bored and frustrated, your less able children just get left behind. So the grouping means that you can focus your attention. (School Leader, School 4)

Other reasons included making children feel more comfortable, as they were working with ‘similar’ children: as one respondent argued ‘Less able don't feel overwhelmed and they are working at the pace that helps them’. Others saw it as necessary given the size of classes. Some of these comments reflect what Dunne et al call the ‘mundane practicalities’ of ‘pupil numbers, teacher availability, timetabling and classroom accommodation’ (Dunne et al. 2011:502). However, underlying other comments there was a pervasive normalised discourse of ‘ability’ as natural and as fixed. For example, this teacher holds in tension the nurture versus nature debate: whilst on the one hand acknowledging that children come to school with different socialising experiences, she also states that some children have natural flair, ability and brains.

If they've got a natural flair for mathematics, you have to really give them the opportunities to explore that. [...] They choose [activities] because it's their natural
ability. So children are all very different. Some children come to school and they’re just ready to go while other children just need a lot of nurturing to get to that point. […] If you had all the children come to school at the same point and everybody’s brains were the exact same but it’s not. (School Leader, School 4)

This idea of ‘ability’ as being something natural and based in different brains justifies the division of children into different groups, with different tasks and expectations. This idea of a natural concept of ability was extensive throughout the survey, interviews and focus groups; we would argue that it permeates the education system. Nonetheless, teachers did raise significant concerns about the impact of grouping on children, and felt real tensions about using the practice. These are the focus for the following two sections.
3. THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

In this section we explore teachers’ concerns about the impact of grouping practices on children. Teachers were concerned that young children were aware of the ability groups they were placed in, and some commented that this labelling reduced children’s levels of self-esteem, and in some cases leading to disruptive behaviour. Some teachers suggested that ability labelling was experienced by the children as a criticism of their developing learner identities and so damaged the children’s self-belief in these first years of school. There were fears that the cumulative negative impacts of ability grouping and negative learner identities became ‘sedimented’ (Scherer, 2016) as the children grew older, leading to the potential development of mental health problems.

In this section we also consider how early years teachers reported that increasingly the play-led principles of the EYFS, were in tension with grouping by ability. These teachers argued that play was essential for children to develop the characteristics of effective learning such as resilience, self-regulation and self-confidence. Finally, some teachers argued for a rebalancing between wellbeing and academic attainment so that they were given equal weighting.

3.1 CHILDREN’S AWARENESS OF GROUPING

Contrary to a common perception that young children are not socially aware enough to recognise ability grouping when it happens in their classrooms, in our survey 65% of early years and Key Stage 1 teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘Children are aware which group they are in’. Previous research with Key Stage 2 pupils has demonstrated that children are ‘aware of the grouping systems in place in their school and the reasons for them’ (Hallam et al., 2004:529). Similarly, our early years and KS1 teachers in both interviews and the survey stated that the children were aware of how and why their classrooms were hierarchically grouped.

*Children are aware of groups and it damages self-esteem and sets expectations that the more able can only do the more challenging work where the rest of the class can feel they have nothing to offer (W)*

*Children are very aware even at this age of the group that they are in, which can affect confidence (W)*

*I have been a full-time supply teacher in all primary year groups for 15 years. Children do know what group they are in however young they are (W).*

*Even if groups are moved around based on in lesson work or assessments, children are still aware of basically a ranking system in the class and I don't see how this is of benefit to the children (W)*

*My own son has been aware of what group he is in at his school since year 2 and it knocked his confidence (W)*

Despite the teachers attempting to disguise the ability group labels by using various euphemisms, they believed that the children knew what the labelling meant.
They know. We might call them foxes and rabbits but they know. (FG2).

I just think how demoralising for those kids to know, they’re not daft. I think they’re incredibly aware despite how well intentioned it is or whatever you say it is. They’re not stupid, are they? (FG3)

Children’s awareness of their grouping was seen as evident in their behaviour and statements:

Generally, the higher ability ones will say. Some of them will say, “I’m in the best group. (Year 2 Teacher, School 1)

Often more able pupils become arrogant (W).

The following teacher noted how the children from the higher group interacted patronisingly with the children from the lower group, reinforcing the negative learner identity.

When I would get them to write together, what would happen was that the kids from the higher groups would just, like, tell the other kids what to do. And almost talk to them like a teacher, or a kind of disapproving way, a kind of exasperated way. (Year 2 Teacher B, School 1)

This finding would suggest that the reasoning that children are unaware of grouping, and therefore it is a harmless practice in early years and Key Stage 1, is questionable. The teachers stated that because the children were aware of which group they were placed in and why, this led to reduced self-esteem and confidence.

3.2 FEARS THAT GROUPING REDUCES SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE

Among both our survey and interview respondents there were clear concerns that ability grouping reduced children’s self-esteem and self-confidence; this echoes findings from research in Key Stage 2, where Hallam et al noted how ‘ability’ groups led to a ‘decrease in self-esteem’ for some children (2013:46). In our survey 45% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement Grouping damages some children’s self-esteem”, whilst 29% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Although we did not ask teachers to specifically comment on this issue on the survey, many respondents made comments in a general section on grouping, often using very emotive language such as ‘disgusting’, ‘distracted’ and ‘segregation’ to describe the potential impact:

It is disgusting to label someone as ‘low ability’ at the age of 4. Maybe they can’t spell but who cares? It just damages their confidence and lets them down. In a fire, I want someone to have the confidence to get people out, not know how to write an exclamatory sentence or tell me how many vertices a square-based pyramid has. Utter nonsense. We are ruining our own children (W)

Fixed ability groups are highly damaging to self-esteem and put a lid on the learning of all abilities (W)

I think the (self)labelling that comes with segregated groups is often more damaging than the benefits (W)
It limits children and sometimes stops teachers having high expectations of pupils. It damages self-esteem and doesn't provide models for other children (W)

It was deemed an efficient way to plan differentiated lessons but it made children very competitive and destroyed self-esteem in some pupils (W)

I do think it can really damage self-esteem - the children who spend their whole education in the bottom group (W)

This was an issue we explored in more detail in the focus groups and interviews, where we found teachers saw being moved to a lower ability group as negatively affecting self-esteem and the child’s perception of themselves as a learner.

….. that just would cause a drop in their self-esteem. If they go, "I'm not as good at Maths or English as I thought I was because now look at where I am". (FG2)

In these circumstances the child’s interpretation of being moved to a lower ability group is that of failure with damaging and long-lasting effects. This suggestion chimes with the research from the United States which has found that labelling children at school as ‘low ability’ can have an impact throughout an individual's life (Boaler, 2005). One teacher we interviewed could recall the experience of being placed on a 'struggling' table:

I remember when I was in Year 1, I was put on the table where the children were struggling and I still remember that, that I was put on the struggling table. It was horrendous for my self-esteem. I still remember it now. (School Leader, School 4)

These findings suggest that an unintentional but highly problematic effect of ability grouping is the tendency it has to create and produce negative learner identities amongst the young children themselves. Hallam et al (2004, 527) showed that primary grouping by ability 'caused pupils' status to be defined by their ability'. Boaler (2013, 147) noted that children 'take a very clear message' from ability grouping practices - 'some children are clever and some are not'. As the following teacher notes once a child has internalized such a negative learner identity it tends to remain with the child, particularly as evidence suggests that children remain in their ability groups throughout their education (Dixon, in Boaler, 2005, 135). Similarly, a teacher noted that once such a negative learner identity is produced, it is ‘extremely hard to shift’.

