

# Effective Teaching and Learning for Pupils in Low Attaining Groups

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# Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Tables .....	vi
List of Appendices .....	vii
List of Abbreviations .....	viii
<b>Executive summary.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Chapter 1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 The education of low attaining pupils</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 The current study</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>1.3 Parameters of the study</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.4 Limitations of the study</b>	<b>4</b>
1.4.1 Limitations of the Survey	
1.4.2 Attainment and ability	
1.4.3 Defining low attaining groups	
1.4.4 Access to schools	
<b>1.5 Structure of the report</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 2. Background</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.1 Rationale</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2.2 Literature Review</b>	<b>7</b>
2.2.1 Organisational grouping	7
2.2.2 What are the positive effects that have been linked to attainment grouping?	8
2.2.3 What are the negative effects that have been linked to attainment grouping?	8
2.2.4 How do schools motivate pupils in lower attaining groups?	9
2.2.5 Within-class grouping	10
<b>2.3 The Policy Context</b>	<b>10</b>
2.3.1 Pupil grouping	10
2.3.2 Within-class grouping	11
<b>Chapter 3. Research Design</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.1 Approach to the Research</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.2 The Sample</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3.3 Methods and Analysis</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.4 Ethics</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>3.5 Limitations</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 4. Predictors of Set Placement</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4.1 Introduction</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4.2 Variables</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>4.3 Characteristics of low set members</b>	<b>21</b>
4.3.1 Gender	21

4.3.2	Ethnicity	22
4.3.3	Free School Meal Eligibility	23
4.3.4	ACORN categories	23
4.3.5	Special Educational Needs	24
4.3.6	Prior attainment	25
<b>4.4</b>	<b>Modeling the predictors of setting</b>	<b>26</b>
4.4.1	Year 6 numeracy	26
4.4.2	Year 6 literacy	27
4.4.3	Secondary mathematics	27
4.4.4	Secondary English	28
4.4.5	Discussion	28
<b>4.5</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Chapter 5. The Organisation of Pupil Groups</b>		<b>31</b>
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Patterns of Organisation and Rationales for Grouping Systems</b>	<b>31</b>
5.2.1	Key Stage Two	31
5.2.2	Key Stage Three and Key Stage Four	33
<b>5.3</b>	<b>How is the Composition of Attainment Groups Decided?</b>	<b>37</b>
5.3.1	Who makes decisions?	37
5.3.2	Criteria for allocating pupils to different attainment groups	38
5.3.3	Adjustments to groups	40
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Who are the low attainers?</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>5.5</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Chapter 6. Key Institutional Strategies Supporting the Learning of Low-attaining Pupils</b>		<b>48</b>
<b>6.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>6.2</b>	<b>Managing resources to support the learning of low attainers</b>	<b>48</b>
6.2.1	Investing in support staff	48
6.2.2	Other resource support	52
<b>6.3</b>	<b>Curriculum provision and assessment at Key Stage 2</b>	<b>55</b>
6.3.1	Curriculum differentiation	55
6.3.2	Reviewing performance	55
6.3.3	Literacy	55
6.3.4	Assessment for Learning	56
<b>6.4</b>	<b>Curriculum provision and assessment at Key Stages 3 and 4</b>	<b>56</b>
6.4.1	Curriculum pathways	57
6.4.2	Collaboration with neighbouring schools	58
6.4.3	Other learning support strategies	58
6.4.4	Assessment and examinations	59
6.4.5	Mathematics	60
6.4.6	English	60
6.4.7	Science	62
<b>6.5</b>	<b>Building positive relationships</b>	<b>63</b>
6.5.1	School ethos	63
6.5.2	Discipline/reward systems	65
<b>6.6</b>	<b>External Involvement</b>	<b>67</b>
6.6.1	Parents/carers	67
6.6.2	External agencies	68
<b>6.7</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>70</b>

<b>Chapter 7.</b>	<b>Key Classroom Strategies Supporting the Learning of Low-attaining Pupils</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>7.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>7.2</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>72</b>
	7.2.1 Deploying teaching assistant support	72
	7.2.2 Views on support interventions	73
	7.2.3 Maximising the use of material resources	75
<b>7.3</b>	<b>Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment</b>	<b>76</b>
	7.3.1 Addressing the needs of low attainers in the classroom	76
	7.3.2 Differentiating and ensuring success	76
	7.3.3 Varying forms of learner engagement	78
	7.3.4 Expectations and challenge	81
<b>7.4</b>	<b>Interpersonal relations</b>	<b>82</b>
	7.4.1 Teacher-pupil relations	82
	7.4.2 Peer relations	85
<b>7.5</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Chapter 8.</b>	<b>Effective Teaching and Learning for Low Attaining Pupils – an overview discussion.</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>8.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>8.2</b>	<b>What are the population characteristics of pupils in low attainment sets?</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>8.3.</b>	<b>What practices and processes do schools use to identify and organise low attainment groups?</b>	<b>90</b>
	8.3.1 Pupil grouping practices	90
	8.3.2 Identifying low attainers	91
<b>8.4</b>	<b>How do schools and teachers motivate and inspire low attaining pupils to learn?</b>	<b>92</b>
	8.4.1 Concentration of resources	92
	8.4.2 Customisation	94
	8.4.3 Positive learning environment	97
<b>8.5</b>	<b>Are different approaches used for pupils from specific social groups (minority ethnic/social class/ gender) who are over-represented in low attainment groups and/or ‘at risk’ of low educational outcomes?</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Chapter 9.</b>	<b>Implications of the study</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>9.1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>9.2</b>	<b>The grouping debate</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>9.3</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>9.4</b>	<b>Policy</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>9.5</b>	<b>Research</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>References</b>		<b>106</b>
<b>Appendices I - X</b>		

## List of Tables

<b>Table 3.1</b>	<b>The case study sample summaries</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Table 3.2</b>	<b>Ethnic composition of the survey sample</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Table 3.3</b>	<b>Initial themes for case study data analysis</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Table 4.1</b>	<b>The basis for decisions on setting in primary and secondary schools</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Table 4.2</b>	<b>A selected summary of the ACORN categories</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Table 4.3</b>	<b>Gender by sets</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Table 4.4</b>	<b>Ethnicity by sets</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Table 4.5</b>	<b>FSM by sets</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Table 4.6</b>	<b>ACORN categories by set</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Table 4.7</b>	<b>SEN by sets</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Table 4.8</b>	<b>Prior attainment in English by sets</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Table 4.9</b>	<b>Prior attainment in Maths by sets</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Table 5.1</b>	<b>Schools using attainment setting in Key Stage Two</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Table 5.2</b>	<b>Grouping arrangements in case study schools at Key Stage Two</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Table 5.3</b>	<b>Schools using attainment setting in Key Stage Three and Four</b>	<b>33</b>

## List of Appendices

<b>Appendix I</b>	<b>Case study sample</b>
<b>Appendix II</b>	<b>Survey Instrument</b>
<b>Appendix III</b>	<b>Interview Schedule</b>
<b>Appendix IV</b>	<b>Acorn Categories</b>
<b>Appendix V</b>	<b>Analysis of Key Stage 2 numeracy</b>
<b>Appendix VI</b>	<b>Analysis of Key Stage 2 literacy</b>
<b>Appendix VII</b>	<b>Analysis results of secondary mathematics</b>
<b>Appendix VIII</b>	<b>Analysis results of secondary English</b>
<b>Appendix IX</b>	<b>Technical rational for the analytical approach</b>
<b>Appendix X</b>	<b>School case studies (a-m)</b>

## List of abbreviations

ACORN	A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods
CAT	Cognitive Abilities Test
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EAL	English as an Additional Language
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
KS1-4	Key Stages 1-4
LM	Learning Mentor
MLR	Multinomial Logistic Regression
NPD	National Pupil Database
PLASC	Pupil Level Annual School Census
PLUM	Polytomous Universal Model
SEN	Special Educational Needs
FSM	Free School Meals
LA	Local Authorities
LEA	Local Education Authority
NC	National Curriculum
Ofsted	Office For Standards in Education
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
SATs	Scholastic Aptitude Tests
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SES	Socio Economic Status
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TA	Teaching Assistant
UPN	Unique Pupil Numbers
VA	Value Added

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

The research investigated the characteristics of pupils in low attainment sets, the factors that determine the composition of these sets and the approaches to effective teaching of pupils in low attainment groups used by schools. Central to the aims of the study was the identification of how schools and teachers maximise the benefits of attainment grouping and mitigate its disadvantages. It was conducted by the Universities of Sussex and Manchester, on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). While the main focus was on low attainment sets, consideration was also given to effective teaching approaches with pupils regarded as low attaining in other grouping arrangements and more generically within the broader school context.

The study sought to answer four key research questions:

1. What are the population characteristics of pupils in low attainment sets?
2. What practices and processes do schools use to identify and organise low attainment groups?
3. How do schools and teachers motivate and inspire pupils in low attaining groups to learn?
4. Are different approaches used for pupils from specific social groups (minority ethnic/social class/ gender) who are over-represented in low attainment groups and/or 'at risk' of low educational outcomes?

## Key Findings

There were three main ways in which schools and teachers motivate and inspire low attaining pupils to learn. The advantages of attainment grouping for low attainers were maximised and the disadvantages were minimised in these three ways:

- **concentration of resources:** lower attainment groups were smaller allowing greater personal learning support and attention, teachers were similarly qualified and experienced across sets, teaching assistants, learning mentors and sometimes more senior pupils, were involved in providing learning support. This was effective where it was well coordinated by schools and teachers. The use of technology was widespread in teaching and learning with low attainers.
- **customisation to specific learning needs:** curriculum materials were drawn from multiple sources and customised to meet the learning needs of low attaining pupils. Materials incorporated a range of cognitive demands to allow pupils to select the level of challenge. Literacy and numeracy were infused effectively across the curriculum. Test level entry decisions were delayed to reduce demotivation and vocational pathways including college attendance and work placements were provided. Curriculum programmes with strong coursework components or modular tests were offered, effective school monitoring systems for tracking pupil progress were in place, peer-support and more feedback and praise. Use of a range of in-class grouping arrangements to promote active pupil engagement with their learning and to encourage focused oral participation were employed. Teachers constructed a positive environment in which pupils took more responsibility for their own learning and could make mistakes without any ridicule or disruption by peers.

