



Cycle of Constraint: A study of perspective and practice of ability grouping for literacy and numeracy in DEIS primary schools in Ireland

1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a PhD thesis (2012) by Deirdre McGillicuddy of the School of Education, University College, Dublin, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme.*

2. What is the study's purpose?

The purpose of this study was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the implementation and use of ability grouping for numeracy and literacy in Irish DEIS primary schools. Two explanations are needed here.

- » DEIS is an acronym for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools and is also the Irish word for 'opportunity'. It is used to identify and categorise the most marginalised schools, which are entitled to resources in line and appropriate to their categorisation. There are 2 categories: DEIS Band 1 (the most marginalised and disadvantaged) and DEIS Band 2.
- » Within the context of this study, 'ability grouping' was considered as the organisation of children into groups based on perceived ability for the teaching of numeracy and literacy. It took the form of within-class, cross-grade or setting groupings. Within-class ability grouping is used within a classroom, whereby children

can be reorganised into groups based on ability depending on the subject being taught. Setting is the regrouping of pupils into classes based on ability and tends to be implemented across a year group or standard. Cross-grade grouping is when pupils are placed into ability-defined groups from different class levels.

The study explored the extent to which ability grouping is being used and how it mediates children's experience of primary school. There were four main objectives:

- » to identify national-level patterns in relation to teacher use, perceptions and experiences of ability grouping;
- » to consider the impact of teacher and school background on the implementation of these practices;
- » to conduct intensive case study analysis of teacher implementation of ability grouping;
- » to explore children's experience of ability grouping with reference to:
 - › learner identity;
 - › psycho-social responses;
 - › affinity with school;
 - › social interaction.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available from the Library, University College, Dublin.

* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

3. How was the study undertaken?

The study sought to capture children's experiences of ability grouping in the primary classroom. It adopted a child-centred approach, ensuring that all methodologies were child-friendly and appropriate to the age of the children. A two-phase mixed methodological approach was adopted. Phase 1 involved a national survey of teachers teaching 1st/2nd and 5th/6th classes in DEIS primary schools (n=685). Phase 2 involved capturing a more in-depth picture of the use of ability grouping at the micro level of the classroom at Junior (2nd class) and Senior (5th class) level. Case studies of three primary schools were conducted for this purpose, including interviews with school principals (n=3), teachers (n=9) and parents (n=3). Children were asked to partake in focus group interviews (n=89), in completing a questionnaire (n=93) and in a socio-metric survey (n=100). The socio-metric survey sought to identify peer interactional patterns within the classroom in order to identify whether ability grouping impacted on the children's identity as learners and social beings within the social world of the school. Field observation notes were also completed during the course of the visits to the three case study schools.

4. What are the key findings?

Key quotes from the children and teachers (using pseudonyms) are presented in this section in order to provide an insight into their voiced experience of ability grouping in school. The ability group label (e.g. Low Ability Group) refers to that which the class teacher had assigned to each child.

4.1 Ability grouping is prevalent across DEIS primary schools

'There is Smart Maths, there's Medium Maths and there is Dumb Maths.' [Caitríona, Low Ability Group]

Findings from this study indicate the prevalence of ability grouping as a mechanism for organising children for learning in literacy and numeracy across DEIS schools, with 71.5% of teachers indicating that they currently use this practice. The main findings with regard to the implementation and use of ability grouping in primary school classrooms are as follows:

- » **Rationale underpinning use of ability grouping:** The study found that both internal (school policy, context and standardised test results) and external (Departmental policy and the Inspectorate) factors were influencing teachers' decisions to use ability grouping. Teachers use ability grouping because they feel it allows them to adapt instruction to meet

the individual needs of their pupils, while also affording an opportunity to provide extra help and enrichment. It was perceived as a means of providing additional support to children who were considered to be struggling, while facilitating the needs of the higher ability children, allowing them to 'fly'.

- » **Assignment into ability groups:** Decisions regarding the assignment of pupils into ability group levels were made based on both subjective (personal judgement and teacher-designed tests) and objective (standardised tests) measures.
- » **Movement between ability groups:** While teachers indicated that there was a possibility of movement between ability groups, there was very little evidence from both teachers and children of this occurring in the case study schools. Indeed, evidence emerged that children assigned to a group at age 8 tended to remain in this group as they progressed through primary school. Barriers preventing movement from occurring included learning pace, behavioural issues and a sense that the group compositions were appropriate to the ability of the child. It emerged that children assigned to the below-average ability group were particularly stuck at this level, with teachers communicating a marked difference in their ability to work (meaning that children tended to remain at the lower end of the class); these children were perceived to have a 'fixity' in terms of their abilities. The children themselves voiced an anxiety, justifying the lack of upward movement between ability groups, aligning the acceptance of failure with the individual rather than with the process of ability grouping within the system.

4.2 Teacher and pupil characteristics inform the use of ability grouping in schools

Findings from this study indicate that both teacher and pupil characteristics inform the implementation and use of ability grouping in Irish primary schools.