So often it comes back to very, very early and it comes back to when they realised that they were ‘daft’, they were ‘dim’. Their self-image has been built up and it's so much part of that. It's from very early and it's and it's extremely hard to shift, extremely hard to shift (FG2).

This argument that labels become fixed and permanent contrasts with the current trend for encouraging ‘growth mindsets’ (Dweck, 2006).

### 3.3 GROWTH MINDSETS AND THE LIMITING IMPACT OF ABILITY GROUPING

Teachers in our survey noted how ability grouping acted as a ‘ceiling’, limiting children’s potential and expectations.
Grouping is pointless and lazy teaching. Damaging to children and sets a ceiling of expectation (W)

Grouping puts a ceiling on expectations, children can only move down, they never move up because they’ll have missed some steps (W)

It sets a ceiling for a child who feels they can only achieve to a set level determined by the teacher (W)

I think if you have your groupings, for me it’s just very much (a) you’re, kind of, putting a ceiling on their learning…. I just think it’s a lot easier to, like, spoon-feed children and have them, kind of, regurgitate what they should do, as opposed to having it mixed and there not being a ceiling and seeing where it goes. (Reception Teacher, School 1)

This language resonates with Boaler’s work, who noted how ability grouping acted as a ‘psychological prison’ that ‘breaks ambition’ and ‘almost formally labels kids as stupid’ (2005, 141). Boaler notes that ‘ability grouping practices used in schools communicate that ability is fixed, initiating the harmful fixed mindset beliefs that detracts from children’s learning opportunities throughout life’ (2013, 145). Thus, there is the suggestion that ability grouping practices serve to embed at an early age the notion that children’s intelligence is a fixed entity, known as ‘fixed ability thinking’ (Marks, 2013). The following teachers articulated the dangers of establishing such perspectives:

[Grouping] is a form of educational apartheid that sustains negative attitudes amongst teachers about certain pupils and their families. Children do have different skill sets but grouping by ability takes those skill sets and establishes them as something much more definitive (W)

[Grouping] is an old fashioned and unimaginative way of working that harks back to times when people believed that intelligence was an innate fixed entity (W)

Well I just think there’s so much pressure on children….We’re really worried that our children write themselves off before they’ve started, they see themselves as failing (FG3)

The suggestion here is that grouping as a practice solidifies differences in ‘skills’, and that children internalise the idea that ‘ability’ is fixed and ‘write themselves off’. As Dweck (2006) argues, grouping practices encourage children to believe that intelligence is an innate and natural with a fixed ceiling. This produces a ‘helpless response’ and so that children ‘give up’ when faced by challenges.

I think most teachers voted for no streaming in our school because they felt that the ones in the bottom group were thinking, "I'm failing. I'm in the lower group…. well I'm stuck here. I might as well not try". (FG1)

Children put into fixed ability groups at the beginning do not have the opportunity to develop growth mind sets and raise their attainments levels to the best. They also can lack a 'can do attitude' and can develop a dependency on the adult who works with the group (W)
Here we see grouping practices contrasted with a ‘growth mindset’ (Dweck, 2006), which is the belief that ability and intelligence is not a fixed characteristic but rather is contextual and malleable and can be increased through effort. This theory is currently very popular in education, as evidenced by the large trial of growth mindset approaches funded by the Education Endowment Fund (EEF, 2017). In the early years and Key Stage 1, the establishment of a growth mindset is seen as particularly important in building children’s emotional resilience, determination and positive mental health. Boaler notes that ‘schools should be encouraging growth mindset beliefs as a matter of urgency’ (2013:150). In our survey, some teachers used the language of ‘growth mindset’ to explain why their schools were moving away from grouping by ability to mixed grouping and self-choosing:

- We have started using mixed ability groups this year. I was sceptical at first but now children decide which of 3 challenges they will attempt mild, spicy or hot (our chilli challenges) and most children respond well and push themselves! This is based on growth mindset ideas (W).

- My school have tried to get rid of ability groups this year and have adopted a ‘growth mindset’ approach where children sit in mixed ability groups (W).

- Our groups are very fluid and we have been trialling a ‘growth mindset’ approach where children are in mixed ability groups rather than in ability tables (W).

- We use Growth Mindset in our school and encourage the children to challenge themselves to select their choice of activities in English and Maths, therefore do not see the need to teach in ability groups (W).

However, even when using a growth mindset approach that allowed children to choose the level of their activity, some teachers suggested that they still steered children back to their ‘appropriate’ ability level demonstrating how fixed ideas can persist.

- When children are working independently and they’re choosing their level, where, as I’ve said, they’ve chosen completely the wrong level for them, so they’ve gone way past their next step. (Year 2 Teacher B, School 1)

Given the prominence of growth mindset approaches, the contrast made with grouping as producing a ‘ceiling’ on learning suggests that this approach offers a strategy or justification for shifting away from grouping.

4. GROUPING AND PLAY-BASED PEDAGOGY

Early years teachers in our survey commented that ability grouping was an inappropriate pedagogy with young children, instead emphasising the importance of play and sustained shared thinking.

- I think grouping should rarely be done in nursery as you should be concentrating on developing their learning through play, sustained shared thinking and targeted teaching (W).

- Dislike grouping in Reception because the curriculum in EYFS is all about the individual and learning through play. We would not use it if it wasn’t for phonics (W).
I am a firm believer in the 'Unique child' and learning through play. So I think that children should be engaged by interest and continuous provision of challenge. Unfortunately, financial constraints and insufficient staffing means that inappropriate grouping is used to deliver Phonics, Maths, etc. (W).

These early years teachers’ belief in the importance of play for children’s views of themselves as learners is echoed in research that states ‘it is through their play that children become self-regulated thinkers and learners and see themselves as successful, capable and competent learners’ (Chivers 2016:4). The Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE 2014) states that social play develops self-confidence and competence. For young children play is active, participatory and builds perseverance, cooperation and resilience (Chivers 2016), all of which are key to wellbeing and mental health. However early years teachers felt a tension between the EYFS principles and the demands of the data-obsessed school (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017) which increasingly led to inappropriate grouping.

Grouping in a data driven world seems to be becoming the norm. This sadly takes away from child led play time as we are forced into writing and reading constantly rather than appreciating the real heart of EYFS (W)

The realities of resource constraints, for example, lack of support staff and the constant fixation on data results, means that grouping becomes necessary (W)

As we see in more detail the following section, there are real tensions for teachers between what they would choose to do, and what they feel is necessary. The following teacher is clear that there needs to be rebalancing within the early years and KS1 between academic attainment and well-being, so that equal weighting is given to both.