- **creation of a positive learning environment:** the school ethos promotes mutual respect and value for the contribution of all pupils irrespective of attainment group, teacher-pupil relations are strengthened in and out of class and improved communications between schools, teachers, pupils and their communities sustain motivation. A more relaxed disciplinary regime in class is offered with emphasis on participation and teamwork, praise and positive affirmation to encourage and motivate active pupil participation and engagement in learning. Pupils' views are solicited and used in productive ways to inform teachers and school change and provide a more conducive and comfortable environment. Co-ordinated multi-agency support and involvement are provided to support learning needs. The support of parent/carers, the community and local businesses are drawn in as important contributors to a positive and motivating learning environment.

Schools working effectively with pupils in low attaining groups were not found to adopt specific approaches for particular groups of pupils such as minority ethnic groups, but instead personalised the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment such that pupils in any group could benefit.

Demographic patterns (social class, ethnicity, gender) within low attainment sets were not widely acknowledged by teachers except with respect to gender. This was discussed with regards to the relative underachievement of boys although this was not found to be statistically significant predictor of set placement in the survey. The only significant survey finding on gender is the relationship between being female and low attainment set placement in Key Stage 2 literacy which contradicts other recent research findings. This survey finding deserves further investigation to establish its robustness.

Social class is a significant predictor of set placement. Pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds have a higher probability of being placed in lower sets irrespective of prior attainment. SEN is another significant predictor of set placement and these pupils are concentrated in the low attainment sets. Ethnicity is a weaker predictor of set placement. These results are in-line with a range of research findings elsewhere that have explored school experiences and outcomes for different social groups.

Even in those schools with the most widespread setting practices, pupils in low attainment groups also enjoyed opportunities to learn in other kinds of groups, for example, mixed attainment groups or in-class grouping arrangements.

## **Methodology**

The research included a brief review of the literature, in particular to update the previous review on pupil grouping undertaken by Kutnick et al, (2005) and to add evidence more specifically relating to pupils in low attaining groups. It also involved undertaking a survey of schools in 12 Local Authorities (LAs) and in-depth case studies in 13 schools in four of these LAs.

A national survey of 404 schools (302 primary; 102 secondary) in 12 Local Authorities (LAs) was undertaken. In total, 168 were returned completed, providing a response rate of 41.6% (41% for primary; 43.1% for secondary). Of these, 44 (26.2%) were from the secondary schools and 124 (73.8%) from primary schools. The survey collected data on Years 8 and 10 and additionally Years 6 and 7 to strengthen its analytical power around a key assessment and school transition point.

The completed questionnaires included data on the specified school populations with Unique Pupil Numbers (UPNs) as well as data about school setting and grouping procedures. Hence the definitions of low, middle or high set were those identified by the schools.

In order to address some of the limitations of using only Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility as a proxy for social class, the analysis in this research also employed the residential neighbourhood classification (ACORN) schema. ACORN categories are based on the approximately 2 million postcodes in the United Kingdom, the average postcode being shared by around 14/15 addresses.

Thirteen schools were selected as case studies from four of the LAs, two of which were shire counties and the other two metropolitan areas. The schools were selected on the basis that they were making good progress with low attaining pupils and represented a wide range of pupil populations with respect to social class and minority ethnic intakes. However, they were more socio-economically disadvantaged than the national average and specific ethnic groups, such as Bangladeshi pupils were overrepresented and others, such as White British pupils were underrepresented. The data collection in these case studies focused on Years 5, 8 and 10 in the specific subjects of English/literacy and mathematics/numeracy, and additionally science in Years 8 and 10. Data collection included documentary evidence, individual and group interviews with staff, classroom observations of low attainment groups in the specified subjects/years, shadowing of selected low attaining pupils and focus group interviews with these shadowed pupils. Subject to the advice of the school, some parents were also approached.

The research focuses on the experiences of pupils in low attaining sets. The term 'attainment' has been adopted throughout this report in preference to the more commonly used term 'ability', which is problematic, since there is no means of measuring 'ability'. 'Attainment' in the context of this report, is measured by the proxy of National Curriculum Test results, which are one common predictor of allocation of pupils to groups.

It is acknowledged that there are a number of methodological weaknesses that may have influenced these findings, such as a significant time lag of up to three to four years between the measures of attainment (the Key Stage test results) used.

## **Main Findings**

### ***School policies on pupil grouping***

- Schools varied in the extent to which grouping practices were a matter of whole school policy or decided by departments.
- In some schools broad principles (for example to group by attainment) were set at school level and departments had discretion only over the details of organisation, for example the number of sets in different subjects. In other schools decisions about whether or not to group by attainment were devolved entirely.
- Numeracy / mathematics was the subject area most commonly taught in attainment sets and in some cases was the only subject in which setting was used. The nature of the subject was reported to demand attainment grouping to facilitate differentiated teacher responses to individual learners. English was set the least and science had more variation across schools.

### ***The characteristics of pupils in low attaining sets***

- In the survey, schools indicated that setting decisions are based predominantly on prior attainment and perceived 'ability'.
- The analysis of data on pupils' allocation to groups confirms prior attainment as the main, albeit a relatively poor predictor of set placement, for example, with over half the pupils with low prior attainment in English ending up in middle or high sets. Although prior attainment remains statistically significant, setting decisions are clearly not made on this basis alone.
- Social class is a significant predictor of set placement. Pupils from higher socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are more likely to be assigned to higher sets and less likely to be assigned to lower sets. This was confirmed by the analysis based on both FSM and ACORN categories.
- Special Educational Need (SEN) is a significant predictor of set placement (after controlling for social class and prior attainment), with these pupils concentrated in the low attainment sets. Less than 10% of pupils in the highest sets have SEN. This suggests that SEN and low attainment are seen as closely related or overlapping and that set placement may also be confounded by the effect of behaviour.
- Ethnicity was a weaker significant predictor of set placement, (after controlling for social class and prior attainment), with pupils of Bangladeshi origin being slightly less likely to be selected for the higher sets.
- Gender was not a significant predictor of set placement (after controlling for social class and prior attainment), except in Key Stage 2 literacy where, against recent trends, females were more likely to be placed in a low set. Overall, males are slightly overrepresented in the low sets and under-represented in the middle sets but this difference was not statistically significant.
- Other factors including teacher assessments, teacher judgements and pupil characteristics such as behaviour are likely to influence set placement. Some schools allocated pupils with behavioural difficulties to high sets irrespective of prior attainment because they believed that the classroom context provided in these groups would promote positive behaviour. Other schools allocated these pupils to lower sets because they were smaller and provided higher staff ratios.

### **Key institutional strategies**

#### ***Human and material resources***

- In almost all cases, resources were allocated to keep the class size of low attainment groups small to allow the concentration of resources and more individualised teaching and learning.
- In all the case study secondary / high schools, decisions about resource allocation and curriculum provision for low attaining pupils at Key stage 4 was in competition with other resource demands, especially where there was potential to directly impact on and improve the school's standing in the performance tables e.g. focusing resources on pupils at the GCSE grade C threshold.

- The use of teaching assistants (TAs) to support the learning of low attainers was a key strategy across the case studies schools. They were used in a wide variety of ways to support both the teacher and teaching as well as the pupil and learning.
- Support for the learning of low attainers was most effective when it was co-ordinated and the TAs and teachers worked together as a team. More consistent levels of support were in place at Key Stage 2 but school size and timetabling complexities made this more difficult at Key Stages 3 & 4.
- The teachers in low attainment groups in the vast majority of cases were as experienced and well-qualified as staff in higher attaining groups. In addition, pupils in low attaining groups usually enjoyed and benefited from the support of teaching assistants although by Key Stages 3 & 4 some pupils were sensitive about very focused attention by a teaching assistant in the classroom.

### ***Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment***

- Many subject departments tried to maintain set flexibility by teaching the same topics across different sets using appropriately differentiated materials.
- Pupils' progress and set placement was monitored using National Curriculum test results, a range of other school tests / assignments and teacher judgements. In many cases the results of tests were used to identify learning needs which were often fed back individually to pupils.
- At Key Stage 4, low attaining pupils were often provided with alternative curricular programmes either in specific subjects or through a comprehensive vocational programme that included parts of the week outside the school in college or work-based placements.
- Irrespective of the grouping practices there were explicit attempts to vary approaches to teaching in low attainment groups to provide activity-based learning and to appeal to different learning styles.
- In many schools, curriculum texts, classroom arrangements and testing formats were often adapted to facilitate the learning experiences and outcomes for low attaining pupils. Assessment for learning was widely promoted as a way to provide feedback on learning and as a motivation device for low attaining pupils.

### ***School ethos***

- In all schools, there was an explicit school ethos that provided an inclusive and nurturing environment. This included valuing the positive but often non-academic related achievements of low attaining pupils.
- Although schools adopted different and often contrasting approaches in their efforts to improve learning they all used prizes and awards for achievement, effort and attendance to motivate pupils' engagement in their learning.
- Consulting pupils either through action research or in parents' evenings was an effective way to encourage pupils to take more responsibility for their learning.

### ***External involvement***

- Involving parents / carers was effective in improving the learning of low attaining pupils. This was encouraged in a variety of ways including outreach to homes, inviting parents / carers into school and through homework activities and reading schemes.
- Some schools hosted classes for parents / carers, especially in English as an Additional Language (EAL), which was reported to have positive effects on their children's self-esteem and confidence.
- All schools had access to specialist services for low attaining pupils including speech and language therapists, behaviour support officers, psychologists and language and communication support officers who were usually co-ordinated by the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO).
- Although these were not specifically targeted at the low attaining pupils, some schools enjoyed the involvement of local businesses supporting learning in a variety of curricular and extra- curricular sessions, schemes and activities. These opportunities were usually more available in the city schools that could also draw on other resources including EMAG and Excellence in Cities.

### **Key classroom strategies**

#### ***Resource use***

- TAs were used in a wide variety of ways to support the learning of low attainers. The imaginative use of TAs extended their role beyond their attachment to, and focus on, the learning of one or two identified pupils. Strategies were also employed to encourage some independence from the TA and to facilitate focused teacher attention on the learning needs of the low attainers.
- Low attaining pupils were assured equal access to learning materials and media through the organisation of school and class sharing systems. This was especially important in the less well-resourced schools.

