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# **Innovative Grouping Practices In Secondary Schools**

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## **1. Background to the project**

In its White Paper 'Excellence in Schools' (DfEE, 1997) the government called for a reconsideration of pupil grouping in secondary schools. Setting was advocated in science, mathematics and languages and it was proposed that schools be required to justify other forms of grouping. At the same time, there was a commitment to identify other forms of effective grouping, particularly flexible grouping plans that would provide "support for those who need it most while continuing to challenge all pupils" (op.cit. p38).

Setting is one type of grouping arrangement, based on pupils' ability or attainment in particular school subjects. Other forms of structured ability grouping are streaming and banding. The definitions of the different types of grouping are as follows.

Streaming	Pupils are assigned to classes on the basis of a measure of general ability, the most able pupils in one stream, the next most able in the next stream and so on. Pupils remain in these streamed classes for most subjects.
Banding	The year group is divided into two, three or four bands on the basis of a measure of general ability. Each band contains more than one class and pupils may be regrouped within each band. Bands remain consistent across subjects.
Setting	Pupils are regrouped into classes for different subjects on the basis of their attainment in the subject concerned. Setting may be carried out across the whole year group or within a band or timetable half, provided that two or more classes in a subject can be time-tabled at the same time.
Mixed Ability	No attempt is made to group pupils by ability. Pupils may be grouped on a random basis or placed into classes to ensure that a particular mix is achieved, for example, of social background or gender.

Secondary schools in this country have had considerable autonomy in the way they group pupils. The majority of schools use some form of ability grouping in at least some subjects, although only a very small proportion use streaming. The amount of ability grouping increases as pupils move up through the lower school from year 7 to year 9 (Benn & Chitty, 1996). In the drive to raise standards and following the introduction of the National Curriculum many schools reconsidered their grouping practices. The levelled curriculum and assessments may have encouraged schools to increase setting. Some schools have considered their grouping arrangements in their search for solutions to particular problems, such as the improvement of literacy, the motivation of lower attaining pupils, or better differentiation of learning.

The effect of ability grouping on pupil attainment has been the subject of debate for many years. Recent reviews of the international research demonstrate that the overall effect of ability grouping on average pupil attainment is limited. Slavin (1990) selected 29 well-designed research studies, some of which were British, and on the basis of these concluded that ability grouping had little effect on pupils of any levels of ability. In all educational systems, the spread of attainment widens during the secondary phase of schooling, but streaming or selective schooling tend to produce a wider spread than other forms of grouping. Enrichment classes and accelerated groups can help raise the attainment of more able pupils (for reviews, see Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Reynolds & Farrell, 1996). Recent research in this country has questioned whether the academic outcomes of pupils in top sets are always better, particularly those of girls in mathematics (Boaler, 1997).

Ability grouping has both advantages and disadvantages (Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Hallam 1996; Harlen & Malcolm, 1997). Reducing the range of attainment within a class allows teachers to adapt their teaching more readily to the needs of the group. Reducing the range of attainment in a class should make it easier for teachers to work at an appropriate pace, thus maintaining interest and motivation. Ability grouping is seen as a way of challenging the most able. Schools that use setting can organise smaller classes for the lower attaining pupils.

The disadvantages of ability grouping lie mainly in its impact on non-academic outcomes and on the opportunity to learn. Lower streams and sets tend to include disproportionate numbers of pupils of low socio-economic status, from particular ethnic minority groups, boys and those born in the summer (see Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Hallam, 1996; Ofsted 1999). Placing pupils into groups is not an exact science, but once placed into a low group, movement upwards is very difficult. Incorrect placement in a low set may restrict future examination entry. Most teachers do not like teaching the bottom sets and instruction is often at a slower pace and of lesser quality (Finlay, 1984; Hacker, Rowe & Evans, 1992). Research demonstrates that pupils tend to be labelled and stereotyped, their motivation to learn adversely affected and their future options restricted. Bad behaviour can occur in lower streams because of pupils' recognition of their place in the scheme of things, (DES, 1989). In addition, ability grouping plays down the importance of pupil, teacher and parental effort.

Because of these advantages and disadvantages, ability grouping has been the subject of heated debate. Those in favour stress the positive effects on attainment whereas those against stress the negative impact, particularly the social inequities of streaming and the alienation of pupils in bottom streams. In the context of this debate, many secondary schools have adopted mixed systems in which subject departments are allowed to decide whether they wish to set or not. Pupils are taught in mixed ability form groups for some of the time and regrouped by attainment in subjects that are considered unsuitable for mixed ability teaching.

A major concern with mixed ability grouping is the difficulty of teaching effectively. Teachers generally find it easier to teach pupils of similar ability. Inspection reports from Ofsted (1995; 1999a; 1999b) indicate that teachers sometimes have difficulty matching work to pupil attainments. Although setting may reduce this problem, it does not eliminate it and in about a third of cases the match of work to pupils' needs was reported to be poor as little account was taken of the range of abilities within each set. This was also a conclusion from Boaler's (1997) research. Generally, teachers tended to make inadequate use of assessment information and often lacked detailed knowledge of the range of ability in their classes. Frequently, pupils in different sets are required to do much the same work. In mixed ability

classes, teachers tend to teach to the middle of the ability range and even experienced teachers use whole class teaching methods (Reid et al, 1981).

The challenge now is to find ways of grouping pupils and developing pedagogy that capitalises on the advantages and minimises the disadvantages outlined above. In other words, how can schools develop grouping plans to achieve the best attainment outcomes for pupils while minimising any negative impact?

## **2. Aims of the project**

The aim of the current project was to provide case study examples of secondary schools that have adopted different forms of effective pupil grouping. Explicitly, it was intended to move away from the rigid distinction between ability-based and mixed ability which has polarised the debate unhelpfully. The schools represent a variety of different forms of grouping and a variety of geographical locations. To be selected for the study, it was not sufficient for the schools simply to have adopted the particular form of grouping, they also had to be able to demonstrate that they had put in place mechanisms for evaluating the impact of the practice on pupil learning outcomes.

The aim in the case study reports is to give information to schools that will enable them to assess the advantages and disadvantages of each of the grouping practices and encourage them to develop more effective and innovative approaches. Resource implications and management issues are also considered. The evidence provided by schools in terms of pupil attainment is discussed and suggestions made to help schools evaluate their own practices.

### **3. Innovatory practice**

Innovatory practice was interpreted to mean forms of grouping that departed from the common streaming, setting or mixed ability patterns. The initial conceptions of innovatory practice were developed in the context of a research project funded by ESRC, on ability grouping at the University of London Institute of Education. This research explored the relationships between grouping practices and both academic and non-academic outcomes at Key Stage 3. While setting up this project, the researchers identified examples of innovative grouping practice which did not fit the categories adopted for the research design. For that study, the researchers were constructing a sample of schools with three different grouping patterns in the lower school (years 7 to 9): mixed ability in all subjects; setting or streaming in most academic subjects from year 7; and a combination of mixed ability with setting. Several schools contacted were operating grouping arrangements that did not fall into one of these patterns and had to be excluded from the study although it was recognised that their approach may be of interest. A few mentioned grouping arrangements that were developed to meet the needs of particular groups of pupils in the school, or to support study and thinking skills teaching for all pupils and these schools formed the first point of contact. Additional schools were identified through contacts and recommendations.

The schools were selected to represent a variety of different forms of grouping. We looked especially for:

- grouping arrangements that allowed flexibility for pupils to move from one group to another;
- grouping patterns to meet identified needs of particular groups of pupils;
- the systematic teaching of thinking and study skills;
- accelerated learning.

An important requirement of the project was that the schools could provide evidence that the grouping arrangements were effective in raising standards. This requirement proved to be quite problematic, as many schools had not collected systematic evidence on the effect of the programme or grouping arrangement on pupil learning. In some cases this was because the arrangement was fairly recent, but in others a particular grouping had been in place for several years with no systematic evaluation of the effect on attainment. For example, some schools have taught boys and girls separately for many years. Schools that were unable to provide evidence of systematic evaluation were excluded from the study. The issue of evaluating the effects of practice will be taken up in the final section of the report.

#### **4. The case studies**

Initial contact with the schools was made by telephone. The purpose of the project was described and the head or deputy was asked to provide information about the practice. At this stage, schools were also asked to describe how they were evaluating the effect on pupil attainment. As the schools were chosen to provide examples of different types of innovatory practice, there is no attempt to present them as representative of schools in general. They do, however, provide some interesting examples and ideas for other schools to consider.

During the spring of 1998, a one-day visit was made to each of the schools. Face to face interviews were carried out using semi-structured schedules. In all schools the Head teacher or a senior teacher was interviewed along with up to four key teachers and four students who were directly involved in the initiatives. These interviews were recorded. Brief conversations about the pupil groupings were held with many other students and with other teachers, including those **not** involved with the groups. In all schools, classrooms were visited and in some cases lessons were observed. A collection of school documentation (OFSTED reports, brochures, minutes of meetings, in-house evaluation reports, examination data) was analysed and used for reference as were videos and websites, where available. Details of data collected in each particular school are given at the beginning of each case study.

Further information about the interviews is available from Judy Ireson. The main areas covered by the interviews were as follows. Headteachers or members of the senior management team were asked about the school and its intake, the particular grouping practice and how it operated, who was involved initially, why the school decided to group pupils this way and what were the perceived benefits and difficulties; the evidence used by the school to evaluate the impact of the arrangement; and whether they thought a similar arrangement would work in any school.

Teachers were asked in more detail about the grouping and its impact on their teaching and on the pupils; they were also asked to explain how the practice was evaluated. Pupils were asked about their learning and how the particular grouping differed from other groups. Quotations from staff and pupils who were interviewed in the schools are presented in italics in the text.

We would like to thank all the participating schools for their generous help in this project.



## **Brooke Weston CTC, Corby, Northants**

### **A four tiered curriculum in every subject: groupings by four tiers of attainment in every classroom**

*Based on interviews with the vice-principal, teachers, students, brief classroom observations, school's annual review report, Ofsted report, website information, BBC East Midlands video of the school in action.*

#### ***The college***

Brooke Weston is a City Technology College that takes its students from the boroughs of Corby and Kettering and surrounding villages in Northamptonshire. Currently there are 1151 students on roll with 18% on FSM and very small numbers from ethnic minorities. The school population is drawn from a catchment area that contains many families on low incomes. Corby, in particular, is seen as a deprived area.

#### ***Types of grouping at the college***

The types of grouping at the college are mixed ability and setting but each class then utilises a four-tier system. In years 7 and 8 students are taught in tutor groups of mixed ability for all subjects. In years 9, 10, and 11 they are split up into sets reported to be largely because of forthcoming KS3 tests, although this extended into subjects which are not tested. There are sets in mathematics, science, English, French, history, geography and technology but students remain in mixed ability groups for art, music, drama, PE and RE. At KS4 setting continues.

#### ***A four tiered curriculum in every subject: groupings by four tiers of attainment in every classroom***

Philosophically, the college believes in differentiating the National Curriculum to meet individual needs and, to accommodate students' differing abilities, work in lessons is based on a four-tier system. The four-tier system applies at all times, in all subjects in years 7-13, in all sets in years 9-11 and has been running for seven years.

Students can attempt work on one of the following levels:

BASIC	which represents the minimum acceptable for a student of a particular age to achieve
STANDARD	which is the average performance expected for a student of a particular age
EXTENDED	which is above the average performance of a student of a particular age
ADVANCED	which is at least one year in advance of an average student of a particular age

There is a Fast Track early entry to GCSE for those students consistently working at extended and advanced levels.