Grouping may work in KS2 but for EY & KS1 school should be about developing emotions, feeling secure, making friendships, building confidence, independence as much as learning to read, write and count (W)

Thus, as we see in the following sub-section, grouping is seen as consistent with ‘learning to read, write and count’, but inconsistent with the wider emotional and social role of schooling.

5. NARROWING OF THE CURRICULUM AND DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

We noted that several teachers in our survey were concerned that notions of ‘ability’ were limited to particular aspects of the curriculum, such as Literacy and Maths, and that this was related to a narrowing of the curriculum.

Ability can be misunderstood. Some children can build fantastic trains and talk about pistons and the power of steam - surely that is a great asset and shows an early scientific ability - but they may not yet be ready to read. We should be concerned about the ability to self-motivate and develop investigation and enjoyment and creativity for the inventors of the future. The early years curriculum is narrowing and schools are becoming only interested in literacy and Maths (W)

As Literacy and Maths have been given greater prominence in the curriculum through reform of the EYFS and changes to assessments, attainment in these subjects may have become the only measure of a child’s ‘ability’, displacing broader notions of what constitutes
attainment. In turn, this can have an impact on what children are exposed to, as ‘lower ability’ group children are given a narrower curriculum in order to help them ‘catch up’:

I believe grouping by ability is detrimental to those lower ability children by a narrowing of the curriculum (W)

There were also suggestions from teachers that this experience of a narrower curriculum in a ‘low ability’ group led to some children becoming “disengaged” from school, and the creation and exacerbation of behaviour problems:

It can produce disenchanted groups that are tough to teach (W)

Ability groups can be highly limiting and lead to disruptive behaviour, especially at the lower ability end. Grouping this way doesn't particularly boost anyone's confidence and self-esteem - the higher ability compete and feel inferior of each other and as previously mentioned the lower ability tend to be more disruptive and I tend to get more behavioural issues down that end of the spectrum (W)

The bottom sets are difficult to manage, damaging for children's self-esteem and there is no inspiration from other children within the set (W)

Grouping on tables also potentially leads to children being on a table with poor behaviour. This isn't always the case but some children who struggle in lessons, also develop poor behaviour as a way to avoid work or because they are frustrated that it's hard. There is surely no benefit from putting all of these children together! (W)

The problem with grouping comes with low ability as this tends to group SEN, EAL and behaviour problem all in the same group (W)

As we see in this final comment, children in the 'lower' group may have additional needs in terms of support, but they are not homogenous in this respect, and there is a risk in grouping these children together. The following teacher noted how replacing ability groups with mixed groups had, ‘for the first time’, improved children’s behaviour:

In previous years LA/SEND children and boys did not do as well when grouped by ability as they had no peers to 'aspire' to and had poor behaviour. For the first time, I have had mixed ability groups all year and the children, especially, SEND, less able and boys, have made much better progress than they would if they were grouped (W)

This point about behaviour is important given the context of rising numbers of permanent and fixed exclusions of Key Stage 1 children (Morton 2015); there were 5,850 exclusions in 2012 rising to 8,560 in 2015, with boys more than 6 times as likely to be excluded than girls (DfE 2017b).

6. THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH

Finally, some teachers noted concerns about the cumulative effect of the various negative impacts of grouping, including a reduced self-esteem and confidence, imposition of a ‘ceiling’ on learning, and an exacerbation of disruptive behaviour, on children's mental health.
So we’re getting to the stage, what are we doing with grouping? I mean what we’re going to have is loads of mental health issues with children. (FG3)

It's pressure on teachers that becomes pressure on young children. I really worry about the mental health issues... There's children's lives at stake. (FG3)

[Discussions about grouping are] probably because mental health is quite big on the agenda now, isn't it? Mental health of children even down to the age of four is a big thing at the moment. I think because that’s part of what we’re talking about at the moment, that's what made us think, "Mental health, we’re affecting their mental health, so let's not do grouping" (FG1)

Setting is actually against their wellbeing …. the focus is on children's wellbeing, not progress. However, the mental wellbeing of children, having role models and feeling successful and things, the argument was swayed that setting is bad, particularly for ones down the lower end because they think they’re going to be unsuccessful. (FG1)

These concerns echo those who argue that for many Key Stage 1 children, especially boys, the relentless pressure to perform at such a young age is developmentally inappropriate, resulting in 'a tsunami of mental health problems' (Jarvis 2016:15). Similarly, Zeng et al (2016) found that ability grouping can lead to anxiety and panic attacks and being emotionally 'distraught' at an early age. One primary school headteacher has commented that 'the focus on IQ and academic achievement above emotional well-being … have eroded confidence and left children without the inner resources to cope' (Taite 2015).

These concerns are raised by teachers in a context where children’s mental health has been frequently raised in the press and policy discussions. For example, YoungMinds (2017:20) has estimated that three children in every classroom has a diagnosable mental health problem, and recent research with 10,000 children has shown a quarter of girls (24%) and one in 10 boys (9%) are depressed at age 14 (CLS, 2017). These concerns relate also to younger children; for example, cases of self-harm have been noted in primary school aged children as young as six years (Kidsmatter 2017; Shuttleworth 2017). A recent survey of primary school headteachers showed that eight out of 10 reported an increase in children presenting with mental health issues due to assessments and curriculum changes. Heads reported that raised levels of stress, anxiety and panic attacks in primary children had risen by 78%, fear of academic failure by 76% and depression by 55% over the past two years (Weale, 2017). In this context, the teachers in our study make reference to the mental health impact of grouping specifically, arguing that it is detrimental to mental wellbeing.
4. TENSIONS FOR TEACHERS

Grouping policy is an individual matter for schools, although it has at times been encouraged by policy (Dunne et al. 2011), and may be the teacher’s independent decision in their own classroom. In this study, we found that 60% of teachers responded that they were individually responsible for choosing their practices in relation to grouping, with 41% commenting it was a decision made by the senior leadership team (SLT) and 35% saying it was a decision made by the phase leader. Interestingly, this did not have any impact on the extent of grouping. However, our interview data suggested that often teachers were able to decide on their own how they used grouping, but felt under pressure from convention, their training, and from SLT.

In this section, we explore how teachers feel about using grouping by ‘ability’, whether they make the decision themselves or it is made for them, and the arguments they make to ‘defend’ grouping in the light of their awareness of its potentially damaging consequences. We also consider briefly the role of assessment policy in decisions on grouping, and the practices relating to informing parents, which reveal further tensions. Overall, we see the tensions for teachers between what they feel to be beneficial for the children, and what they see as necessary given the pressure they are under; as one teacher put it, ‘I wish we didn’t have to do it’.

