

## **A BRIEF ACCOUNT ON PUPIL GROUPING STRATEGIES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

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### **Abstract**

*This review article explores the pupil grouping strategies which are based on age-grouping in primary schools in the United Kingdom. It considers two main strategies for grouping pupils within classrooms from the standpoint of the possible advantages and disadvantages experienced by younger children in a cohort. Taken into account are the chronological grouping, which is called single-age grouping as well, and the vertical grouping, also known as mixed-age group or family grouping. Reviews on the studies of different grouping strategies of pupils that have been employed in primary schools in the UK has indicated that among the grouping strategies, within-class grouping may prove to be a the significant one. Furthermore, the most effective strategy may be within-class mixed-age, mixed-ability grouping of pupils for raising the standard of education in primary school.*

**Keywords:** Pupil grouping, Within-class grouping, Chronological grouping, Vertical grouping, Primary school

### **Introduction**

In all the classrooms of United Kingdom (UK), pupils are grouped in some form or other (Blatchford et al., 2005). Consideration of pupil grouping in classrooms in UK can be track back as early as the recommendations of the Hadow Committee Report on primary education (Board of Education, 1931). Pupils are grouped in the classrooms in order to provide for the huge differences that exist among any aggregation of individuals. These differences are the varieties of interests and purposes, the wide range of talents and skills, variations in the ability and potential, in speed, depth and nature of comprehension. All these distinctions among the pupil necessitate the practice of many varied materials and resources as well as classroom procedures that provide opportunities for each student to move as rapidly as possible in reaching their own potential (Hock, 1961).

There was also a long tradition of structured ability grouping in the UK, resulting from the government's order to assist in achieving the government's targets for pupil attainment and to raise the standard of education the

government indicated that primary schools should consider setting children by ability (DfEE, 1997; Ofsted, 1998b). Following the separation of the old 'elementary' schools into primary and secondary schools, the Primary School Report of 1930 recommended that children in primary schools should be grouped in classes according to ability (streaming) where numbers allowed (Hadow Report, 1931). However, most of the primary schools were too small to implement streaming strategy. In 1944, the Butler Education Act, established the requirement for ability grouping in primary schools. Thus the practice of streaming (ability grouping) became widespread in larger primary schools throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Though, in the 1950s its popularity had declined due to research reports that revealed it had no significant effect on overall attainment, and had negative social consequences for certain pupils (Jackson, 1964; Barker Lunn, 1970).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a Paris-based think-tank, analysed successes and failures in education systems in 39 of the world's most developed nations. It reports that thousands of UK primary schools are locking their pupils into a cycle of disadvantage by separating them into ability groups. It found that countries that grouped pupils into ability groups at an early age tended to have higher numbers of school drop-outs and lower levels of achievement. Grouping pupils into ability groups at school was commonplace in the UK in the 1940s and early 1950s. By the early 1990s it had virtually disappeared because studies had shown it had no effect on overall attainment of the students. However, it has gradually been re-introduced into UK schools (Shepherd, 2012).

In 1970s, there was also a general inclination in educational values towards a more child-centered approach with emphasis on the overall development of the individual rather than on academic achievement; and on equality of opportunity rather than the pursuit of excellence. The Plowden Report (1967) reflected this movement, and was powerful enough to encourage schools towards 'upstreaming'. With the abolition of the 11+ examination and the spread of comprehensive secondary education, mixed ability classes became the norm in primary schools. From the result of a survey of primary schools in 2 LEAs in the early 1990s, Lee and Croll (1995) reported that less than 3% streamed by ability. Ability grouping (streaming) as a form of school organization in primary schools had almost disappeared (Hallam et al., 2003).

During the 1990s, combined with the main educational emphasis on increasing standards and a widespread assumption that the best way to maximize academic success was by selective grouping that led to government guidelines promoting the use of setting. In 1993, all primary schools were encouraged to introduce setting by the Department for Education (DfE Report, 16/93). This was reinforced in 1997, by the Government White Paper 'Excellence in Schools' (1997) which suggested that setting could be beneficial in raising standards. It is worth considering in primary schools.' The document presented a case study of a primary school which implemented setting for maths and reported significant benefits from the practice: it focused the range of attainment within a class; it reduced the pressure on teachers; it enabled teachers to maintain appropriate pace and challenge, and to make good use of whole-class teaching. It was mandatory for schools by law to undertake baseline assessments of all children entering primary school, in the basics of language and literacy, maths and personal and social development. Furthermore, these assessments were to be analyzed by LEAs to help schools measure children's subsequent achievement (Hallam et al., 2003).