#### ***Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment***

- Teachers addressed the learning of low attainers by considering both the cognitive demands and affective outcomes. Strategies employed included a slower pace of delivery, increased scaffolding, reduced levels of challenge, peer-support and more feedback and praise.
- Differentiated materials were used to specifically address learning needs of low attaining pupils although in many cases teachers attempted to cover the same topics across the attainment range.
- To avoid the potential to impose limits to attainment through differentiation, teachers gave pupils opportunities to select and vary the level of challenge in their learning. Pupil selection of learning task also worked to reduce stigma associated with pupils being given easier classwork tasks.
- Reinforcement was emphasised by teachers as important to effective learning by low attaining pupils. There was less consensus about whether this was better accomplished through repetition or through new learning activities. Many teachers, however, tried to present low attainers with a range of unthreatening ways to understand, engage with and practise new concepts.

- Practical and interactive approaches, often involving ICT and/or the interactive whiteboard, were popular with pupils and often used by teachers to motivate low attainers and as a reward for good behaviour.
- The balance between providing pupils with appropriate challenge, opportunities for success and maintaining high expectations was particularly difficult in low attainment groups. Assessment for Learning (AfL) and peer-evaluation were identified as effective strategies in achieving this balance.

### ***Interpersonal relations***

- Teacher-pupil relations were widely regarded as highly significant to the effective learning of low attaining pupils. Teachers described their approach as more negotiated with low attainers in which practical, interactive or fun activities were used as a reward for good behaviour and/or task completion.
- Low attaining pupils referred to a more relaxed disciplinary environment in their classrooms as well as the difficulties of maintaining order experienced by some teachers. Although there was mixed opinion about this, most pupils preferred an explicit disciplinary context to help them avoid distraction and disruption.
- Many teachers went out of their way to cultivate positive relations with low attaining pupils and made efforts to respond flexibly to provide a positive learning environment that encouraged pupils' participation. This was accomplished through the use of praise, treating mistakes as part of learning, careful questioning techniques and paying attention to cultural sensitivities.
- Teachers and pupils alike, regarded peer relations as having an important influence on learning. In the classroom most pupils were more sensitive to gender than to ethnic differences.
- Although social stigma and low self-esteem were associated with being identified as a low attainer, most pupils seemed less disturbed by this once settled into their class and engaged in their learning.

### **Conclusions and implications**

There is no single form of attainment grouping. Different schools adopt different practices, and the same schools may adopt a range of practices for different subject areas or different year groups, which may differ from year to year.

- In practice, schools operate under a wide range of practical constraints which mean that the 'ideal' pupil grouping may be impossible to create. Low attainment groups contain a wide range of attainment and overlap greatly with other, 'higher' groups.
- Low attainment groups, created in similar ways might function and be experienced quite differently in different contexts affected by the curriculum, teaching approaches and level of support available.
- From the research undertaken, three main categories emerged, within which teachers and schools maximise the advantages and minimise the

disadvantages of low attainment groups. These were concentration of resources, customisation and learning environment.

In considering the implications of these findings, five broad principles have been identified. These are:

1. Flexibility: the case study schools, placed pupils in low attainment groups for particular parts of the curriculum, or at particular stages of their school career, reviewed placements regularly and transferred pupils between groups as seemed appropriate.
2. Breadth: the case study schools offered innovative ways for pupils in low attaining groups to access the curriculum without sacrificing breadth and which have the potential to raise rather than lower expectations.
3. Support: the case study schools paid as much, or more attention to the quality of support as to the level of support. Moreover, they offered pupils opportunities to support each other on shared tasks without generating a sense of stigma.
4. Involvement: pupils in the case study schools often had clear views about what they find helpful about the groups in which they are placed. The implication is that pupils (and, indeed, their parents/carers) could be more involved in making decisions about where they are placed, and in offering feedback about the quality of their placements.
5. Responsiveness: the case study schools had robust means of understanding how their practices impact on pupils in their particular situations. This is partly about listening to pupils. It is also about looking for impacts on pupil progress and attainment, and about monitoring the quality, breadth and flexibility of provision.

Beyond these considerations of practice are wider social implications. Schools should consider whether the creation of low attainment groups is the most appropriate response to pupils' difficulties if those difficulties are systematically associated with social class, ethnicity or gender.

The personalisation agenda promises flexible and individually-responsive provision in every school. Some thought will need to be given, however, to the role of attainment grouping within such an agenda and the resultant patterns of curriculum provision. Some of the practices we have outlined in this report create low attainment groups that are well taught, highly focused and highly supportive. As such, they could become an important building block in providing positive learning experiences and outcomes in cognitive and affective terms for all pupils.

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The education of low attaining pupils**

The longstanding government commitment to raising standards of achievement for all pupils in schools was re-affirmed in *Every Child Matters: Change for Children in Schools* (DfES, 2004) that focussed on the need to raise the educational achievement of the lowest attaining pupils. The need for greater differentiation in teaching and learning was highlighted and precipitated government support for attainment grouping in schools. In the White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More choice for parents and pupils*, (DfES, 2005) the benefits of attainment grouping were described in terms of improved motivation, social skills and standards of achievement.

Research has also indicated a range of advantages of setting for pupils and for teachers (Slavin, 1990; Harlen and Malcolm, 1997; Kutnick et al, 2006). However, research has also suggested some negative effects of attainment grouping especially for low attainment groups (Harlen and Malcolm, 1997; Hallam, 2003; Ireson and Hallam, 2001; Kutnick et al., 2005). These studies point to lower pupil motivation and self-esteem, poor behaviour, a less stimulating classroom environment, lower teacher expectations and a more restricted curriculum for pupils in low attainment groups. In addition, the research suggests that boys and low attaining pupils prefer mixed ability classes (Ireson and Hallam, 2001). Despite this less than conclusive research evidence on the positive and negative effects of attainment grouping, schools have increasingly adopted setting practices as a means to provide more differentiated and appropriate learning experiences for pupils and to improve standards.

A research focus on classroom practice has continued to support innovation and professional development around the characteristics of effective teaching (see for example, Day et al, 2006; Sammons, 2006). Teacher-pupil relationships have been identified as of considerable importance to pupils' experiences of schooling (Corrie, 2002; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Munn et al, 2000) with different teaching approaches adopted by teachers for pupils in different attainment groups (Harlen, 1999; Gallannaugh and Dyson, 2003; Kutnick et al, 2006).

While research has shown that within the classroom, teachers have a significant influence over pupils' educational experiences and outcomes of schooling in terms of attainment and affect (Day et al, 2006; Downey, 1977; Harlen and Malcolm 1997; Dunne, 1998, 1999; Sammons, 2006), there has been little research that has focussed explicitly on teaching and learning in low attainment sets. The study reported here has a contribution to make to improved knowledge and understanding of this research gap. Grouping practices, however, remain variable, with some schools operating flexible systems with set and mixed ability groups in different curriculum areas and across different year groups. While the focus in this study was primarily on teaching and learning of pupils in low attainment sets, it has drawn on the experiences of these pupils in other grouping contexts and in the school as a whole.

The influence of the teacher is not simply restricted to the classroom; it extends beyond to their participation in broader institutional structures and processes which lead to pupils from different social groups experiencing school in different ways (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Significantly here, the group composition and pedagogical context of low attaining pupils' learning within attainment sets, while crucially important in themselves, have been shaped through a number of prior school

processes. The critical importance of understanding the school decision-making processes that lead to the composition of low attainment pupil groups has been highlighted by recent research. This not only shows some persistent patterns of poor educational outcomes for pupils from low socio-economic groups, minority ethnic groups and boys, studies also indicate differentiated experiences of schooling and the over-representation in low attainment sets (Cooper and Dunne, 2000; Gillborn & Mirza, 2000; Demie, 2001; Marshall, 2002; Singh Ghuman, 2004; Mamon, 2004; DfES, 2005; OFSTED, 2005; Connolly, 2006; Kutnick et al, 2006). Through either quantitative, qualitative or mixed research approaches that range from smaller case studies to wider ranging surveys, these studies, taken together, provide evidence of educational inequalities that disadvantage pupils from lower socio-economic groups and black ethnic minority groups in particular.

Pupils' experiences within school setting processes and practices are highly significant to their learner identities, their expectations, aspirations and motivations. While prior performance data (e.g. Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT) scores and National Curriculum levels) inform this process, teachers inevitably play a significant part in setting decisions, which in turn influence their pedagogical approaches with low attainment pupil groups (Keddie, 1971; Nash, 1973; Kutnick et al, 2006). In this sense, the organisational structures and processes in schools are highly pertinent to the pedagogical context for low attaining pupils and their teachers.

Recent research asserts that no one grouping practice suits all and suggests that within-class grouping can mitigate some of the negative effects of attainment grouping/setting (Kutnick et al, 2006). The impact of within-class grouping strategies will vary according to group size and composition, as well as the learning task (Blatchford et al, 2003).

With some notable successes in raising attainment of, for example, minority ethnic pupils through the Excellence in Cities programme (Kendall, et al, 2005), it has been suggested that, through innovative practice, standards within low attainment groups can be raised by increased motivation, expectations and social skills (DfES, 2005). There remains, however, limited in-depth and systematic research on effective teaching and learning for pupils in low attainment sets. In the spirit of the persistent government efforts both for inclusion and to raise standards, this research set out to explore, analyse and report on whole school and classroom procedures and practices that best support and encourage pupils in low attainment groups to achieve their potential through positive attainment and affective outcomes.

## **1.2 The current study**

The research reported brings together a strong focus on effective teaching and learning for pupils in low attainment groups, an emphasis on the school processes that determine the composition of low attainment sets and analyses of the characteristics of pupils in low attainment sets. While the primary concern is with low attainment groups, this is supplemented by a focus on low attainers in other grouping arrangements and more generically within the broader school context. In-depth case studies and a survey were used to provide both qualitative and quantitative data which were integrated and triangulated to address the research questions. This study provides rich data on school and classroom level practices and processes; statistical analyses of the populations in low attainment sets and indicates how these might connect and interact. In particular, the study sought to answer four key research questions:

1. What are the population characteristics of pupils in low attainment sets?

2. What practices and processes do schools use to identify and organise low attainment groups?
3. How do schools and teachers motivate and inspire pupils in low attaining groups to learn?
4. Are different approaches used for pupils from specific social groups (minority ethnic/social class/ gender) who are over-represented in low attainment groups and/or 'at risk' of low educational outcomes?

These research questions were addressed in a three dimensional approach that incorporated:

- A review of the relevant literature including national policy and previous academic research (all research questions);
- A series of in-depth cases studies of schools seen to be doing well with low attaining pupils (research questions 2-4); and
- A national survey of schools using the National Pupil Database (NPD, research questions 1-2).

