

# Research for Teachers

## Pupils in low attaining groups

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### What makes teaching and learning effective for pupils in low attaining groups?

All schools work hard to identify and support pupils who are attaining well below the average. This TLA research summarises a study that explored the ways in which teachers and schools support such pupils by placing them in groupings and providing specific and tailored support. The study identified some successful classroom, department and school strategies for assisting low attaining students to learn.

The study is:

Dunne, M., S. Humphreys, J. Sebba, A. Dyson, F. Gallannaugh and D. Muijs. *Effective teaching and learning for pupils in low attaining groups*. DCSF (Research Report 011), 2007.

The study set out to discover how pupils in low attaining groups can be motivated and supported to learn. It also looked at whether different approaches were used for different types of pupils and it considered how schools organise low attaining groups and what kinds of pupils end up in these groups.

The researchers surveyed 168 primary and secondary schools from 12 local authorities, to find out how they organised low attaining pupils, and to study the characteristics and attainment of these pupils. The researchers then produced 13 in-depth case studies of schools seen to be doing well with low attaining pupils (i.e. achieving good value added scores for their pupils). Staff and pupil interviews and observations in these schools were cross-referenced with the statistical analyses, enabling the researchers to identify which strategies were working best.

Significantly, the researchers used the term 'attainment' in preference to 'ability'. 'Ability' was seen as problematic since there is no means of measuring it, whereas attainment can be measured with greater consistency, for example using National Curriculum Tests.

The researchers found that schools that had had success with low attaining pupils were employing specific strategies to encourage participation, motivation and engagement. These included extra classroom support

measures, such as good use of teaching assistants (TAs), teaching approaches appropriate to the needs of pupils who are attaining well below the average, providing a varied and appropriate curriculum, and flexibility in grouping arrangements.

Beyond the classroom, successful schools promoted an inclusive school ethos to all, took care of the emotional needs of pupils in lower sets and were making extra links with the wider community.

The research confirmed that schools allocated pupils to lower sets partly based on prior attainment scores, though setting decisions were clearly not made on this basis alone. Other factors included assessments, teacher judgements and pupil behaviour.

In terms of pupil characteristics, pupils from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, with less parental support and fewer learning resources at home, were more likely to be found in low sets, whatever their prior attainment, as were those with Special Educational Needs.

This summary also contains four case studies which illustrate some different ways in which schools other than those who participated in the study have worked successfully with low attaining groups.

We think that teachers of low attaining pupil groups (both whole-class groups and smaller groups within more mixed classes) will find the teaching and learning ideas contained in this summary useful. School leaders who have responsibility for allocating pupils to groups or sets, and those who manage TAs or other resources aimed at pupils who are attaining well below the average, will also find the summary helpful in deciding the best approach for their school.

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## Overview

### **Why is the issue important?**

Almost all schools place pupils in groups or sets for some of the time, either in certain subjects or in certain year groups. Pupils placed in low attaining groups are by definition those who are perceived to be doing less well than the average. This research provides evidence and challenge to schools on two issues. Firstly how and why certain pupils are put in low attaining groups and secondly what strategies best motivate and inspire pupils in low attaining groups to learn.

### **What did the research find out?**

The study found that pupils are placed in low attaining groups partly as a result of their prior attainment. But there are other factors, including socio-economic background, special educational needs, ethnic background and students' behaviour and attitude to learning are also strong predictors of allocation to a low ability group.

Schools used a huge range of practices in the way they organised their sets/groups. Where schools were successful it was when these arrangements were well planned and coordinated, and where teaching staff were involved in and supportive of the grouping system used.

With regard to classroom practice and school management, the study concluded that schools working successfully with low attaining groups were employing strategies which encouraged participation, motivation and engagement.

### **How was this achieved?**

In this RfT, some specific areas of successful practice were identified, including:

- well targeted extra classroom support, especially coordinated and planned use of Teaching Assistants and mentoring
- strong teacher-pupil relations, especially through use of praise, strong boundaries and reward
- tailored teaching techniques such as providing more scaffolding for learning, more incremental teaching, slower paced

- lessons and varied questioning techniques, and building vocational learning into the curriculum at Key Stage 4, and
- involving people outside of school in pupil learning.

### **How was the research designed to be trustworthy?**

The research was rigorous and included a large sample. 168 primary and secondary schools from 12 local authorities returned detailed questionnaires on their practice regarding grouping and setting of pupils. Thirteen schools which demonstrated success with low attaining pupils through high value added scores were looked at in much more detail. Lesson observations, staff and pupil interviews were used to identify successful practice in these case study schools.

### **What are the implications?**

The review showed the importance of:

- schools having a clear rationale for how and why pupils are placed in low attaining groups
- making use of specific strategies at classroom level to best motivate and engage low attaining groups of pupils
- strategic planning and management of resources and the development of a school ethos to support all pupils in their learning

### **What do the case studies illustrate?**

The case studies show, for example, how:

- an 'assertive mentoring' scheme helped turn around some low attaining pupils
- the relationship between teacher and Teaching Assistant is of critical importance to supporting low attaining groups
- a structured model which improved student responsibility and involvement in class made a difference, and
- a school listened to the views of pupils in low attaining groups

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## **Study**

### **What were the key findings from the study about supporting low attaining pupils?**

The schools in the study demonstrated a range of ways in which low attaining groups of pupils could be successfully supported. Some of the practical ways that this was achieved and which are covered in greater detail later in the RoM were:

- keeping the curriculum varied and challenging for all, e.g. by including opportunities for vocational learning
- maintaining high levels of pupil motivation, participation and engagement, for example via a positive learning environment and high expectations
- identifying specific teaching strategies for low attaining groups, including: providing more scaffolding for learning topics; using varied examples and teaching styles; varying the pace of lessons
- giving additional support to low attaining pupils, often through: more small group and individual attention; additional resources, such as personal whiteboards or greater access to ICT; targeted support from teaching assistants (TAs) and others
- sustaining positive teacher-teacher relationships and pupil-pupil relationships, and
- maintaining strong discipline at the same time as making learning fun.

Looking at all the successful schools the researchers identified five principles on which these schools were basing their approaches to low attaining pupils.

- A broad curriculum - schools ensured pupils in low attaining groups had access to the full curriculum. This helped to raise expectations of pupils and teachers rather than lower them.
- Extra support - the schools in the study found ways of providing a higher quantity and quality of extra support for low attaining groups. Schools used extra teachers, teaching assistants, other adults and other pupils to provide this support.
- Involving pupils - many schools used the views of pupils about what they found helpful to improve teaching and learning in low attaining groups.
- Responding to what works - the case study schools were good at finding out how practices impacted on pupils, by measuring progress and attainment as well as by listening to pupils and teachers.
- Retaining flexibility - schools often put pupils in low attainment groups for parts of the curriculum, not for all lessons. Groups were reviewed regularly and pupils were transferred when appropriate.