All departments use the differentiated structure and plan for the four tiers in their own ways. Within the four tiers, departments can further stratify and individualise the programmes as they

wish. Students report that all teachers give students a good idea of what is required at each of the BSAE levels. For example, in English, students are shown their “learning route” – a flow chart of a term’s work, which explains clearly the curriculum content that will be covered each week. An ‘action plan’ at the beginning of each week describes the different tasks for the different tiers and students are told about each of the tasks in detail. Teachers provided a ‘core’ input and advised students whether they should attend it. Students will be learning the same skill - the difference comes in the level of difficulty to which the skill is taken. This principle applies across the subjects. Students working on different levels might sit together. Some commented that they found this useful as they could ask peers for support.

Year 7 students described how the system works:

*You are given a description of the work you are going to have to do in all the levels. You choose the one you think you will most be able to do. An example is – in English – STANDARD work would be ‘write a paragraph on the book you are reading’. EXTENDED would expect you to use more descriptive words.*

*In science, the teacher will put, for example, ‘BASIC questions are numbers 1 and 2’ so you can read through the questions and see the kind of thing it involves.*

*In some subjects like music STANDARD / EXTENDED are quite similar – you don’t have to do that much more. In others like French there are bigger jumps.*

**Student self-selection of level of work:** Students are responsible for selecting the levels at which they are going to work. It is the students’ decision. Even if a student goes for a level that the teacher believes is out of reach, the student will still embark upon it. The teacher’s task is to provide a safety net for them, if they decide to drop back down. “Our experience is that students’ decisions are always either realistic or aspirational”, explained the Vice-Principal.

Students and teachers negotiate the levels of work to be attempted, whether within an individual lesson (where students might want to change part way through a lesson because they think the level is too hard) or over time. For example a Year 7 student’s experience was: *For English I tried ADVANCED. After ten minutes in the class, I found it was too hard. I told the teacher and it was OK to change to EXTENDED, whereas in Maths, I am on EXTENDED and constantly managing that all right, so will stick with it.* A Year 8 student explained: *You can talk to the teacher if you are embarrassed you have made a wrong choice. They may suggest they put you in the one lower and see how you get on with that.* Another said *Over time, the teacher talks to you and says ‘do you want to work harder or is it too hard?’ Then you move up or move down.*

**Going into sets in Year 9:** Setting is also based on negotiation, not a matter for the teacher alone. In the English department each student has an individual learning programme (ILP) and at the end of Year 8 students look back over their ILPs, look at how well they did, the level they are generally working at. In other subjects students are asked to look at marks and classroom test results. Students are asked “Which set should you be in Year 9, what’s your aim?” Teachers report that students seem to understand that they can only achieve a particular level in the end but that choosing between the four tiers is the best route for them to achieve their best possible level.

If the student insists on a particular set, the student’s will prevails until life in that set illuminates her/his own achievement. A teacher explained . . . *because students have had experience of choice in years 7 and 8, they are usually very clear about their own abilities and potential and*

*choose their sets realistically.* Other teachers reported that overall students don't see negative connotations in choosing lower sets.

**BSEA within sets:** Sets are arranged to accommodate the BSEA levels and departments organise sets in their own ways. For example, there may be a set containing students doing work at ADVANCED and EXTENDED levels plus three other parallel groups or two sets with students working at STANDARD, EXTENDED AND ADVANCED levels plus two sets with BASIC AND STANDARD levels.

The vice-principal explained: *Even in a set where one would expect students to be getting STANDARD or better, BASIC is still an option, although an option we would expect them to take only occasionally.* It is college policy that *nowhere will there ever be a sink group, a completely BASIC group.* In lower groups higher levels are always on offer and teachers find that students aspire to higher levels. As one Year 8 said *Even in the sets . . . you can really go at your own pace . . . not kept to one pace . . . can really speed up if you want.*

**Monitoring and evaluation:** Careful monitoring of pupil progress is a key part of the system. Departments have their own ways of monitoring student progress but all are reported to be thorough. For example, the quality of comments made by staff on student individual learning plans in English is carefully monitored. There is performance monitoring for Y10 and 11 with individual action plans for individual students. Because students can have their work marked by more than one member of staff in a team-teaching situation, standardisation of marking is also monitored. The following are some views expressed by students who were interviewed:

*In most subjects we get lots of useful comments on our work.*

*If a teacher takes your book in say for science . . . they always give it back the next lesson. You always know if you are giving cause for concern, or if your work is satisfactory or good, what they think of your effort and all the levels of BSEA you are getting.*

*Teachers keep checking that you are not always doing the easier level . . . keep suggesting things.*

*If you keep getting good marks in your STANDARD work and you are always doing STANDARD work . . . the teacher would probably suggest that you start doing EXTENDED level work . . . that happened to me in RE.*

*If they spot something going wrong when you are trying EXTENDED, they'll suggest you might like to go back and try standard again.*

### ***Implications for Teaching***

The major implication for teaching is planning for differentiation, which takes a great deal of the teachers' time. However those interviewed believed that it was time well spent. Some departments employ team teaching which offers a mix of expertise and a mix of approaches in classrooms containing two tutor groups or sets. For example in English, one teacher may be giving a 'core lesson' on a particular skill to students working at BASIC and STANDARD levels while the other takes the remaining students aside to focus on individual learning. In the case of team-teaching, planning the division of labour needs to be very meticulous. However, interviewees report that it is *a great model for professional development, expanding the range of professionalism for both teachers involved.*

In any one lesson, a range of teaching strategies is employed. At times teaching may be the same for all tiers at some stages of a lesson for example when using video, demonstration or the introduction to work on offer. The students' view is that: *It really helps when the teachers*

*comment at the beginning of the lesson and say exactly what is expected of you.*

At other times, in the open access study areas, students use the banks of computers and other research resources for investigative work in all subjects (students can access lesson materials on screen) or engage in practical and experimental work. In the words of one Y8 student: *The teaching differs within the lessons. Part of the time you'll be copying down something from the board and part of the time you'll be doing practical.*

In our brief classroom observations a wide range of practice was observed. At times the teacher imparted knowledge, at other times the teacher was a resource and guide. What was clearly noticeable was that teachers and students engaged in a great deal of one-to-one talk and teachers gave very specific feedback on how work could be improved.

### ***Benefits of the system***

All those interviewed were very positive about the system at the college. The system had been running since the college was opened and so there had been no difficulties associated with major change such as resistance from members of staff.

Teachers who were interviewed reported the following advantages of the system:

- The system embodies the ethos of the college exactly. The college puts students at the centre and so allows them to be in charge of their own learning;
- Across teachers, students and parents there is a common language of achievement; the language of BSEA forms a framework for planning, reporting and recording; parents understand the 4 tiers and can talk about them with teachers in relation to their children's progress;
- All students understand what BSEA means and everyone knows where they stand. There is no confusion with students because BSEA happens in all subjects. Teachers and students are working to the same clearly identified goals; parents can see their children achieving;
- It is easy to make cross- subject comparisons;
- The different levels of task are clearly explained at the beginning of lessons and this enables students to make an informed choice. Hence they are not phased or 'turned off' because the task in front of them is usually not daunting;
- Because teachers are focusing on what individuals can do, they don't make great global statements such as *Year 8 can't use commas*;
- In the case of team teaching, students have a choice of teachers to whom they can relate.

Students also reported advantages:

- *If you attempt a better level than you are at . . . you're likely to guess at all your answers and come out with a lower level. So it feels good to aim at the right level and get good results;*
- *In some schools with top sets and everything, some children get the mick taken out of them. That doesn't happen at this school . . . our levels are our own;*
- *It's good in mixed ability groups. If you were round a table and all working on the same level, then people would ask for your advice (maybe not exactly copy) but certainly not do it by themselves really. I think BSEA is good. It's good to have different bits of work going on . . . you get down to your **own** work;*
- *Those on the BASIC level at any time can benefit . . . they can listen into discussion on the table and lift their ideas;*

- *Teachers give you more freedom to choose how you will learn. You can choose your own level. You get to decide . . . you know what you're best at and maybe your teacher doesn't know as well as you do;*
- *You can get fast tracked . . . you can take your GCSEs earlier.*

### ***Impact of the programme***

The programme is clearly having ***a strong impact on student motivation***. *You keep working at your hardest so you can move up a level in everything*, explained a Year 7 student and others interviewed showed equal enthusiasm. *Even if you thought . . . oh I'm not as good at EXTENDED but you tried it and you achieved it . . . then you'd want to keep trying for EXTENDED*. Teachers believe that being able to choose their level of work really empowers students: they know what they are being asked to do, therefore they invest in things and take the initiative. This leads to a culture of 'mutuality': students feel they are "getting all this" from the staff and so are willing to put their all into it. They have clear targets to aim for, usually the next tier up. Even after ADVANCED level work, they can go for the Fast Track.

The programme is also having ***an impact upon students' understanding of their own capabilities***. By working through the BSEA levels and understanding their differences, students clearly learn more and more about their own capabilities. By Year 11 there was a 0.9 correlation between students' predictions of their GCSE results and the actual outcomes. The correlation with staff predictions was 0.7.

Teachers believe that the programme is having ***some impact on pupil self esteem*** because every student feels their strengths as well as their weaknesses are known. Through very sensitive curriculum differentiation, achievable targets are set for everyone so they do succeed. Students who come up identified as SEN from primary don't feel labelled SEN they are simply on the BSEA system like anyone else. Perhaps linked to enhanced self esteem, some students are seen to behave more positively in Brooke Weston than in many other areas of their lives and the principal and vice-principal put this down to the respect they have for members of staff.

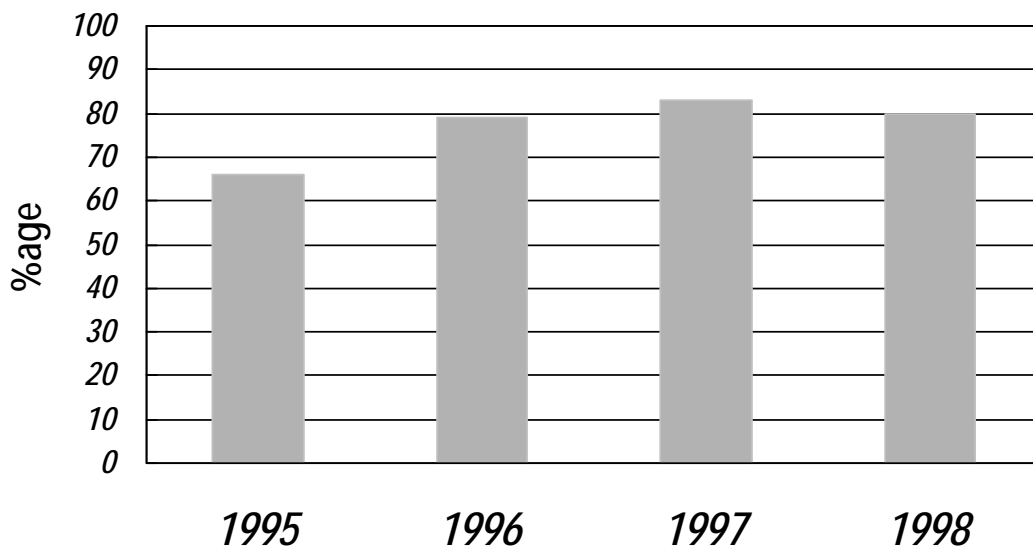
The ethos of the school makes a difference in terms of ***boys' achievement***. Because the culture is one of mutuality between staff and students, there is no kudos for boys in being negative about their learning. The vice-principal's view was that a 'lads' culture would be likely to thrive in a more adversarial environment, leading boys in particular to 'take on' the staff and opt out of learning. Although girls still outperformed boys in national examinations, the gap between boys and girls at the college was smaller than at the national level.