According to Taylor (1983), there are two general methods by which grouping of students in classrooms are most commonly done. They are chronological or single age grouping and vertical or family grouping. Historically, chronological and vertical grouping were the traditional ways of grouping children and are still retained in the UK as the main methods of organising children in schools. Vertical grouping which was originated in small country schools has been increasingly adopted by larger town schools.

Research have provided useful evidence on the extent of different forms of grouping, such as school and class sizes and ability grouping practices in schools and classrooms levels. Several research surveys have been carried out regarding the nature and extent of grouping practices in schools and classrooms (Bealing, 1972; DES, 1978a; Lee and Croll, 1995; Hallam et al., 2003; Kutnik., et al. 2006; Ofsted, 1998b). Comparisons among survey results helpin theestablishment of trends over time and are more readily made when samples are based on large, randomly selected samples. However, different grouping strategies can affect pupils' learning, attitudes and interactions with teachers and peer in various

ways (Blatchford et al., 2005). Hallam et al. (2003) established the extent of setting, within-class grouping, vertical (mixed age) grouping and mixed ability grouping and were able to relate these to school size and age of pupils.

### **Within-class grouping**

A feature of educational life of all pupils that can be specify with certainty is the grouping within classrooms. Consideration of grouping in classrooms should not simply give emphasis on what has traditionally been referred to as the 'small group' or the number of children that can sit around a table in the classroom (usually between four and six pupils). Classroom grouping, in terms of how the class is organised and taught should consist of a whole class seated and working together (Blatchford et al., 2010). Research have shown that in primary schools, any classroom consists of a number of different sized pupil groups working simultaneously and the group size may vary as a lesson progresses (Baines et al., 2003; Kutnick et al., 2002).

In line with traditional classroom pedagogy, primary school teachers will often have responsibility for a whole class. However, it should be noted that a pupil will spend the majority of classroom time in the presence of peers (whether simply by being seated next to other children or actually working with other children). Thus, each pupil will have a very limited amount of time to interact with their teacher and we need to consider the role of within-class grouping in relation to pupil's learning and the quality of interactions with peer as well as teachers (Blatchford et al., 2010). However, groups working together without the teacher works best when the pupils are mixed-ability and contain the most and least able pupils. For effective group functioning high-ability pupils are crucial nevertheless, they also benefited from the process of working in groups that serves to enhance their own skills (Bennett & Cass, 1989; Swing & Peterson, 1982; Webb, 1991). Groups should reflect this with a mixture of younger and older pupils where classes are cross-age (mixed-age). Furthermore, they should reflect the ethnic mix of the class and have a gender balance (Salvin, 1990).

Allocating pupils to groups in this way can promote social mixing and break down stereotypical views of other pupils (Blatchford et al., 2010). Research have shown that within the classroom, teachers have a significant influence over pupils' educational experiences and outcomes of schooling in terms of attainment and affect (Day et al., 2006; Downey, 1977; Harlen & Malcolm, 1997;

Dunne, 1998, 1999; Sammons, 2006). Comparison to specific forms of organizational grouping, within-class attainment grouping may have greater potential to raise standards through personalizing the learning experience (Kutnick et al., 2005). Some studies have also revealed positive effects of within-class grouping (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998) and it may make differences in progress between lower and higher sets less significant (William & Bartholomew, 2004). Within-class ability grouping is seen as a means of raising attainment that avoids the social and emotional disadvantages of streaming (MacIntyre & Ireson, 2002).

### **Chronological Age Grouping (Single-age grouping)**

Chronological age grouping can also be called as a 'single age grouping' (Taylor, 1983). On the whole, an organisation based on chronological age grouping is probably the most widely used. In this strategy the students in the classrooms are divided according to their age, all of them having been born in the same school year. The age gap among the children in any one class may be just a few months or it may be a year, depending upon the numbers in the school and the size of its annual reception class intake. However, Allen et al. (1975) claim that chronological grouping means entire classes of the same age. In larger schools, with three or four parallel classes in each year, this may mean only a three months' age difference within each class. On the other hand, in a small school, there will be a much wider gap up to one year.