4.1 TEACHERS’ CONTRADICTORY FEELINGS ABOUT GROUPING

Among our respondents there were clear concerns about grouping and the impact on children, as discussed above, but simultaneously there was a reluctance to change practice. Teachers we spoke to identified many reasons for grouping students, as discussed above and in the literature, including those based on children’s confidence. However, these positives often sat alongside caveats about how it should be done:

Whilst it can make preparation for the teacher easier, I don’t think it’s particularly good for the children, especially those at the far ends of the spectrum. (W)

I think one of the positive things about grouping is that children often feel safe and secure within their own ability group to actually be able to share. They feel that much more confident I think if they’re in ability groups. But my issue obviously is this thing about children should have aspirations to be able to move up all of the time. There are definitely positive and negatives about groupings, whichever way you look at it. (FG4)

I would say though, I do think it’s important not to completely stream because children who may be in that middle set are aspiring to be like those in the top set and therefore they need those role models in order to work alongside; equally for those children who are both borderline and also need that inspiration to move up. So I think it’s very important that we don’t completely stream. (FG4)

So, if you’ve got a child who’s on Phase 2 and a child who’s on Phase 5 then they’re obviously going to need completely different things, but there’s no reason why that Phase 2 child shouldn’t be exposed to all the other sounds because otherwise, what happens is that child might stay on Phase 2 forever and never be exposed to any of
the other stuff, so then, they’re always going to stay on Phase 2. (School Leader, School 3)

In this final comment, we see how despite the argument that children have different needs, this school leader views exposure to other sounds as vital in ensuring progress. This combination is one where grouping is used, but the limiting effects are reduced; of course, this involves more time and complex organisation.

In some cases, the negatives were recognised alongside attempts to make grouping a positive and motivational strategy:

Yes, so the [EYFS] profile will get done, but we will test them in a fun way. It won’t be too horrible for them, but we’d try and find out what they know, because really, I mean, again, some of them in early years are doing Phase 5, you know, they’ve got that far. (School Leader, School 2)

The phrase ‘too horrible’ suggests that the teacher knows that testing is unpleasant, but she reframes the event as a positive one celebrating those who have gone ‘far’ in Phonics. Often teachers’ reluctance to use mixed attainment grouping was based on a fear of producing lower results, as suggested here by a teacher discussing whole class phonics teaching:

I think that’s something behind the phonics bit is that because it’s drilling for a test, grouping them might be the best way; but doing it for a whole class is a risk that people aren’t willing to [take]. (FG2)

This language of fear and risk indicates the high stakes nature of testing in early years and Key Stage 1. Grouping by ‘ability’ was associated with taking preparation for tests seriously, as we discuss further below.

Many survey respondents commented that their practice was determined by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) or school policy:

It is a school requirement (W)

I’d rather not group by ability but SLT expect us to (W)

Thus, those who were able to challenge the orthodoxy of grouping or even the notion of ability, were usually those in a position of strength, either through their successful results or personal professional standing. For example, these teachers felt for various reasons that they were able to challenge the practice in their schools:

You limit children when you put them in a set. I had a really poor group, I remember this year particularly because I'm not in favour of setting on tables, I never have been. Even regardless of where I'm teaching, I do it my way. (FG2)

[Last year, I said] “Here we could get rid of the groups, the ability groups”, and the Head was just like, I think what he said to me was, “They might do that at X but it’s just not practical and not realistic”. [This year] I’m doing my masters’ and I have to do a project. I wanted to do my project on teaching in mixed attainment groups. So that’s what’s given me, like, a reason to be like, “Right, I’m going to do something different”. (Year 1 Teacher B, School 1)
Just like the schools in Braun et al (2011) who have the freedom to adapt policy to suit their school, these teachers felt they had a reason or enough professional standing to try ‘something different’, and were enthusiastic about the results. Another teacher commented:

"It's just in some schools there's a lot of pressure to conform to whatever system is in place. But within that, some schools allow some teachers, maybe more experienced teachers, and might direct certain teachers to put them in ability groups, but it might be that "This is how we do things here". So it might not be directed directly at them, but you're having to be quite strong: "I know these kids, I know what I'm doing and then do something differently". (FG2)"

This raises the question of which teachers are afforded this freedom and autonomy, and where they work; potentially, there is a risk that mixed attainment teaching is a luxury only for the schools that are already high-attaining.

Finally, it was clear from our focus group discussions that removing established practices of grouping could be an alarming idea for those who have always worked in that way:

"Then if you take away a big thing like - not just setting but actually ability grouping within the class is so common - that if you take that away, you've got to have something to replace it with. You can't just leave teachers to sink or swim, you've got to say, "This is what we should be doing instead." (FG2)"

Nonetheless, there remain emotional costs to maintaining a system which many teachers feel has negative impacts. As one teacher put it, ‘I was always aware of the fact that there was a real, like, disparity between what I believed and what I was doing’ (Year 1 Teacher B, School 1).

### 4.2 THE PRESSURES OF POLICY AND TESTING

Despite their concerns about the impact of grouping, teachers felt under pressure to use this practice to ensure their assessment results were acceptable. This tension is summed up these written comments on the survey:

"As a professional I do like the idea of using mixed ability groups but feel pressures of targets/attainment at the end of the year means I do use grouping more than I should. (W)"

"With the present curriculum it is a necessary evil. (W)"

"I think it benefits some children at the expense of others. However, in a climate of results I also think it is a necessary means to an end in many circumstances. (W)"

"It is sometimes necessary, particularly for the horrific KS1 SATS preparation, but it is detrimental to children's self-esteem and ability to work with a wide range of children. (W)"

In particular, the Phonics Screening Check and Year 2 SATs motivated practices of grouping, although there were also references to pressure from the EYFS Profile in Reception:
[We use] sets for Year 2 because of SATs and then it was class teaching again in three and four (FG2)

Then in Year 1 they are streamed by ability for phonics because of the phonics test. (FG4)

I think the only pressure we feel obviously is the phonics screening. Because we are— well, we’re not unique but we’re in a tricky situation. We’re not dealing with white British families, we’re dealing with a whole multi-faith, multi-cultural spectrum, and obviously there’s more pressure on us to get a certain percentage to the pass rate. So, we know that we are going to have to pull out all the stops to do it, but what is the best way of doing it? (School Leader, School 2)

Then in Year 1 they are streamed by ability for phonics because of the phonics test. We’ve got a two-form entry school so they’re mixed between the two classes by ability and they move to a different class, if necessary, for that. Again, then in the classes they are sat on tables [by ability]. (FG4)

Within the policy context of continual improvement, and the “incredible amount of pressure to get children to a certain level” (School Leader, School 4), these teachers use systems of grouping and interventions to reduce the risk of ‘failing’. This atmosphere of fear was also apparent in teachers’ descriptions of why their senior leadership teams chose these practices: as one said, “It’s SLT panicking in a room” (FG2).

This fear and panic leads to practices which prioritise actions based on data, and the production of data to show progress – what we describe as datafication (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017)

The other thing we started doing because of the fear of Ofsted, because we’re due one soon and we’re worried about going back into required improvement, is we’ve started doing [pupil progress meetings]. We do three pupil progress meetings a year, then we do three midpoint ones in between each of them, where we go back and we reassess any child that wasn’t at the right point and any child who is on the pupil premium list. We reassessed them so their data has to go up in between. Then when you come to the pupil progress meeting, it has to have gone up again. The idea almost being that you can double their rate of progress by meeting more often. (FG2)

This adoption of practices on the basis of improved attainment operates in contradiction with the research evidence that indicates grouping has no overall benefit; as in secondary education, mixed-ability grouping is resisted despite the evidence, even though there is a trend towards evidence-based policy (Taylor et al. 2016). Other research similarly has found that schools are fearful within the education market (Jackson 2010), concerned that attainment levels will be reduced, and that existing and potential parents will disapprove. Furthermore, teachers are wary of changing practices with the result of increasing their workload, for example if they needed to produce new plans and resources, and concerned about the impact on their results, which now determine their pay and progression (Taylor et al. 2016). Here, assessment policy creates a context where teachers feel they cannot do anything but use grouping, because of the potential consequences. One outcome of this
tension is that they find ways to alleviate their concerns, for example through emphasising how pupils can move groups.