***Impact on achievement***

The *programme appears to have had a positive impact on pupil achievement*. Over the last three years around 60% of students nationally have achieved level 5 or above in English, mathematics and science in Key Stage 3 tests. In comparison, the test outcomes from Brooke Weston are 83%, 94% and 95% respectively. By themselves, these results do not give a clear indication of value added between Years 6 and 9. However, the college reports that the intake covers the full range of pupil ability including many students from underprivileged homes. The distributions of NFER test scores for the pupils entering the college between 1991 and 1995 support this and indicate that the intake remained fairly stable over that period.

The following diagram indicates the trends in GCSE performance of the college since 1995. (It should also be noted that out of a total entry of 1592 students for GCSE in 1997, only 22 gained grades at F, G or U).

***GCSE: Students 5 A\* - C***



The Principal attributes the very good GCSE results to *the policy of encouraging students to identify their own achievement targets and the college using all its resources to assist the students to attain them*.

The vice-principal and teachers interviewed believe (and the video of the school shows) that the programme has demonstratively benefited those from underprivileged homes where it is often difficult to receive a great deal of support for learning. Students themselves explained that they would not have achieved what they have achieved at Brooke had they listened to the low expectations of contacts outside of the college.

***Perceived difficulties***

Interviewees reported that following a truly differentiated curriculum and preparing work at four levels is very hard work. As there are not always commercially-produced resources available, staff have to retain an innovative and creative approach.

The vice-principal observed that some staff with experience elsewhere do not always take easily to the less directive role of the teacher as facilitator and assister. He explains that the *main issue is with teachers who have developed an orthodoxy or methodology where the approach is more confrontational and less well structured and allows for a lesson to be at one level. They find it difficult to adjust to the college's structure, pace and expectations.*

In relation to this, supply teachers may find it difficult to slot in and so all cover is done from within. However, this poses no difficulties as the staff absence rate is very low.

### ***Would it work in any school?***

Interviewees believe that this system of differentiating the curriculum and giving students choice could be successful in any school or college, "if the will was there". The crucial factor would be the attitude of middle and senior managers and how each department responded to implementing the differentiated curriculum. Schools would need to start in Year 7 and "grow it up through the institution, in all subjects".

### ***Comments***

- Results speak for themselves but it should be acknowledged that this college teaches a long day (from 8.30am till 6.00pm if students want) and a long week (32 hours as against DfEE minimum of 24). Extra hours are used for additional subjects such as Japanese or homework clubs.
- The college was newly founded as a City Technology College and has had the benefit of a new start and good resourcing.
- Students are well supported even before they join the college. There is an explanation on the net aimed at Year 6 students about how the BSEA system works. Curriculum materials are available on a web site, as far as copyright allows and students are able to dial in from any computer in the college or from home.
- An important point made by the vice-principal is that BSEA is student centred but not laissez faire. It is carefully monitored, carefully reported and negotiated, assessments are clear and unambiguous, expectations are clear and unambiguous.

## **Sandringham School, Hertfordshire**

### **Student choice within a modular curriculum**

*Based on: interviews with the Acting Head, the deputy who co-ordinates the modular curriculum, a teacher taking extension groups in English; interviews and brief conversations with eleven students from years 7, 9 and 10; brief conversations with members of the teaching staff; brief observation in two modular lessons; school documentation.*

#### ***The School***

Sandringham is a co-educational school taking over 1000 students from in and around an affluent suburb of St Albans. The school has less than 5% of students on free school meals and a small intake of children from Asian and African Caribbean families (less than 10%).

#### ***Types of grouping at the school***

Several types of grouping are used in the school. In Years 7 and 8 most subjects are taught in mixed ability classes. To ease the transition from primary to secondary, pupils are taught in mixed ability groups by the same teacher and staffed by a support teacher for an Integrated Learning Programme in English, history, geography, RE and PSE. *It breaks you in and is not a scary leap*, explained a student in Year 8.

There is also an extension group in English for the more able students, selected, in Year 7, on the basis of primary records, Key Stage 2 test results and primary teachers' comments. In Year 8 extension groups are selected on the basis of Year 7 teachers' recommendations.

Setting is in place from the first term in Year 7 in maths and in science and from Year 8 onwards in Modern Foreign Languages. The rest of the curriculum is managed in mixed ability groups. However, in Years 10 and 11, there are two bands in English.

Sandringham is unusual in that it also offers student choice through a modular curriculum, alongside a core curriculum. The modular curriculum provides students with choice and the opportunity to specialise. Groups are based on student selections, not on teacher assessments. In year 9, the modular choice occupies 16% of the curriculum increasing to 28% in years 10 and 11.



### ***The modular curriculum and student centred grouping***

The ideas of the modular curriculum and student choice came directly from the head in 1992. The ideas were “pushed through in an intensive way” at a three-day residential staff conference. The reason was to motivate students by giving them more ownership of their learning, offering as wide a range of subjects as possible, allowing students to decide on how much time they wanted to spend on subjects and giving them the opportunity to specialise in certain areas. In other words netting student motivation and responding to student demands. The overall aim was to raise achievement.

In Year 8 students are introduced to the idea of the modular curriculum by heads of year and at a curriculum evening for themselves and their parents where they are shown how to build modules into GCSE courses. In Year 9 the modular curriculum starts on a small scale but becomes more extensive at Key Stage 4 where it incorporates option choices. Staff decided to give students a taster of the modules in Year 9. The modular curriculum at Year 9 forms a bridge between the integrated learning arrangements at Years 7 and 8 and the more extensive modular curriculum in Years 10 and 11.

The school aims to offer modules that not only meet the requirements of the National Curriculum but also meet the needs and interests of individual students. There are 25 teaching hours in a week within which 4 are given over to the modules. In Year 9, the subjects involved are science, technology, modern foreign languages, humanities, RE and IT. There is also ‘extension English’ aimed at able children in Year 9. In Years 10 and 11 some modules run in English and maths, art, drama, PE and music and there is also a GNVQ in business studies and IT. Every faculty is represented.

Modules are short courses with ‘catchy’ titles which can be added together to achieve success in seven to eleven GCSE subjects. They can be taken purely for interest or to extend studies in particular areas where students are experiencing slight difficulty or where they want to learn more. There are 4 nine-week modules in Year 9, five modules of 12 weeks duration in Year 10 and two sixteen-week modules in Year 11.

Because modules are chosen at periods during the year and not all at once, Year 9 students have a chance to re-think and change. Some subjects appear as both compulsory and optional. This is to allow students the opportunity to use a module for “further practice” or “extension” of a particular course.

Years 10 and 11 students are guaranteed first choices if engaged on a GCSE course. Exceptions are made if hardware is limited in I.T. Groups are arranged into manageable sizes. As a general rule, the maximum number for ‘sit down’ subjects is 30, for practical subjects including arts and science, 25. Technology groups are kept to 20. However, these numbers can be flexible.

### ***Implications of the modular curriculum and student choice for teaching***

Heads of faculty need to give careful consideration to where they are deploying teachers, for example whether they will teach the core or modules or both, especially as some teachers have certain preferences.

In the modular curriculum, all subjects are in the market place and this presents a challenge to teachers to make subjects and courses attractive to students. Teachers need to vary their approaches and classroom management styles as they may have the challenge of teaching some students both in the core and in the modules. For example, in maths this means teaching in sets and in mixed ability groups. They may be teaching some support modules and some fast moving GCSE modules in the same subject. Teachers are constantly challenged to reinvigorate the modules and develop new ideas.

Some of the students interviewed had noticed a difference between the teaching in sets and the teaching in modules and saw it as *same work, different pace in sets, ... same work, one pace in modules*. Others explained *You don't really know if you are doing a module or not. The teacher's attitude is the same ... nothing special about it except you picked it*. Of the extension group, a Year 8 student reported *Lessons involve a lot of debate. It's a lot more relaxed in the group ... we are all the same ... we all feel the same*.

Teachers may also have the challenge of teaching very large or very small groups. They need to be flexible. For example, when 109 students opted for forensic science in Year 9, science teachers had to change plans and adapt programmes. Similarly when a group of 36 opted for geography, the teacher decided to take them all, accepting that the marking load would be much heavier than that of colleagues with small groups.

### ***Benefits of the modular curriculum***

The acting head reported that many of the school's new intake of children cited the modular curriculum as a reason for choosing Sandringham. Parents see the modular curriculum very positively when it is explained clearly to them and enjoy having some say in what their sons and daughters are doing.

Staff reported that the student choice is very popular with the students themselves. There is a student evaluation at the end of each module. Students who were interviewed felt they could negotiate with teachers when they thought they needed an extra module. They also enjoy the autonomy associated with making choices. As one put it: *We get to choose what we like to do instead of the teacher saying you have to do this and you have to do that*. The modular curriculum allows students to get involved in what they want to do and to be "architects" of their own learning.

The majority of teachers appeared to support the ideas of the modular curriculum and student-centred groupings . . . *the modular curriculum and student centred groupings fits with the ethos of the school . . . we look at where students are and how we can get them beyond their expectations . . . we really push the idea of "everybody can be somebody" and the modular curriculum makes that live*. The ethos in modular groups is very positive because students want to be there, they are never thrust into a subject in which they have no interest.

The modular curriculum offers students flexibility because it is chosen in blocks. It is

different from options because it is flexible, it doesn't say "that's it for two years". Candidates can do two performance Arts subjects at GCSE. Very able students can do a GCSE through one session a week. Students having problems in English and maths can take extra modules. Structures are in place for GNVQ.

Students reported the following advantages:

*You get to find out if you really like something.*

*You can move between the groups.*

*If you are very good, you take other lessons for fun.*

*Can do more GCSEs than in other schools; can take as many as you like ... whereas in other schools they get a set amount they have to take. Does help a lot ... if you don't want to take as many GCSEs you can use the modules for other interests.*

*Your set of friends becomes wider.*

### ***Impact of the modular curriculum and student centred grouping***

In their observations and conversations with students, teachers had noted that there were low levels of disaffection and truancy and a positive impact on self-esteem of the vast majority of students. When students began to achieve in one area it had a knock on effect in other areas.

The element of choice was clearly a major impact on student motivation. A member of staff reported *The students are all there because they have chosen to be there, not because they have been put there by teachers. The only raison d'être is motivation.* Science teachers had managed to capture the interest of Year 9 students . . . managed to excite young people at that very crucial stage. The number of students choosing double science had gone up dramatically, from 90 to 140. Because modules 'finish' on a certain date, the pace of teaching has been increased.

