

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Institution: University College London | | |
| Unit of Assessment: UoA 23 Education | | |
| Title of case study: Best practice in grouping students | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014–2018 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Jeremy Hodgen | Professor of Mathematics Education | September 2017 to present |
| Becky Taylor | Senior Research Fellow | January 2016 to present |
| Becky Francis | Professor, Former Director Institute of Education | July 2016 to present |
| Antonina Tereshchenko | Senior Research Fellow | April 2016 to present |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2017 to 2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N | | |
| 1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>The key finding of the Best Practice in Grouping Students research – that attainment grouping is promoting educational inequality (even when schools attempt to implement it ‘fairly’) – has provoked a shift in national policymaking and public debate. It has prompted teachers into greater reflection around what has been a long-standing and entrenched aspect of educational policy and school practice. With almost all UK secondary schools, and many primary schools, shown to be grouping students by attainment at the outset of the study, the research’s impact on improving practice and mitigating harm to millions of learners is substantial.</p> | | |
| 2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>Programme: The study team included Professor Becky Francis and colleagues first at King’s College London (2014–2015) and then at UCL Institute of Education (2016–Present). Co-investigators were Professor Jeremy Hodgen (King’s, 2014; University of Nottingham, 2014–2016, and UCL, 2017–Present), Professor Louise Archer (King’s, 2014–2016; and UCL, 2017–Present), and Professor Paul Connolly at Queen’s University Belfast. The project was funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (GBP1,164,000).</p> <p>Context: The Best Practice in Grouping Students project investigated effective approaches to grouping secondary students, focusing particularly on disadvantaged students’ outcomes. Grouping students by attainment – “setting or streaming” – is widespread: international data suggest 99 per cent of UK secondary students attended schools that grouped by attainment, into different classes, for some or all subjects – the highest proportion across OECD countries. Longstanding research evidence shows that setting or streaming are not effective ways of raising attainment for most pupils, and that low attainers do relatively worse when in low attainment groups compared to mixed attainment classes. However, there has been little research on the composition of effective mixed attainment practice, or on efforts to improve equity within attainment grouping. Existing research also appeared to have had little effect on practice. Both the last Labour government and senior Conservative ministers, as well as Ofsted on occasion, systematically endorsed and encouraged attainment grouping over the period 1997–2015 (R1).</p> <p>Methodology:</p> <p>1. The research’s first strand, ‘Best Practice in Setting’, investigated setting across 126 schools with 24,742 pupils in Years 7–8 via a randomised control trial (RCT). This was the first rigorous</p> | | |

experimental investigation of attainment grouping conducted in English schools. The research aimed to improve and evaluate the educational attainment and self-confidence of students placed in attainment groups for maths or English by preventing poor practices, such as misallocation of pupils to groups, low expectations of low-attaining and disadvantaged pupils, and not allocating skilled teachers to low-attaining groups. The intervention was informed by a literature review that distilled seven explanations for detrimental effects of setting (**R1**).

2. The second research strand, 'Best Practice in Mixed Attainment', was a pilot study across 13 schools with 2,107 Year 7–8 pupils. It investigated the impact of mixed attainment teaching and grouping on student attainment and self-confidence, and what constitutes good mixed attainment practice (**R1**, **R2**).

Key findings:

- Almost a third of pupils are misallocated to sets, and patterns of misallocation reflect bias according to pupil ethnicity and gender (**R3**).
- Pupils in low sets are subject to lower aspirations and poorer pedagogy. Teachers more highly qualified in their taught subject are more likely to be placed with high sets (**R4**).
- There is a relationship between the set level in which pupils are placed and their self-confidence, both in that subject and more generally. Over time, pupils in low sets lose confidence, while for those in high sets it grows. This demonstrates causality of labelling via attainment grouping for pupil self-confidence (**R5**).
- Improving equity in setting is difficult. The RCT showed no significant effect for the intervention 'Best Practice in Setting'. Schools found applying the project's stipulations hard. The research catalogued the various practical and cultural reasons why schools found it hard to improve (**R6**).
- Mixed attainment grouping can be effective but there is little existing research to show how it is best implemented. The research introduced some key principles for effective practice from its findings.
- Many secondary school teachers who have no prior experience of mixed attainment practice are wary of it, fearing it increases workload. The research showed the need to support schools to improve their practices (**R2**).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1 Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Pepper, D., Taylor, B. & Travers, M.C. (2017) Exploring the relative lack of impact of research on 'ability grouping' in England: a discourse analytic account, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 47(1), 1–17.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2015.1093095>

R2 Taylor, B., Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Pepper, D., Tereshchenko, A. & Travers, M.C. (2017) Factors deterring schools from mixed attainment teaching practice, *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 25(3), 327–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2016.1256908>

R3 Connolly, P., Taylor, B., Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Mazenod, A. & Tereshchenko, A. (2019) The misallocation of students to academic sets in maths: A study of secondary schools in England, *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(4), 873–897.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3530>

