**Learners’ attitudes to mixed-attainment grouping: examining the views of students of high, middle and low attainment**

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**Scope of Paper**

The paper explores the impact of different methods of grouping on academic and personal outcomes of students. The data is taken from the ongoing ‘Best Practice in Grouping Students’ RCT, based in England, looking specifically at the ‘Best Practice in Mixed Attainment’. Data is taken from 8 schools, where year 7 students of multiple SES and academic backgrounds were interviewed independently or in group environments.

The research focused on the opinions of mixed-attainment or ‘heterogenous’ groups from three different attainment levels: high; middle and low. The areas that are discussed are:

* equity and individualism
* comparison, competition, and status
* empowerment and learner identities
* feeling threatened and exposed
* differentiation

**Background**

Previous research has discussed the use of mixed-attainment classes in humanities, music and arts. However, it is rare to find these approaches in core subjects such as maths, English and science, where ‘setting’ or ‘homogeneous’ approaches are preferred within the UK. The use of setting has been discussed extensively in the past, particularly in regards to how high achievers tend to have positive benefits, whereas lower ability students have delayed progression of 1-2 months per year and decreased confidence and engagement.

This aim for this research was to address the gap on how different learners perceive mixed attainment grouping, as the majority of previous research is qualitative and potentially misses students’ voices.

Preceding research suggests that high attaining students tend to prefer the setting system, whereas disadvantaged students, such as those that qualify for free school meals, are likely to prefer the mixed-attainment approach. This is further demonstrated by sociological research that has suggested that learner identities are inter-connected with race, class and gender, where there is potential for disadvantaged and minority students can be overlooked.

**Key Findings**

The results of the study presented mixed results towards mixed-attainment grouping, as presented in the table below. Interestingly, the high and low attainers had more positive opinions of mixed-attainment grouping, whereas middle attainers tended to be more divided.

|  | **Positive views** | **Negative views** | **Mixed views** | **Total** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Higher attainers | 18 (51%) | 8 (23%) | 9 (26%) | 35 (100%) |
| Middle attainers | 12 (41%) | 13 (45%) | 4 (14%) | 29 (100%) |
| Lower attainers | 16 (76%) | 3 (14%) | 2 (10%) | 21 (100%) |

Following on from the dataset, the subsequent sections will look more specifically at different attainment levels responses.

High attaining students

The data does not portray the previous research that high attainers dislike the mixed-grouping system, with more than half of the students’ reporting a positive opinion. The paper discusses that a significant proportion of high attainers described how heterogenous grouping promotes fairness and equality of opportunity. In addition, they discussed how this approach increased social inclusivity of the whole class, as they were aware that some lower-ability students had a reduced curriculum content.

Another benefit of mixed-attainment classes, cited by high attainers, is the diversity within the class, which promotes the benefits of understanding others opinions and seeing how other students may think. They discuss how the opportunity to work with other students and help them understand concepts helped them deepen their level of understanding, relating to the elaboration aspect of cognitive learning.

The paper discusses that there were also negative opinions from the high attaining group, particularly as some students’ displayed a competitive and meritocratic approach to their learning. Some students described their mixed-ability lessons as ‘easy’, ‘boring’ and ‘not challenging enough’. This may be due to teachers not differentiating and setting challenges in class, but may also be due to the entitlement that some students held, which Yonezawa, Wells and Serna (2002) suggests originates to academic labelling and subsequent ‘learner identity’ associated with their experiences within lower school or primary school. This theory suggests that some students may feel that they have a superiority over other students, based on how they were set in KS1 and KS2, as well as due to their race, gender or socioeconomic status.

An interesting note of the study, is that when discussing what limits high-attainers progress in heterogenous classes, students tended to prefer the use of the word ‘behaviour’, rather than ‘ability’ or academic status. Many of these students stated that they preferred to be in a high-attaining class with other students who share their values of wanting to do work and avoid distractions of other students who mess around and do not want to do the subject.