### **Advantages of Chronological Grouping**

Children generally fall within a narrower band of intellectual, social, emotional and physical development than they do if an age of two or three years is represented within one class. This is not easy to say that there cannot be a fairly considerable difference in the ability and the maturity of children who are of roughly comparable chronological age. The differences can be very marked and the variation in their rates of progress appreciable; but these variations are generally greater if there is, in addition, a difference of two to three years in the child's age (Taylor, 1983).

Allen et al. (1975) affirmed that it is often thought that chronologically-grouped classes display greater social cohesion and interaction for the children tend to be at the same level of socio-emotional development and have similar levels of interest. They also claim that teachers may feel more secure with a narrow age

range. Their task seems simpler as the range of ability appears to be less than in classes where children are vertically grouped. Both children and teachers can make a completely fresh start putting past mistakes and failure behind them with each school year.

### **Disadvantages of Chronological Grouping**

The task of the reception class teacher, in particular, is not an easy one. In a large school situated in an area in which there is a high proportion of families with young children, there may be a full class of thirty or more new entrants all beginning at the same time. These children come together to the unfamiliar world of school and many of them have had little or no experience of sharing the time and attention of one adult with others in a large group. In this new and to some children, the frighteningly large situation of people and things, the children's overwhelming need is for attention and for personal contact with the teacher to help it over the early strangeness and unfamiliarity of school life. Yet, it is this very attention which is difficult for the teacher to provide when there are so many children in need of it at the same moment (Taylor, 1983).

The reception class teacher's problems do not end with satisfying the children's need for security and emotional stability as they settle into school or indeed with organizing their daily program so that they learn and make progress. The use of auxiliary staff in primary schools is invaluable to the teacher of very young children and does much to help him or her with the day-to-day affairs of the reception class. But the organizational and practical problems inherent in a large class of new entrants, all bewildered together, all comparatively unskilled, continue to be extremely pressing despite the welcome assistance of another pair of hands.

It is not only within the walls of the reception class that chronological age grouping presents its difficulties. They appear also in the organisation of the school itself, and they arise because of the practice of termly admission at the beginning of the infant or primary school and annual transfer to the junior or middle school at the end of it. This means that a large infant or primary school opens with smaller numbers in the new school year, fills up during the year and may be bursting at the seams in the summer term. With chronological age grouping in this situation, a teacher may be needed for a new class for each term,

and this is no easy way of arranging it with a permanent staffing ratio which is usually calculated on the basis of average numbers throughout the year.

At the beginning of the school year the whole class is new with no nucleus of children left over from the previous year to continue class tradition or routine. They also emphasized that in the last year of the infant school, where there are parallel classes with narrowly differentiated age ranges, too many children who need help in reading may be concentrated in the youngest seven-year-old class (Allen et al.,1975). However, the children in the younger, parallel classes may do less well, even when allowance is made for their age because they are known to be younger and appear less able. The teacher expects less from them so they tend to underachieve. Teachers may be persuaded that they have a homogeneous class, all at the same level and be blinded to the exceptions. They further assert that many teachers tend to specialize in one age group for several or even many years becoming known as a 'reception class teacher', or 'a top infant teacher'. This may considerably narrow the range of a teacher's experience. Moreover, in a small school where there is an intake, each term means that a child may spend only one term in the reception class and subsequently very short periods in any of other classes due to the pressure of new entrants.

### **Vertical Grouping (Mixed-age grouping)**

Vertical grouping of students is also called 'family grouping'. With vertical grouping, there is usually an age range of up to about three years in any one class, though sometimes there can be even wider age span. But to take a fairly usual example, in a large primary school, the five, six and seven-year-olds are together in one set of classes and the eight and nine-year-olds are together in another set. There may be two or three of each of these sets depending upon the size of the school. All the classes in any one set are identical in structure, and families and friends can stay together unless there are reasons in a particular case that would make this undesirable. There is, of course, no reception class as such. Each class in the younger set receives an equal number of new entrants every term so that even with a large new intake no teacher has ever had more than a few children who are just starting school. At the end of the school year, all classes in the older set lose roughly the same number of children in the middle school (Taylor, 1983).

The principle has long been established in small country schools which have always been vertically grouped by force of circumstances. Indeed, vertical grouping was first introduced to urban classes by teachers who had become convinced of its benefits by their experience in rural areas and who were concerned to extend these benefits to children in the towns. In town schools, however, classes are likely to be much bigger and it is the combination of large numbers and the extensive age and ability range of a vertically grouped class that often leads to the choice of a chronological age structure (Moyle, 1993). Family grouping is concerned with children making progress at the individual level, rather than at age grouped or class rates. Ridgeway & Lawton (1965) noted that it required flexible grouping arrangements and a relevant teaching style and an open plan school designed to accommodate family grouping (Cohen & Cohen, 1988). Due to the social and family-like structure of classes where pupils, at least one year apart in age, are taught by the same teacher together for several years, vertical grouping has been adopted as a system of choice by some schools (Hallam et al. 2013). The supposed benefits of vertical grouping are similar to those made for mixed-ability teaching (Veenman, 1995).