Informed by insights from the literature, the case studies of schools doing well with low attaining pupils reported here have provided detailed descriptions of school contexts. These include the formal records, structures and processes in schools together with the multiple personal accounts, experiences and perspectives of teachers and pupils in low attainment groups. This was vital for providing evidence and illustrations of the ways that schools and teachers capitalise on the positive effects and mitigate the negative effects of attainment grouping.

The survey was the first one to link individual pupil characteristics to pupil grouping practice on a national sample and as such, provided a unique opportunity to examine comprehensively the nature of pupils in lower attainment sets. These analyses also provided a broader sample within which to locate the case study data. This was especially significant for illuminating school processes that determine the formation of sets and highly pertinent to questions about pupil populations (minority ethnic, gender, social class) in low attainment sets. In turn, this has provided opportunities for analytical reflection upon the ways that institutional processes construct and circumscribe the context for the teaching and learning of pupils in low attainment groups.

The findings of this research have important implications for policy and practice aimed at improving the educational outcomes of all pupils. In particular, it highlights examples of good practice from schools and classrooms where low attaining pupils are doing well. By providing data and illustrations of teaching and learning in low attainment groups, it focuses attention on the educational experiences and outcomes for these pupils and their relationships with their teachers and within schools. This, in itself, provides some stimulation for teachers and school managers to critically reflect on the impact of everyday school practices and procedures and to develop strategies that aim for better cognitive and affective outcomes for this group of pupils.

Cross-referencing between the case studies and statistical analyses provides important findings that underline the direct connection between the micro-level processes and macro-level effects. Again, this is critically important to institutional processes and central to the government's policy agenda for higher standards and for educational and social inclusion. In particular, the extent to which population characteristics are predictors of low attainment group placement is vital for informing new initiatives in local and national policy and practice.

### **1.3 Parameters of the study**

This study has focused predominantly on processes of the formation of attainment sets and on effective teaching and learning of pupils in low attainment groups. There are three key dimensions to this study that might be simply represented by the following questions:

- Which pupils get into low attainment groups?
- How do they get into (or out of) low attainment groups?
- How do schools maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages of teaching and learning for pupils in low attainment groups?

It was not a study of whether setting by attainment was right or wrong in principle. Rather, the research intention was to provide evidence of school and classroom strategies that encourage good progress of low attaining pupils, to explore the institutional processes of this form of school organisation and to investigate its broader population effects.

The central focus of this research has been upon pupils in low attainment sets. As the background section indicates however, the research about the impact of different in-class grouping strategies has much to offer that is pertinent to this study. Further, and as described above, the variability and flexibility in school practices has led to some case study data and analysis drawn from teaching and learning of low attaining pupils in other grouping contexts. It has also included a range of learning support strategies available more widely in the school and beyond the classroom.

### **1.4 Limitations of the study**

#### **1.4.1 Limitations of the survey**

There is an extensive literature on the definition of social class. Hence, measurement of social class as a key indicator of educational success is both contested and problematic. The standard proxy indicator of eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) commonly used in the past in educational research has well-rehearsed limitations (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000; Marshall, 2002). The FSM eligibility measure does not reflect wider aspects of social class beyond stated income, such as occupation, educational background, attitudes and other characteristics known to contribute to longer term outcomes. However, the National Pupil Database used in this study does not carry all these data and the researchers did not wish to further burden schools or participants. These issues were partially addressed by extending the social class analysis to include the ACORN categories, a more differentiated classification based on postcode data, but nevertheless, the analysis although more reliable, is still an approximation in terms of social class.

The ethnic categories, although more reliable, have associated difficulties of definition and comparison. There are particular difficulties around the multiple ethnic identities aggregated in the 'White' category that refers to skin colour rather than ethnicity, an issue that also exists in the 'Black' and 'Asian' categories and sub-categories. We are aware that there are important historical, cultural and material distinctions between ethnic groups and have explored these in the quantitative analyses. It is important to note, however, that the sample was constructed to allow a particular focus on minority ethnic pupils and those with low SES backgrounds which has resulted in a skewed sample. These limitations are discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

The final presentation of the research has emerged from the discussions of the literature, the data and the analysis. In this sense, the final framing and articulation of the research, its findings and implications has been the result of a dynamic research process in which we have made and rationalised research decisions, informed by the practical contingencies of school contexts. The findings of the research reported here, clearly demand additional studies for further substantiation and elaboration. There are evidently some aspects of this research that would benefit from further focussed research.

#### **1.4.2 Attainment and ability**

We acknowledge the effort required by schools in the larger sample to provide the data on sets. Besides the attendant difficulties with data transfer and entry that influence data quality, there are a number of added limitations for the statistical analysis.

Ability is a contested concept and the difficulties with definition mean that any direct measure is unavailable. The use of attainment levels (i.e. Key Stage Assessments) as a proxy measure is also problematic as they are an outcome of very complex and contingent social processes. In these terms this is a major limitation of the quantitative analyses.

Within policy and practice, the range of nomenclature has added to a general lack of linguistic clarity and presented multiple opportunities for misunderstanding and disagreement. In this research, we used the term attainment rather than ability in an attempt to be clear that attainment data are a key national indicator of pupil learning and progress. It is also the indicator against which effective teaching and learning may be gauged.

While we acknowledge the common usage of 'ability' to indicate groups or personal pupil attributes and potential, it is not an objective term. It is often used interchangeably with terms like attainment and achievement to focus on learning outcomes and implies (innate) individual cognitive capacities. However, it has been argued that attainment outcomes are influenced by, and produced through, the multiple, complex and inter-subjective social processes in schools (Dunne, 1999; Zevenbergen, 2005). While this is an important analytical distinction for us, respondents in the case studies nevertheless referred to ability groups, and where pertinent, we have reported their contribution in their own words.

#### **1.4.3 Defining low attaining groups**

Another difficulty in negotiating our research interest with schools relates to their arrangements for pupils identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN). Variations in local school practices demanded clarity about our focus on pupils in low attainment groups but not those specifically constructed to meet the needs of pupils identified as SEN although pupils with SEN very often comprised the majority of pupils in the lowest attainment group.

Our initial request to work with teachers and students in 'bottom sets' thus needed considerable clarification. To make the process more complex, the composition of these sets varied from year group to year group, subject to subject and school to school. Year on year changes in school and subject department organisation also meant that some schools that were selected and had agreed to participate at the end of the school year 2005-6 had changed their setting arrangements by the time the fieldwork took place. This was especially the case with the primary school sample. Nevertheless, we have sufficient data and analysis that focuses on pupils in low

attainment groups and we have incorporated the additional data to provide more comprehensive insights into teaching and learning of low attaining pupils in set and mixed attainment classroom contexts.

#### **1.4.4 Access to schools**

Access to schools for in-depth case study work is always something of an imposition that takes teacher and pupil time, energy and focus away from the main purposes of schooling. In this research, these difficulties appeared to be exacerbated by the rather sensitive nature of the research focus on pupils in low attainment groups. While the schools were all welcoming and in the main had structured an itinerary for the data collection, there were inevitable gaps in the case studies. In some cases, access was not given to the lowest set but rather to, for example, set 3 out of 4 sets. The reasons for this were not stated but it is possible that the greater challenges present in some 'bottom' sets were shielded from observers. Although this has provided greater congruency with the survey analysis which refers to three attainment categories, this effectively altered the focus from the **lowest** to the **lower** attaining pupils and groups.

Another consequence of the negotiated research engagement in schools was that access to parents and external agencies was severely limited. Our access was based on specific school guidance and recommendation. It is possible that this was too demanding a request for schools or that the researchers might have raised issues with parents such as the criteria used to determine group composition, that the schools themselves had not made explicit to parents. This is clearly an important dimension for the understanding of educational processes, experiences and outcomes that will need further specific research attention.

### **1.5 Structure of the report**

This report continues with a background chapter that reviews both the relevant literature and national policy. It draws on the findings of recent research that has explored issues related to the key research questions.

This is followed by a chapter that outlines the main features of the research design.

Then in Chapters 4-7 we present the data analysis.

In Chapter 4, the findings of the survey are presented with statistical analyses and a national profile of pupils in low attainment sets. Details of the statistical analyses may be found in the appendices.

Next, in Chapter 5, both survey and case study data are combined in a presentation of the findings concerned with the school processes that inform the composition of low attainment sets.

The findings on effective teaching and learning strategies for the pupils in low attainment groups are reported in Chapters 6 and 7. Details of the key strategies that schools and subject departments use to provide the conditions for the effective teaching and learning of low attainers are presented in Chapter 6. This is followed by detail from the classroom level in Chapter 7, which provides illustrations of good practice.

The final two chapters respectively provide a research summary and a consideration of the main conclusions and implications of the research.

## Chapter 2. Background

### 2.1 Rationale

Throughout the policies of the last 10 years there is evidence of the attempt to pursue equity and excellence and not to regard these as in conflict. Priorities identified in *The Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners: Maintaining the Excellent Progress* (DfES, 2006a), included closing the gap in educational attainment between children from lower income and disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers, while raising standards for all. This echoed the concerns expressed in *Every Child Matters: Change for Children in Schools* (DfES, 2004) that focussed on the need to raise the educational achievement of the lowest attaining pupils and the recognition of the urgent need to reduce the social class attainment gap (DfES, 2006b). Another priority has been increasing the post -16 participation rate while ensuring that the curriculum in secondary schools is relevant and engaging. These priorities reflect a commitment to equity and might be seen as focusing in particular, on the pupils likely to be found in lower attainment groups. Reducing the number of young people on a path to poverty and an unfulfilled adult life was a further priority which again suggests a focus on those pupils in lower attainment groups (Palmer et al., 2007). Furthermore, the focus on personalised learning throughout recent policy documentation has emphasised the need to design the educational service to the needs of the child not to adopt practices that are determined at the convenience of the service providers.

The White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES, 2005) encouraged further use of attainment grouping but reiterated that decisions about grouping reside with the schools:

*It will continue to be for schools to decide how and when to group and set by ability. But we will encourage more schools to adopt such grouping and help them to learn from the innovative practices that some schools are already employing without lowering expectations for pupils in lower ability groups or limiting choices in the curriculum. (p.53)*

This report is aimed at highlighting 'good practice', defined as practice that effectively supports the learning of pupils in lower attainment sets. We acknowledge that 'good practice' is contextually variable and may be interpreted in a range of ways by schools and teachers (Fielding et al, 2005).

