



Teacher ‘quality’ and attainment grouping: The role of within-school teacher deployment in social and educational inequality

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The research finds some evidence of inequitable deployment of teachers to different sets (tracks).
- Teachers with higher subject qualifications appeared more likely to teach high sets.
- This pattern appeared slightly mitigated by an intervention to improve equity in deployment.
- Pupils perceived teaching standards and teacher expectations to differ according to set (track).

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ABSTRACT

Prior research suggests that where pupils are ‘tracked’, better qualified, more experienced teachers tend to be deployed to higher attainment groups, at the expense of pupils in lower tracks. This is especially pertinent from a social justice perspective, given consistent findings in the UK that pupils from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented in low attainment groups. This article draws on data from 380 teachers, drawn from 126 secondary schools in England, and interviews with 118 Year 7 students, to examine whether these findings from prior research in the US and elsewhere extend to the case of England in the present day. Findings show *some* evidence of these inequitable tendencies: those teachers highly qualified in their taught subject were less likely to be allocated to low sets. We also examine whether an intervention designed to encourage more equitable distribution had any impact on practice, and find tentative evidence that deployment in intervention schools had been impacted in relation to teacher subject qualifications. Pupils believed that teachers of higher sets had higher expectations and standards of behaviour, whereas those for low sets were seen to be unhelpfully indulgent, indicating a need for research attention to pedagogy and tracking. Findings are analysed from a social justice perspective, with interest in the consequences of inequitable distribution of teachers for the reproduction of social inequality.

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1. Introduction

While research on segregation by attainment¹ remains a

contested area,² nevertheless is widely established that practices of segregation by attainment tend to disadvantage those pupils allocated to low attainment groups, who make less progress than their peers in higher attainment groups (Higgins et al., 2015; Ireson &

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¹ Segregation by attainment includes many different practices, many of which may overlap or be practiced in tandem. Between school segregation occurs where different types of school are provided for pupils deemed to have different ‘abilities’. Within-school segregation includes practices such as: tracking (or ‘streaming’, as it is referred to in the UK), wherein students are placed in the same ‘ability’ group for most or all lessons; setting (common in the UK), wherein pupils are placed in attainment groups for particular subjects; and ‘ability tables’, where pupils are separated within class according to attainment (commonly practiced in primary schools in the UK).

² While (often dated) meta-analyses tend to find no significant overall effect of attainment grouping (see Education Endowment Foundation, 2016), some studies have found a small advantage from attainment grouping in outcomes for students in higher attainment groups (see for example: Argys, Rees, & Brewer, 1996; Kulik & Kulik, 1992; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016). Meta-analyses suggest that grouping by attainment has no significant impact overall, conferring a slight advantage to high attainers simultaneous to a more significant disadvantage for the (small group) of low attainers (e.g. Slavin, 1990; EEF, 2016). Nevertheless, it is also worth pointing out that the research remains complicated by a range of factors, and occasionally contradictory.

Hallam, 2001; Kutnick et al., 2005; Slavin, 1990; Suknandan & Lee, 1999; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). It is also consistently shown that pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (and those from certain minority ethnic groups) are over-represented in low attainment groups (Connolly et al., forthcoming; Dunne et al., 2007; Jackson, 1964; Kutnick et al., 2005). We have argued that this means pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in low attainment groups are subject to a double disadvantage (Francis, Archer et al., 2017), as they enter the education system disadvantaged in relation to their more affluent peers (Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010), and are then subject to practices known to have a detrimental impact on their performance.

The various potential explanations for the sub-optimal progress and outcomes for those placed in low attainment groups have also been subject to extensive research and debate. Our review of prior research identified seven explanations reflected in the research literature (Francis, Archer et al., 2017). An especially controversial explanation among these is the *quality of teaching* experienced by pupils in low 'ability'³ groups. Although the findings of prior studies on this topic are not straight-forward, in their reviews of the literature both Slavin (1990) and Ireson and Hallam (2001) maintain there is some evidence that teachers perceived as lower quality tend to be placed with lower 'ability' groups. Such findings are supported by more recent studies such as those of Papay and Kraft (2014) and Kelly (2004).