### **How did schools organise groupings and which pupils were in lower groups?**

The researchers analysed the survey data from the schools to find out how schools organised groups and how they decided which pupils were placed in lower attaining groups.

The themes in which the researchers picked out significant findings were:

- grouping at key stage 2
- grouping at key stages 3 and 4
- allocation of pupils to attainment groups, and
- characteristics of the low attaining pupils.

#### *Grouping at key stage 2*

A wide range of grouping systems was used in the primary schools. Some grouped for numeracy or literacy, depending on priorities. Some primary schools used setting from year 3 onwards, others delayed setting until later, often in preparation for national tests. In general schools tried to keep lower attaining groups smaller to maximise individual attention available to pupils. Grouping arrangements were highly variable, sometimes changing during the course of the school year. For example, one school had small groups of pupils who are attaining well below the average during the spring term only. The headteacher reported:

'...the progress the children make in the spring term is amazing. It's very, very focused on the needs of the small group.... it certainly suits the pupils who are attaining well below the average.'

#### *Grouping at Key stages 3 and 4*

Setting was used much more extensively in key stages 3 and 4, though there was still considerable variation. Setting and banding systems were often designed as a means to: aid timetabling; concentrate additional support (e.g. TAs) for pupils who needed support; and allow low attaining groups to follow a modified vocational curriculum for part of the week. On the whole teachers in successful schools tended to support the grouping strategy of their own department, whatever that strategy was. This indicated that the important factor was staff support for whichever grouping strategy is used rather than one strategy being better than another.

Timing of grouping was often delayed until key stage 4, though again there was wide variation. One school set pupils only in maths and only at key stage 4, while another school used streaming from key stage 3, with all classes in every subject using setting. Whatever grouping practice and timing was used, low attaining groups were again generally significantly smaller in secondary schools.

#### *Allocation of pupils to attainment groups*

The allocation of pupils to groups was most often decided by subject specialist senior teachers, in consultation with other teachers and pastoral support staff who knew the pupils.

The criteria which schools said they used to allocate pupils were fairly common, including prior attainment, teacher assessment (formal and informal), teacher judgements and pupil behaviour. Nearly half the schools in the research reported that they reviewed setting decisions every term and a quarter of the sample every half-

term. This indicated flexibility in making adjustments when necessary.

### *Characteristics of pupils in low attaining groups*

The researchers found some trends in the characteristics of pupils allocated to low attaining groups. Schools indicated that setting decisions were based mainly on prior attainment. The data confirmed this to an extent, although prior attainment did not predict all setting decisions by any means. For example, over half the pupils with low prior attainment in English ended up in middle or higher sets.

Social class was a significant predictor of set placement. Pupils from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds were more likely to be assigned to lower sets, whatever their prior attainment.

Under the umbrella term 'family background', which several school leaders and teachers cited as a factor in poor attainment, experiences such as poverty, family breakdown, inappropriate parenting, poor diet, lack of sleep and a lack of learning culture at home were given as specific causes of under-attainment.

Special Educational Needs (SEN) was also a strong predictor of set placement. Pupils with SEN were concentrated in the low attainment sets.

Ethnicity was a weaker but significant predictor of set placement. For example pupils of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin were less likely to be selected for the higher sets.

Schools varied in their approach to setting based on behaviour. Some schools allocated pupils with behavioural challenges to higher sets, in order to provide positive role models for them, while others reported moving pupils to lower sets for 'behavioural reasons'.

Pupils in lower sets were also reported as typically suffering from low self-esteem, lacking confidence, having less independence, poorer levels of concentration, and showing disaffection or lack of motivation.

### **What classroom strategies did teachers use to motivate and inspire low attaining pupils to learn?**

Teachers from the project schools described the targeted strategies which they used to motivate and inspire pupils who are attaining well below the average. Generally these strategies centred around using more appropriate syllabi, using practical and interactive teaching, providing more scaffolding for pupil learning and finding ways to sustain motivation.

The researchers organised these strategies into four themed areas:

- differentiation
- engaging learners
- encouraging participation, and
- keeping expectations high.

### *Differentiation*

Differentiation took various forms in low attaining groups. Where resources allowed, some pupils were withdrawn from class to receive different teaching, often using a lot of interactive ICT and games. Differentiation for lower attainers within class was achieved in various ways, including providing clearly structured activities, broken down into stages, and giving instructions more slowly. For example in one observed numeracy class the teacher put a number of sums on the board, which ranged in difficulty. She asked all pupils to start with the easier ones but then to choose for themselves which other sums they did. This avoided the danger of differentiated teaching restricting what pupils who are attaining well below the average might achieve and also avoided potential stigmatising by peers for being given an easier worksheet.

### *Engaging lower attainers*

Teachers demonstrated a range of different ways to engage lower attaining pupils. There was general agreement that while pupils benefited from some repetition to reinforce learning, more often low attaining pupils benefited from a variety of materials and approaches to reinforce understanding of one topic. Teachers working successfully in lower attaining classes also gave significantly more examples, especially when introducing a new topic. For example in a lesson to introduce numerical division, the teacher presented one example in several different ways. These included using a bead line, drawing on the whiteboard and using a grid. Pupils were then encouraged to use the method they preferred.

### *Encouraging participation*

The researchers found that teachers used more varied means to encourage participation of pupils who are attaining well below the average than they did for other pupils. Questioning and feed-back strategies were identified as particularly important. These strategies included: following up an incorrect pupil answer with an easier question, leaving more thinking time for pupils, a higher level of praise for correct answers, highlighting only one area of improvement per piece of work, and asking more closed questions to build up learning step by step. Practitioners may like to look at a previous RoM on effective talk in the primary classroom (click to RoM 34) which explores ways in which teachers encourage participation. In another school some of the lowest attaining year 8 pupils were encouraged to participate in learning by buddying with and helping younger pupils to read.

### *Keeping expectations high*

Many teachers felt that low attaining pupils needed to be set work at varying levels of challenge, the easier work ensuring that they experienced a sense of achievement. Nonetheless, teachers and schools stressed the need to keep expectations high no matter what set they were teaching. Similarly teachers gave mixed ability groups the same writing tasks, giving greater scaffolding for lower attainers by providing writing frames, although recognising the danger of making them too dependent on this extra support.

The following pages of this RfT look in greater depth at three key practical areas which the researchers identified as critical in delivering on the four themed areas above: namely, relationships, use of teaching assistants and classroom management.

## **How important were relationships in helping low attaining pupils to learn?**

### *Teacher-pupil relationships*

The study showed that teacher-pupil relationships were particularly important in teaching low attaining groups. Low attaining sets tended to contain fewer pupils which helped teachers to get to know their pupils better, focus teaching and learning at an appropriate level, provide greater individual and personal attention, control the class dynamics, behaviour and disaffection more easily, and develop positive relationships.