### 4.3 GROUP FLUIDITY

Guides to good practice in grouping advise that groups should be fluid, with regular assessments of which students should be moved (Taylor et al. 2016). This idea – that regular movement of pupils can alleviate the negative effects of grouping – was present in the interviews and focus groups, and worked to resolve some of the tensions discussed above.

*Every six weeks, every half term we reassess where they are up to: "Great, you've done well, you can go into the next group". We have celebration assemblies where we get them all standing, "You've gone into...", that sort of thing. So the whole idea is everybody succeeds.* (FG3)

*[In Reception] They’re fluid so they can move. They’re dependent on what is being taught that week. If a child needs a bit more input then they’re moved about. It's just purely so that they can address the children's needs and continuous provision and such like.* [FG4]

This discourse of group fluidity was also apparent in the survey, where 50% of respondents answered ‘as necessary’ or ‘when necessary’ in the comment box for the question on ‘How often do Maths groups change?’, rather than report changing groups every half term or term. For Phonics, the responses were slightly different, with 46% answering ‘every half term’, and 34% ‘as necessary’ or ‘when necessary’.

Despite this emphasis on fluidity, some of the data from the interviews suggested that groups were not moved very often:

*I look at it every half term but I don't tend to make all that many changes.* (Year 2 teacher, School 1)

*In reality, timewise and resource-wise it's very tricky, and actually from a teacher’s point of view it's easier to put them in five groups, keep them in five groups and look at them at the end of the half-term.* (Year 2 teacher, School 3)

*I have to say, one of the problems with sets, where you go to different classes or different teachers or whatever is that movement between sets then can become difficult, where if you're moving up and you're going to a group where they've covered stuff that your group hasn't covered, and you've missed out on that learning.* (FG2)

*Our phonics streaming with the Read Write Inc programme, it's not very fluid. They don't move very often because if they move quite often, I mean it's a big undertaking to the very structured assessments but also, where it's a very structured programme, if they move often, you'll find that they'll miss out and there'll be gaps. So generally, when they're in a set they stay in it for quite a while unless they've made real accelerated progress and can move but often they don't move very much.* (FG4)
Here we see a number of reasons why groups are not fluid: time, resources, keeping content consistent, the pressure of tests, and the structured nature of the scheme being used, such as Read Write Inc for Phonics. Even where these teachers want to change their groups often, their ability to do so is limited, causing further tensions. As one comment on the survey stated, ‘Pupils remain stuck in the ability group they’ve been assigned to for a number of reasons’.

Furthermore, we would like to raise some questions in relation to the argument that fluid groups are less damaging. It is important to note that even groups that are moved around often can be damaging to children: the actual movement of children could also have detrimental effects on a child’s confidence, particularly when they are moved ‘down’ a group. Frequent movement can create an atmosphere of uncertainty, where children fear being ‘relegated’ to lower sets or groups. For example, this teacher explains how a child only has to make one mistake and this might move down a group:

The thing is she only really has one deficit in her comprehension so I’m thinking I’ll switch her down one peg and bring someone else up. Because she’s done well to stay in the top group all this time. (Year 2 Teacher, School 1)

Fluid groups are not neutral groups: they still have negative effects and can create even more uncertainty. This is apparent, as we discuss below, when parents become aware of their children’s groups.

4.4 INFORMING PARENTS

Finally in this section, we note that there is widespread reluctance to inform parents; this further reveals the extent of teachers’ contradictory feelings about grouping:

![Figure 4A: Responses to the question ‘Do you inform parents of their children’s groups?’](image)
Amongst the teachers we spoke to there was an overwhelming feeling that parents do not need to know about groups and telling them will only cause problems.

We don't say anything about that but we tone it down at parents’ evenings, especially if we know that there might be a lot of pressure on the child already. (FG3)

We don’t particularly tell our parents what group their children are in. I think it can quite often cause difficulties in the playground actually when parents are talking to each other and saying, ”My child's this and your child's only that.” So we tend to avoid that where we can. (FG4)

Where we do put in provision for a more able child, quite often that parent has come and said, ”My child is more able, what are you going to do about them?” We always have that. (FG4)

I have worked in other schools where that’s been a big thing, where we’ve had to tell... We’ve had parents complaining about groups. (Year 2 Teacher B, School 1)

One parent said, ”I thought So-and-so should have been in this group,” but not even their child. (Year 1 Teacher A, School 1)

This suggests further that teachers have confused and contradictory feelings about grouping practices; they worry about pressure on the child, and questioning from parents. We would suggest that these tensions, which are borne out of a complex policy context, compromise their professionalism and morale. Furthermore, in a context where parents are often not aware of a child’s group, the movement of children is a key moment when parents notice the groups and may question them.
5. THE ROLE OF PRIVATE COMPANIES

An interesting and unexpected finding from the study was the role of private companies in determining schools’ grouping policies, particularly for Phonics. Alongside the government-issued guidance in Letters and Sounds (DfES 2007) and the material provided to support the Phonics Screening Check, schools frequently use Phonics schemes to organise their Phonics teaching. The most popular of these is Read Write Inc. provided by Ruth Miskin Training, which is used in over 5000 schools in the UK, according to the website which sells related resources (OxfordOwl 2017). As the Department for Education match-funds schools' investments in Phonics schemes, ‘phonics is big business with financial rewards waiting for anyone who invents ‘the best’ scheme or programme for teaching it’ (Lewis and Ellis 2006:20). Three years ago, it was estimated that ‘around £40m has been spent on the rollout of systematic synthetic phonics programmes’ (Clark 2014 in Darnell 2017: 524). In this section, we explore the influence of Phonics companies on grouping practices.

Phonics teaching, as described in the Letters and Sounds document, is based on ‘phases’ of learning, from hearing sounds in Phase 1, to developing spelling in Phase 6. Phonics teaching was a key feature of discussions with teachers about groups, as Phonics was seen as a distinct subject which required specific pedagogic practices. This echoes the finding of a DfE report in 2014, which noted that ‘the majority of schools said they grouped children by ability for phonics sessions and that this was an increasing trend’ (Walker et al 2014:8). For many participants in our study, the sequential nature of the phases of Phonics and the advice given in schemes such as Read Write Inc (RWI) justified the use of grouping practices specific to phonics, including the unusual practice of groups across the key stage or even the whole school. Some of the teachers were clear that they disagreed with grouping children in this way and were frustrated that school management had bought into these edu-businesses, but understood that the move was motivated by the need to improve scores on the Phonics Screening Check in Year 1.