### 2.2 Literature Review

#### 2.2.1 Organisational grouping

The review of the research evidence on the impact of pupil grouping practices (Kutnick et al., 2005), drawing on earlier literature (e.g. Slavin, 1990; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998), concluded that no one form of organisational grouping benefits all pupils. A number of studies (e.g. Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004; Hallam and Ireson 2003; Ireson, et al., 2005; Boaler et al., 2000) have evaluated different approaches to pupil grouping within schools. The lack of clear evidence to support one form of grouping may reflect the greater influence that other factors have on outcomes such as composition of the group, effectiveness of teaching (Day et al, 2006) and the curriculum offered (Kutnick, et al., 2002; Blatchford, et al., 2003). Attempts to narrow the achievement gap through setting or mixed attainment grouping, appear to have had little effect on the range of achievement that they were designed to reduce.

### **2.2.2 What are the positive effects that have been linked to attainment grouping?**

Attainment grouping in practice, appears to advantage some pupils while disadvantaging others. Ireson et al., (2002) found that pupils with higher Key Stage 2 test scores in mathematics subsequently did better in sets, while those with lower scores did better in mixed attainment groups. Higher sets were found to have the more experienced and highly qualified teachers (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998), an advantage for those pupils but a disadvantage for pupils in lower sets. Only in one study (Boaler, 1997b) have pupils in higher sets appeared to be disadvantaged by attainment grouping. Boaler found that one third of the girls in top sets in mathematics wanted to move down a set because they found the pace and style of teaching unhelpful. Furthermore, pupils identified as exceptionally able may try to hide their talents and / or appear to attract a disproportionate amount of teacher attention in mixed attainment classes (Butler-Por, 1993, cited in Freeman, 1999), suggesting that setting may enable attention to be more evenly distributed although the balance of this attention to learning or behaviour across different attainment sets is less clear.

There is some evidence that pupils prefer setting (Hamer, 2001; Hallam & Ireson, 2007), though Hallam and Ireson noted that pupils were more likely to prefer whatever arrangement they had experienced. Overall, however, those in higher sets were more likely to report preferring setting whereas those in lower sets preferred mixed attainment groups. Teachers are also reported to prefer setting (Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Hallam & Ireson, 2007) perhaps because setting is seen as allowing pupils to learn at the appropriate level and pace for the group (Hallam & Ireson, 2007; Hamer, 2001; Kutnick et al., 2005; 2006). This suggests that teachers may assume that a set contains pupils all at the same level, a view confirmed in one study in which some maths sets were taught as if identical in attainment (Boaler et al, 2000). Some studies (e.g. Slavin, 1990) have suggested that grouping by attainment increases the motivation of the lower attaining pupils by removing any competition or intimidation from working alongside higher attainers but more recent research (e.g. Boaler et al., 2000) consistently contradicts this. In research across three countries, Hufton et al., (2002) noted that motivation was associated with vocational aspirations rather than academic performance, such that lower attaining groups can focus on areas of relative strength that might be better recognised by subsequent potential employers.

### **2.2.3 What are the negative effects that have been linked to attainment grouping?**

Group composition and possibilities of difficult group dynamics in lower sets can be a major disadvantage of attainment grouping. Lower sets are usually smaller and have a disproportionate number of boys, pupils from lower socio-economic groups and in some schools, pupils from specific ethnic groups (Boaler, 1997a; Boaler et al., 2000; Kutnick et al., 2006; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). Set placement can have critical effects on Key Stage 3 results such that pupils of the same prior attainment achieve higher levels in the tests if placed in a higher set (Ireson et al, 2002). This is advantageous for pupils in higher sets but disadvantageous for those in lower sets and increases the overall attainment gap. Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) reported that for pupils with similar prior attainment in maths, an average of 1-3 grade differences were achieved at GCSE between pupils in the lowest and those in the highest sets. This suggests not only that the basis for setting is problematic since pupils of similar attainment are not placed in similar level sets, but that there are disadvantages to being taught in a lower set.

A more consistent finding in the literature concerns the effects of being in lower sets on pupils' motivation and self-esteem. Lower sets were noted to damage self esteem and lower aspirations in Hamer's (2001) study, were less likely to be taught by subject specialists and more likely to experience changes of teacher (Boaler et al, 2000). Moreover, the pupils in lower sets in Boaler et al's, (2000) study reported being insufficiently challenged. Kutnick et al. (2006) found that pupils in higher sets worked more in small groups whereas pupils in lower sets worked more of the time as a whole class and less in pairs or small groups. This was noted to allow teachers to present information and maintain control over behaviour. This finding is of concern given the conclusions of a recent systematic review (Smith et al., 2005) on what impacts on students' motivation to learn, in which group work was concluded to increase engagement in learning.

There is evidence (e.g. Harlen & Malcolm, 1997; MacIntyre & Ireson, 2002) that some pupils are allocated to inappropriate groups where setting is used. This is a concern in particular, since many studies (e.g. Hallam & Ireson, 2007) have reported that there is relatively little movement between groups mainly because the allocation is rarely reviewed. This is of particular relevance given the acknowledged widening of the attainment gap as pupils move through secondary school and the way that early disadvantage tends to be consolidated by the use of prior attainment data (DfES, 2006b). The way schools organise sets and groups and the influence of the teacher have been highlighted as important to the educational experiences and attainment for minority ethnic pupils in particular, such that these in-school factors often entrench wider social inequalities (Richardson and Wood, 2004; DfES, 2006d; 2007).

#### **2.2.4 How do schools motivate pupils in lower attaining groups?**

There is little evidence from research that specifically identifies the approaches used in lower attaining sets. However, there is evidence that teachers can mitigate some of the negative effects associated with membership of lower attaining groups. The review by Kutnick et al, (2005) concluded that the use of differently constituted within-class groups appeared to reduce the negative effects. Hart et al., (2004) argued that all pupils can become better learners and Sammons (2006) identified the characteristics of effective teaching in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage as including high expectations, good communication with feedback and assessment through interaction with pupils.

In school case studies of personalised learning, Sebba et al. (2007), noted that approaches to motivate lower attaining pupils included providing a more flexible range of curricular accreditation and work-related learning opportunities, strongly developed assessment for learning practices and flexible use of learning mentors and administrative staff to ensure adequate individual support. Above all else, the schools in which lower attaining pupils were most highly motivated and engaged were characterised by an ethos that reflected strong, genuine pupil voice. This included for example, pupils choosing from tasks offered at different levels, selecting with whom they worked on different tasks and observing teachers through the school council to provide evaluative feedback on the effectiveness of teaching.

Although earlier research has indicated that excluded pupils often have unmet learning needs, particularly to do with literacy (Parsons, 1999), the Annual Report on inspection, Ofsted (2006) singled out English as meeting the needs of pupils in lower attaining groups more effectively, through using a wider range of teaching styles, giving pupils more varied opportunities to work individually, in pairs, small groups or whole classes.

### 2.2.5 Within-class grouping

Studies of the overall impact of pupil grouping offer limited insight into within-class teaching and learning processes and how these processes are affected by pupil attainment. In contrast to specific forms of organisational grouping, within-class attainment grouping may have greater potential to raise standards through personalising the learning experience (Kutnick et al., 2005). Some studies show positive effects of within class grouping (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998) and it has been shown that within-group teaching may make differences in progress between lower and higher sets less significant (William & Bartholomew, 2004).

Prior to the study by Blatchford et al. (2005), there was limited evidence from studies involving pupils who have received training in group work skills. The relationship between group size, composition and learning task was found by Blatchford et al. to be critical in promoting or inhibiting learning. For example, pupils assigned an individual practice task may be inhibited if asked to undertake the task while seated in a small group, or discussion-based tasks will be facilitated if pupils work in pairs. These issues were reported in the research (e.g. Blatchford et al., 2005; Kutnick et al., 2006) to be inadequately addressed in classrooms.

## 2.3 The Policy Context

### 2.3.1 Pupil grouping

Policy statements have contributed to the debates about pupil grouping for many years. The debate about pupil grouping in primary schools was re-energised in the early 1990s by the *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in the Primary School* paper, also known as the *Three Wise Men report* (Alexander, Rose and Woodhead, 1992). This report focused mainly on curricular organisation, but introduced consideration of pupil grouping by attainment within curriculum subjects and described various sizes of pupil grouping within primary classes (including individual, small group, and whole class). In secondary schools, the debate has focused more on grouping strategies as a means of raising achievement. In 1997, the Government White Paper *Excellence in Schools* stated that:

*We do not believe that any single model of grouping pupils should be imposed on secondary schools, but unless a school can demonstrate that it is getting better than expected results through a different approach, we do make the presumption that setting should be the norm in secondary schools.*

(DfEE, 1997, p.38).

The White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES, 2005) noted that Ofsted data show that the proportion of Key Stage 3 lessons which are set has risen since 1997 to over a third in 2005, with greater rises in English and maths. The significant majority of English, science and modern foreign language lessons in secondary schools, and about nine in ten maths lessons are already organised by setting. At several points in the White Paper (e.g. pp.11, 42, 53) it was reiterated that it is for schools to decide how pupils are grouped. It was acknowledged that whether pupils are in sets or not, all classes contain pupils with a range of attainments, interests, motivation and different home and background circumstances. Furthermore, throughout the White Paper, personalised learning was emphasised through for example, extended curricular opportunities and choices, rather than attainment grouping per se, as the means by which standards would be raised.

Subsequent policy documents implicitly adopted a flexible position on pupil grouping and guidance, supporting the national strategies and including many examples of

different types of grouping for different purposes. So for example, the national strategies guidance *Grouping pupils for success* (DfES, 2006c), noted that grouping by age not by attainment, is the principal way in which pupils are organised into classes. It suggested that some small schools provide useful examples of how teachers form and reform groups to suit the learning objectives, on the basis of age, attainment, need or by giving pupils the choice. The guidance recommended close monitoring of the over-representation of boys, some minority ethnic groups and pupils with special educational needs in lower sets, acknowledging the curricular limitations that this might create. The Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group (2006) acknowledged the need for teachers who have high expectations, to work in lower sets in order to challenge low attainers.