### **Advantages of Vertical Grouping**

The main value of mixed-age programs is the flexibility they provide to students whose growth is a series of sudden rather than a smooth, linear progression. The rule becomes a wide range of abilities rather than the expectation that everyone is at the same level by serving a range of students with a large chronological-age gap. A pupil may be ahead of or behind his chronological peers, but the classroom has teachers and materials available that are appropriate to the needs of every pupil, regardless of where he or she falls on the spectrum of abilities. There is no skipping or failing of grades because a pupil remains with his chronological peers whatever his academic needs (Bernstein, n.d.). There is no difficulty in placing a newcomer into a class, as a child will find children of his or her own age group and mentality in whichever room are chosen and he or she will also have the company of children of different ages. There should be no 'personality' clashes between child and teacher or child and child or a lack of progression on the part of the child. He or she can be moved to another class without difficulty (Allen et al., 1975).

Vertical grouping gives an atmosphere of stability and removes the awkward situation which sometimes arises with chronological grouping in which a child may spend as little as one term in its classes; a very unsettling experience. Within

vertical grouping situation, the child has the chance to become familiar with its surroundings for a sustained period. The presence of mixed age groups gives greater opportunities for different levels of conversation and speech. The atmosphere is then more than that of the natural family and the child is, therefore, less inhibited. Additionally, the older children acquire a sense of responsibility towards the younger ones.

In the vertically grouped class, there is not such a break in the teaching of basic skills. Under this system, the numbers in the class are evened out. As the children become more stable, the teacher is able to know and understand them better. Within the framework of the vertically grouped situation, the children are able to find their own level. The slower child, for example, may work with a younger group without attracting attention. In fact, the children find their emotional and mental level and are able to work within it.

The theoretical advantages of vertical grouping are substantial for the child. When it first starts school, it comes into a class in which there might be an older brother or sister, or even an older friend, who provides a comforting link to the world of home. The older child can help the younger one to feel less strange in its new surroundings and can give some extra attention and practical assistance needed until it has settled down. However, Taylor (1983) suggested that the benefits from the older children come from the development of qualities of leadership and responsibility to acting on behalf of the teacher in many ways and in showing consideration to those who are less mature and less skilful than themselves.

Teaching a vertically grouped class is in many ways easier where an integrated program is in operation. It follows that if conditions are unfavourable to integration, vertical grouping should be carefully considered before it is introduced, especially where classes are large. It is by no means impossible without integration to manage the degree of individual teaching that vertical grouping requires, but it does need skill and a real organization on the part of the teacher if it is to work well. One other area in which some adjustment is necessary for vertical grouping is that which involves the whole class at the same time, such as stories and poetry. A story or a poem which satisfies the seven-year-old may be quite without interest for the very young child and vice versa. It is, therefore, preferable either to present these on a group basis or to make an

arrangement with the teacher of another class whereby each plans stories and poems at different levels of interest and the children from both classes join whichever they prefer.

From the point of view of overall school organization, the great merit of vertical grouping is that it entirely solves the problem of accommodating new entrants termly without having to move children from one class to another during the year. On the other hand, the extensive provision of material and equipment that is necessary to encompass the full age and ability range in every class can be quite a serious drawback.

Rathbone (1988) stated that one major objective of vertical grouping is the development of children's social skills. Older children are expected to help in some ways with the education of their younger classmates. Undeniably, the system is also referred to as 'family grouping'. Moreover, when the children stay in one class for more than a year, vertical grouping can be a help to the teacher because although some children move on into other classes, some children who are familiar with the routines of the class stay on to help the new younger members of the class.

### **Disadvantages of Vertical Grouping**

One of the chief problems appears to be a misunderstanding on the part of parents who believe misguidedly that by staying an additional year in the same class their children are being victimised in some way. Despite the evidence to the contrary; or they may fail to understand the advantages to their children in being educated with other age groups and feel these groups in some ways impede the children's progress. Though there may be a tendency for the older children to help the younger ones too much thus, impeding their own progress. Furthermore, the older children should not be permitted to become a kind of teacher's substitute (Allen et al., 1975).