The teaching-learning process was generally more negotiated in low attaining groups and this was linked with pupils feeling more in control of the direction of teaching.

Some teachers gave low attaining pupils some additional responsibility for their learning, for example selecting certain tasks and choosing pupils who they were going to work with. This required careful teacher monitoring and relied upon good teacher knowledge of what their pupils know and can do already and of their characters.

Strong relationships between teachers and pupils also helped them to strike a balance between a more relaxed teaching environment involving humour and maintaining discipline in groups of pupils, many of whom typically had behavioural problems. Successful classroom relations were always based on mutual respect.

In one school, a pupil described a respected teacher in these words:

'..she is not dead strict. She does have a bit of fun ... but she keeps people in order.' (pupil, year 8)

Practitioners may like to read a case study (click to case study 1) which explains the positive impact which

'Assertive Mentoring' of pupils by teachers had at one secondary school. Underlying this success was the teacher-pupil relationship.

### *Pupil-pupil relationships*

Low attaining pupils were identified as often lacking in self-esteem and self-confidence. Teachers who were successful with such groups emphasised the need to value all contributions in class, encouraging pupils to make mistakes and not ridiculing each others' wrong answers. In some schools pupils were encouraged to take this further, for example by applauding good work from other pupils.

Avoiding stigmatisation by peers was also a feature which recurred in successful low attaining groups. Feelings of stigmatisation generally disappeared once pupils were in class, so long as the atmosphere for learning was positive. In one school a teacher reported:

'...They get me to close the door so they can't be seen in the room [by other students] with students known to have specific learning difficulties.... However once the door is shut then there's no problem with it.' (head of department)

A number of schools made good use of cooperative learning techniques such as asking pupils to discuss topics in pairs, then in small teams before debating as a whole class. In one of the schools, which was conducting research into pupils' views of grouping, there was strong emphasis on the importance of peer-peer classroom support. The head teacher explained:

'Nearly all the children said that if we don't understand something it's better for the other children to explain it to us.' (Headteacher)

Another successful strategy for low attaining pupils which helped to strengthen peer relationships was the use of peer marking. Peer marking took time to be accepted by pupils but once it became established it was appreciated, with pupils becoming much more positively critical of their own work as a result.

### **What role did teaching assistants play in supporting pupils in low attaining groups?**

The use of teaching assistants (TAs) was identified by all of the schools involved in the research as central to supporting the learning of pupils who are attaining well below the average. It was the most frequently used additional resource to support these groups of students. The positive impacts were maximised when TA support was coordinated and well planned.

The most effective ways the researchers found TAs being used were:

- targeted work by TAs
- making TA support for individuals less obvious
- spreading TA time across a whole class, and
- sharing the teachers' load - inside and outside the classroom.

We give some specific examples of each of these strategies below.

#### *Targeted work*

In one school a teacher took the lowest attaining pupils out of the bottom set class once a week for some specialist tuition. The concepts covered during this time were then followed up by three TAs in the classroom during the rest of the week. TAs themselves often also worked with individual pupils or small groups who had been withdrawn from low attaining sets. This worked best when it was carefully planned, with the teacher knowing exactly what work was going to be covered and which particular skills were going to be practised.

#### *Making TA support for individuals less obvious*

Several TAs reported that secondary pupils often felt particularly embarrassed about having a TA assisting

them in class. This was successfully reduced by sensitive management, with the TA making it clear that s/he was available to help, but making it less obvious s/he was attached to a particular pupil.

### *Spreading TA time across a class*

Some teachers were aware that if a TA was attached to a particular group all the time then this could be counter-productive, because this group could end up with less teacher time or attention and could become over-dependent on the TA. This was tackled in some schools by ensuring that the TA did not only work with the low attaining pupils. One teacher explained:

'I don't always want her to work with the [lowest-attaining] group - it's not good for them or her and I also need to see how the children are doing.' (Year 5 teacher)

A different teacher had developed a very practical way of avoiding over-dependence. The teacher introduced a topic before allocating TAs to particular tables. She reported that this noticeably increased pupil concentration at the start of a task because the pupils did not always know exactly when they would be receiving additional support.

### *Sharing the teacher's load - inside and outside the classroom*

The splitting of classroom management tasks was a particularly effective way of using TA time, especially where the teacher and TA were used to working together. For example in one low attaining class the teacher took the register while the TA organised children's access to library books and then checked them off while the teacher did the introduction to the lesson. For lower attaining groups containing pupils with behavioural problems, classroom management issues were more pronounced. Coordinated TA support was used to reduce time spent on tasks other than teaching and learning. Practitioners may like to read a case study (click to case study 2) which identifies some good practice in using TAs with pupils who are attaining well below the average across one authority, particularly focusing on the teacher-TA relationship.

Several schools also reported that TAs acted as important links between teachers and parents/carers, especially as many TAs came from the local community and were therefore seen as more approachable.

### *How did low attaining pupils view TAs?*

The low attaining pupils interviewed at both primary and secondary school were generally positive about the support offered by TAs (and learning mentors). Primary pupils commented that being withdrawn from class for individual support enabled them to concentrate more in smaller, quieter groups, and that they enjoyed the more practical activities which they felt helped them to improve. At secondary level a number of low attaining pupils noted that the support had helped them to improve their grades.

Regarding in-class support from TAs, pupils at primary level liked the fact that TAs could help them when they got stuck and could clarify the teacher's instructions. Researchers observed several cases in which valuable learning time was lost when pupils had not understood the task and a TA or teacher was not available to clarify.

In one school research project, pupils judged one-to-one contact to be the most effective form of intervention. As a result of this the school management team was considering whether to make a change based on this feedback, to give pupils individual support once a week rather than small-group interventions five times a week.

### **How were classroom materials and arrangements used to support low attaining pupils?**

The schools which were serving lower attaining pupils well (indicated by high value added scores) all customised the curriculum, assessment and teaching in order to suit the particular needs of these pupils.

### *Customised curriculum materials*

Materials often focused on the same topics and assignments as those being taught in the higher sets, but they typically incorporated a range of demands to allow pupils to select the right level of challenge.



Many of the low attaining groups were given greater access to materials to support learning, such as individual whiteboards, calculators or specialist books.

#### *Resourcing practical, creative and active approaches to learning*

Teachers in effective settings for pupils who are attaining well below the average used a wider variety of practical, creative and interactive approaches in the classroom for lower attaining pupils than in other classes. These included examples such as teaching mathematical concepts through drama and making greater use of practical work in science. Teachers stressed the benefits of relating learning to pupils' own life experiences. There is more detail about the strategy of incorporating pupils' life experience into the classroom in a previous RfT on home school knowledge exchange.