A major issue that arises in the research reviewed above is that pupils in lower sets are restricted in the levels that they can achieve in Key Stage tests and GCSE grades, by the curriculum that they follow and test or examination tiers for which they are entered. The recent focus in policy on personalised learning has included a strong emphasis on broadening curricular entitlement and choice, including through a wider range of qualifications. For example, Blair's speech to the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (30 November 2006) suggested that a major increase in qualifications could be realised through the new diplomas being introduced in 2008, in ICT, engineering, construction, care and media. He stated that young people with these diplomas will be able to progress when they are ready, and go on to university or apprenticeships. Time will tell whether these vocational routes will increase post-16 participation for pupils who are in lower sets in school.

The policy relating to inclusion is an area in which the motivation, engagement and achievement of all pupils, including those in lower attainment groups has been addressed. In *Removing Barriers to Achievement - The Government's Strategy for Special Educational Needs* (DfES, 2004a), the need to develop the skills and capacity of schools to work with the full range of pupils was acknowledged. The strategy outlined the need to monitor pupil progress to ensure that some children did not remain unidentified as underachieving. Concerns expressed in this document about pupils with identified special educational needs, such as lack of access to relevant curricular pathways and limited opportunities for progression, are also noted in the literature review, to apply to pupils in lower sets in general.

The *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004b) policy and the Children Act which followed, provided five outcomes for children seen as key to their well-being: being healthy; staying safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being. The radical changes that were set out in the Children Bill are leading to a reconfiguration of services with greater shared responsibility across agencies. The bill also emphasises the importance of listening to children, young people and families. This policy offers significant opportunities for pupils in lower sets since children with additional social or emotional needs are over-represented in these sets and should be able to access more coherent, multi-agency support to reduce barriers to learning.

### **2.3.2 Within-class grouping**

The DfES (2005) White Paper acknowledged that within-class attainment grouping was commonplace in primary schools and noted the benefits:

*Grouping students can help build motivation, social skills and independence; and most importantly can raise standards because pupils are better engaged in their own learning.* (DfES, 2005, p.58)

Many of the guidance documents in the national strategies make reference to within-class grouping (e.g. DfES, 2004c). The national strategies guidance *Grouping pupils for success* (DfES, 2006c), noted the need to teach pupils specific group work skills, for example taking notes of what people say, effective chairing, contributing to discussion, listening and managing disagreements and conflict. It also noted the need to teach pupils explicit strategies for self-monitoring how they work together.

## **Chapter 3. Research Design**

### **3.1 Approach to the Research**

A broad and comprehensive approach was adopted in this research study which included the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. This was accomplished through in-depth case studies as well as survey research in a larger sample of Local Authorities (LAs) and schools. While each element of the research offers its own data and potential for analysis, we have taken the opportunities to draw these together to complement each other where appropriate. In addressing the research questions we structured the data collection around four dimensions:

1. School and low attainment group populations and characteristics;
2. School organisation and processes including those that related to allocation of pupils to sets;
3. Classroom practices and experiences with specific reference to teaching and learning in low attainment groups; and
4. The multiple perspectives of a broad range of stakeholders including teaching and support staff and pupils.

### **3.2 The Sample**

The samples for the survey and the case studies were overlapping. For the survey, twelve LAs were sampled and the case study schools were drawn from four of these. The specificity of the selection criteria for the case studies was the primary concern and for this reason the broader survey sample was finalised after the confirmed participation of appropriate schools in four LAs. The case study sample needed to include a range of contexts and schools in which pupils in low attaining groups were making good progress. Two metropolitan and two shire county LAs were selected to provide four locations that provided a range of contexts representing rural/ urban and northern/southern locations. Each of these LAs provided a long list of schools with positive Value Added scores, then, with more detailed reference to time-series data on school achievement over the previous four years on available data bases e.g. Ofsted, LA and school web-sites, a short list of schools with appropriate profiles was compiled and these schools were approached to participate.

The sensitivity of the issues addressed in this research was indicated by the responses from schools. In some cases, school heads declined immediately or eventually after a lengthy process of staff consultation. Six LAs were approached initially to provide the case study sample but two were unable to identify any appropriate schools that agreed to participate. Across the four LAs, thirteen schools were selected and agreed to participate as case studies. School population characteristics were an important consideration in the final case study sample selection and these had to be balanced against other selection criteria. Given the research focus and questions, it was necessary to include a range of schools with different social class and minority ethnic pupil intakes within the sample. Table 3.1 below, shows sample data available at the point of sample selection which is not entirely consistent across cases. Also, in efforts to preserve school anonymity these have been rounded up and approximated.

**Table 3.1 The case study sample summaries**

Name	Type & Location	Pupils on roll <sup>1</sup>	FSM <sup>2</sup>	Ethnicity / EAL <sup>3</sup>	SEN <sup>4</sup>	Attainment range <sup>5</sup>	Value Added Measure <sup>6</sup>
HP1	Primary City south	350	Very High	Multi-ethnic 30% Bangladeshi High EAL	7.4%	253 – 286	103
HP2	Primary City south	300	High	Multi-ethnic High EAL	13.1%	203 - 246	101
KP1	Primary City north	300	Very High	33%+ Minority ethnic High EAL	7.6%	200 - 208	100
FP1	Primary Shire county north	200	High	95%+ White British Low EAL	9.0%	240 - 277	100
GM2	Middle Shire county north	600	Low	90% White British 10% Minority ethnic Low EAL	3.0%	278 - 291	100
GM1	Middle Shire county north	200	Low	95%+ White British	5.7%	235 - 275	99
HS1	Secondary City south	1200	High	Multi-ethnic 50% Bangladeshi 30% White British High EAL	9.0%	45 - 75	1020
HS2	Secondary City south	1150	High	Multi-ethnic High EAL 76%	4.8%	77 - 87	1060
KS1	Secondary City north	1100	Low	Multi-ethnic 24% Indian	6.1%	54 – 63	990
FS1	Secondary Shire county north	800	High	95%+ White British Low EAL	11.1%	29 - 51	1040
FS2	Secondary Shire county north	800	Average	95%+ White British	6.7%	37 - 61	1000
GH1	High Shire county north	750	Low	95%+ White British Average EAL	7.2%	49 - 65	1010
GH2	High Shire county north	1350	Low	95%+ White British Very low EAL	3.8%	71 - 80	1020

Source: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/performance/tables/> [Date accessed 14/05/07] and <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/> [Date accessed 14/05/07]. The Ofsted reports refer to school data that were collected at different times for each school.

<sup>1</sup> Pupil numbers have been rounded to the nearest 50.

<sup>2</sup> FSM data are approximated in 4 categories in relation to a notional average of less than 15% : low; average (15-39%); high and very high (40% plus)

<sup>3</sup> Approximate proportions of pupil ethnicity are indicated followed by the available data on EAL

<sup>4</sup> This refers to statemented pupils only.

<sup>5</sup> The aggregated attainment scores have been contracted to show the range of results over the last four years. Secondary and high school figures refer to the percentage of A\*-C grades at the end of Key Stage 4..

<sup>6</sup> The Value Added Measure in primary school refers to a base of 100 and have been rounded to the nearest whole number. In secondary schools it refers to a base of 1000 and these have been rounded to the nearest 10.

The intensive case studies were carried out in a variety of schools including four primary, two middle<sup>1</sup>, two high and five secondary schools with a combined sample of five Year 5 classes, seven Year 8 classes and seven Year 10 classes (See Appendix

<sup>1</sup> Middle schools include both Year 5 and Year 8 pupils and high schools include Year 10.

l). Given there were more secondary schools in the sample and, as expected, the secondary schools were larger than the primary schools and more likely to use setting, more Year 8 and 10 classes than Year 5 were included in the sample. Within all schools the main focus was upon the specific subjects of English/literacy and mathematics/numeracy, and additionally science in Years 8 and 10.

The survey was administered to schools in a much larger sample of twelve LAs that was broadly representative of the context in England, with a regional spread and an appropriate balance between metropolitan, urban and rural locations. The survey sample included schools in the four LAs within which the case studies were carried out. All the LAs lent support to the research. The survey questionnaire requested the unique pupil numbers (UPNs) by set groups in English / literacy and mathematics/numeracy in Years 6, 7, 8 and 10 as appropriate to the age-range in each school. In addition, information about schools procedures for set composition was requested (See Appendix II). In total, 404 questionnaires (302 primary; 102 secondary) were sent out to schools across the twelve LAs, 168 were returned completed, providing a response rate of 41.6% (41% primary; 43.1% secondary). Of these, 44 (26.2%) were from the secondary range (years 7, 8 and 10) and 124 (73.8%) primary range (Year 6). A total of 4688 usable returns related to primary pupils, a total of 6674 related to secondary pupils. Not all are used in all analyses, due to missing values on key variables for some.

In terms of demographic characteristics, 46% of pupils in the surveyed schools were girls, and 54% boys. Free School Meals eligibility was 38.8%, significantly above the national average. In terms of Special Educational Needs, 3.8% were stated, 5.3% categorised as needing School Action Plus, and 11.6% as requiring School Action.

The categorisation of the sample in terms of ethnicity is given in Table 3.2 below. As can be seen, Asian students are significantly overrepresented in the sample, especially Bangladeshi students, while White British, Black Caribbean and Black African students are underrepresented. In terms of attainment, 70.4% of students in the primary schools in the sample reached level 4 in English and 74.6% in maths at KS2, both below the national average. In the secondary schools, 64.8% reached level 5 in English, and 69.1% in maths at KS3, again below the national average. The percentage achieving 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE was 61.7 % just above the national average.

The skew in the sample in terms of characteristics relative to the national population is the result, firstly, of a deliberate decision to sample LAs serving a more urban and therefore disadvantaged context, and to sample areas with a significant proportion of non White British students, and, secondly, of very differential response rates between LAs.

While the final sample met all research requirements, the specificities of the selection criteria together with the sensitivity of the research focus, provided a particularly challenging context within which to access appropriate case study and survey schools and LAs. To provide incentives for participation and to increase the response rate, the team offered to provide feedback from the survey and analysis to each of the twelve LAs. In the four LAs with the case study schools, a feedback session and a summary written report was offered to the LA officials and school representatives.

**Table 3.2 Ethnic composition of the survey sample**

	Percentage
White British	53.6
Bangladeshi	18.3
Pakistani	10.3
Indian	7.1
Other Asian Background	1.2
Black Caribbean	2.7
Black African	2.6
Mixed Heritage	4.2
Total	100.0

Note: Separate figures for primary and secondary pupils are given in chapter 4.