5.1 THE INFLUENCE OF READ WRITE INC

Read Write Inc was the most mentioned phonics company used by our respondents, which appeared to have an influence even when schools did not buy the actual scheme. Grouping based on phonics phases are central to RWI, which advises that ‘The pupils are grouped across the school in homogeneous groups’ (Ruth Miskin Training 2017: 6). As one teacher explained:

As soon as our children go into Key Stage 1, then we have a lot of streaming and a lot of setting. We do Read Write Inc as well. So the phonics is set and then we do the full literacy hour of Read Write Inc in Year 1 and Year 2. So across the whole of Key Stage 1 they’re streamed and set into I think about 10 groups. (FG3)

In one case study school, children were grouped for Phonics across the school, so that some Key Stage 2 children were placed with Key Stage 1 children:

The children in each [Phonics] group are from mixed years. So in Phase 2 we’ve got some Year 2s, some Year 3s, Year 1s. And in Phase 5 here we’ve got some Year 2s, some Year 4s, some very bright Year 1s. (School Leader, School 2)
In the RWI scheme, children are assessed each half term to see if they can progress onto the next phase (and group). When we asked on the survey about how phonics groups were decided, the overwhelming response was that this was based on RWI assessments. For example:

Regularly assessed every half term following Read Write Inc scheme (W).

We use the Read Write Inc programme and their assessments, every half term. We group into colours according to the assessments (W).

As the school leader quoted above went on to explain, these assessments are very thorough and specific to the sounds in each phase:

Because we screen all the time, so at the end of each term each teacher who has a phase group will test their group, every single one in their group. And they will literally, you know, go through, we'll test them and see if they know all the sounds. [...] And if we feel they've done exceedingly well they can go up. If they haven't done terribly well they'll stay put. If they've done a bit disastrously— very, very rarely it has been known for us to think do you know what, they're really not phase 5 - they really need another go at phase 4. So yes, there is room for movement and movement would come at the beginning of each new term. (School Leader, School 2)

Thus, it was clear from the range of responses that teachers’ choices about their methods of grouping for Phonics were influenced by the advice of the RWI scheme; however, this also provoked some tensions.

### 5.2 Phonics Groupings Contrary to Teachers’ Principles

As with wider views on grouping, discussed earlier, some teachers felt there was a tension between their principles and the practices they were encouraged to use in terms of grouping. The sequential nature of RWI meant that alternative forms of Phonics teaching appeared unfeasible to some teachers:

As we use RWI it would be quite complex to have children working at different levels in one group and I am not sure it would work (W).

Furthermore, some teachers felt that the notion of ‘ability’ itself was defined and determined by RWI assessments; others used the phases interchangeably with levels of ‘ability’:

The way in which ‘ability’ is defined in my school is through the Read Write Inc assessment scheme (W).

The phase two children for example would then go with a TA or I would send my phase one children with a teaching assistant and the phase two will go with me. So we have the more able children who have moved on to phase four (School Leader, School 4).

There is a danger here that a child’s ability becomes synonymous with where they are grouped for Phonics, with potential implications across the curriculum. For example,
children’s access to reading books was determined in one school by their phonics phase, with children being allocated reading books by phase.

There were some clear concerns about using an external scheme to decide on practice:

In Read Write Inc. we have to follow the scheme strictly despite believing that it goes against good practice in the early years. (W).

I am opposed to grouping across a year group or phase e.g. for phonics in the style of Read Write Inc. for example. (W).

Generally, we don’t use it and we give children challenges to decide for themselves which level of challenge they want to attempt but in phonics we have to use Read Write Inc. with children working at different levels. (W).

Ability grouping shouldn’t be done. Read write Inc phonics doesn't work if you don’t though. (W).

As we see in these comments, the use of RWI adds to sense in which grouping policy is determined by factors beyond the teacher’s control. As one commented, ‘I don’t get to have a say about who is grouped where’ (W). The teacher’s professional autonomy is undermined by phonics companies that had been bought in, usually due to pressure to improve Phonics Screening Check results.

5.3 PRESSURE OF THE PHONICS SCREENING CHECK

As the Phonics Screening Check is an important early accountability measure for schools, teachers felt that their grouping decisions for Phonics were particularly determined by ‘targets’:

Schools are under tremendous pressure and it’s all about scores on the doors and data and targets and so on and so forth, despite knowing that this isn’t what’s best for our children, they are precious. The example I can give is in terms of streaming if you want, setting the children, it’s phonics, in the first instance. (FG3)

Here again, this focus was seen as not what is ‘best for our children’ but determined by the need for scores and data. Although the Phonics Screening Check is described as a ‘light-touch’ assessment (DfE 2014), there are consequences for both schools and pupils if the expected ‘high stakes’ assessment data are not met, and grouping and interventions are seen as the solution:

They do phonics early on. I think that the Year 1 phonics test has had that real impact of doing phonics groups. (FG2)

I even know a well-meaning school where the parents of some children are offered before school lessons for Year 1s to do extra phonics but it’s up to the parents to agree or not (FG2)

This pressure leads, as we discuss in the following section, to practices of ‘triage’ where resources are prioritised on the basis of improving Phonics results. Certainly, the drive to improve results encourages the use of external schemes such as Read Write Inc; as one
survey respondent commented: *With Read Write Inc we have consistently had 96%+ phonics test pass rate in our very mixed ability intakes (W). The scheme is effectively marketed at schools that are concerned about their Phonics results, with a section of the website titled Are you set up for success in the Year 1 screening check?. We see here an interesting example of how policy interacts with private companies, as they find solutions to schools’ (and Local Authorities’) apprehensions and fears around achieving the correct data, and this in turn has an impact on grouping practices.*
6. SOCIAL MOBILITY AND EQUALITY CONCERNS

Issues relating to the broader context of education, particularly relating to background and the dangers of ‘labelling’ children, arose repeatedly in the research study. The issue of groups reflecting children’s backgrounds as much as their attainment was noted as a concern in several interviews and in comments on the survey. As one respondent simply put it, ‘I think we end up with middle class and not middle class groups’ (W). This is compounded by the insistence of more advantaged parents that their children should be in higher groups:

Whereas there might be somebody else who says, "I think my child should be in this group and they’re entitled to this support to allow them to access that group." Our **middle-class parents, for want of a stereotype...** (FG2)

Where we do put in provision for a more able child, quite often that parent has come and said, "My child is more able, what are you going to do about them?" We always have that. (FG4)

This association between the social background of the child and their group placement is potentially a serious issue in an education system which aims to reduce the attainment gap for disadvantaged children. Previous research has noted the tendency for teachers of young children to make links between the assumed class status and the ethnic background of children’s families and their ‘ability’ or level of development (Bradbury, 2013). This association was present in some of the interview responses, for example here in reference to the ‘Pupil Premium children’:

Yes, so the majority of the pupil premium are with me who are just one step behind where they should be. But then our pupil premium children don’t do any reading at home, none. So then we have a TA, a teaching assistant, her job is just to read with the pupil premium children and to try to catch them up. (School Leader, School 4)

As this teacher continues to comment, this difference in experience justifies the use of grouping, even for nursery children:

So last year I taught nursery and we grouped the children in nursery as well but it’s done in a way that they don’t realise they’re being grouped or anything. They’re not being labelled in any way at all but it’s done because, especially in early years, children come to the early years with a lot of different experiences from outside of school. So you have some children who already know all their sounds and everything like that, where you have other children who still can’t hear a sound so it’s very difficult to teach those children together. [...] 60% of the children who are pupil premium didn’t make their good level development, so they didn’t reach where they should be. (School Leader, School 4)

Although this teacher argues that they are ‘not being labelled in any way’, this runs counter to the research and findings above which suggest that children are aware of how they are placed and that this has an emotional and academic impact. Indeed, later in the interview she also commented that ‘... the aim of an ability group is to close the gap. Sometimes it just widens the gap, because your more able children are just ready to go’. 