Students who were interviewed commented:

*If you've picked it...you're a lot more enthusiastic about it. That's the one you've picked; that's the one you really want to learn about.*

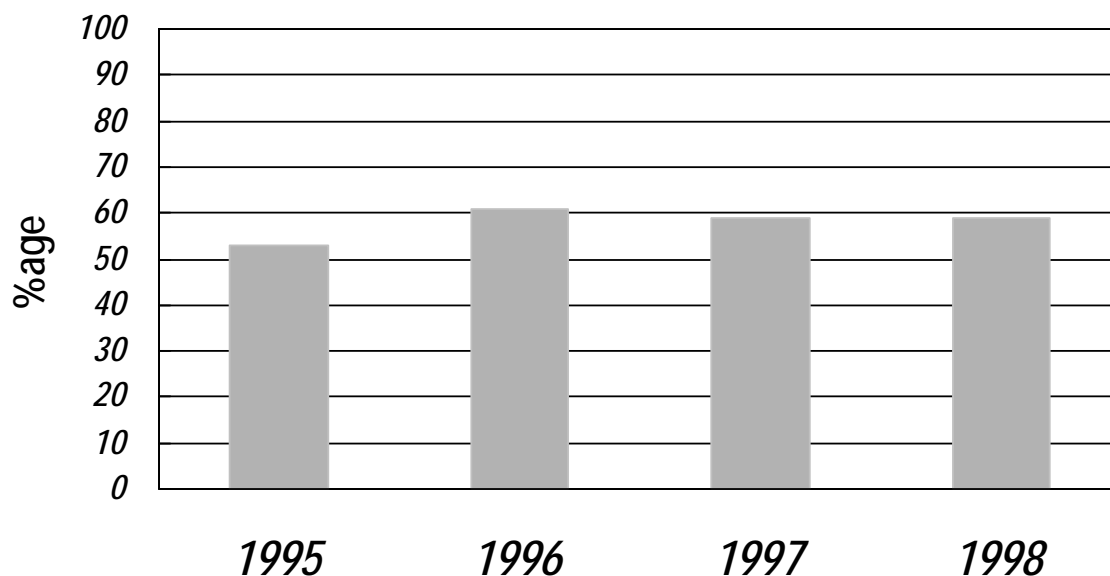
*In a module...everyone's chosen that so obviously everyone wants to learn that so no-one's going to mess around. There must be an impact on the work because people don't talk so much and concentrate more.*

*Really the modular curriculum offers a way you can concentrate on what you really want to do...so you get better marks instead of getting an average mark.*

### ***Impact on achievement***

Since the onset of the modular curriculum and student choice, the school has raised achievement significantly in the modular subjects. The school gets its best results at GCSE in subjects that are taught in mixed ability groups as part of the modular curriculum. A member of staff reports that *possibly the greatest outcome has been on the results of the middle range of students, where D grades have been pushed up to C grades in many cases.* The following diagram indicate the trends in GCSE performance of the college since 1995.

## GCSE: Students 5 A\* - C



From teachers' formative assessment and exam results there is evidence of improved results in English and maths which is arguably due to the extra support modules students can take in those subjects. Students now take GCSE in food technology a year early. Results show 100% A - C grades and a high percentage of A grades.

### ***Perceived Disadvantages***

Although members of staff were convinced that the modular curriculum has led to success in examinations, they reported the following disadvantages.

*The modular curriculum seems to allow students to make stereotypical choices. For example, the food technology group is mostly girls while the science (materials) group is predominantly boys.*

*We are not getting enough students in Modern Foreign Languages and this may be due to how the timetable is arranged . . . i.e. which other modules are on offer at the same time.*

*Every module has to be self-contained in its own right. It doesn't work if run-on modules are developed.*

*The modular curriculum is quite expensive to run in terms of staffing.*

*It is quite a large administrative task and needs a secretary assigned to the modular curriculum co-ordinator.*

*There are still some problems with monitoring progress: Heads of Faculty need to find ways of tracking a child's progress through their subject; subject teachers' greatest difficulty is with reporting on individual students*

The only disadvantage seen by students who were interviewed came from a Year 8 pupil in the Extension English group who remarked . . . *the "boff label" . . . I don't like it and sometimes people call me a boff. What we need to do is show people what we do in a lesson . . . show them how normal we are.*

### ***Would the modular curriculum and student choice work in any school?***

The modular curriculum and student choice may be worth considering if schools are concerned about student involvement and motivation. However, the main message from those interviewed is that both teachers and students need to understand and espouse the philosophy – not work against it. As one teacher explained *It wouldn't work in any school – you've got to get the ethos right and you need staff who are flexible and believe in the student's right to choose* As one student commented *Students need to understand that the modules are there for their own advantage.*

### ***Comments***

- Although the school has identified a number of disadvantages of the modular curriculum, it is addressing these. For example, there is an action research project that is investigating students' stereotypical choices and the school is developing a shared set of assessment procedures to support teachers in monitoring progress.
- It is clear that all staff have to be committed to an organisation such as the modular curriculum in which the parts are interdependent. Flexible teachers with a broad teaching repertoire seem to be what is required.
- There may be some tension between the ethos of the modular curriculum (student choice) and the extension English module (for very able students) Some students who chose the extension English module in Year 9 were not really able students. This created a dilemma for the teaching team. Ethos prevailed and the teachers accepted the students and ended up with mixed ability in a group intended for able students.
- The system does appear to have raised the attainments of some groups of pupils, who are achieving C rather than D grades, and to have improved pupil motivation through increased choice and opportunity to learn.
- The school has made a clear and positive attempt at motivating and supporting students at a time when motivation may be decreasing. In relation to this, teachers have worked on student interests. They have added a RE module that has led to a GCSE course in Year 10 and Year 11. They have introduced catering to Year 9 that leads to a GCSE course in Year 10; they have devised student choice modules that capture interest in many other subjects; they have offered extra modules for students in difficulty.

## **Langley School, Solihull, West Midlands**

### **Intensive literacy programme in Year 7 and thinking and study skills programme in mixed ability groups**

*Based on interviews with the Deputy Head, teachers of literacy groups, 4 students involved in literacy and thinking skills groups, teachers involved in thinking skills and study skills groups, pupil evaluations, OFSTED report, anonymised pupil records.*

#### ***The school***

The school is situated on the border of Solihull and Birmingham in an area that contains both very expensive housing and some of the poorest housing. There are 934 pupils on roll, 13% taking free school meals and 4% from South Asian and African Caribbean families. The school has a unit for pupils with physical disabilities and a unit for pupils with specific learning difficulties.

#### ***Types of grouping at the school***

The school groups pupils in a variety of ways: in groups of mixed ability for history, geography and English; in sets for mathematics, science and modern foreign languages; and in groups withdrawn from mainstream classes for those pupils in Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9 who need intensive support in literacy and numeracy. The school provides a good example of the flexible use of grouping for particular purposes. Students are withdrawn for an intensive literacy programme, but returned to their mainstream, mixed ability English classes as soon as possible. The school uses mixed ability grouping for thinking and study skills programmes in the lower school. There is also an initiative in gender sets for English in Years 10 and 11.

#### ***The intensive literacy programme in withdrawal groups***

The intensive literacy programme has been running for three years. For the last five to six years the school has seen a decline in the reading ages of pupils arriving in Year 7. The school decided to tackle the problem by building up the reading age of individual pupils through an individual literacy programme within a very small group. The school philosophy is that you cannot teach pupils to read in public and so pupils are withdrawn from English lessons into discreet groups for the teaching of literacy.

The special needs staff first look carefully at the primary school records and the LEA reading test results for all the Year 7 pupils. Pupils with a reading age of under 10 are then given a standardised reading test to ascertain accuracy and ability in reading comprehension. At the same time, the whole year group is given a spelling test to gauge a rough spelling age. The special needs staff have non-contact time to run the tests for the first two weeks of the term and by October pupils who are having difficulty with literacy are identified and their parents are invited to agree to the programme.

Pupils who are in the programme are withdrawn from mainstream English lessons for 4 hours per week and in Year 7, there are 4 literacy groups running with 7 -10 pupils in a group. The groups fall into two sets. In the first set are pupils who are considered to need a 'booster',

those with a reading age of between 9 and 10. These pupils need additional help in reading accuracy and comprehension and the staff aim to release them from literacy groups by the following Easter. In the second set are pupils who have more entrenched difficulties, including some receiving outside support. They will need more intensive work and may have to remain in literacy groups in Year 8 and Year 9 where groups in each year contain 4 or 5 pupils.

Four teachers teach the literacy groups and the school manages to maintain continuity of staff, which is important. Each child in a literacy group has a mentor, 'someone special' from the four literacy teachers and who looks out for them and gives verbal feedback on progress to the other members of the teaching staff. There are also link teachers in each department with responsibility for contact with the literacy teachers.

Monitoring progress is very systematic and rigorous. Regular case meetings are held on individual pupils and pupils are tested often using the same standardised tests as mentioned above. Work is scrutinised for any signs of progress. Dictation tests are customised to a child and spelling is tested every week. Teachers note the percentage rate of errors. Individual cards are designed to test comprehension. There are regular tests at the end of each unit of the individual reading programmes. For some pupils progress is recorded in their Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Parents are seen as a "valuable source of assessment" and additional meetings are held with parents to draw on their knowledge.

When the literacy teachers feel pupils may be on the brink of leaving the literacy groups in Year 7, they test them once again. However, the teachers try to ensure that pupils do not struggle when they return to mainstream English and so do not allow them to leave the groups until teachers feel they are ready to sustain the level of self-esteem that has been built up. Often pupils who have difficulties in literacy and numeracy are less confident generally in other subjects so staff wait until the pupils are visibly more confident before moving them back. Progress is made in Year 7 and groups generally reduce from 10 to 5 each year. Teachers believe progress is made because programmes are customised, intensive and because groups are small.

### ***Implications for Teaching***

In all literacy groups, the curriculum is designed to improve the basic literacy skills of the pupils. Every week there is a spelling lesson, a reading lesson, a comprehension lesson and a writing lesson. Each child is heard reading in every lesson and this time is also used for sharing any problems a child may be having across the school. There is clearly a range of different learners even within the small groups and so each has an individual programme (e.g. phonics for one child, spelling patterns for another). This means meticulous planning and meticulous preparation on the part of the teachers. The teachers spend a great deal of time searching out commercially-produced resources and developing their own materials.

In the autumn and spring terms of Year 7 there are two blocks of paired reading. The scheme is sponsored by McDonalds. Pupils from the literacy groups are paired with older pupils for three mornings a week. The older 'tutors' are encouraged to keep a reading record on their 'pupils', to think how they can raise self-esteem in reading, to write a positive comment at the end of the reading and to encourage the reader to think about how they have improved. Often the pupils who volunteer to be tutors are pupils who have been in the literacy groups themselves. Teachers say that they make the best tutors because they seem to have a great

deal of patience.

In Years 8 and 9 the pupils with continuing difficulties are rigorously tested on spelling and given a great deal of Cloze work. There is a stress on deduction, drawing out information from texts, producing information as notes and writing stories built on a class text using the same characters.

One of the teachers explained how teaching the Literacy groups differs from teaching mainstream groups:

*It's all bound up with the relationship you have with the children . . . you spend more time on pastoral aspects. You need to give some of yourself to the group. These children have a different expectation of teaching . . . not to deliver and receive. They have to trust you and you have to work to get that trust. You need to be something more than a teacher.*

Other teachers referred to *a different pace and concentration span*, stressing that teaching is better done in short sharp bursts. Of crucial importance is recall at the start of every lesson and recapping at the end. For reading comprehension and writing, the teachers engage in what they call 'quality marking'. This involves giving regular, personal feedback that specifies exactly what the child needs to do to improve. A Year 7 student explained that her experience of the small Literacy group was different from that in mainstream English groups, saying *teachers really listen to you reading and if you get stuck you can go up and ask*.

### ***Benefits of the programme***

The literacy programme is clearly having a strong impact upon student performance (see next section). However, interviewees spoke of additional benefits of running literacy groups. For the subject teachers, it was a benefit that pupils were withdrawn. This allowed them to work with smaller groups and they felt that the other pupils remaining in the class benefited from more focused teaching. The teachers also felt comfortable that pupils were able to cope with the demands of their subjects when they returned from the literacy groups.

The paired reading scheme in Year 7 was seen as having an impact on the ethos of the school, particularly on student collaboration and mutual support. From 10 original volunteers, the number had risen to 40.

### ***Impact of the programme***

The reading ages of pupils in the Year 7 literacy group rise considerably, particularly those in the faster group and some pupils make dramatic progress. Reading ages can go up as much as three years in two terms. For example, one child improved her Reading Age from 8.6 to 11.0 in accuracy and 8.11 to 11.6 in comprehension in 6 months.