### 3.3 Methods and Analysis

The survey instrument was administered to schools in twelve LAs and followed up with both written and telephone reminders. The returned questionnaires included data on the specified school populations identified with UPNs (Unique Pupil Numbers) as well as data about school setting and grouping procedures. To enable analysis, the UPN data were entered and merged with specific NPD and PLASC data supplied by DfES in preparation for analysis using SPSS. The primary analysis of these data provided findings about the characteristics of the pupil populations in attainment groups across the sample in general, by year group and by subject. With the principal focus on low attainment sets, the comparative analysis has highlighted ethnicity, social class (FSM and post-code data), gender and prior attainment. It has also involved multinomial regression analysis that has explored the probabilities of pupils from different population groups entering low attainment sets. While these data and analysis are predominantly concerned with the broad sample, where appropriate this has also been repeated at the LA and school levels. This has been reported mainly in Chapter 4.

The data produced by the survey concerning school procedures for set/group formation have also undergone analysis and, with the case study findings, have been incorporated into Chapter 5. On the questionnaire, respondents were asked to identify pupils already in set groups in their schools as members of low, medium or high sets (See Appendix II).

The methods used to gather data in the case studies took place over 3-4 researcher days in each school location. These included the collection of school documents and records; individual and group interviews with staff (e.g. senior management team, head of subject department, subject/classroom teachers and teaching assistants); classroom observations of low attainment groups in the specified subjects/years; shadowing of selected low attaining pupils during these classes and focus group interviews with these shadowed pupils (refer to Appendix III for the interview schedules). Subject to the advice of the school, some parents were also approached. The data from each case study have been collected in the light of the need to balance research design with the additional burdens placed on pupils, teachers and the school overall by having researchers present in the school. Nevertheless, the data collected have provided a rich nuanced picture of the teaching and learning experiences for pupils and staff in low attainment groups.

Where appropriate the school level quantitative data have been incorporated with the survey data and analysed accordingly. The main focus of the case studies was on Years 5, 8 and 10. These year groups were selected in an effort to minimise disruption in schools by avoiding year groups preparing for significant external examination. It is only the case study schools that include data on Year 5 whereas data on Years 8 and 10 have been collected in both the case studies and the survey. In addition, the survey included data on Years 6 and 7 to strengthen its analytical power around a key examination and school transition point.

The qualitative data were collected and initially analysed with respect to the overlapping themes detailed in Table 3.3 below.

**Table 3.3 Initial themes for case study data analysis**

<p><b>Material resources:</b> (allocation of rooms, space, layout, displays, facilities, access to materials)</p>
<p><b>Human resources:</b> (allocation of teacher/teaching assistants to classes, and in-class time; support interventions, including for specific social categories)</p>
<p><b>Curriculum, pedagogy &amp; assessment:</b> (timetabling, including tensions and trade-offs among particular curriculum subjects; curriculum and assessment differentiation, personalisation; grouping (class and within-class and movement up/down); syllabus; teaching styles; progress and record keeping)</p>
<p><b>Teacher-pupil relations:</b> (formal and informal – mentoring, support; classroom interaction)</p>
<p><b>Peer interaction:</b> (formal and informal among and between particular social groups; peer support, assessment; peer status)</p>
<p><b>Teacher disposition:</b> (teacher attitudes to low attainment groups; disposition in class; availability; expectations, encouragement, rewards, praise of pupils)</p>
<p><b>Pupil motivation:</b> (levels of motivation, involvement, application, autonomy; attitudes to movement up/down; attendance)</p>
<p><b>Discipline:</b> (rewards, sanctions, group and/or individual)</p>
<p><b>Parental &amp; external involvement:</b> (parental involvement in ability grouping and communication re student progress; involvement of external agencies to support student achievement)</p>

The range of approaches and procedures for attainment grouping from the case study data have been collated and incorporated into the relevant survey data. The main findings are reported in Chapter 5.

A further phase of the case study analysis viewed each of the above themes across the case studies. Through this process the most significant aspects of the key

questions about effective teaching and learning practices for low attaining pupils emerged. The main focus was on a) How the advantages of attainment grouping for low attaining pupils are maximised and b) How the disadvantages of attainment grouping for low attaining pupils are minimised. This concern with low attainment groups, however, was supplemented by also focusing on low attaining pupils in other class grouping arrangements and more generically within the broader school context. In Chapter 6, the school and subject department strategies are highlighted and in Chapter 7, a range of classroom practices are presented. In both these chapters, examples, vignettes and quotations have been drawn from the case studies to illustrate the main findings and apparent good practice.

### **3.4 Ethics**

A number of ethical issues needed to be addressed in this study. Confidentiality and anonymity of the individuals were offered prior to completion of questionnaires or participation in interviews. However, school staff may be able to identify one another in this report and in some cases, the identity of the school may be apparent to readers working in the local service. Furthermore, individual staff that were observed and interviewed were identified by the school management, possibly introducing selection criteria of which the research team would not be aware. Similar issues relate to the participating pupils. It is difficult to assess whether individuals were willingly included or excluded in the research. Those participating schools were informed of the purpose of the research from the outset and offered feedback on the findings. The intention of the research is to improve the quality of experiences for pupils although the research process itself is likely to have caused some disruption within the schools.

### **3.5 Limitations**

Some of the limitations of this research have been described in Chapter 1. Attributing outcomes to particular practices, in this case to specific approaches to working with lower attaining pupils, is always problematic. However, in this study, the use of quantitative and qualitative data provides possibilities for confirmation or contradiction in findings and interpretations. The combination of survey and case study data has provided rich, high quality data that has much to contribute to understandings of, and good practice with, low attainment pupil groups. The imaginative and effective ways that schools and teachers have worked towards and accomplished good practice is evidenced by this research. Nevertheless, the research also echoes a call for more research especially concerning practices and consequences of attainment grouping for different groups of pupils. The demand for more research with a larger sample and a clarified focus is pertinent here. In addition, we suggest that deeper comparative dimensions have the potential to be informative. More specifically, in-depth research, that, for example, looks at the way different kinds of pupils experience school and classes differently and how teachers approach teaching different attainment groups within the same subject, year and school context, might illuminate ways that the best cognitive and affective outcomes can be achieved with low attaining pupils. This comparative approach would also address some of the apprehensions noted around the focus of this research on pupils in low attainment groups only.

There is clearly a need to look more closely at the significance of the schools' external relations with parents and other agencies. More focussed research is needed to explore this in greater detail.

## **Chapter 4. Predictors of Set Placement**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter we present analyses of the survey data which were drawn from primary and secondary schools in twelve LAs including the four LAs within which the case studies were located. The data on setting comes from the survey sent out to schools (see Appendix II). Respondents were asked to provide the Unique Pupil Number (UPN) of pupils by set. Data on the independent variables are taken from the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) and the National Pupil Database (NPD), provided by the DfES then relevant files were merged. In conducting the analysis, we used regression models in which we have separated primary and secondary school data.

The main purpose of the analysis is to look at the impact of predictors on set placement which we present in this chapter. These predictors were: attainment, free school meal eligibility (FSM), residential neighbourhood classification (ACORN) schema, gender, SEN and ethnicity. In the next section we discuss the variables and categories used. Then we analyse and discuss the survey data that describes the demographic characteristics of pupils in different sets. Following this we use a statistical model of the predictors of set placement with specific reference to numeracy/maths and literacy/English. We conclude this chapter with a summary of the main findings.

### **4.2 Variables**

Setting data were collected from schools using the survey instrument (see Appendix II) in which respondents were asked to provide UPNs of pupils falling respectively into, low, middle and high sets. The resultant three categories, high, low or middle set were necessary for analytical comparison. In a few cases, particularly in some larger secondary schools, the survey response demanded the amalgamation of multiple sets into three groups for analytical purposes. This was completed on the basis of the school descriptions of these groups. Setting was thus coded as a three category dependent variable with analyses aimed at predicting set placement based on a number of determinants. The resultant proportions in each set category therefore varied slightly such that in the sample as a whole, 29% of pupils were in low sets, 37.9% in middle sets and 33.1% in high sets. Of the secondary schools that responded, all set in Maths in all years. In English, 77.2% set in year 10, while 52.3% set in years 7 and 8. In primary schools, in year 6, 43.8% set in Numeracy and 26.6% in Literacy. No significant differences were found by region or school characteristics in terms of setting behaviours.

In response to the question on what basis setting decisions are made in literacy and English, 22% of respondents who answered this question specifically mention ability. The vast majority of other responses refer to attainment or test results, with 4.1% mentioning other factors, such as attitudes and behaviours as influencing setting decisions. Looking at the specific tools used, Optional National Curriculum tests are the most frequently mentioned, by over 40% of respondents. Other methods mentioned are CAT tests, NFER tests, projected National Curriculum test results and teacher assessment. In some cases a combination of methods is used.

In Table 4.1 below, the percentages are given for responses from primary and secondary schools for each basis for decisions on setting.

**Table 4.1 The basis for decisions on setting in primary and secondary schools**

	% Primary	% Secondary
Ability measures/cognitive tests	19.8	32.5
Optional NC tests	45.8	38.9
Teacher Assessment	14.2	8.1
Attitudes and behaviours	8.1	6.9
Others	12.1	13.6

The measure of attainment was **prior attainment** in statutory tests. This was either Key Stage 1, 2 or 3 tests depending on the year group of the pupils in the data set. A composite attainment measure was constructed from the different categories in each subject, to ensure the strongest level of prediction. These measures were then standardised to ensure comparability into five categories of attainment. An important caveat with respect to these data is that as statutory tests are occasional, there is in many cases a significant time lapse between the test results and the setting decisions analysed. This is most pronounced for those pupils in Year 6, where the most recent test was Key Stage 1 tests in 2002, this is also an issue for other year groups though to a lesser extent. Furthermore, while most schools claimed that prior attainment was a factor in setting decisions, this was often linked to or elided with a notion of ability. These are problematic concepts and in practice they are often confused. In crude terms, as no measure of ability was available, we have used attainment in the national curriculum tests as a proxy.