Pupil interviews showed that lower attaining pupils enjoyed and learned more from lessons which were more activity-based. Practitioners may like to read a case study ([click to case study 3](#)) which describes how one teacher made a positive impact on GCSE results for some low attaining students, by organising PE lessons with a much greater degree of interaction, pupil involvement and pupil responsibility.

Several teachers however did point out the potentially fine line between interactive learning as stimulating fun and what might be viewed as childish and therefore unmotivating. For example, one science teacher recounted an incident when he had used a video which used puppets with different groups. The higher-attaining group had 'loved it' whereas the lower-attaining group had felt 'insulted'.

#### *Varying pupil groupings*

Teachers generally used a range of in-class grouping arrangements, in order to promote pupil engagement with learning and to encourage participation. Groupings were often changed during the course of a lesson to help reinforce the same learning point. For example, the English department in one of the case study schools had a policy of using mixed attainment groups of six pupils for in class activities and changing the group membership for each activity, to ensure the learning experience for each pupil was varied.

#### **What different approaches were used for low attaining pupils from different social groups?**

The researchers' survey found that certain groups of pupils were generally over-represented in lower attaining groups. These included pupils from ethnic minorities, boys and pupils from lower socio-economic groups. There were pointers from the research about ways that these groups of pupils could be best supported.

#### *Ethnic background*

Pupils' ethnic background was hardly mentioned by teachers and other staff in interviews about low attaining groups. Where it was mentioned, in some of the city schools in the study, teachers said that although there was racial tension and segregation outside the school, they worked hard to ensure that pupils generally got on well with each other. Any reported conflict was confined to the playground rather than the classroom:

'I think as a school we're quite good at getting pupils to leave their problems outside school when they come in.' (Teacher)

Language support was an area in which ethnicity was explicitly raised. One specialist teacher of a year 10 group with English as an additional language (EAL) felt that the groups were usually very responsive (backed up by researcher observation) because she was herself Bengali and therefore able to communicate in Bengali when necessary. A teacher from a different school observed that their English department greatly benefited from having several Bengali members of staff within their department. By contrast the mathematics department lacked this cultural and language support which he believed would have helped some of the 'quiet Bengali girls' who were often found in the bottom set mathematics classes.

Another area of language support was 'Jolly Phonics', used in a number of schools who reported that it was particularly effective with newly arrived EAL learners in lower sets. Pupils in two of the schools with high numbers of EAL learners also benefited from the oracy programme 'Talking Partners'.

#### *Gender*

Gender was the most common characteristic referred to by teachers of low-attaining groups. Boys were reported as over-represented in low attaining groups, especially in secondary schools. Several teachers referred to the need to find ways to manage the 'laddish' behaviour that was typical in such groups. One solution several teachers reported was to maintain firm boundaries in low attaining groups, but also to encourage a more relaxed atmosphere in these classes. Also several teachers reported the need to have greater flexibility regarding the structure and content of lessons for pupils who are attaining well below the average - to be able to make changes depending on the response of pupils. Practitioners may wish to refer again to the case study (click to case study 1) which describes an 'Assertive Mentoring' initiative. One of the successes of this initiative was to reduce 'laddish' behaviour within low attaining groups.

### *Socio-economic background*

Students from low SES areas were significantly over-represented in low attaining groups in the schools surveyed. A number of teachers also referred to the background of low attaining pupils, citing 'family breakdown, poverty, inappropriate parenting, poor diet, lack of sleep or lack of learning culture' as possible factors - especially for literacy difficulties.

Many schools saw literacy as the 'key sticking point' for pupils who are attaining well below the average from low SES backgrounds and made some specific efforts to counter this. One school, for example, adopted the Success For All (SFA) Literacy Programme which 'aims to ensure that children born into low income or poorly educated families succeed at school'. In this programme pupils work with others at a similar level whatever their age and therefore are carefully matched in groups where every pupil makes similar progress at the same time.

### **What strategies did schools and departments as a whole use to support the learning of low attaining pupils?**

The study found that the way that schools and departments as a whole were managed had a strong impact on the experiences of low attaining pupils. The researchers organised the key institutional and management strategies for supporting these pupils into five themes:

- management and development of teaching assistants
- curriculum arrangements at key stage 2
- curriculum arrangements at key stages 3 and 4
- school ethos, discipline/reward systems, and
- involving people outside of the school.

### *Management and development of teaching assistants*

All of the case study schools invested in TAs, targeting this additional support towards lower attaining pupils. The management and coordination of this support was central to its effectiveness. For example in one secondary school, the pupils with designated support were all allocated to the same half of the year group. This ensured that all available TA support was concentrated on pupils who needed it. In a primary school, TAs were managed such that the teacher of the bottom set had the same three adults supporting her class every day. The researchers also stressed the need for TA deployment to be coordinated, finding evidence of excellent communication between school managers, teachers and TAs in some schools.

Another key ingredient was an investment in the training and professional development of TAs. For example in one school a TA had been trained to manage the newly installed computer database for tracking pupil progress. Another primary school had appointed a literacy advisory teacher, part of whose job was to train TAs to a 'higher level' and to ensure consistency of intervention across the school.

### *Curriculum arrangements at key stage 2*

Primary schools which provided good teaching and learning for lower attaining pupils had developed a number of specific strategies, such as cooperative learning, peer marking and whole class (rather than individual) feed-back following tests.

A number of primary schools considered Assessment for Learning strategies as particularly effective with low attaining pupils, especially for example for helping lower attaining pupils to decide 'what makes good work'. You can find out more in our earlier RoM about putting AfL strategies into practice. (click to RfT 19 AfL: Putting it into practice)

#### *Curriculum arrangements at key stages 3 and 4*

Lower attaining pupils in secondary schools were provided with enhanced teaching and learning experiences in a number of ways. The lower motivations or non-academic interests of many low attaining pupils were addressed by offering more vocational pathways at key stage 4. This often included off-site work in small groups, learning at local FE colleges, extended work experience, or through offering alternative accreditation through more flexible learning in school (e.g. the skills based ASDAN programmes which accredit personal and social development).

Collaboration with neighbouring schools was also observed in several cases. Vocational courses were followed for example through a 'virtual college', a coming together of three local schools, to maximise use of resources and reduce travel costs by sharing facilities.

Several teachers and managers also reported deliberately selecting programmes with a heavy coursework component and introducing Assessment for Learning strategies because they believed these favoured low-attaining pupils.

#### *School ethos, discipline/rewards*

To try to tackle the relatively low self-esteem and poor motivation of low attaining pupils, schools strove to create a strong and positive school ethos which emphasised the inclusion of all pupils.

One way of creating a positive school ethos was to take the views of pupils into consideration wherever possible, for example through action research on pupil grouping and how pupils learn best. Practitioners may like to read a case study (click to case study 4) of a school which set out to listen to and act upon low attaining pupils' perceptions of their own learning and their classroom environment. Another positive strategy was to ensure that school rewards could be won by all pupils. This was ensured by the rewarding of effort, behaviour and attendance, as well as academic achievement.