It is also sometimes difficult to preserve equal opportunities for each age group in the class, for example, the needs of the seven-year-old may be given undue stress just because their promotion to the junior school is imminent. Unless teachers make comparisons of work right through the school at each age level, so that they cross-reference the standards of each age in every other class, children of equal age and ability may leave the school with unnecessarily different

attainments. Head teachers in some schools ask all the teachers to hand in each month the work of the seven or six-year-olds in their classes, so that the head and the teachers can see that a comparable standard is being kept throughout the school. Failure to seek such comparisons may impair teachers' efficiency and be contrary to the best interests of the children. It is tough to furnish for the physical and mental capabilities of the various age groups in certain subjects and it would be advisable to group the children into ages drawing on more than one class, for such activities as story time, music, and movement, where skill is largely dependent on maturation. Where there is a changeover to single age classes at junior school level, a certain amount of unsettled feelings may arise in some children accustomed to working in groups, though one feels that at seven plus years, many would appreciate it.

Children who are in the care of weak, uninterested or supply teachers are seriously disadvantaged by vertical grouping and many of the objectives of vertical grouping have to be abandoned if such teachers have to be given a different class each year. Desperate parents have been known to complain that their children had not had an adequate teacher by the age of nine years, after four years of schooling. There can be no doubt, however, that in a vertically grouped classroom the teacher's resourcefulness is stretched to the limit, as he or she has to prepare work for the vast range of abilities within the class. Rathbone (1988) argues that parents' concerns about vertical grouping also have to be answered. Parents need to be informed about the rationale of the system. Teachers in vertically grouped schools also need to ensure that their children have access to those parts of the curriculum which are best taught to children of approximately similar age. Physical education and games lessons, for example, may need two or more classes to be joined together, so that the teaching is effective. A coherent pattern of work that covers the curriculum satisfactorily, the setting up of the classroom each morning, and the recording of what each child has done are essential if this system is to work effectively. The teacher's workload is immense.

## **Conclusion**

Review on the available literature on the studies of different grouping strategies of pupils that have been employed in primary schools in the UK has indicated that among the grouping strategies, within-class grouping may prove to be a significant one. Furthermore, the most effective strategy may be within-class

mixed-age, mixed-ability grouping of pupils for raising the standard of education in primary school. Many researchers who have studied on the effects of vertical grouping have concluded that there are no significant differences between cross-age and single-age groupings on pupils' academic achievement or social and personal development (Pratt, 1986; Miller, 1990; Veenman, 1995).

In within-class grouping of pupils, the size of classes, size of within-class groups, composition of within-class groups, nature of the assigned learning task, intended social interaction and teacher intervention appear to be related. Planning for effective learning need consideration of the social pedagogic relationships between these factors. Research have indicated that group work can be successfully used and implemented into primary school classrooms, provided teachers are aware of social pedagogical principles and train pupils in the skills of group working. It has also shown that involvement in group work, with support from relational and other group working skills has positive effects on pupils' academic progress. These results have suggestions for educational policy and practice (Blatchford et al., 2010). Greenfield (2011), suggested that in order to be widely accepted and effective, policies do not have to be mandated, but can arise spontaneously as a consequence (intended or unintended) of other policies or practices, which serve to make compliance with an implicit policy more or less obligatory.

There are three main contexts for learning in any classroom; teacher-led work, individual work and interaction between pupils. Pressures arising from the curriculum and the classroom context mean a heavy emphasis on whole-class teaching followed by individual work, with little room for group work (Blatchford et al., 2006). Blatchford et al. (2010), had argued that the third context for learning - peer-based interactions, or 'co-learning' - has been neglected, certainly in the UK. Thus, suggested that, given space and time to develop pupils' group working skills, teachers can bring about a transformation in the teaching and learning environment. It offers learning possibilities for pupils which is not provided by the first and second context i.e., either teacher-led or individual work, and can contribute to national concerns with engagement in learning and attitudes to work and classroom behavior. They further suggested that, group work deserves to be given a much more central role in educational policy and school practice. Evidences reviewed form the research studies have indicated that within-class grouping, rather than class-level organizational

grouping initiatives, may have greater potential to raise standards (Blatchford et al. 2010). Further research on whole-school processes that can best support and sustain group work will be noteworthy and helpful in making pupil-centric policy that can be effective and widely recognized.

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