Attainment Grouping as self-fulfilling prophesy? A mixed methods exploration of self confidence and set level among Year 7 students

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A B S T R A C T

Within-school segregation of pupils by attainment remains prevalent, despite evidence that these practices detrimentally impact outcomes for those in low attainment groups. This article explores the hypothesis that 'ability grouping' by setting impacts pupil self-confidence, precipitating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Survey data from 11,546 11/12 year old pupils in 'ability sets', and individual interviews and focus groups with 66 pupils, are drawn upon to explore this hypothesis. We find a significant correlation between perceived set placement and self-confidence in the set subject. More importantly, we also find a correlation between set placement and general self-confidence in learning. Pupils' qualitative responses illustrate how setting can promote self-fulfilling prophecy, and worrying evidence of internalisation of 'ability' labels among pupils.

1. Background

Segregation of students by attainment remains a controversial area. Despite an extensive, longstanding, international body of research questioning the value of grouping students by 'ability',[1] the approach remains prevalent in many international contexts; whether via institutional segregation, or via within-school practices of tracking (referred to as 'streaming' in the UK), setting, or within-class groups organised on the basis of attainment (Francis et al., 2017).

The research on 'ability grouping' is diverse, complex, and not without issues. For example, different attainment grouping practices are frequently conflated within different pieces of research or meta-analyses, and sometimes there is a lack of clarity on the nature of the practices analysed (Dracup, 2014). Moreover, as we have observed elsewhere, while it has been long established that there is no statistically-significant beneficial effect of attainment grouping overall (see, e.g. Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Slavin, 1990; Boaler, Wiliam, & Brown, 2000; Kutnick et al., 2005; EEF, 2016), with a marginal benefit to high attainers balanced by a more significant detrimental impact for low attainers (Boaler & Wiliam, 2001), there has been little effort to disaggregate potential explanations for these findings (Francis et al., 2017). There also continues to be controversy concerning the impact of student grouping

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practices on the highest attainers, where evidence suggests these students benefit from extension (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016). Again, the research on facilitating these exceptional students has often been unhelpfully conflated with that on grouping practices and pupil outcomes more broadly (EEF, 2016; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, the longstanding finding of a negative impact of attainment grouping on those young people in low attainment groups (see e.g. Kutnick et al., 2005; Slavin, 1990; EEF, 2016) comprises a significant issue for social justice, especially given that young people from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to be over-represented in these groups (Boaler, 1997; Taylor et al., 2017; Dunne et al., 2007; Jackson, 1964; Kutnick et al., 2005). In this sense, the research implies that many young people in low attainment groups face a double disadvantage (Francis et al., 2017): they begin schooling with disadvantaged starting point due to their low socio-economic status, but are then additionally subject to educational practices that constrain, rather than accelerate, progress. This is especially significant within an English context given the scale of the practice of attainment grouping in England (Hallam, Ireson, Lister, Andon Chaudhury, & Davies, 2003). In secondary schooling (high school) the vast majority of schools practice setting, wherein pupils are segregated by attainment for particular subjects, and a smaller portion also apply 'streaming' (tracking) where pupils are banded by prior attainment and stay in these same groups for the majority of curriculum subjects.

Elsewhere we have set out the seven different explanations for the poorer progress for those in low 'ability' groups evidenced in the literature on attainment grouping (Francis et al., 2017). Two of the potential explanations are: pupil perception and experiences of attainment grouping, and the impact on their learner identities; and (relatedly) self fulfilling prophesy. Here the label of 'low achiever' that is somewhat explicit in the act of placement in a low attainment group precipitates a set of assumptions, behaviours and educational offers that serve to ensure that low attainment is further established. These latter include particular pedagogic and curriculum offers, reflective of lower expectations, that tend to be applied to pupils in low attainment groups (see e.g. Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Ireson, Hallam, & Hurley, 2005; Dunne et al., 2007; Rubie-Davies, 2007), but also particular behaviours and dis/associations in the young people concerned as they respond to having been labelled 'low ability'. Conversely, there is also evidence of a set of favourable practices that are precipitated by placement in high attainment groups, including allocation of subject-specialist teachers, application of high expectations and releated pedagogy and resources, and so on (Finley, 1984; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Kelly, 2004).

1.1. Research on the impact of attainment grouping on self-confidence

It has been shown that self-perception[2] impacts young people's educational outcomes, and that this can be related to attainment grouping. For example, Linchevski and Kutscher (1998) showed that young people with similar prior attainment levels performed better when placed in higher attainment classes than in lower attainment classes. Of course, this could possibly be explained by teacher quality and/or curriculum offer targeted at the different group (these are also identified as tending to differ depending on attainment group level; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Kelly, 2004). But it seems likely that the labelling of young people according to placement in attainment groups also impacted performance. Carol Dwek's (2006) work on 'mindset' also highlights the import of student self-perception for learning, and the detrimental implication of messages that 'ability' is fixed.

There has been a range of international work exploring the impact of different conceptions of students' sense of self on their learning outcomes. This populous field includes attention to the constructs of self-confidence, self-esteem, self-concept, and/or self-efficacy. These constructs are all somewhat distinct, and reflect different disciplinary perspectives and trajectories, but are not always distinguished or applied consistently. Sociological work tends to explore notions of self-confidence and esteem. For example, researching in Flanders, Houtte, Demanet, and Stevens (2012) found that students on 'academic track' have significantly higher self-esteem than students on 'vocational track'. They found that these discrepancies for self-esteem were greater for students in multi-lateral schools than in categorial schools, leading Houtte et al. (2012) to speculate that in schools that contain both tracks academic students may compare themselves with the vocational track students, resulting in a higher awareness of status differences and consequently higher self-esteem. Addressing self-confidence, Brown, Brown, and Bibby (2008) found that lack of self-confidence was among reasons that students were deterred from pursuing Maths at post-16.

Psychologists have frequently applied the construct of self-concept. Ireson and Hallam (2009) found that students' academic self-concept was correlated with attainment grouping across the three subject areas they investigated, with those in the top attainment groups having higher self-concept than those in low attainment groups. However, this correlation with respective attainment group did not extend to general self-concept. This contrasted to findings from a prior study which found that students in schools using 'moderate levels of setting' had higher general self-concept; and that setting in English tended to lower the self-concepts of the higher attaining pupils and to raise the self-concepts of lower attaining pupils (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). In their Singaporean study of streaming (tracking), Liem, McInerney, and Leung (2015) found that between-stream differences in academic self-concepts were negligible, where in the same national context Liu, Wang, and Parkins (2005) found that streaming appeared to have a short-term negative impact on lower-'ability' stream students' academic self-concept (albeit they also found this relationship reduced over a three year period). Belfi, Goos, De Fraine, and Van Damme's (2012) literature review surprisingly concluded that 'ability' grouping is beneficial for the academic self-concept of lower attaining students. Kulik and Kulik's (1982) meta-analysis found no relationship between tracking and self-concept. However, somewhat parallel with the sociological findings of Houtte et al. (2012), Marsh (1984) draws attention to the relativistic nature of self-concept, arguing that it depends on some frame of reference, and that 'ability' grouping is likely to have 'substantial effects on self-concepts within different ability groupings' (p. 799): what he refers to as the 'Big-

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[2] Teacher perception of pupils and their potential has also been shown to have a strong impact on pupil outcomes, see Francis et al. (2017) for further discussion.