#### *Involving people outside school*

The involvement of parents/carers to support learning was observed to have positive effects on the confidence and self esteem of low attaining pupils. This liaison worked best when coordinated with specialists, such as family liaison officers or attendance and welfare officers. A number of the schools were experimenting with novel ways to engage hard to reach parents of pupils who are attaining well below the average, especially to encourage greater involvement with homework. Strategies included classes for parents/carers (some joint with pupils) and a weekly 'sharing assembly' for parents to come and view work. Practitioners may find it helpful to read our earlier RoM about parental involvement. (click to RoM 29 on 'parental involvement')

Several inner-city schools had also established links with local businesses that encouraged employees to go in to school to work on particular projects with lower attaining groups, or act as mentors. Other successful mentoring of pupils who are attaining well below the average was being carried out by ex-pupils who had more 'street cred' with current pupils.

#### **How was the evidence gathered and analysed?**

The study aimed to investigate what constituted effective teaching of pupils in low attainment groups. It also looked at the characteristics of pupils in low attainment sets and the factors that determine the composition of these sets. The researchers also looked for examples of effective teaching of low attaining pupils who were not in sets.

The research was conducted by the Universities of Sussex and Manchester, on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

The researchers used two main methods in their research:

- a survey of schools in 12 Local Authorities (LAs) in England, and
- in-depth case studies from 13 schools in four of these LAs.

The survey was sent to 404 schools (302 primaries, 102 secondaries) of which 168 were completed (124 primary returns, 44 secondary). The survey collected data on Years 6, 7, 8 and 10. The completed questionnaires gathered data on individual pupils as well as data about how schools put pupils into sets and groups.

The thirteen schools selected as detailed case studies were from four of the LAs. Two of the LAs were shire counties and the other two metropolitan areas. The schools were selected using two criteria: firstly that they had high value added scores (they were making good progress with low attaining pupils) and secondly that there was a good spread of social class and minority ethnic intakes. The case study sample was more socio-economically disadvantaged than the national average and specific ethnic groups, such as Bangladeshi pupils, were over-represented at these schools compared to the national average.

The data collection in the case studies focused on Years 5, 8 and 10 in the specific subjects of English/literacy and mathematics/numeracy, and additionally science in Years 8 and 10. Data collection included: documentary evidence; individual and group interviews with a variety of staff; classroom observations of low attainment groups in the specified subjects/years; shadowing of selected low attaining pupils; and focus group interviews with these shadowed pupils. Some parents were also approached.

The data was analysed to answer two broad questions:

- a) How are the advantages of attainment grouping for low attaining pupils maximised?
- b) How are the disadvantages of attainment grouping for low attaining pupils minimised?

The research focused on the experiences of pupils in low attaining sets. Importantly the term 'attainment' was used in the research and report in preference to 'ability'. Using 'ability' was seen as problematic, since there is no means of measuring 'ability'. 'Attainment' in this research was measured by the proxy of National Curriculum Test results. This is a common predictor of allocation of pupils to groups.

### **What are the implications of the study?**

Teachers might like to consider the following in making use of the findings of the study:

- The research identified several areas of good practice for teaching low attaining pupil groups. Some of the critical strategies involved striving to maintain motivation and participation by varying the pace, style and content of lessons. How could you alter the way you prepare and deliver lessons in order to better suit lower attaining pupil groups?
- The research concluded that good teacher-pupil relations is one of the critical factors in successful teaching and learning for low attaining pupils. How could you develop and improve your relationship with individual pupils?
- Interviews indicated that low attaining pupils themselves understand the need to strike a balance between making lessons fun, flexible and interesting and maintaining strong discipline. How do you need to alter your practice to better achieve this balance?

School leaders might like to consider the following implications:

- The research indicated that the use of TAs is central to the teaching and learning of low attaining pupils, and that a good deal of planning and coordination needs to go into their deployment. What does your school need to do in order to improve the coordination, deployment and professional development of TAs to maximise their benefit to low attaining pupils?
- The schools which worked successfully with low attaining pupils used a range of different setting/grouping arrangements. One common factor however was that teachers generally agreed with the policy on setting that their school or department employed. How can your school ensure that the whole staff team or departmental teams have

input into setting/grouping practices?

- The research indicated that on average certain types of pupils are over-represented in low attaining groups, whatever their prior attainment (e.g. pupils from poorer backgrounds or from certain ethnic minorities). How does your school make decisions about setting and streaming? What information and criteria are used to make these decisions?

### **Gaps in the research**

Gaps that are uncovered in a piece of research have a useful role in making sure that future research builds cumulatively on what is known. But research also needs to inform practice, so practitioners' interpretation of the gaps and follow-up questions are crucial. We think the following kinds of studies would usefully supplement the findings of the review:

- case studies of approaches by teachers which have had a direct and significant positive impact on the learning of low attaining pupils
- studies which look at the ways which different kinds of pupils experience school and classes differently and how teachers approach teaching different attainment groups within the same subject, year and school context
- studies which look more closely at the significance of schools' external relations with parents and other agencies in their dealings with low attaining pupils, and
- more research on the effectiveness of TAs and pupil withdrawal from class.

### **What is your experience?**

Do you have any evidence regarding strategies for teaching low attaining students in your school? Do you have action research or enquiry based development programmes that are designed to explore for example, pupils' views on grouping or ways of promoting parental involvement? We would be interested to hear about examples of effective approaches, which we could perhaps feature in our case study section.

### **Your feedback**

Have you found this study to be useful? Have you used any aspect of this research in your own classroom teaching practice? We would like to hear your feedback on this study, which we can share and use to inform our work.

- email: [research@gtce.org.uk](mailto:research@gtce.org.uk)

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## Case studies

We have chosen four case studies, all conducted by teachers, which illustrate aspects of the findings of the study.

The first case study describes an 'Assertive Mentoring' scheme which helped to turn around the performance of disaffected secondary students.

The second case study describes how two teachers looked at the use of teaching assistants across a whole authority, and in particular looked at the importance of the relationship between the TA and classroom teacher.

The 'Sport Education' model is the subject of case study three, describing how this model made an impact by handing more responsibility for learning over to all students in mixed ability groups, targeting in particular low attaining GCSE students.

Finally case study four describes how a primary school considered its own inclusion strategies, asked pupils for their opinion and subsequently improved practice for low attaining pupils.

## 'Assertive Mentoring' scheme to counter 'laddishness'

We chose this case study because it shows how a particular form of mentoring had a dramatic effect on low achieving pupils. The mentoring scheme aimed to tackle issues of 'laddishness' and 'macho' image particularly among low attaining boys, but also with some girls. Teachers acted as mentors to students using a highly structured and formalised model which they called 'assertive mentoring'.