Teachers report that pupils cope when they return to mainstream lessons. Their behaviour improves and they are better able to organise their work. Literacy teachers have never had to take a pupil back out of mainstream classes.

The school's very detailed assessment records of the pupils in the literacy groups showing progress over time, enable the staff to track literacy group pupils from Year 7 through to Year 11 and to look at GCSE outcomes. In these confidential records, there is evidence of the success of a large number of pupils. For example one child, who came in with a reading age



of 7.8 when he was 11, ended up with 4 grade Cs at GCSE. His progress through test results is clearly detailed in the school record. There is a history of students who have attended literacy groups gaining at least 4 GCSEs.

One Year 8 pupil explained that she was pleased to have been in the Literacy groups for Year 7 and Year 8 because her reading problem was tackled early on. Her view was that her understanding of History had really improved because she could use her reading skills to research historical topics. A Year 9 student, who was “moved back into mainstream” after Year 8 attributed his improvement in English (particularly writing) to working in the small groups. He recalled having more of the teacher’s attention than he ever experienced in mainstream groups and a quieter environment. He could trace his development through the test results he received and through teacher feedback such as *stars and stuff*.

All the students from the literacy groups who were interviewed were convinced that the groups had been set up in order to help each one of them improve. All appreciated the small class size and the amount of attention they were able to receive from the teacher and all understood that they would not re-enter mainstream until their results on the tests improved.

Teachers reported that there were two types of reaction from pupils in the literacy groups: happy to be in the group but having the sole motivation to get out or very comfortable in the group because that’s where they can feel successful. In relation to this, one boy preferred to stay in the small numeracy group for his key stage tests in Year 9, and did very well. Possibly because of the special units within the school, there is clearly a culture that accepts a range of different types of learner. Other pupils see the literacy group as just another set. Other members of staff give the literacy teachers who also work across the school teaching other subjects from Year 7 to Year 11, a high profile and an important status. Teachers reported that parents were generally very supportive and often relieved that their child’s needs had been picked up. Parents and teachers work in close liaison over pupils’ homework diaries.

### ***Perceived disadvantages***

Students who were interviewed could only see benefits in the system but teachers raised some of the disadvantages. One concern was that the literacy groups take pupils with a reading age below 10. The pupils who now cause the greatest concern are those whose reading ages were 10.1 or 10.2 on entry as there is a clear difference between their progress and the progress of those who return from the literacy groups.

Staffing Year 7 is expensive. A great deal of the school’s financial resources go into Years 7 and 8, meaning there is less for the rest of the school.

Reading books are an expensive resource and finding appropriate reading books and comprehension passages that have interesting subject matter and a simple vocabulary is not easy.

### ***Thinking and Study Skills Programme in Mixed Ability Groups***

In addition to withdrawal groups for literacy, the school runs a thinking and study skills

programme in mixed ability classes. The study skills programme forms part of the school's attempt to raise standards in English.

The thinking skills course will not be described in detail, as the Department of Education and Employment has recently published Research Brief No. 115, which reviews research into thinking skills programmes. The review identified three models for delivering thinking skills. These were structured programmes additional to the normal curriculum; subject-specific programmes; and an infusion model embedded within the normal curriculum. The thinking skills programme at Langley is an example of the first type of programme, additional to the normal curriculum.

Two teachers at the school drafted their own courses in Thinking Skills and Study Skills for Langley students. Twenty members of staff across departments are currently involved. Some prefer to teach thinking skills and others, study skills. The two teacher / co-ordinators have prepared every lesson for every term.

The Thinking Skills course has now been running for two years. All pupils in Year 7, including those in the literacy groups, do thinking skills for one lesson per week in their mixed ability class groups of between 24 and 30. In Years 8 and 9 pupils from the middle and lower tiers have one lesson per week once again in mixed ability groups of between 15-20. Pupils not involved are usually those who are taking two modern foreign languages. The teachers aim to develop students' thinking in different ways by giving them various problem-solving tasks and mind mapping.

The Study Skills course, which concentrates mainly on writing skills, has been running for one year for pupils in Years 8 and 9 who have one lesson per week in mixed ability groups of 15-20. The objective is to enable pupils to write their thoughts down clearly and the overall aim is to produce fluent writers by the end of Year 9. The content of the course is English based and is very heavily structured, with a concentration on sentence structure, paragraphing, spelling, grammar, punctuation and comprehension. Teachers aim to help pupils to interpret the language they need in the National Curriculum, for example, to 'analyse', 'evaluate', 'compare', 'contrast', 'describe'. Pupils' listening skills and organisational skills are also included.

In a recent in-house evaluation of both courses, students reported improvement in their approach to tackling questions as part of schoolwork. All students interviewed were complimentary about the thinking and study skills courses.

The impact of these courses on pupil achievement is yet to be felt. The school is undertaking analysis of tests, comparing the attainments of two groups of pupils, one of which took the thinking skills course. In 1998, the school compared the impact of the thinking skills course on pupils' non-verbal reasoning. Two groups of Year 8 pupils were tested. One group then took the thinking skills course while the other took a second modern foreign language. Both groups were re-tested the following summer. The first set of tests showed that pupils who took the thinking skills course had lower non-verbal reasoning scores, on average, than the pupils who took a second foreign language. The non-verbal reasoning scores of both groups improved during the year, with the scores of the thinking skills group showing larger improvements. Whether this will feed into gains at GCSE remains to be seen. Members of staff who were interviewed observed that some students were applying thinking skill strategies across different subjects. Teachers also noticed that teaching the courses had

broken down barriers between departments.

### ***Would it work in any school?***

If the teachers at a school wished to introduce a programme of intensive literacy, as at Langley, they would have to consider the priorities for their financial resources. Providing eleven teachers for 180, Year 7 pupils is expensive.

Interviewees at Langley explained that, to make a programme such as theirs work members of staff would need to believe in individual need, be happy to have pupils identified and be convinced that withdrawal groups will benefit the pupils across the curriculum. A measure of continuity of staff for the withdrawal groups would also need to be ensured as some of the pupils who are chosen for these groups do not find change easy.

The intensive programme in literacy has tackled the learning difficulties of some pupils in an attempt to raise achievement. Three years ago the school decided to set up courses in thinking skills and study skills because the senior staff felt there would be value added to results if these were also taught.

For a school to introduce courses like the thinking skills and study skills courses at Langley, interviewees felt there needed to be a willingness for departments to work together, strong support from the Head and a school culture of “learning drives everything”.

### ***Comments***

- Small withdrawal groups in Year 7 provide a high level of intensive teacher input at Year 7, which reduces thereafter. The programme appears to be organised with the minimum of disruption but with a high rate of success: the small groups, one to one teaching and individually structured programmes can move some pupils on years in a matter of months. The school continues to support the students after they leave the withdrawal groups by encouraging them to go into support studies in Years 10 and 11, through liaison among members of staff and through the help of governors acting as mentors.
- The school is constantly looking for ways of raising achievement through literacy. The current literacy groups take pupils with a reading age below 10. There is now some concern about the pupils whose reading ages were just above the criterion for additional help. Later in the year, the literacy teachers intended to run a short sharp course for these students. In addition the Study Skills courses were introduced primarily to produce fluent writers by the end of Year 9.
- The school uses several forms of grouping, for different purposes. The literacy programme and the study skills course are organised to meet different literacy needs. While the former is taught in small, withdrawal groups, the latter is taught in mixed ability classes. This demonstrates that grouping arrangements may differ in relation to particular learning outcomes.

## **Langdon, East Ham, London Borough of Newham**

### **Inclusive Grouping**

*Based on interview with head of learning support department, teachers from mainstream and learning support department, senior learning support assistant who is the leader of classroom assistants' team, brief observations in classrooms and around school, students with and without statements of SEN, school documentation.*

#### ***The school***

Langdon is a large multicultural comprehensive school in East London serving an area where there is much social and economic disadvantage. There are 1863 students on roll, 42% of whom receive free school meals and 75% of whom come from ethnic minority groups, chiefly Asian families. Overall, over forty languages are spoken by the school population.

Seventy-six of Langdon students have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) and around twenty travel by coach from out of the catchment area. Thirty five of the 76 have LEA funded support (or "resource provision") in the form of staffing. Historically, these 35 students would have attended special schools as they have moderate learning difficulties (MLD) with some tending towards severe learning difficulties (SLD). Some of these students have in fact come from special schools. Their many and diverse needs stem from dyslexia, Down's Syndrome, Niemann Pick disease, visual impairment, hearing impairment, autism, epilepsy and serious difficulties with speech. Some students have both learning difficulties and emotional or behavioural difficulties and some have severe communication difficulties. The school is committed to high achievement and high expectations for all its students.

#### ***Types of groupings at the school***

The Senior Management Team "is not wedded to any particular form of pupil grouping" and may take decisions or change decisions about grouping according to particular cohorts of students. Setting is a matter of department policy. Currently for English and mathematics, Year 7 pupils are arranged in classes of mixed ability followed by setting in Years 8 and 9 and at Key Stage 4. For modern foreign languages, classes are of mixed ability in Years 7, 8 and 9 with setting in German and French at Key Stage 4. In other subjects including science, history, geography and information technology, classes are of mixed ability throughout Key Stages 3 and 4. The school is unusual in the extent to which it embraces inclusive grouping. Pupils with special needs are taught in inclusive groups throughout the school. This is achieved through a combination of well-developed classroom support, partnership teaching and limited use of withdrawal groups.

#### ***Inclusion and Inclusive Grouping***

Langdon shares Newham's commitment to the policy of inclusion, which has been in operation since the late 1980s. A prominent statement in the school's entrance hall reads:

*By inclusion we mean not only that students with special educational needs should wherever possible receive their education in a mainstream school but also they should join fully with their peers in the curriculum and life of the school.*

Students with special educational needs are supported in mixed ability classes and sets and

withdrawn for small group teaching by the learning support teachers in English and mathematics. These small groups contain students with and without statements and are for English in Years 7, 8 and 9 and for mathematics in Year 7. For all other subjects, learning support teachers and assistants provide classroom support, with the amount of support depending on the level of need of any particular individual student. For example, a student with Down's Syndrome receives support in all mainstream lessons and small groups while a student with less severe learning difficulties receives two hours per week from a learning support teacher within a small group. A visually impaired student receives some support from a member of staff during lessons but, being an able student, does not attend small groups.

Each learning support teacher spends part of the week teaching small groups in English and maths and is responsible for the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) of the children in these groups. In addition, according to their strengths, qualifications and training, each learning support teacher is linked to one or more subject departments and spends part of the week supporting students in mainstream classes. Learning support teachers also have responsibility for creating differentiated materials in their link subjects and all materials that are developed are stored centrally so that staff can make use of them at any time.

The role of the learning support assistant is a complex and very important one. They meet and greet coaches, supervise more vulnerable students at break times, run homework clubs and, most importantly, support individuals with the task presented in lessons. Learning support assistants have become experienced in 'ad-hoc' interpretations of lessons, as one assistant put it, *You quickly learn what's going on in any given lesson*. However, some training in simple differentiation has been given. The senior learning support assistant trains and disseminates good practice to her team. Her overall aim is to avoid students becoming over-dependent. In interview, the head of the learning support department explained that the development of the role of learning support assistant has been critical in the success of inclusion at Langdon.

The department works very closely with feeder primary schools in order to identify and relate to children who will come to the school in Year 7. As part of a rigorous transition programme, the SEN staff attend all the SEN reviews of Years 5 and 6 children before they leave the primary schools so that plans can be made to include these children in the life of the school.

**Communication and collaboration:** To maintain effective classroom support requires a high level of communication and collaboration between subject teachers and learning support staff. Lesson planning is a crucial part of effective collaboration and one period per week is set aside for planning the work to be covered and the resources and teaching strategies to be used.