- » **Teacher characteristics:** Younger, less experienced teachers and those who had not engaged in additional professional development were more likely to use ability grouping in the teaching of literacy and numeracy.
- » **Pupil characteristics:** Ability grouping was more likely to be used in classrooms where there were greater numbers of boys present and younger, below-average-ability, minority ethnic children.

4.3 Ability grouping influences teacher practice in teaching numeracy and literacy

Evidence emerged from this study indicating that ability grouping directly influences teacher expectation and practice across ability levels.

- » **Teachers adopted different practices** with the less and more able groups. Children assigned to the higher ability groups were more likely to be encouraged to work independently, while those assigned to the lower ability groups tended to work in a more structured environment under the supervision of an adult.
- » **Teachers held different expectations** for the groups, with greater expectations held for the higher ability groups, expecting them to work at a faster pace, and lower expectations for those in the lower ability groups, assigning them more repetitive tasks.
- » **Classroom management** was perceived to be more challenging when there were greater numbers of low ability and Special Educational Needs pupils present in the class or group. Teachers believed that children assigned to the lower ability group were more difficult to manage, while higher ability pupils were more careful about following the rules.
- » Although teachers communicated a sense that the children were aware of their group assignment, they **believed that it did not matter to the children** to which group they had been assigned. It was suggested that the children were accepting of the situation and just got on with things.

4.4 Ability grouping influences children's experience of learning in numeracy and literacy

This study found that ability grouping had a direct impact on children's experience of learning in numeracy and literacy in school. Findings were conceptualised under a framework encompassing the emergence of learner identity, the psycho-social response, peer group status and positioning and affinity with school.

- » A dichotomous understanding of learner identity emerged from the children, with those assigned to the low ability group considered to be **dumb, slow, not liked** and **low**. Pupils

assigned to the higher ability groups held higher ability-related status within the class, being positioned as **smart, good, liked** and **high**.

- » Children vocalised a psycho-social response to how they were positioned in terms of ability group assignment in class. Being considered as clever evoked positive emotional responses, such as **pride, confidence** and **happiness**, consequently associated with an elevated sense of self-esteem. In contrast, those assigned to the low ability group were imbued with **shame, sadness** and **upset**, thus displaying lower levels of self-concept.
- » The majority of children in the study indicated that they liked their teacher and their school. Those who had less of an affinity tended to be older children, boys and pupils assigned to the mid- and high ability groups. Children assigned to the low ability groups displayed greater affinity with their teachers and school.
- » This study explored the nature of social interaction between the children, with specific focus on inclusion and exclusion within peer groups. Findings indicated that boys, majority ethnic children, 'coolios'* and those assigned to the mid- and high ability groups tended to be included within peer groups. Children who were excluded from peer group interactions were boys, Travellers, 'geeks', 'messers' and those assigned to the low ability group.
- » Teasing was an issue for the children, especially for those assigned to either end of the ability spectrum. Children assigned to the low ability groups reported experiencing ability-related teasing, indicating that they were teased about school work assignment. Ability group-related teasing was experienced by children assigned to both the low and high ability groups.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study identified and conceptualised four main conclusions.

1. Processes underpinning the assignment of children into ability groups

'I think you start with a piece of work and if you get a few wrong they will put them in one of the lowest groups and if they get them right they will put them in the highest groups.' [Peter, High Ability Group]

* In the questionnaire, the children were asked to align themselves to a specific peer group/gang in order to explore their positioning among peers. The children named these groups as the 'coolios' (the children who mess and joke and still do their work), 'geeks' (the children who are always good and work hard in school) and 'messers' (the children who are always in trouble and never do any work).

Teacher expectations of different children and their capacity to learn were shaped by the intersection between identity markers (gender, ethnicity, dis/ability, social class and age) and constructs of ability and discipline. These directly informed the process of assigning pupils into different ability group levels.

- » Teachers in this study were engaged in an action of defining and maintaining the boundaries between children in the classroom. The decisions on ability group assignment were teacher-determined, made using evaluative tools, identified by the children as comprising of tests, constructs of ability and teacher choice.
- » Assigning children into ability groups defines what is accessible and what is not, thus shaping their academic and life aspirations. It contributes to how children think about, act upon and approach their social world, moulding the way in which they interact with their environment. This process of assigning children into ability groups ultimately positions children as 'winners' and 'losers' within the educational 'game'.

'You are up teaching in that school and I am making sandwiches because you were put in the A group and I was in the B group.' [Mr. Burke]

- » Teacher (personal characteristics and perceptions, as well as their professional and life experiences) and child (expectations about different children and their capacity to learn) characteristics have a profound impact on the ability grouping process.

2. Ability grouping: Teacher practices and perceptions

Findings from the national survey of teachers and from the three case study schools indicate that Irish teacher practices and perceptions vary according to their understanding of different learners and their capacity to learn across ability group levels.

- » Classroom context plays a significant role in shaping the nature of the pedagogic action employed by the teacher and the perceptions/expectations they held for different learners (such as younger children, boys, minority ethnic and below-average-ability pupils, and those attending DEIS Band 1 schools).
- » Teachers adapt their practices in line with

their perceptions of the learner identities associated with being assigned to each ability level, with higher ability children exposed to fast-paced, independent learning experiences and lower ability children experiencing repetitive, adult-supervised, structured learning environments.