R4 Francis, B., Archer, L., Mazenod, A., Craig, N., Taylor, B., Tereshchenko, A., Hodgen, J. & Connolly, P. (2019) Teacher 'quality' and attainment grouping: the role of within-school teacher deployment in social and educational inequality, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 77, 183–192.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.10.001>

R5 Francis, B., Craig, N., Hodgen, J., Taylor, B., Tereshchenko, A., Connolly, P. & Archer, L. (2020) The impact of tracking by attainment on pupil self-confidence over time: demonstrating the accumulative impact of self-fulfilling prophecy, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 41(5), 626–642. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1763162>

R6 Taylor, B., Francis, B., Craig, N., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Mazenod, A., Tereshchenko, A. & Pepper, D. (2019) Why is it difficult for schools to establish equitable practices in allocating students to attainment 'sets'? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 67(1), 5–24.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2018.1424317>

Research quality indicators: research outputs have been through a rigorous peer-review process, peer review funding, article award, reference point for further funding.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Principal beneficiaries: Students, through schools either avoiding grouping pupils by ability, or by reducing negative effects, or by formulating mixed ability teaching effectively; teachers, through better-informed practice; policymakers and the public, through evidence-informed policy which seeks to reduce harm.

Reach and significance: The research has halted policy promotion of attainment grouping, preventing further harm, so improving provision in a contentious area of school practice which the research confirms has profound impacts on many young people across England.

Instrumental impact: Policy

Policy documents published by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2019 show a profound shift in the government's approach to attainment grouping, with official endorsement of the practice replaced by the encouragement of teachers to reflect on the issue, with professionals being directed towards the team's research. The prior active published advocacy for attainment grouping from successive Governments and from Ofsted for more than 25 years (**R1**) has ceased.

Current advice from the DfE's Teacher Early Career Framework (2019, **S1**), sets out in one of its "standards" for teachers to follow: *'How pupils are grouped is...important; care should be taken to monitor the impact of groupings on pupil attainment, behaviour and motivation.'* The team's research is listed twice among sources used by this document, first with regards to Classroom Practice, and second referring to Adaptive Teaching. It is the only research cited specifically on this subject in the section where the above statement appears and there is no direction toward advocating any specific grouping practice. The Early Career Framework, and its sister document ITT Core Content, form the core curriculum for all English Initial Teacher Training, and all Early Career training development, meaning that all new and developing recruits to teaching study this content.

This impact on policy thinking is reflected in discussion and presentations at the highest level. Francis and Hodgen provided the leading input into a September 2018 DfE roundtable on attainment grouping. Professor Francis also discussed the study findings at a meeting with the then Secretary of State, in January 2019. Another DfE roundtable followed in October 2019. The team also met senior Ofsted officials in December 2019. Hence the project findings have impacted national policy, including influencing senior civil servants (**S2**). As confirmed by the DfE's Deputy Director for Curriculum Policy, *'The research... had significant reach amongst Department of Education officials. Following a briefing of senior officials led by the Secretary of State's policy adviser, follow-up sessions were held with officials from the department's Curriculum Policy Division. These briefings helped both to focus officials on the potential damaging impact of setting and streaming, and consideration was made of how the department could support the already widely shared findings of this report. In particular it supported the department's focus on race equality in the education system'* (**S2**).

Instrumental impact: practice

There is evidence of the research findings being considered by teachers as they weigh up how to group pupils.

National-level influence: The team worked with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) on 2018 revisions to the 'setting and streaming' section of EEF's Toolkit. The Toolkit informs Pupil Premium spending decisions in up to two-thirds of English schools and receives more than 28,000 page views a month. The Deputy CEO of EEF said that this first rigorous UK based study on attainment grouping has informed *'a significant update to our Teaching and Learning Toolkit, which saw the separation of our "Setting or streaming" strand into a new "Within-class*

attainment grouping” strand, along with the former “Setting or streaming” strand’ (S3). The Deputy CEO of EEF stated that the research ‘has been important in growing the evidence base and increasing its relevance to English schools’ (S3).

This programme of research has been critical in EEF developing new strands of funding, such as School Choices: Understanding the impact of school-level decisions and policies, for rigorous investigation of research questions that cannot be answered through randomised controlled trials. The Deputy CEO of EEF further stated that the evidence from the project has *‘also guided the EEF’s grant-making and evidence generation choices, helping us [EEF] to steer our investments towards those domains of teaching practice that hold the greatest promise of impact for disadvantaged young people’ (S3).*

In mobilising the research, the team has presented to c. 35 teacher and school leader conferences between 2015 and 2020, including keynotes at national practitioner conferences such as ResearchED attended by 1000+ teachers. As such the research findings are *‘influencing a debate about attainment grouping as the norm’* because it *‘has added considerably to current evidence about setting and streaming in schools’ and has ‘made it safe to have a professional debate about better practice. Your research has added to the debate about quality and equity’* (Former HM Chief Inspector (HMCI) (S4).