As some students who do not speak English as their first language may also have special needs, liaison between teachers of English as an additional language and the learning support teachers is also important. The work is supported by the Borough EAL Service who have a teacher whose brief is to go into schools for 2 terms to observe and work with non-statemented students with special needs for whom English is an additional language. As an outcome of this work a great deal of useful teaching materials are produced for support in mainstream classrooms.

To assist in communicating the needs of students with statements. Individual Education Plans

(IEPs) are distributed to all teachers with whom the students work together with “snapshots” which give three or four lines for quick reference.

**School guidelines on differentiation:** The school uses a clear working definition of a differentiated curriculum as one in which the teacher is aware of differences in the ability and response of different students and tries to adapt some features of the students’ work in the light of these differences. The school has developed clear guidelines for teachers on differentiation and suggests that adaptations can be made to:

- the social organisation in which the students work
- the ways in which students are asked to think about a task
- the subject matter and content of a lesson

The guidelines highlight the importance of different aspects of pedagogy. For example teachers are asked to:

- Set up collaborative group work; students may be set a task that cannot be successfully accomplished unless all participate;
- Organise discussion of how to work together, how to learn from and with each other;
- Allow students to ask questions, answer each other’s questions, say what they still do not understand, verbalise what they have learned;
- Revise central concepts and ideas;
- Expect different kinds of response and end product, offering students a chance to work at different levels of ability;
- Focus upon one thing at a time;
- Encourage independent learning.

**Systematic Evaluation:** To evaluate partnership teaching and other aspects of the inclusion policy there is a link group that includes all learning support teachers and a representative from each subject department. This group meets twice a term and deals with differentiation, partnership teaching, positive report writing, the dissemination of IEPs, and other relevant issues regarding students with SEN.

**Staff training:** With so many staff involved, training is crucial as a means of supporting inclusion. School INSET has focused on issues relevant to the whole staff such as the Code of Practice for identification and assessment of SEN, partnership teaching, curriculum differentiation, behaviour management and some specific aspects of SEN such as Autism.

### ***Implications for teaching***

All year groups in the school contain students with special needs and so all subject teachers are involved in their education. The partnership teaching system at Langdon involves subject teachers and teachers of learning support or English as an additional language working closely together. One period per week is set aside for planning the strategies to be used with the whole class and for developing or selecting differentiated materials. During the actual teaching, both teachers take turns leading the lesson, contribute to class discussion, take equal responsibility for discipline, marking and assessment and offer support to all students.

Clearly inclusive grouping requires much more planning and liaison on behalf of teachers. As one interviewee put it, *Planning for differentiation and group dynamics constitutes a massive amount of work, time, effort and energy from teachers.*

Teachers also have to be aware of and understand different targets set for different students. Developing appropriate social skills is an important aim of the learning support department to enable students to learn to access what they need and “not stand out”. For some students, therefore, the targets are not only academic but social, for example that they can learn to sit in a room in a large group of people for an hour, or that they can collaborate with other students to complete an activity.

Another implication for teaching is that teachers need to be diplomatic when they give back grades and marks. In the words of one learning support teacher *Being included can enhance self esteem . . . but it depends how aware the students are of their ability and it depends on how teachers describe ‘ability’ for example, how marking is carried out, whether levels are constantly made public.*

As with all students there is a need to monitor progress of students with statements. Subject teachers give regular assessment tasks, the learning support department use regular record keeping sheets for performance in English and mathematics, learning support assistants, based on focused observation, write diary entries on the content of mainstream lessons and how students responded. Feedback to students involves ipsative assessment, for example, *Look what you learned by the end of the lesson. Look what you were doing last year and what you are doing now.*

IEPs may be monitored differently depending on student progress. If things are going well they are monitored annually. If a student is causing concern, they are monitored more often. All students have an annual review whereby the teachers who take them describe strategies they have used and how successful they have been.

### ***Benefits of inclusive grouping***

Members of mainstream and support staff saw many benefits for themselves, particularly in relation to working with another person. They felt that working with another teacher or classroom assistant was a form of staff development; two sets of ideas, two ways of working with students were in play and people could learn from each other. Learning support staff were able to pass on ideas within departments when an idea worked well with students.

Subject teachers were pleased that learning support teachers and classroom assistants shared in *keeping an eye on individuals and not merely the statemented children* and they saw this as making the whole task of teaching *massively advantageous because it gives you an opportunity to do different types of work more easily ... use different strategies and work with groups.*

Teachers and other adults who were interviewed listed a number of benefits for students. Because learning assistants are time-tabled to work with a range of students so that they are not “every minute” with their named student – they can cascade their expertise with a range of students in the classroom, while at the same time encouraging some independence in their named students. Because staff have to differentiate work for different types of learners (both EAL and SEN) this has had spin offs for all students. Inclusive grouping fits exactly with the ethos of the school which is to welcome all students. In the words of the SENCO: *A comprehensive school is a ... school for the society. The school ethos is also about achievement and high expectations. There is accreditation of the success of all statemented and non-statemented students at presentation evenings when awards are given for academic*

*performance, citizenship and personal development.*

Inclusion encourages students with SEN to have high expectations of themselves. *Students who have benefited most are those with the most severe difficulties, the ones who, in a special school setting, may have been less influenced in appropriate social skills by not having enough mainstream peers.* Students with statements have the opportunity to get a grade at GCSE, something less likely at special school.

The presence of SEN students can bring out the best in some of the most unlikely students. This is evidenced in a regular special event put on by the PE Dept for students who have great difficulty with mobility and co-ordination due to major learning and or physical difficulties. *It is a fun event based on It's a Knockout where vulnerable students are assisted by student helpers. Many of the helpers are students with EBD who receive a boost to their own self-esteem and show positive behaviour of a level that would not otherwise be shown. Hence inclusion assists the development of citizenship across the school and encourages a caring ethos.*

Students also thought there were benefits:

*It's good ... they aim to get you off that coach as soon as possible*

*The school is looking at learning from a new perspective*

*Our helpers and teachers work well together*

*They [learning support assistants] let you try and do it but they support you*

*When they are teaching, teachers speak on everyone's behalf and address the needs of everyone*

### ***The Impact of inclusive grouping***

Perhaps the most significant impact of the inclusive grouping policy at Langdon has been on social outcomes. The following are reports from mainstream and learning support staff: *The greatest impact has been on mainstream students' tolerance and understanding. When you see students working together on a project in the playground messing around together, special education needs or not ... that's when it's all worthwhile.* Our observations corroborated this. There were some particularly positive interactions among the students.

*There is one very positive outcome: it's that of social responsibility. Almost never are statemented students picked on, mainstream students are very protective and have a code of ethics.*



*Students have a much wider understanding of the range of difficulties of their peers. The level of interpersonal understandings is “fantastic”. It’s a two- way thing : in a tutor group containing an Autistic boy with incredibly advanced learning difficulties, the others have no fear of autism, they understand the condition and that when he is frustrated he will express it in ways different from themselves. It is also good for the autistic boy because he is constantly challenged by students talking to him, interacting with him and he has to respond. If he had been in a special school he would have been with more students who also have problems with interactions and may have made less progress.*

Despite an increase in the variety of special needs of students coming to Langdon (including 24 with emotional and behavioural difficulties) for the last three years the school has had no permanent exclusions.

A rigorous check-up on homework diaries over the years has found that all students are using their planners properly and for students with statements this shows there has been some impact on independence.

### ***Impact on academic achievement***

Despite an increase in the variety of students with special needs attending Langdon, GCSE results have improved. Overall 41% of all students obtained 5 or more A-C grades – a 6% increase on the previous year, 92% of all students obtained 5 or more A-G grades – a 4% increase on the previous year. In 1997, all 7 students with statements and “resourced provision” entered for GCSE achieved one or more GCSEs. A boy with moderate learning difficulties achieved a GCSE in drama with a C. A student with Down’s Syndrome achieved a GCSE in dance. In 1998, GCSE results continued to improve with 42% achieving 5 A – C grades and 96% of students gaining 5 or more GCSE passes.

A Year 7 student with a statement clearly felt he had started achieving when he reported: *I get loads of help and can now read much better ... helps me a lot in science. I’m getting good so now I’m helping someone else with reading and writing. I’m improving my grades.*

In principle the learning support department aim to enter all students for key stage tests and GCSE examinations. However, it is important to note that including statemented children with statements in GCSE and key stage 3 tests has an impact on school statistics because some of these children achieve lower grades. In 1997, no students were disapplied from tests in English, maths and science. The school’s results were either slightly below or matched the national results but showed improvement from previous years.

### ***Some perceived disadvantages***

Those interviewed reported the following issues as disadvantageous or problematic:

- The biggest barrier to even greater success is the lack of adequate support staff which of course is a very expensive commodity. As it is, the head of the learning support department spends a great deal of time “juggling” staffing so that maximum support can be given to students. Staff are constantly moved around so that they can give support to more than one student at any one time.
- Although there is some borough training for LSAs and the senior LSA at Langdon trains

her own team, there is in general not enough on offer for learning support assistants.

- There is an extremely important issue around GCSE examinations for statemented students. With the exception of students with dyslexia, others with SEN have difficulty in gaining readers and amanuenses as they are in key stage tests. They have to be shown to have a considerable mis-match between cognitive ability and literacy skills. The interviewees perceived this as a great drawback and felt that, with the kind of support allowed in key stage tests, some of the more vulnerable students could have gained a G grade at GCSE in some subjects.
- Sometimes it can be difficult for those children performing at Levels 2 or 3, who are aware that they are not doing as well on the National Curriculum as other children in their class.
- Assessment tasks are difficult to design. Subject teachers' regular tests and tasks at the end of a taught unit have to be "watered down" and this is an onerous and problematic task for learning support teachers.
- In very large mainstream schools *you'd probably never get the whole staff to be totally convinced about inclusion*

Despite the comments quoted above, teachers feel that Langdon has reached the conclusion that inclusive grouping is a feasible form of pupil organisation and that it genuinely benefits all students. Teachers feel that they now need to move on to look at maximising not only vulnerable students' social performance but also their academic performance perhaps by monitoring the actual help given by classroom assistants and by developing accessible assessments tasks.

### ***Would inclusive grouping work in any school?***

When asked if inclusion would work in any school, teachers explained that *Our area has an advantage, we already have a wide range of religious and cultural backgrounds any way and so lots of work is done on tolerance and acceptance of difference. Our children are, on the whole, very open minded.* Consequently they felt that a school in a similar catchment area would be at some advantage if it wanted to introduce inclusive education.

However, even in such a situation, interviewees stressed that the process would have to start slowly and there would need to be a group of committed staff and sufficient staffing to give support within classrooms so that both students and teachers felt supported in the challenges to be faced. To avoid staff "being scared" they would need to see it working and to visit schools like Langdon. Above all, the learning support system has to be well organised and the job given status with promotion possibilities and training.

### ***Comments***

- Students spend a great deal of their time in mixed ability groups but also there is some setting. Setting is still a matter of individual department policy. As the Head of Key Stage 3 commented *If some departments get good results through setting then they are apt to stick to it.*

- There may be some tension with settings if many pupils with behaviour problems are placed in lower sets. As the SENCO commented: *You can create a monster that nobody wants to teach ... children who are disaffected with children who are just not very bright.* For this reason the learning support department and some teachers interviewed are not keen on bottom sets, although they are at pains to ensure that learning support is concentrated in lower ability sets. If staffing levels were sufficient the SENCO would prefer to teach pupils with learning difficulties separately from a group of pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. At Langdon, pupils are placed in sets according to attainment only, but there can be a preponderance of pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties in those sets.
- Inclusive grouping arrangements are consistent with an inclusive ethos. To be successful requires consideration and commitment by the school to partnership and support teaching.