Middle attaining students

Potentially the most interesting view was that of middle-attainers. Those that had positive views of heterogenous grouping tended to focus on the benefits to themselves, where they could potentially achieve more and enable their progress within the class. Much like the views of the high-attainers, some students suggested that the diversity that comes with mixed-grouping can learn more from other students’ answers.

Some students within the middle-attaining group identified that students are aware of the ability hierarchy which is often present in schools, where there is a favouritism for the higher students to do well and achieve high grades, as well as to the lower ability who need further support. Thus, these students can feel that they are missing out on attention and progression.

Other middle-attainers cited that they felt inferior and frustrated in mixed ability classes, feeling embarrassed if they were struggling with work. They felt that teachers often asked high attainers that completed their work first to help other students. This left some students feeling ‘humiliated’ and ‘babied’, reducing self-confidence.

Some middle-attaining students had similar opinions to high-attaining students, stating that some lower-attaining students interrupted the flow of the lesson and stopped the class from doing their work, mainly due to asking multiple questions.

Low attaining students

A large majority of students preferred the mixed-attainment approach to lessons as they increased the range of opportunities available to students. They noted that some students had reduced curriculum content in lower sets, where students’ can feel excluded from their peers.

In particular, one student reported that she had the opportunity to learn about ‘what the good people are doing’ within the mixed-ability setting, which she would not have had in a homogenous lower-set environment. This helped students discover things that they were good at and learn about themselves, which can improve self-confidence.

Other students noted that they were initially nervous about sitting next to higher-attaining students, with students doubting whether they belonged within the class. One exchange between two students highlights the opportunities that lower-attaining students identified:

Colm: But now I know if you're sitting next to smart people, you can get a better job, then you can –

Debbie: Get a better grade on your GCSE’s.

Colm: Yeah. Then you can get a lot of money to have a nice family and have a nice house

This exchange highlights that lower-attaining students can feel as though they are ‘left for unemployment’, but that they found the mixed-attainment grouping to increase their opportunities for gaining academic qualifications and the potential for better long-term prospects.

Whilst a large majority of students in the low attaining group reported positive views, 10% of these students reported that they could feel intimidated and disheartened by the faster pace and more challenging work in a mixed-attainment environment.

Teachers

Teachers reported that collaborative work within heterogenous classes can provide opportunities for lower-attaining students to thrive, taking on responsibilities which can increase self-concept and self-efficacy. This can provide a mutual benefit to learners of all abilities and bring a sense of community to the school. They argue that there is a need to remove ability labels from students, instead producing ‘empowered learners’ who want to learn.

**Conclusion**

The research shows that students attitudes to mixed attainment classes are largely related to their prior attainment levels. In particular, lower-attaining students tended to view heterogenous classes more positively due to its inclusivity and collaboration.

In comparison to previous research, which has suggested that higher-attaining students hold negative views to mixed-ability teaching, this research presents that high-attaining students reacted favourably to this approach in terms of social justices and inclusivity.

There are many reasons for and against both heterogenous and homogenous grouping, which are often influenced by politics, society and pedagogical explanations. Regardless of the grouping method, the quality of teaching helps to define whether or not students achieve. Therefore, teachers should ensure that they differentiate to meet the needs of the class, whilst being aware of the emotional implications that relate to this. Furthermore, they should look at collaborative approaches, ensuring that all members of a group have equal opportunity to thrive.

As this research is ongoing, there will be further papers which are likely to cover further aspects of grouping and views of others.

**Rationale**

I think that it can be a little unusual looking at how groups are set within schools, which is predominantly determined by school leaders and local guidelines. Whilst classroom teachers have little say in the class grouping system, they are in control of grouping within the class. There will be a natural difference in attainment within a class, regardless of whether the class is set or mixed-ability, therefore this research can be applied within the classroom regardless. But thinking about how we group students and deliver information to them is imperative. We need to be aware of the opinions of students across different backgrounds, whether that be looking at how they may react in terms of their attainment, to their background.