- » Teacher practice and perception means the ability positioning of children assigned to the higher ability group is affirmed. This results in more positive teacher practices and expectations for these high ability learners.
- » Ability group assigning also contributes to an affirmation of ability positioning for children assigned to the low ability group. However, such positioning is connoted with negativity, feeding into more negative teacher practices, ultimately impacting on more negative teacher perception and expectation for pupils assigned to this group.

3. Ability grouping, embodiment of learner identities and the affective domain

'You feel ashamed that you are not in the higher group.' [Robbie, Mid Ability Group]

This study found that ability grouping has a profound impact not only on how children identify themselves as learners in the classroom, but also on how they feel about themselves as social beings.

- » Ability grouping emerged as an assessment and evaluative tool, demarcating the boundaries of ability between children, thus reinforcing their perceptions of themselves and others as learners in the classroom.
- » Embodying an identity as a low ability pupil evoked a negative psycho-social response, one characterised by sadness and shame. In contrast, embodying an identity as a high ability pupil was characterised by a positive psycho-social response and with feelings of happiness and confidence.
- » Children are constrained within the ability groups to which they have been assigned, with little opportunity for movement. Thus, the continual embodiment and reinforcing of their identity as learners is compounded, informing their expectations about what is possible for them as academic and social beings within the classroom.

4. Ability grouping and child culture

'... if you had no friends, you'd be a little loner and everyone'd slag ya.' [Gerry, High Ability Group]

Findings indicate that ability grouping acts to regulate the interaction between children, their peers and teachers, as well as reinforce hierarchical relations and social regulation within the classroom.

- » Ability grouping influenced the nature of interaction between the children in the classroom, particularly in relation to friendships, academic and social status, as well as the experiences of being positioned as 'included' or 'excluded'.

6. What are the recommendations?

'Everyone staying together ... then nobody could be saying that "we're better than them" or anything. We're the same.' [Ralph, Mid Ability Group]

A number of recommendations for policy, teacher education, classroom practice and continuous professional development can be made on the basis of findings from this study.

1. Recommendations for policy

- » The implementation and use of ability grouping be reconsidered and the use of different forms of mixed ability group work promoted.
- » The development of future policy documents take national and international models of good practice into account when considering the organisation of children for learning in the primary school.
- » External bodies working with schools, particularly in the teaching of numeracy and literacy, are informed of the issues highlighted in this study with regard to the implementation and use of ability grouping in primary schools.
- » More support and information is provided to teachers working in DEIS schools regarding the most effective and equitable way for organising children for learning in numeracy and literacy. This is of particular concern as teachers working in the most disadvantaged contexts (i.e. DEIS Band 1) highlighted the difficulty of addressing the needs of all children across the broad range of abilities in their classes.

2. Recommendations for teacher education

- » Initial Teacher Education programmes prioritise teacher understanding of the impact of grouping children by ability on their academic and social experience of primary school.
- » Teachers' skills in using mixed ability grouping practices within the classroom are developed.
- » Programmes are developed to provide teachers with theoretical and practical perspectives of working with children in more disadvantaged contexts, with particular focus on issues related to social justice and inclusion.

3. Recommendations for classroom practice and continuous professional development

- » Teachers are encouraged to engage in continuous professional development in order to equip them with practical tools for engaging in reflexive practice in their classrooms.
- » The delivery of in-service training to teachers on the new literacy and numeracy programme explores more equitable pedagogical approaches for meeting the needs of a diverse range of abilities in the classroom.
- » Where ability grouping is being used, teachers should have clear and transparent procedures when assigning children into groups, placing equal emphasis on subjective and objective measures. Teachers should also ensure that movement between ability groups is enabled.
- » Children assigned to the lower ability groups are afforded the same opportunity for learning experiences as those assigned to the mid- and high ability groups. In particular, these children should be encouraged to engage in more independent learning tasks in the classroom.
- » Teachers are informed about children's awareness of the differentiated processes and practices being employed when assigning them into ability group levels. Specifically, teachers should be made aware of the psycho-social response of children to their ability-related positioning in class and how this manifests in how they understand their identities as learners.
- » Teachers are informed about the different academic and social status attributed to being assigned to each of the ability group levels. Teachers should be made aware of the influence of ability grouping on peer dynamics in the classroom, particularly in relation to ability group-related bullying.



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7. What are the benefits of the study?

This first in-depth national study of the implementation and use of ability grouping for numeracy and literacy has provided a comprehensive insight into how teachers and children perceive and experience this practice in DEIS primary schools in Ireland. The study has highlighted particular issues of concern, most specifically how ability grouping compounds and reproduces academic and social inequalities among children within the education system. Uniquely, this study has explored the complex dynamic interaction between ability group assignment, the embodiment of learner identity and psycho-social responses, highlighting the profound implications that ability grouping can have on how children perceive themselves and others as numerate and literate learners in the classroom. Importantly, this study contributes to the vacuum of evidence about ability grouping at primary school level, providing policy-makers, practitioners and the academic community with an insight into how this practice is implemented, perceived and experienced by both teachers and children within the Irish context.