## **George Spencer School and Technology College, Nottingham Single-sex English groups**

*Based on interviews with the Deputy Head, teachers involved in teaching the groups, students involved in the groups, other members of staff, lesson observations, school documentation.*

### ***The School***

At the time of the study, George Spencer was a grant maintained school and technology college in Nottingham serving an area of two distinct communities, the council estates of Stapleford and the owner occupied estates of Totton. There were 1150 students on roll with 6% taking free school meals and less than 1% from ethnic minority families.

### ***Types of grouping at the school***

In Year 7 students are in mixed ability classes for all subjects and continue in mixed ability groups during Key Stage 3 apart from the following combinations. In Year 8 for maths there is a top set and three mixed ability groups, English continues in mixed ability groups, combined science is taught within two top sets and two groups of mixed ability and in modern foreign languages students are set by ability. In Year 9, maths, science and modern foreign languages are set by ability. In English there is a top set and three groups of mixed ability. Setting continues in Key Stage 4.

### ***Single-sex English groups***

This is a relatively new initiative. In spring 1998 when the case study was carried out, it had been running for 6 months (2 terms) and arose out of the school's OFSTED inspection - one of the key issues for action was to raise standards in boys' literacy. Boys were further behind than girls, particularly at Key Stage 3. The school decided to tackle this by looking at pupil grouping and, specifically, by setting up new groupings in English in Year 9, forming some single-sex and some mixed-sex groups.

The initiative was carefully handled and planned in advance. Parents were consulted, head of Year 8, head of English and Year 8 teachers were consulted on advantageous social combinations. This resulted in a careful selection of students to make up the single-sex groups while trying to keep a balance of mixed ability in the groups and at the same time specifically selecting certain low-achieving boys who might benefit. Before the groups met the English department debated teaching and learning styles and planned resources and materials that could be used. They decided to monitor the outcomes of the initiative through the middle management Key Stage 3 team, using quantitative and qualitative measures. No requests were made for any extra record keeping from the teachers concerned, rather the results of in-house assessments at the end of each module and levels in key stage test results for 1998 were used as quantitative measures. They decided to compare results between boys in the mixed group and boys in the boys' group, and between girls in the mixed group and girls in the girls' group. For qualitative measures they decided to analyse interviews with pupils in the single-sex groups and to carry out classroom observations in the single-sex

groups, focusing on teaching and learning.

Students in one half year of Year 9 were chosen because teachers *wanted to start small* and considered Year 9 to be a crucial year group because traditionally they *tended to get interested in things other than school and work tails off*. Also teachers *wouldn't have to wait around for three years for GCSE results* to see if single-sex groups made a difference. Achievement could be measured by KS3 test results.

For three sessions a week (the usual timetable for English) the Year 9 students are divided into four groups for English. There is a mixed 'top set', two single-sex groups of mixed ability and a mixed-sex group of mixed ability. Classes average out at around 28 although the last group mentioned is smaller.

Two teachers expressed a real interest in teaching the single-sex groups. A male teacher takes the boys' group and has attended training on 'How boys learn'. A female teacher, with responsibility for boys' achievement and a personal interest in how girls learn teaches the girls. She has also attended courses on learning styles. Another member of the English department takes the mixed-sex group.

The Key Stage 3 team found that students in both groups were initially pleased to have been selected for the groups and expressed expectations to get on better with work, to be away from distractions and to produce higher level work. In our interviews with students, they reported that their peers in other types of groups had hardly reacted *It's just another group-doesn't bother you, doesn't bother them*. The students were all in favour of the initiative and explained:

- *All this is to 'up' our levels.*
- *It's most important to do this in English but maths would also be good. However, it's good to mix for some subjects . . . practical subjects because girls and boys have different things to offer. Take technology . . .if you put the two types of skills together, basically you've got the perfect thing.*
- *A man teacher for boys and a woman for girls is good . . .they know all about it, they've been teenagers themselves.*

From their interviews with pupils involved, staff reported:

- the boys were saying lots of positive things about the teaching: they liked an emphasis on oral work; they liked short term tasks, they felt they had a chance to respond and express themselves in lessons;
- the boys appreciated being by themselves, not needing to prove themselves not needing to be 'lads' in that laddish culture;
- most girls felt they were special and different by being in the single-sex- group but some were ambivalent and missed the dynamic element of having boys there with whom to interact. However, the great majority of girls said they were becoming more used to the idea of not having boys in the class.

Single-sex groups were proving very popular with parents. Many parents whose students were not selected for the single-sex groups wrote to the school, saying they wanted their students to be involved. Feedback from parents whose girls and boys were in single-sex groups wanted them to stay in them in Year 10 because they felt they were learning more and

gaining in confidence.

Members of staff not involved in teaching the single-sex groups appeared to accept the project as just one initiative to meet the school aims of raising achievement of all pupils. Some disagreed with the groupings because they believed pupils might lose out socially, by being in single-sex groups. Some departments whose results were good or very good did not feel the need to go over to single sex groups.

### ***Implications for teaching***

One of the Key Stage 3 middle managers stressed that teaching strategies have to be carefully thought about. For example, boys seem to want to learn if the teacher:

- plans for short term activities
- gives very specific instructions about what is being looked for
- gives timings and is very clear about what is to be expected at the end of 5 minutes, half way through the task etc.
- gives clear verbal feedback and marking showing what National Curriculum level has been gained

From the Key Stage 3 team observations in class, it appeared that boys were very keen to know how they were doing and so a lot of teaching needs to focus on what they have to do to improve or to get to the next level. There is a competitive edge in lessons. In interview, the teacher teaching the boys' set expressed the same sentiments and explained that he had changed his methods, as follows:

*The pace is very quick, the delivery very punchy. There are a lot of 'short burst' activities. We don't write everything down ... the boys retain information very well through oral interaction. They appreciate that they don't have to write it down to prove they've done and understood it- a lot of writing doesn't appeal to boys, they want to move on, they want to learn things quickly. I explain that these 'short bursts' will eventually lead up to a written activity, which they know they need for tests – they are expecting it. So I give lots of messages : “This is leading towards, this is part of a set of building blocks which is leading towards....This is why we are doing this... we are doing this because... By the end you will be able to do... It's about short term goals, long term goals.*

The teacher explained that he tended to be *more sparkly with the boys' group . . . can relate to them . . . find myself being very active and spontaneous . . . almost performing . . . exaggerating my natural teaching style.* He keeps the lessons very interactive, praises responses and contributions and so gets good oral feedback from the boys on what and how they are learning.

The following brief exchange within an interview with some students related to the teacher's style.

Boy: *Our teacher recaps a lot, he keeps us interested, keeps us entertained. . .*

Girl (aside) *Yes, they would normally be asleep*

The teacher described how most aspects of monitoring progress in the single-sex groups were the same as those in mixed set groups. All students have targets and written explanations about what they have to do to improve. However, teacher assessment may differ slightly - in

the boys' group the teacher sometimes used discussion rather than written outcomes to record what boys knew and understood. He reported that he had applied some of the strategies used with boys in mixed sex groups, such as faster pacing and found that, although the fast pace may work, many of the girls preferred to write things down and wanted more notes, especially while revising.

The teacher taking the girls' group explained that the main issue when working with a group of girls was getting them to talk: *They have been conditioned to be passive through so many years of schooling that it has been a very lengthy process to get them to take the initiative and speak out.* She went on to say *Sometimes it's like getting blood out of a stone. If you ask them point blank, they always know the answer but it's almost as if they are thinking "I'm not going to volunteer, I'm not going to take the risk, I'm going to keep my ideas to myself".*

*What makes girls successful in English is that they have qualities that the boys don't have and they seem to need the boys there, in order to display it. So in single-sex groups the teacher needs to find ways of replacing whatever that is – get them to bounce ideas off each other. The implications for teaching may be through building strong relationships with the girls, setting up collaborative group work, and developing strategies for instilling self-confidence.*

From research, both teachers had learned that, when discussing and debating, boys talk more about rules and laws girls talk more about the moral side of things and the caring side of things. The teachers wanted to bring out the best in Speaking and Listening in both sexes and so they were purposefully intervening to develop the other aspects of talk. For example the teacher of the boys' group was asking them to analyse 'caring-type' poems and found that boys were able to discuss some quite sensitive issues. For example after reading an extract from Nick Hornby, they were able to discuss the different ways in which boys and girls handle puberty.

Our brief lesson observations involved two very different learning environments. In the boys group there was fast-talking, whole class, interactive work where boys continually contributed and the teacher repeated in many different ways the aim of the task and how to proceed. Many different small activities were included which focused on an analysis of a Nick Hornby article. In the girls' group, heads were down and there was whispered talk as girls worked in small groups. The teacher circulated round the groups checking work and giving timings, pacing them through an analysis task. Although the teacher asked for volunteers to read out work, there were none. When a girl was specifically asked to read out her findings, the work was of a very high standard.

### ***Benefits of single-sex groups***

The following are some benefits of single-sex grouping as perceived by teachers, other adults and pupils.

**Benefits for Girls:** *Because the pace in the girls' group is faster and because there are no interruptions they definitely produce more work.*

*Girls seem to have benefited from a "very secure environment" involving a complete lack of discipline problems and very focused lessons.* Feedback from parents indicated that some less able girls felt very secure and safe.

*More able, active girls possibly benefit most from single-sex groups as they maximise the opportunities they have to contribute.*

The head of Year 9 has found that she has been able to work at a much faster pace with Year 8 girls in French. This group happened to contain only girls, it was not deliberately set up as a single-sex group. She has found that it benefited girls to increase the amount of oral work, a technique used with the boys' group, and that the girls *compete for marks and compete for attention*.

Girls noticed that they were working well without boys.

*It's better without the boys. Boys shout out all the time because they are more confident. I feel more confident to put my hand up now.*

*It's much quieter ... I get on much better with my work.*

*It's better ... girls listen to each other more, learn more from each other.*

*It's better with a teacher of your own sex ... it's very difficult for teachers to get both girls and boys interested in a lesson*

**Benefits for boys:** Boys could talk more freely. They did not show off to each other, as their peer position was already well established with the other boys. They said that they tended to show off in mixed classes for attention from the girls. *The general gut reaction is that boys have benefited more than girls from being in a single-sex group.* However one or two boys found it hard to concentrate in any lesson and may not have benefited as much as the others. Boys who enjoyed speaking out and had good memories, spontaneous talkative boys, seemed to benefit most.

Some of the boys commented

*Teachers are more hard on you ... make you work harder and quicker. You put more into it ... you can concentrate more*

*People are in competition to get on*

*No girls to distract you. You don't need to feel stupid in front of the girls. You can ask the teacher for more help but you can't wait till break to see the girls*

*You get more enjoyment out of English*

The teachers of the single-sex groups acknowledged that they had felt under scrutiny and had therefore put more effort into their teaching. The deputy head said that the aim was that the school would be able to learn more about how boys and girls learn and that staff would think more about extending their own repertoire to further meet the needs of all their students. There may have been benefits to the mixed ability mixed gender group because it was smaller.

### ***Impact of the single-sex groups***

Observations by the monitoring team show a very positive 'learning' ethos in the boys group with rare and sometimes no occurrences of boys being off task. This was corroborated by our brief observation. The teachers noticed a change in the boys' discourse. After mock tests in May 1998, all boys started talking about how they had handled the questions and how previous lessons had prepared them for the tests. This is contrary to the conventional behaviour of boys in the experience of the monitoring team. Comments are usually more limited. Boys usually say *That was terrible* or express similar sentiments.