Evidently, the notion of 'teacher quality' is nebulous as well as controversial. In the United States, a substantial literature on 'teacher effectiveness' refers to teacher 'quality' and 'effectiveness' reasonably interchangeably (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, & Wyckoff, 2008). The status, validity and impact of 'observable qualifications' of effectiveness continue to be debated (Boyd et al., 2008; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010), but conventional measures include indicators such as level and type of qualification, level of curriculum subject expertise, and length/type of teaching experience. Clearly, none of these indicators can be taken as guarantees of effective teaching or otherwise (indeed inconsistency in prior study findings indicate their relative weakness in this regard), and teacher 'quality' should not be seen as fixed or static. Nevertheless, quantitative and experimental research has often shown significance of these indicators across teacher populations. Some studies have found length of experience to be especially associated with effectiveness (Rockoff, Jacob, Kane, & Staiger, 2011), with the thrust of findings on this topic suggesting that the largest teacher gains from experience occur in the first five years of teaching (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006; Papay & Kraft, 2014; Sass, Semykina, & Harris, 2014) – albeit, Wiswall (2013) and Papay and Kraft (2014) show that, especially for maths achievement, there continues to be a return from experience throughout a teaching career. Clotfelter et al.'s (2006) study shows that teacher licensure test scores correlate with pupil achievement in maths. Likewise, while the impact of certification levels remains debated, with qualifications being a relatively weak proxy for teacher quality (Shulman, 1986), Kane, Rockoff, and Staiger (2007) find that initial certification status does impact student test performance; and Rockoff et al. (2011) also show that teacher maths knowledge significantly impacts pupil attainment. Coe, Aloiso, Higgins, and Elliot Major (2014) likewise argue that teachers with strong subject knowledge make a greater impact on pupils' learning. Boyd et al. (2008) find that recruiting teachers with stronger credentials – e.g. test scores or

'certification status' – "could substantially improve student achievement" (p. 794).

Indeed, researchers such as Coe et al. (2014) and Hattie (2013) maintain that – in terms of in-school factors – it is quality of teaching that makes the strongest impact on pupil outcomes across the board. Research by Sanders and Rivers (1996), Aaronson, Barrow, and Sander (2007) and Kane et al. (2007) demonstrates the differential in student achievement gains attributed to differences in teacher effectiveness. Moreover, teacher quality is found to be especially impactful to the attainment of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2012; Sutton Trust, 2011), and for those with low prior attainment (Black & Wiliam, 1998). It has also been asserted that teacher quality ranges widely within schools, in England (Buddin & Zamarro, 2009). This diversity in effectiveness has however been shown to map on to school and pupil demographic factors: extensive research in the United States has found that more highly qualified, and more experienced, teachers tend to be matched with more socially advantaged students; the converse being the case for disadvantaged students (Clotfelter et al., 2006; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). And in the UK, research by Sims (2017) demonstrates that pupils in the most disadvantaged quintile of schools are around twice as likely to have an unqualified teacher, and more likely to have an inexperienced teacher.

Relating these measures of teacher effectiveness or quality to the literature on attainment grouping, it has been suggested that higher groups are more likely to be allocated highly qualified and experienced teachers (Suknandan & Lee, 1999; Kelly, 2004). Whereas lower attainment groups have been found to be more often assigned to the least well-prepared teachers (Good & Marshall, 1984; Oakes, 1985); less likely to be taught by a subject specialist (Kelly, 2004), and to experience more changes of teacher (Boaler, Wiliam, & Brown, 2000). Papay and Kraft (2014) likewise find that novice teachers tend to be assigned to lower attaining students. Kelly's (2004) research additionally found that teachers designated to higher tracks had "much higher levels of perceived efficacy and satisfaction with teaching" (p. 69).

Hence, the existing research highlights: i) the importance of high quality teaching, especially for pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; ii) a tendency for less effective teaching to be provided to socially disadvantaged pupils, and to lower attaining groups; and iii) the over-concentration of socially-disadvantaged students in low attainment groups. We can deduce, then, the socially retrogressive impact of these trends.

As well as the 'quality' of the *teacher*, there is extensive evidence in the literature on segregation by attainment that the level of the 'ability' group to which a teacher is assigned influences the quality of the *pedagogy* provided, due to application of different expectations that in turn impact pace and quality of pedagogy (Ireson, Hallam, & Hurley, 2005; Mazonod et al., 2018; Murphy & Hallinger, 1989). For example, Gamoran's (1992) review suggests that teachers of higher tracks were more enthusiastic and devoted more time to preparing lessons (see also Hallinan, 1984, for the converse being the case with low tracks). Ireson et al. (2005) and Boaler et al. (2000) show that teachers of high sets tend to provide fast-paced and challenging work, whereas pupils in low sets are often subject to slow-paced lessons which cover less curriculum material in terms of both breadth and depth (see also Gamoran, 1992). Research also shows that pupils in higher sets are given more homework (Ireson & Hallam, 2001).

As we have shown, given the relationship between set placement and social background, this trend is especially retrogressive.

³ We do not ascribe to a view of 'ability' as fixed, hence our adoption of inverted commas.

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