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6.1 WIDENING OF ATTAINMENT GAPS

In social mobility terms, the link between background and how children are grouped or labelled prevents some children from ‘going as far as their talents take them’. This is then exacerbated by the fact that labels tend to follow children up the school, and may become ‘self-fulfilling prophecies’.

Grouping lowers expectations and reduces aspiration. (W)

It doesn't help lower ability children who at times are not challenged enough, especially if the 'low ability group' has a range of abilities and expectations for some are too low (W)

It results in children being labelled and then self-fulfilling prophecies set in (W).

I think the gap definitely broadens. If you isolate those children, if you separate them, I think so. (Reception Teacher 1, School 1)

One teacher recounted his personal experience of how being labelled ‘behind’ affected him:

That's the biggest self-fulfilling prophecy, the expectation affects all of us and that frightens the hell out of me. From personal experience, when I was in Year 5 I was about two years behind the rest of my cohort in Maths so I was at a Year 3 level when I was in Year 5. […] I couldn't learn my times tables and I was convinced I would never be any good at Maths. Now, I ended up doing a Maths degree at [elite university] and I'm now a primary school teacher. But if I hadn't have had a teacher at the beginning of the secondary school who let me believe I could do it, even though I was so far behind, that would never have happened. (FG2)

This teacher was fortunate to be able to counter the label that he had been given, and had attached to himself; however, he is likely to be an exception. As Hart comments ‘When young people’s learning is dominated by judgements of ability, their sense of identity may be profoundly affected, not just while they are at school, but beyond, into adulthood’ (2004:4). The following example from this study shows how ability grouping serves to dramatically reinforce negative self-fulfilling prophecies. In one focus group, a teacher recalled how a girl’s aspiration to be a doctor like her mother disappeared when she was moved down a set.

She said, “I used to want to be a doctor like my mum but since I moved to the middle set I’ve realised that that’s not something I can do, because I’m not good enough so I’m thinking about what else I might do in the future.” (FG2)

This compelling example demonstrates the emotional injury that ability grouping can have upon children’s identities and their future aspirations. Similarly, the adults interviewed in Boaler’s study (2005) linked the limits in their job prospects to the ability grouping used in school.

Participants also expressed concerns about race equality:

The Equalities Act has changed, hasn’t it? When it was the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, you had a duty to allow every child to reach their potential. If
they're not in the right group and they're not accessing the right learning, then they're not reaching their potential. So there are issues to do with race equality if you're not allowing children to access the curriculum that is right for them and reach their potential. (FG2)

As discussed in an earlier section, teachers were concerned about the potential for grouping to limit the curriculum and cause a 'ceiling' on learning.

6.2 EDUCATIONAL TRIAGE AND DIFFERENTIAL RESOURCES

This study found further evidence of ‘educational triage’ (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000), where resources are allocated based on the imperatives of high-stakes testing. Research from many testing systems and age groups around the world has found the practice of focusing on the borderline group while leaving those guaranteed to pass and those ‘hopeless cases’ to one side (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Here we found that this was a further complication of grouping:

And sometimes we have children that are very much on the borderline and we know that there's a chance that they could achieve it … So they're the ones we will really look to get there. (Reception Teacher, School 3)

If you think about just in Year 1, you think, "Well these are the children that have to make it" - they get the extra. Well are those children still the ones who are getting the extra? Because you're like "They only just scrapped through so now we've got Key Stage 1 SATs to worry about so now we've got to…". Do those ones who are at the bottom, do they get left and forgotten? The ones at the top, are you like, "Right, these absolutely have got to get because we've got so few who are going to get GDS [greater depth] or are going to get ES, expected standard?". Right, these ones absolutely have to get it, and they've got it drummed into them. I feel that follows them through more strongly than perhaps it should. (FG3)

One teacher explained that they had been specifically brought into Year 1 to work with a borderline group to improve Phonics results:

In Year 1 they had a panic where these children don't know these things and so then they went to a panic measure of bringing it [grouping] in. So almost everybody was in with the teacher although it was differentiated, and then I took what was deemed, the “must get these children to pass their phonics check” group. […] so they were obviously the children that they just went, "Well these ones aren't going to make it," so they're in the class doing something differentiated. Then there was the bulk going, "Yes, I think these ones are going to be fine." Then there were the other ones that they were like, "These have got to do it otherwise our score is going to be awful," basically. (FG3)

This practice is regarded as particularly damaging to attempts to reduce gaps in attainment, as children from disadvantaged backgrounds and from some minority groups are more likely to be placed in the ‘bottom’ group, ‘left and forgotten’, to use the phrases from the teacher above (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) while the borderline children who will have the most impact on attainment data ‘get the extra’.
More widely, there were concerns about the different resources and staff allocated to different groups. In particular, there were a number of comments about 'lower' groups being taught by a teaching assistant, sometimes in inappropriate teaching spaces:

SEND and low ability children nearly always get taught by a TA in my wide and varied experience. Often the TA plans for their LA group also and even provides the work for them, in many schools I have been in. This can't be right. (W)

The lower ability children don't always have access to the same quality teaching. (W)

Phonics teaching hasn't been great in the past and what was happening was it was always the lowest ability children were out of class with a teaching assistant getting… and that was the phonics diet they had. So, you've got some children that were literally on Phase 2 forever. (School Leader, School 3)

Teachers also referred to groups being taught in corridors and broom cupboards. As suggested in other research (Dunne et al. 2011), the 'borderline' groups are prioritised in terms of space and quality of teaching staff, with potentially negative effects in the longer term. As one teacher commented, there is an inevitable problem of expectations with any 'lower' group:

It doesn't help lower ability children who at times are not challenged enough, especially if the 'low ability group' has a range of abilities and expectations for some are too low (W)

### 6.3 SUMMER-BORN CHILDREN

Finally, one issue which is of particular importance in Reception and Nursery classes is the underachievement of summer-born children. As some children enter Reception at just four, and some at almost five, there is a real difference in children’s experiences and maturity, and this has an impact throughout their school careers (Dixon 2002, cited in Boaler 2005, 135). Campbell’s (2013) research into KS1 grouping practices found that summer-born children tended to be placed in the lowest ability groups more often, while autumn-born children who were relatively older were more often placed in the higher ability groups. In this study, placing children into groups at an early stage was seen by some participants as sedimenting the difference between autumn and spring-born and summer-born children, and as failing to provide role models:

We have a lot of summer borns and so in terms of their language acquisition, if they were ability groups they wouldn't necessarily get those really good role models from the other children. (FG4)

There were also a number of comments which emphasised that children develop at different rates at different times and so grouping, especially where groups remain stable, could disadvantage some children by limiting their learning.
BOX 3: INTERVENTIONS AS A FORM OF GROUPING

Intervention groups of targeted children are a form of temporary grouping, with consequences for the children similar to those for standard grouping. Children are removed from the classroom and given different work based on their perceived ‘problem’ that requires and intervention. Often the group is taught by a teaching assistant, for example, for Phonics interventions:

… what was happening was it was always the lowest ability children were out of class with a teaching assistant (Senior Leader, School 4)

As discussed above, children in intervention groups may not experiences the same learning environments or the same quality of staff. Interventions may be temporary, but frequently the same children are subject to interventions repeatedly over the years, for different subjects. It seems that the motivation for this practice comes from the need to intervene where children are not making adequate progress:

I used to enjoy my people progress meetings when we used to talk about the children. Now you come in, all our data in your hands and literally we get names reeled off, these are the children who are not on track on a thingy, I want to know what you're doing. It literally is a list of interventions, any intervention. There's no thought. You don't talk about the child, it's just occasionally even said in meetings and again, I don't blame them for this because they’re panicking. Even if you think it's not going to have an impact, we have to have something on this bit of paper so that when it doesn't, we can show that we at least did something. It's like a parallel universe. (FG2)

In this ‘parallel’ universe, what matters is that there is an intervention to point to, associated with every child who is ‘not on track’. However, we would argue that some of the damaging impact of grouping discussed in this report may also apply to temporary forms of grouping such as intervention groups, and thus these should also be used with caution.

Moreover, we also found that policies relating to grouping and interventions were often intertwined. In School 2, there was a decision to move away from grouping for Phonics across the school to whole class groups, causing the school leader we interviewed to make plans for intervention groups to compensate:

I’m going to pull out the children who have not made much progress in early years. So those that are coming up from early years with very little phase 2 segmenting and blending going on. […] So I will pull out some Year 1s, some Year 2s, possibly some newly arrived children who are actually going to be in Year 4 but they’re Romanian and they haven’t been here for more than a few months and they’re not picking up very quickly. So although they’re Year 4, they’re going to really benefit from the end of phase 2 with a big push. (School Leader, School 2)

Here interventions are seen as a way to solve the problem of not grouping by ‘pulling out’ the children who are not making enough progress.
7. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, this research study, involving focus groups, interviews with teachers and school leaders and a large survey of teachers, has found a complex picture of grouping in early years and Key Stage 1, and an equally complex set of arguments and feelings about these practices. Children are grouped by ‘ability’, attainment, or their stage of development, from the age of two in some cases. There is widespread use of interventions, which we can see as a form of grouping, which allows for the removal of some children for particular activities. The extent and type of grouping varies by subject and age, as far as our sample suggests, and some schools may rely on external private companies to determine their grouping practice, particularly in Phonics. Many teachers think children are aware of their group, and they are concerned about the detrimental impact of being labelled on children’s self-confidence and behaviour, and about the production of limits on children’s learning, in contrast with a ‘growth mindset’. There were concerns raised that this could have a potentially negative impact upon some children’s mental health. Some early years teachers want to keep free-flowing play as a central pedagogy which develops young children’s confidence, self-regulation and positive learning dispositions. However, teachers both in early years and Key Stage 1 feel that the pressure of assessments produces the need for grouping in some form, and they are reluctant to change their practice due to lack of time and space to think about ‘doing differently’. Thus, grouping becomes a ‘necessary evil’, with teachers commenting ‘I wish I didn’t have to do it’. Moreover, as the ideas of ‘ability’ as fixed and grouping as best practice permeate the school system, many teachers are wary or fearful of moving away from this practice. The idea that groups are fluid and children move regularly is presented as a solution to the negative impact, but we also raise concerns about moving between groups as a moment with particular importance to children and parents. Our findings suggest that teachers continue to have concerns about the social impact of grouping, in terms of widening gaps between groups of pupils. This coheres with extensive research which suggests that grouping as a pedagogical tool is an important part of a complex jigsaw of practices which systematically disadvantage children from poorer backgrounds (Francis et al. 2017). Grouping by ‘ability’ works against the government’s stated aims of reducing attainment gaps and allowing all children to flourish in the Great Meritocracy.

The practice of grouping and its relation to assessment makes this research important at a time when the government has announced it will re-introduce Baseline assessment in Reception, and keep Key Stage 1 SATs until 2023 (DfE 2017a). The Phonics Screening Check will continue, and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile will see a further focus upon Maths and Literacy so that it is ‘appropriately aligned with the year 1 curriculum’ (DfE 2017a:6). Our findings here suggest that these practices will encourage the use of grouping by ‘ability’ as schools attempt to find ways to improve their results (despite the evidence to the contrary). Furthermore, an assessment at the very start of compulsory education in the form of Baseline Assessment has the potential to provide evidence and justification for further grouping in Reception, as it will label children at the beginning of their school careers. Meanwhile, we note the recent concern between increases in poor mental health among children and the relentless pressure for schools to continuously improve academic attainment. YoungMinds (2017:20) a children’s mental health charity, has called on the Government ‘to rebalance the education system, so that the wellbeing of children is
considered as important as academic attainment’. This concern – mainly focused on secondary education – may become increasingly relevant to primary education too.

In light of these findings, we recommend:

- Teachers should feel justified in questioning what they see as the damaging emotional and academic impact of grouping for young children, given the wide research to this effect.

- Teachers should feel confident that play is appropriate with young children to develop self-confidence, positive learning dispositions and the development of a growth mindset.

- Senior leaders should be aware of the research in this area, and consider the need for grouping practices, particularly for younger children who may have their learning limited or be labelled in their first years of school.

- Policy makers should examine whether the explicit and implicit support for grouping in policy documentation is appropriate, in the light of their stated aims of reducing gaps in attainment and creating a meritocratic system. Relatedly, those responsible for policy should reflect upon the introduction of further assessment into primary schools, and consider the impact of grouping practices.

- Policy makers should make the Phonics Screening Check non-statutory, because of the impact on grouping practices which, from age three, can have detrimental effects upon children’s wellbeing, particularly those children who are labelled as ‘failures’ at age six if they do not pass the Phonics Check. Policy makers should also be aware of the frustration that teachers feel with Phonics companies undermining teachers’ professional decision-making.

- Teachers’ unions should support their members to address the drivers of excessive workload, and lobby the government to address accountability and curriculum pressures that lead to the labelling of children.

- Teachers’ unions should support their members by sharing case studies of schools who do not group or label pupils by ability.

- Parents should feel empowered to ask questions about grouping practices in their child’s class, and the basis for these decisions.

- Researchers should explore further the impact of grouping on young children’s mental health, the link to assessments, and the impact on equality.

To this end, we hope that this report can begin a conversation about the ‘taken for granted’ practice of grouping, and its use with young children.
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