The 'assertive mentoring' (AM) scheme was developed in a Darlington secondary school. The scheme was identified by researchers from Cambridge University as the main reason why the school made dramatic progress - increasing its 5+ GCSE A\*-C results from 38% in 1998 up to 96% by 2007, and raising the school to 32nd in the country for KS2-4 contextualised value added scores.

### **How was the scheme run?**

The AM strategy aimed to engage under-achievers in their own learning, supporting them to opt out of 'laddish' behaviour without threatening their status in the eyes of their peers. The strategy included:

#### *1. Student target setting and tracking*

Students had targets set at the beginning of Years 7 and 10. These were regularly reviewed and altered when necessary. Subject teachers were encouraged to raise targets upwards, never downwards. The Assertive Mentoring Senior Leader (AMSL) challenged targets where appropriate.

#### *2. Assigning mentors*

All students were assigned mentors. Mentors used the target data to challenge their mentees. Crucial to the effectiveness of mentoring was its assertive style. The regular one-to-one conversations between mentor and student were:

- evidence driven
- business like, and
- had direct benefits.

The mentoring meetings were used to review targets and to design interventions which broke down barriers to learning. Mentors checked to ensure these were implemented and making an impact. Students were not allowed to give up on themselves.

### **How were mentors trained?**

Mentors were trained to use six 'Key Principles of Influence' to help pupils identified as low attaining to change their attitudes and attainment. The six principles are:

- reciprocity - obliging a student to return a 'favour'
- social proof - drawing students' attention to good things that others are doing
- authority - using your authority as an 'expert' to create a leadership position in the relationship
- liking - helping to encourage positive friendships among students
- consistency - getting the student to commit and encouraging loyalty to the mentor, and
- scarcity - highlighting the special value of the mentor-mentee relationship.

### **What effect did assertive mentoring have on students?**

Below is a summary of one case history, showing how AM strategies were successfully deployed.

Gus was a 'laddish character' in Year 10. He messed around in lessons if he got the chance, becoming frustrated when, in his view, the teacher was 'boring' or 'picked on him'. Gus revealed his frustrations with his Maths teacher to his mentor. He thought the teacher was mocking him. Gus said he couldn't do Maths, and that was his teacher's view. He admitted he was seriously under-achieving and said that there was no chance of the situation changing.

### **Actions**

The mentor gave Gus a 'get out of jail free' card for Maths only. This gave him permission to remove himself from confrontation rather than to 'kick off' with the teacher in the classroom. He was to seek out his mentor to 'sound off' to in private. His mentor approached his teacher in order to 'broker this deal', getting the teacher to see the student's perspective without undermining the teacher's position. The mentor suggested some other strategies which the teacher could use in the classroom e.g. more Maths challenges in lessons, friendly competitiveness, and rewards linked to performance. Gus valued the efforts of the school to put things right. Gus was promised rewards (attendance on school trip) if his Maths grade predictions improved, sanctions if they did not.

## **Results**

Gus was not flaring up in lessons. This had a calming impact on the others in the class. The Maths teacher saw Gus and others responding better. The 'deal brokering' was working. Teaching became easier and the teacher became more ambitious in his teaching. Gus tried harder and his predicted GCSE grade improved. Gus was even prepared to accept that his Maths teacher might have a legitimate view of the situation. This represented quite a shift in attitude. In June of year 10 Gus had been predicted by his Maths teacher to get an E grade in the GCSE. He actually achieved a B grade in his final GCSE.

## **Conclusion**

The target tracking and AM scheme showed that even the most challenging of students could be moved on. The outputs showed clear improvements for all students. Some movements were dramatic. Since mentors began to be aware of the 'principles of influence' and use them systematically, teachers adopted them for everyday classroom use.

Assertive Mentoring relied entirely on the relationship between teacher and student. Progress was only made by students when a mutually respectful and trusting relationship had been established.

## **Reference**

Farrar, E. (2008) *Using assertive mentoring to counter laddishness*. National Teacher Research Panel conference paper. Available at:

[Research Summaries from the Teacher Research Conference 2008](#)

## **Making best use of teaching assistants for low attaining pupils**

We chose this case study because it looked into the most effective ways which teaching assistants (TAs) were being used across one local authority. These included assisting in the teaching and learning of low attaining pupils. In particular the study looked at the importance of the relationship between individual teachers and TAs in their classroom.

The researchers wanted to find out:

- how schools were deploying teaching assistants
- what responsibilities teachers were giving to teaching assistants and what expectations they had of them, and
- what contributions teaching assistants were making to enable teachers to carry out their tasks more effectively.

Two Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) investigated the deployment of support staff across twenty primary schools and seven secondary and special schools in Plymouth local authority. Headteachers, class teachers and TAs were interviewed in each school. The audits looked particularly at good practice in:

- the role and deployment of TAs
- the existence of good working practice between teachers and TAs, and
- the contribution that TAs made to supporting and developing standards of teaching and learning.

## **Deployment of teaching assistants**

Teaching assistants were deployed in a variety of ways, including:

- assigned to small groups - low ability, targeted groups
- assigned to individual children with specific special needs
- class based and/or curriculum specific, and
- developing curriculum resources and/or working in school libraries.

### **Partnership between teachers and teaching assistants**

Partnership between teachers and teaching assistants encouraged mutual support and confidence, especially when teaching assistants were class-based and in a long term situation. There were also many examples of positive working relationships, consisting of good teamwork, respect and gratitude for the TAs' work and support. Essential elements to building a good relationship appeared to be:

- clear expectations from the teacher, and
- the teacher's desire to be proactive in building the working relationship.

One teacher's proactive attitude was expressed in the following terms:

'My relationship with my teaching assistant has developed into one of mutual confidence and respect..... I recognise the value of support that my TA provides to students and encourage her to take part in the lessons.'

### **Teaching assistants' involvement in planning and delivering lessons**

All schools involved teaching assistants in the planning of activities and classroom strategies. TAs were provided with information about materials needed to adapt work for students with special needs, such as visually impaired students, students with ADHD or students who required physical support. Time was also set aside (for example during assembly) to allow teachers to share planning with TAs. Schools stressed the importance of building in this joint non-contact planning time.

### **The involvement of TAs in feedback, assessment and record keeping**

TAs provided teachers with valuable insights into students and their learning activities, as well as giving students direct feedback. In one instance a TA gave feedback directly, using a simple grading system relating to the degree of support a student had needed from her. The TA and student also completed a simple statement on the student's learning progress, involvement, interest and motivation in the activity, using this opportunity to provide positive encouragement and to praise achievement.