There had been an impact on the boys' interest in learning. When the boys were in the boys' group, they seemed to want to understand their errors and learn how to do better. As their teacher explained: *You can be very diagnostic with them about their work and they don't get offended and take it personally.* An illustration of this was when the boys realised a common mistake and, together with the teacher, devised a way of keeping tabs on "sticking to the point" in their writing.

The way in which the boys reacted appeared to be the main impact of the initiative. The boys' teacher had experienced *more enthusiasm from them than I have ever seen in mixed-sex groups. I've never seen so many so motivated. There is a work ethic there and if there's something hard . . . they'll want to succeed. Listening is much better and eye contact. I've seen this before in top sets. They are very focused and they really concentrate on the lesson in a way that I've never seen so many boys do . . . that has surprised me the most.*

The boys' group appeared to have developed its own particular atmosphere. As the teacher put it *There is a really good ethos in the classroom, a team spirit in there. It's quite an intimate atmosphere. A lot built on trust. They encourage each other . . . the shutters are not up.* This was corroborated by our observations. The teacher thought that the self esteem of some boys had improved, they seemed to *believe* that they could do things and were more confident to ask or say what they could not understand.

There was an impact on what these two teachers learned about their students. The teacher of the girls group confessed that she had learned a great deal, *It's been a big eye-opener for me and has made me more aware of how girls 'are'. My ideas have been challenged! By teaching the girls I have learned that you need to be sensitive about feedback. Also that they are not scared to ask for help but do it in a very subtle way.*

Reports from in-house observations were that the learning climate in the girls' group had changed for the better. Many girls were initially very passive and did not offer voluntary contributions. However as the initiative got underway, more girls were observed to be becoming more responsive. There also appeared to have been an impact on the girls' output. Their teacher reported: *The quality of their learning has been good ... maybe I've been tempted to teach them more like a top set – it's a great thing ... I've been pushing them all the time. They know they are doing hard work and they value that.* In the words of one girl: *We're certainly getting through loads more work.*

Linked to the point above, the girls' teacher had found that less able girls were less willing to take on differentiated work, rather they wanted to push themselves to do harder work and were becoming more competitive. Feedback from parents at parents' evenings suggested there was increased self esteem and self worth in some of the girls.

There was limited evidence from observations of the third group of mixed-gender pupils. However, from teachers' comments it seemed that the boys in that group behaved less positively as learners, although it is possible that this group contained more students of lower ability than the two gender groups and this could have been a factor.

Other members of staff were interested to find out what had been learned, particularly about the boys. More English teachers were willing to be involved when the initiative was extended to both Year 9 and Year 10 the following year. The two teachers were keen to consolidate

what they knew and were planning to take two year 10 groups on to GCSE.

The two teachers currently involved felt there had been a significant impact on their own professional development arising out of the experience itself and also through the discussions they had together about strategies and materials that worked well with either boys or girls or both. As one put it, *Professionally it's been one of the most pleasurable experiences I've had, refreshing and challenging.*

### ***Impact on achievement so far***

The school is very successful and gains good results in both Key Stage 3 tests and GCSE examinations, with each pupil receiving on average 6 GCSE at grades A\* to C.

The aim of the single-sex groups was to raise boys' achievement further. Senior teachers who were interviewed and were part of the monitoring team reported that although many students were gaining Level 6 in the Year 9 mock tests in 1998 the figures told them nothing about the impact of the single-sex groupings on boys' or girls' results. Value added analysis, based on Key Stage 3 tests taken in 1998, does not show any statistically significant impact of the gender groups on either boys or girls levels of attainments. This analysis used measures of verbal and non-verbal reasoning on entry to the school as indicators of general ability. So, while there is some indication that pupils in the single gender groups may have achieved higher levels in Key Stage 3 tests, it is not clear that the groups were completely balanced. Although the classes were similar in terms of average attainment, one of the mixed gender classes had a higher proportion of low ability boys. The school will undertake an analysis of the GCSE grades when they become available.

However, from marking and formative teacher assessment, the girls' teacher reported that girls in the girls' group appeared to be improving faster in reading and writing than girls in the past in mixed ability groups. Also, girls' speaking and listening attainment was lower at the start of the year but on formal teacher assessment there was quite a big improvement. This may be partially due to the 'self service' unit in Shakespeare recently introduced, where pupils chose their own levels, which motivated them. Overall, girls were reported to have maintained a very high quality of work with no detriment to their standards. Girls who were interviewed all believed there was an impact on their achievement, as one remarked, *my levels have gone up loads! I was getting level 4s, now I'm getting level 6s.*

From the teacher's assessment of the boys' work in assignments, he was able to report that there was a general trend for work to be more thorough and better presented and that *boys who were thorough have got increasingly thorough.* Two boys who were interviewed both felt that their work had improved in the boys' class.

### ***Perceived disadvantages***

The teachers involved regret that the school received no test results for KS2 from the primary schools, which could have been used against KS3 results to measure value added. As yet, they do not have enough quantitative evidence to go and 'sell' the idea of grouping by single-sex to other departments.

It has been difficult to get the groupings just right. Despite a careful selection, teachers feel that some social groupings within the three Year 9 mixed ability groups have not proved of benefit to certain students in the group. In addition, teachers are not certain that they ended

up with three mixed ability classes with a similar balance of abilities.

The teacher who takes the girls' group feels strongly that research is lacking on *what to do with girls*. None of the boys interviewed saw any disadvantage in the system but girls had the following to say:

*Some girls take the place of the boys and dominate*

*I miss the boys sometimes . . . the lessons are less lively. . . I'd give it seven out of ten*

### ***Would single-sex groups work in any school?***

All those interviewed believed that single-sex groups could be tried in any school but teachers stressed that the initiative needed planning in advance and 'selling' to a whole department within which it will operate. The importance of planning how value-added will be measured and how progress will be monitored was emphasised. Teachers teaching single-sex groups need to be comfortable with the philosophy, they *have to believe in it and throw themselves into it*.

### ***Comments***

- There is probably a combination of reasons for the impact the grouping has had on the boys' attitudes, including being chosen and feeling special, a new environment, commitment and enthusiasm of the teacher, and teaching methods based on reading and research.
- The girls continued to work away quietly as found in many mainstream classes. The teacher was very interested in the question "is there a pedagogy for girls?" and was urgently seeking support and recommendations from research.
- The English staff felt that the benefits would really be seen at GCSE so they planned to carry single-sex grouping through to Year 10 and to introduce it in the following Year 9.
- The school had introduced several ways of evaluating the impact of gender grouping on attainment. Dividing the year group into single gender and mixed classes of similar abilities was an important step, enabling them to compare the attainment of pupils in the different gender groupings. In addition, they had some indication of the pupils' prior attainments, which could be used to compare the 'value added'.
- The importance of the teachers' enthusiasm and commitment to developing teaching strategies and learning from their experience with the single gender groups is likely to have been a highly significant factor. The school was aware of this and keen that the experiment should be a learning experience shared by all the teaching staff.

## **5. Themes arising from the case studies**

The case studies illustrate the variety of ways in which schools have attempted to raise standards through different approaches to pupil grouping. Although each case study stands in its own right, some common themes run through them:

- the schools all produced evidence of good standards achieved, but not all were able to link

- their particular form of grouping with improved standards
- the schools are clearly taking very seriously the government's call to raise standards
  - they are committing considerable resources to the initiatives, in some cases strategically concentrating staff resources to a particular year group or to a particular need
  - some schools were trying more than one way of grouping pupils and were also trying to find ways of improving pupils' learning strategies
  - sometimes schools start initiatives without thinking how they will assess the impact on pupil attainment
  - most schools would prefer to wait a few years before committing themselves to saying that standards are rising
  - those involved in the initiatives are enthusiastic about them and invest a great deal in them
  - teachers work hard to meet individual needs and pupils trust that they will be helped
  - in most cases, there is a whole school commitment, but typically there are some teachers who are less convinced than others
  - many of the initiatives involved teachers working together and sharing ideas about their practice or developing resources, which were valuable forms of professional development
  - students were positive about all the different initiatives
  - initiatives were sometimes introduced in a *top down* way by senior management and sometimes in a more *bottom up* way by members of staff, but in all cases required careful planning and staff training
  - many of the initiatives involve teachers in thinking about pupil learning and in making alterations to the way they teach
  - most staff thought that their school's initiative could be successful in another school, but only if *the will was there* and *the ethos was right*
  - students in at least three schools were able to access class work through the internet and at least one school was in the process of trying to fund computers for students who were not likely to have a home computer.

## **6. Conclusions**

Schools are clearly making great efforts to increase pupil attainment through innovative forms of pupil grouping and this set of case studies illustrates the variety of approaches that are being developed. There is no doubt that these initiatives involved a great deal of work, but they also appear to have generated considerable enthusiasm among teachers, students and parents. All appear to be having an effect on pupil learning, but for some it is too early to say whether the effect will be a lasting one and school self-evaluation needs to become better established to provide evidence of this.

Among this group of schools, there are four main strategies to raising attainment:

1. Meeting diverse needs, through the comprehensive development of resources and classroom support.
2. Increased and systematic pupil self-determination and choice within a structured framework.
3. Introducing programmes to improve pupil learning and thinking strategies.
4. Forming groups to tackle particular needs such as boys' underachievement in English.

Some schools were using more than one of these strategies.

All the programmes involved teachers in working in new ways and teachers appreciated the opportunity for reconsidering their own practice and extending their repertoires. Most of the initiatives gave teachers the opportunity to become more aware of pupil learning and provided supportive contexts in which they could develop their teaching to better match pupil needs. Several required major shifts in teachers' roles.

Flexibility was achieved in different ways by the schools. The differentiated curriculum at Brooke Weston allowed students to move easily from one level of work to another within a mixed ability classroom and without complicated arrangements for flexible groups. The modular curriculum at Sandringham achieved flexibility and student choice for part of the timetable. It also required flexibility from staff, who were very much in a "market", responding to student demand. On the other hand, the literacy groups at Langley were formed to meet particular needs and were less flexible, but pupils were moved out of the groups and back into mainstream classes as soon as possible. Flexibility is often considered to be difficult in secondary schools because of timetabling and staffing, but there are options that schools could consider even within these constraints. More radical approaches such as extending the school day would clearly open up more possibilities. Within a normal timetable, partnership teaching, team teaching or support teaching allow for greater flexibility within a class.

Perhaps the most radical and comprehensive of the initiatives was the differentiated curriculum with student self-determination at Brooke Weston. This school was newly established as a City Technology College and was therefore in a good position to develop a new approach. The differentiated curriculum is offered within the context of a longer school day and generous provision of computing resources. Other schools wishing to follow this lead might find it difficult without similar levels of resource, but staff in the school certainly thought it would be feasible for other schools to develop differentiated resources.

Often schools did not have enough information to be sure that the innovatory practice directly influenced attainment. The staff were most concerned with setting up the programme and getting it working. Typically, evaluation was not built in at the beginning, but added later, after the programme had been running for a time. Frequently this meant that only rather weak evaluation criteria could be applied, for example through post hoc surveys of pupils and teachers, and

through the collection of teacher assessments of progress or GCSE grades. Identifying causal relationships when multiple innovation is the norm is difficult. Without the benefit of a prior measure of pupil attainment, it is even more difficult to attribute an organisational initiative to improvement in attainment. Many schools had to be excluded from the study because they were unable to provide evidence of the effect of their initiative on pupil attainment. If the education system as a whole is to learn which are the most effective ways of raising attainment, then more systematic evaluation needs to be planned.

Schools are well placed to respond to the particular needs of their students. The initiatives illustrated in this report were all well received by students, teachers and parents. They demonstrate a variety of organisational responses through pupil grouping which meet the challenge of raising attainment.

## 7. References

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