Direct influence on teachers:

The research findings (R1–6) informed an ongoing campaign, launched in 2018, encouraging teachers to pledge to start conversations with colleagues about attainment grouping. A video produced by the team to support the campaign and encourage teachers to start conversations about equity and attainment grouping was viewed by 20,000 people in its first week. The campaign is also supported by a teacher resource called ‘Dos and Don’ts of Attainment Grouping’ (S5). This was downloaded over 1500 times since 2019, as well as widely distributed to 1500+ teachers at conferences and events. A former HMCI said *‘I have seen both sets of materials used to inform not only staff development sessions within schools but also conferences across schools, leading many teachers to translate the guidance into changes in planning and delivery in classrooms. Your research continues to influence the debate by reminding us all of the importance of evidence as a practical support for better practice’ (S4).*

Professional development resources, designed to encourage teachers to reflect on grouping practices in the context of research-based practice, were developed by the Chartered College of Teaching (CCT), based on findings from an article written by team members and published in the CCT’s journal, *Impact* (S6). CCT’s Director of Education and Research affirmed that *‘The findings have been widely used across different areas of the Chartered College’s work and through this influenced teachers’ and schools’ thinking on practice with in total 2000 web visits’ (S7).*

The resource ‘Best Practice in Mixed Attainment Grouping’, which was used in the randomised controlled trial to support the intervention, has been distributed widely beyond the original intervention schools to more than 200 teachers at schools and won the 2016 *BERA BCF Routledge Curriculum Journal Prize* for collaborative work with teachers. Building on the findings, the team developed a resource ‘Developing Best Practice in mixed attainment English’ in collaboration with practitioners. This has been shared with 300 English teachers and is downloadable from the website. A headteacher said: *‘As a national Research School, we know that identifying and measuring impact in educational settings is stubbornly difficult; however, if we compare our progress scores for our SEND students (in a mathematics department which has had little staff turbulence) pre- and post-involvement in the project, we have seen our progress 8 scores for mathematics for SEND students in 2018 and 2019 move from a negative progress score to a positive progress score, which is remarkable’ (S8).*

The ASCL ‘Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education’ (2019) for school leaders includes a ‘Pathfinder Resource Pack’ which contains a case study on attainment grouping drawing directly on the research findings. As of 2020, more than 250 school leaders have already committed to

shaping their practices in response to the Ethical Leadership Framework (S9), a significant impact route for our social justice-oriented research.

Conceptual impact: Influencing public and professional debate

The Deputy CEO of EEF stated that the research had 'revitalised practitioner debate about pupil grouping in the UK' (S3), a view corroborated by CCT's Director of Education and Research: 'By providing evidence about the inequitable impact of attainment grouping in England, it has been a catalyst for shifting the debate on the topic across the teaching profession towards a more critical and questioning stance' (S7). The story 'Ignoring the evidence on ability grouping,' based on R1, was among the three most popular stories on the Institute for Effective Education's *Best Evidence in Brief* website for 2017 (S10). TES has covered the projects extensively, with over 10 articles to date. The findings on the extent of misallocation of students to maths attainment sets by race/ethnicity (R3) made national news in *The Independent* (7 Sept 2018) and *The Times* (8 Sept 2018) and featured in a TES podcast which had 2,453 downloads. A former HMCI stated that this finding 'seems to be influencing discussions about setting and ethnicity, as part of the Black Lives Matter debate' (S4). The TES Pedagogy podcast by Francis, 'What every teacher needs to know about setting', had 3,472 downloads. Francis was named among TES's 10 most influential people in the world of education in 2018 specifically for her work on attainment grouping as 'an issue for social inequality'.

In summary, the findings about the inequitable effects of attainment grouping in England have been a key catalyst in influencing policy and practice and thus impacting directly on the many millions of school pupils. Evidence has been provided demonstrating how the most recent policy documents on Initial Teacher Training and the Early Career Framework have cited these findings in a shift from an active promotion of attainment grouping by successive governments towards an encouragement for teachers to carefully reflect on, and consider, the effects of the practice on pupils. Extensive evidence, from national stakeholders, the media and teachers, demonstrates the extent of this considered reflection, how it has drawn on the research findings and its influence on practice.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1 DfE (2019) [Teacher Early Career Framework](#). London: DfE.
- S2 Testimonial from the Deputy Director for Curriculum Policy Division, DfE.
- S3 Testimonial from the Deputy Chief Executive, Education Endowment Foundation.
- S4 Testimonial from former HMCI/CEO of Ofsted.
- S5 Francis, B., Taylor, B., Hodgen, J., Tereshchenko, A. & Archer, L. (2018) [Dos and don'ts of attainment grouping](#). London: UCL Institute of Education.
- S6 Chartered College of Teaching (2018) [Attainment Grouping CPD Pack](#). *Impact*, Issue 2.
- S7 Testimonial from the Director of Education and Research, Chartered College of Teaching.
- S8 Testimonial from Headteacher, Research School.
- S9 Ethical Leadership Commission (2019) [Navigating the educational moral maze: Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education](#). *Pathfinder resource pack* 2019.
- S10 Institute for Effective Education (2018) [What's been most popular in Best Evidence in Brief?](#)