### **Using TAs to support behavioural strategies**

Teachers often worked closely with TAs to develop behavioural strategies. This would often involve devising approaches that encouraged positive behaviour and agreeing sanctions as required by the school's behavioural policy. The TA would also support students with specific behavioural needs who spent time out of the classroom, but consulted closely with the teacher on how this time should be managed. The teacher researchers also found that TAs often provided insight from experience in other lessons that teachers could act upon, and so help to establish and maintain continuity.

In the light of the findings of the audits there were several implications for the effective deployment of TAs to support low attaining pupils:

- Time should be set aside for teaching assistants and teachers to meet together and collaborate.
- Support and guidance should be given to teaching assistants on appropriate strategies to be used with specific students.
- Teachers should be trained on how to deploy and manage teaching assistants to support teaching and learning.
- Strong performance management, training opportunities and career progression are important for teaching assistants to develop.

### **Reference**

Thornton, M & Hedges, C. (2006) *The active engagement of teaching assistants in teaching and learning*. National Teacher Research Panel conference paper. Available at



## 'Sport Education', improving the involvement and responsibility of low attaining pupils

We chose this case study because it showed how one teacher significantly improved the attainment of some low attaining pupils. The project used the 'Sport Education' model which encourages greater involvement and responsibility to be taken by pupils in their learning.

The aims of the project were:

- improve the attainment of disaffected and low achieving pupils through the integration of a school-specific leadership model
- improve pupils' attitudes towards and engagement with learning, and
- marginalise poor behaviour, encourage citizenship, a sense of belonging, accountability, ownership and enjoyment.

The study focused on twelve year 10 students from a secondary school in Birmingham, who were identified as at risk of failing to meet their predicted grade at GCSE in PE. Some of the pupils displayed signs of disaffection, such as disruptive behaviour or reluctance to actively participate in the lesson. The target group was mixed with twelve higher achieving pupils. A formal questionnaire and semi-structured group interviews were used to assess pupils' views of the project.

### **What were the strategies used to engage with pupils?**

The teacher researcher used the 'Sport Education' model which gave the pupils responsibility and accountability for their actions, enjoyment and learning.

#### *Roles and responsibilities*

The class comprised four teams which each contained five pupils. Each pupil was given a specific leadership role with certain responsibilities to fulfil. These roles were Team Captain, Fitness Coach, Equipment Monitor, Skills Co-ordinator and Recorder & Monitor.

#### *Points system and team sheet*

A points system was introduced which aimed to easily measure improvements in various areas. The team recorder registered standards such as attendance, punctuality, kit and homework on a lesson team sheet. Additional points were awarded at the teacher's discretion, for example for exceptional effort, champagne moment, outstanding performance and sports-personship. The team with the most points at the end of the week won and their picture was placed on the Sport Education notice board.

#### *Punctuality revision quiz*

As pupils arrived at the lesson they were given time to revise their notes from the previous lesson. A punctuality revision quiz was then delivered, with those who arrived first receiving the simplest question. This encouraged pupils to be early for the lesson, highlighted the profile of revision and created a more focused start to the lesson.

#### *Lesson structure*

This involved implementing strategies that would give pupils a clear sense of direction and enabled lessons to run smoothly. The teacher set out clear objectives and expectations for the lesson. The lesson was split into shifts of responsibility and lesson objectives were printed on the team sheet setting clear expectations.

#### *Bringing the correct kit*

The 'recorder & monitor' documented any incorrect kits for each pupil in each lesson. The number of incorrect kits declined significantly from 15 in the first term to 2 in the third term.

The project had the following measurable results for the group of low achieving pupils studied:

- improved attainment
- improved attitudes
- decline in poor behaviour
- increased participation, engagement and punctuality
- increased sense of accountability and ownership, and
- increased enjoyment.

More pupils achieved a pass on their ten weekly assessments, hitting their target grade or above. At the end of year exams four pupils outperformed their predicted grade and only one pupil failed to reach their predicted grade.

75% of pupils stated that they enjoyed working with their Sport Education team in their PE lessons. One pupil commented:

'It makes you feel like you belong, like you're needed'.

Another said:

'some people would have chosen not to participate and not be bothered and fade into the background... but if you've got a role, you have to do it and go from there and keep participating'.

All pupils' punctuality improved and the revision quiz ensured a prompt start to the lesson and demonstrated the need to revise in order to progress. The numbers of 'failure to hand in homework' decreased from 24 to six over three terms, while detentions for the target group given for poor behaviour decreased from 18 to two in the same period.

The researcher concluded that the Sport Education model:

- highlighted the importance of a more flexible approach to meet the needs of pupils, in particular using varied teaching styles and giving pupils additional responsibility for their own learning and assessment
- was conducive to a more democratic teaching style and development of positive relationships with students
- provided greater consistency for pupils when the regular teacher was absent, and
- was subsequently found to be even more successful with younger groups when taught from Y7.

## Reference

Holland, E. (2006) *Sport Education: a vehicle for the inclusion and performance of your underachieving and disaffected pupils*. National Teacher Research Panel conference paper.

[National Teacher Research Panel conference publication](#)

## Using low attaining pupils' opinions to improve their learning experience

We have chosen this case study because it shows how opinions of low attaining pupils were gathered and used, along with classroom observations, to create a more positive learning environment for all and to enhance the school ethos. The primary school involved decided to evaluate existing strategies for inclusion, aiming to:

- discover more about pupils' perceptions of their own learning
- find out pupils' attitudes towards the classroom learning environment, and
- identify features of current practice that supported the effective inclusion of pupils with special educational needs.

## Where, when and how did the study take place?

This study took place in a primary school of 300 children in a deprived catchment area of the East Midlands. The school included a Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) unit serving 38 children. The study focused on 12 low attaining children with special educational needs, some from mainstream classes, and others from classes in the unit. The study was conducted over a half term during English and mathematics lessons.

Pupil interviews asked:

- What helps you learn in English?
- What helps you learn in Maths?
- What makes it difficult for you to learn?
- What do you like to hear from staff?
- How does that help you?
- Is there anything the staff or children can do to make it easier for you to learn?

Teachers were asked to deliver their lessons as normal and were observed under the following categories:

- the working situation of the pupils
- teachers' use of praise
- pupils' responsibility for their own learning, and
- what happened when pupils had to tackle problems.

### **What were the key findings related to the learning of low attaining pupils?**

The three most significant findings of the study were:

- there was a perception among most of the pupils that they could only work with the support of adults, especially in English
- more thought needed to be given to feedback and praising of pupils, and
- the school was giving only limited opportunities for independent work.

A lot of the children identified the noise level as making it difficult for them to learn. Other pupil comments included feeling that they did not get enough help and wanting something explaining again. Pupils also requested resources such as counters, and others asked to be able to do things in little steps.

All the children liked receiving praise for effort and being rewarded for working well. One said: 'I like to hear because you are doing so well you can have a free choice'. Receiving praise made them feel happy. Others referred to being motivated by the praise, for example: '[praise] makes me happy, helps me go on better sometimes.'

From the classroom observations it was apparent that pupils with special needs had limited opportunities for individual work. They were mainly working in a small group of pupils, supported by an adult. Very little pupil independence was given in terms of tackling tasks. Pupils were also found to rely heavily on staff for help with solving problems.

### **What was changed as a result of the research?**

Analysis of the research led the school to decide that:

- special needs and low attaining children needed to be provided with more opportunities for independent work (i.e. without direct staff support), and
- pupils should continue to be praised for their effort but should also be given feedback concerning what they had done well and given more suggestions for a next step to encourage further independent learning.

Consequently, the school set about building in opportunities for greater independence into lesson planning - such as taking the register or putting out equipment. More activities were also designed to show that pupils could succeed as independent learners. For example in maths, simpler individual exercises were designed and pairs of pupils were sent to do an activity together without help from an adult.

Teachers also began to focus on constructive feedback as well as straight forward praise. For example: 'That's great, you've got the first sound of every word right'. The researchers also talked with support staff about the importance of both making positive comments to the children and prompting the children without giving them answers to further encourage independent learning.

### **Conclusion**

The research, with its emphasis on pupil voice and teacher peer observation, helped the school to see how classrooms could be made more inclusive for special needs and low attaining pupils. As a result pupils saw their comments being acted upon and were given more opportunities to have a go at independent learning.

### **Reference**

Walters, E., McParland, J., & Lichfield, G (2008) *How inclusive are our classrooms?* National Teacher Research Panel conference paper.

[National Teacher Research Panel conference publication](#)

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## Further reading

### **Related research**

[Mathematical thinking with low attaining pupils](#)

Article published in *Mathematics Teaching*, the bi-monthly journal of the Association of Teachers of Mathematics

[The Object-Process Duality for Low Attaining pupils in the Learning of Mathematics](#)

From the proceedings of the British Society for Research into Learning Mathematics

[Pupil Grouping Strategies and Practices at Key Stage 2 and 3](#)

DCSF website: Research Information

[Do pupils with learning difficulties need teaching strategies that are different from those used with other pupils?](#)

Resource published on TTRB Special Educational Needs website

### **Resources**

[Achievement for pupils who are attaining well below the average](#)

A good practice case study from Parkgate infant and nursery school, published on Herfordshire Grid website.

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## Appraisal

Dunne, M., Humphreys, S. & Sebba, J. (2007) *Effective teaching and learning for pupils in low attaining groups*. DCSF Research Report 011

[DCSF website](#)

### **Robustness**

The researchers surveyed 404 schools in 12 local authorities and carried out in-depth case studies of 13 schools drawn from four LAs to find out:

- how schools identified and organised low attaining groups
- ways schools and teachers maximised the benefits and mitigated the disadvantages of attainment grouping, and
- effective teaching approaches with pupils regarded as low attaining, but not in sets.

The questionnaire asked about school setting and grouping procedures, requesting data on pupil set placement (low, middle, high) in Years 6,7,8 and 10 in English and mathematics. The researchers merged Unique Pupil Numbers with the National Pupil Database and Pupil Level Annual School Census data and analysed the predictors of set placement. Variables included: previous attainment, social class, ethnicity and gender. This approach enabled the researchers to find out the backgrounds of the pupils who had been put in low attaining sets and their levels of attainment.

The researchers selected the case study schools on the basis that they were making good progress with low attaining pupils and represented a wide range of pupils with respect to social class and minority ethnic intakes. However, they were more socio-economically disadvantaged than the national average and Bangladeshi pupils were over-represented. Data collection was focused on Years 5, 8 and 10 in English, mathematics and science and included: documentary evidence, individual and group interviews with staff, classroom observations of low attainment groups, shadowing of selected low attaining pupils and focus group interviews with the shadowed pupils. Some parents were also approached.

The study found schools varied in the extent to which grouping practices were a matter of whole school policy or decided by departments. Mathematics was the subject area most commonly taught in attainment sets; English set the least and science had most variation. Prior attainment and perceived 'ability' were the main criteria on which setting decisions were based. But setting decisions were clearly not made on this basis alone. Pupils from lower socio-economic status, special educational needs' pupils, boys and pupils of Bangladeshi origin were more likely to be assigned to lower sets.

The advantages of attainment grouping for low attainers were maximised and the disadvantages minimised in three main ways:

- individualised teaching and learning
- customising curriculum materials, and
- creating a positive learning environment.

In general, schools working effectively with pupils in low attaining groups personalised the curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment for all pupils. The researchers highlighted how even in those schools with the most widespread setting practices, pupils in low attainment groups also enjoyed opportunities to learn in other kinds of groups, for example mixed attainment groups or in-class grouping arrangements.

## **Relevance**

The longstanding government commitment to raising standards of achievement for all pupils in schools was re-affirmed in the Every Child Matters: Change for Children in Schools report which focussed on the need to raise the educational achievement of the lowest attaining pupils in particular. The report highlighted the need for greater differentiation in teaching and learning and precipitated government support for attainment grouping in schools. However, whilst research has indicated a range of advantages of setting for pupils and for teachers, it has also suggested some negative effects of attainment grouping especially for low attainment groups (see for example the Research of the Month summary grouping pupils and students. (Click to RoM 18)

## **Applicability**

Teachers of low attaining pupil groups, both whole-class set groups and smaller groups within mixed-ability classes, will find it helpful to reflect on the teaching and learning ideas contained in this study, such as:

- providing more scaffolding for learning activities
- customising resources to meet the learning needs of low attaining students
- keeping the curriculum varied and challenging for all

- creating and sustaining positive teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships
- ensuring TA support is well planned
- providing a relaxed disciplinary regime in class, with an emphasis on participation and teamwork, and
- creating high levels of pupil motivation, participation and engagement.

When deciding on how best to allocate pupils to groups or sets, or manage TAs and other resources, school leaders will find it helpful to reflect on aspects raised by the study, such as:

- having effective school monitoring systems in place for tracking pupil progress
- keeping group sizes small and/or allowing for more personal learning support and attention through the deployment of TAs and learning mentors
- finding out how particular grouping arrangements affect pupils, by measuring results and listening to pupils' and teachers' viewpoints, and
- retaining flexibility, eg. by putting pupils in low attainment groups for parts of the curriculum, but not for all lessons, reviewing groups regularly and transferring pupils when appropriate, and
- finding innovative ways for low attaining pupils to access the curriculum which do not necessarily sacrifice breadth and which have the potential to raise rather than lower expectations.

### **Writing**

The report is well structured and sign posted. The findings are brought to life with a large number of illustrative quotes from teachers and pupils. The interview schedules used, details of the statistical analysis and school case study descriptions are provided as appendices.

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