Free school meal eligibility and ACORN categories were used as proxy variables for **social class**. ACORN categories are based on the approximately 2 million postcodes in the United Kingdom, the average postcode being shared by around 14/15 addresses. The marketing-data firm CACI ([www.caci.co.uk](http://www.caci.co.uk)) has produced a classification based on over 250 pieces of information drawn from the 2001 Census and various market research and lifestyle databases. Information used includes data on demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, income, education level, occupation, home ownership and type, car ownership, housing density etc. and 'lifestyle' variables such as interest in current affairs, satellite television, newspapers read, holiday preferences, hobbies and shopping habits. In our view this array of information makes the postcode classification not merely an indication of residential area but a good proxy for cultural capital. There were in the 2004 classifications, a total of 56 types, 17 groups and 5 broader categories. In these analyses we have used the 5 categories (See Table 4.2 and Appendix IV), to allow easier interpretation of the data in the regression models.

The main five categories are: Wealth Achievers, Urban Prosperity, Comfortably Off, Moderate Means and Hard Pressed. A selected summary of the definitions of these is presented below.

**Table 4.2 A selected summary of the ACORN categories**

Category	Summary description
Urban prosperity	High incomes and high levels of saving and investment. Managerial occupations or own their own businesses 90% owner occupiers, detached houses in high status areas
Wealthy Achievers	High education levels including graduates Mostly prosperous Living in exclusive house/ apartments in major towns and cities
Comfortably Off	Average educational qualifications Financially comfortable Professional, managerial, clerical and skilled occupations. 80% home owners, semi-detached / detached
Moderate Means	Low educational qualifications Blue collar /service / retail occupations Some unemployment / limiting long term illness Typically terraced / ex-local council / housing (2-3 bedrooms)
Hard Pressed	Low educational qualifications Low incomes Unskilled occupations / unemployed / limiting long term illness Small properties/ 50% local council / housing association rented

The comprehensive array of **ethnic categories** available for monitoring has the potential to provide rich analyses but the restrictions in the sample size have not facilitated this. To allow sufficient numbers in each category and therefore meaningful analysis, we have recoded ethnicity in seven main groups: White, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, Black Caribbean, Black African/ Other and Mixed/Other.

Three **SEN** categories have been used in these analyses. These are Statemented, School Action Plus and School Action although further distinction between learning and behavioural needs has not been possible in this analysis. Finally, two **gender** categories female and male have also been used in the analysis.

Analyses are based on the full sample of 44 secondary and 124 primary schools.

### 4.3 Characteristics of low set members

#### 4.3.1 Gender

In the sample as a whole, 45.6% of pupils were female and 54.6% male, an over-representation of males compared to the general population. This may, in part, be related to the sample in which some mixed inner-city schools tend to have higher numbers of male pupils. There is a preference in some minority ethnic and religious communities for females to attend single-sex schools which were not included in the sample. Distribution of gender by sets is given in Table 4.3 below.

**Table 4.3 Gender by sets (%)**

#### Primary

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Percentage Female	48.0	49.2	45.4
Percentage Male	52.0	50.8	54.6

#### Secondary

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Percentage Female	41.6	46.2	44.9
Percentage Male	58.4	53.8	55.1

Overall, gender differences in set placement were not found to be statistically significant although the above table suggests that boys were over represented in low sets in secondary schools.

### 4.3.2 Ethnicity

Table 4.4 below shows the representation of the main ethnic groups in the sample and then within low, middle and high sets. As described in Chapter 3 the sample represents a significant over-representation of Asian ethnic groups and a significant under-representation of White ethnic groups compared to the national population (See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the sample). The figures provided in Table 4.4 relate to those within the analysis in which the smaller ethnic categories have been excluded or subsumed e.g the White category includes pupil who are White British and from Other White Backgrounds.

**Table 4.4 Ethnicity by sets (%)**

#### Primary

	Total in sample	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
White	52.7	55.4	46.7	58.9
Bangladeshi	15.4	15.9	21.0	8.8
Pakistani	12.1	11.1	12.2	13.1
Indian	7.3	6.6	6.7	8.3
Black Caribbean	4.9	5.2	5.9	3.4
African/Other Black	3.7	4.1	3.3	3.6
Mixed heritage	3.9	4.0	5.8	3.2

#### Secondary

	Total in sample	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
White	57.0	58.9	50.9	63.1
Bangladeshi	19.0	19.2	24.6	13.1
Pakistani	8.7	7.6	8.5	9.6
Indian	7.1	6.7	6.3	8.1
Black Caribbean	1.7	2.0	2.3	0.6
African/Other Black	2.3	3.3	2.6	2.4
Mixed heritage	4.2	3.9	5.5	3.2

A significant difference was found between ethnic groups in terms of set membership (Chi Square = 38.1,  $p < .001$ , primary and Chi Square = 39.5,  $p < .001$ , secondary). (Chi Square is a global statistic which doesn't indicate which individual groups differ). From Table 4.2 it is clear that students from White ethnic groups are over-represented in the high sets compared to the sample as a whole, to a lesser extent, they are also over-represented in the low sets and under-represented in the middle sets. Of the Asian groups it is only the Bangladeshis who are under-represented in the high sets and slightly over-represented in the low sets, though this may be due to the fact that many are also identified as having English as an Additional Language. In descending order, Black Caribbean, Mixed heritage and African / Other Black pupils are under-represented in the high sets. Black Caribbean and African / Other Black pupils are also over-represented in low sets.

### 4.3.3 Free School Meal Eligibility (FSM)

38.9% of pupils in the sample are eligible for Free School Meals, a significant over-representation compared to the population as a whole which is approximately 15% if taken across both the primary and secondary sectors. The overrepresentation of pupils eligible for FSM is slightly greater in the secondary schools (40.2%) than in the primary schools (34.4%). There is a highly significant relationship between eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) and setting (Primary: Chi Square = 66.5,  $p < .001$ ; Secondary: Chi Square = 60.4,  $p < .001$ ). As shown in Table 4.5, FSM eligible pupils are significantly over-represented in the low sets and under-represented in the high sets, while the proportions in the middle sets are close to the sample averages. This is the case in both primary and secondary schools.

**Table 4.5 FSM by sets (%)**

#### Primary

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Not eligible for FSM	22.1	35.2	42.7
Eligible for FSM	50.7	26.3	23.0
Total	28.2	33.3	38.5

#### Secondary

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Not eligible for FSM	22.0	38.7	39.2
Eligible for FSM	37.2	42.5	20.3
Total	29.5	40.6	29.9

Note: These percentages show the proportions of the sample in each set category. Each set category is not expected to be exactly one third 33.3% as they relate to school populations that are not usually equally split by sets.

### 4.3.4 ACORN categories

The 'hard pressed' group is strongly over-represented in the sample compared to the general population, especially in the primary schools, where 48.3% of pupils from this group end up in the low sets while only 2.7% end up in the high sets. In the secondary schools just over 40% of pupils from hard pressed postcodes end up in the low sets, with 20% ending up in the high sets. Wealthy achievers, by contrast, are strongly overrepresented in the high sets, both in primary and secondary.

**Table 4.6 ACORN categories by set (%)**

#### Primary

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Wealthy Achievers	15.0	24.8	60.3
Urban Prosperity	28.0	36.0	36.0
Comfortably Off	28.9	26.5	44.6
Moderate Means	26.5	37.1	36.4

Hard Pressed	48.3	49.0	2.7
Total	28.2	33.3	38.5

### Secondary

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Wealthy Achievers	12.7	20.8	66.5
Urban Prosperity	24.4	48.0	27.6
Comfortably Off	32.5	36.3	31.3
Moderate Means	35.7	37.0	27.4
Hard Pressed	40.2	39.1	20.7
Total	29.6	40.6	29.8

Note: These percentages show the proportions of the sample in each set category. Each set category is not expected to be exactly one third 33.3% as they relate to school populations that are not usually equally split by sets.

ACORN postcode category is significantly related to set membership (Chi Square = 263.0,  $p < .001$ ). The two main points from Table 4.6 are the strong under-representation of students from the 'hard pressed' group and the strong over-representation of students from the 'Wealthy Achievers' group in these high sets. The converse is true of the low sets.

It is evident that both SES measures, above, indicate a strong social class effect on set placement. This will be discussed later in the chapter and again in more detail in Chapter 5 with respect to the case study data and analysis.

#### 4.3.5 Special Educational Needs

In the sample, 3.8% of pupils are statemented, 5.3% 'School Action Plus', and 11.6% 'School Action'. The remaining 79.3% of students have not been identified as having special educational needs. In the primary schools, 1.6% of pupils are statemented, 5.6% 'School Action Plus', and 12.4% 'School Action', in the secondary schools, 5.222% of pupils are statemented, 5.1% 'School Action Plus', and 11.1% 'School Action'.

From Table 4.7, below, it is clear that pupils with SEN are more likely to end up in the lowest sets. Less than 10% of pupils in the highest sets have SEN in the secondary schools, and less than 5% in the primary schools. The relationship is statistically significant (Chi Square = 179.5,  $p < .001$  in the secondary schools and Chi Square = 183.4,  $p < .001$  in the primary schools). The significant over-representation of all three SEN categories in low sets suggests that, in practice, SEN and low attainment are seen as closely related or overlapping groups. More data on the specific special needs, unavailable in this study, would help to elucidate why these patterns have emerged. Nevertheless, these findings suggest school and teacher difficulties with addressing the individual needs of these pupils and raise questions about the processes of set placement. The challenges of meeting the particular needs of these pupils are those that schools and teachers will continue to face in the context of moves to increased personalisation of learning.

**Table 4.7 SEN by sets (%)****Primary**

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
No SEN	20.2	34.9	44.9
School Action	55.7	29.5	14.8
School Action Plus	65.0	27.5	7.5
Statemented	90.9	5.1	4.0

**Secondary**

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
No SEN	23.4	42.2	34.3
School Action	66.1	21.0	12.9
School Action Plus	59.0	37.7	3.3
Statemented	84.2	6.3	9.1

**4.3.6 Prior attainment**

For these analyses prior attainment was recoded into three groups, low, medium and high, each comprising approximately a third of students in the sample.

**Table 4.8 Prior attainment in English by sets (%)****Primary**

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Low attainment	47.4	35.9	16.7
Middle attainment	20.3	50.2	29.5
High attainment	3.8	31.5	64.8

**Secondary**

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Low attainment	44.4	37.4	18.2
Middle attainment	20.7	50.6	28.7
High attainment	2.1	32.8	65.1

**Table 4.9 Prior attainment in Maths by sets (%)****Primary**

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Low attainment	45.3	38.7	16.0
Middle attainment	22.1	51.8	26.1
High attainment	10.9	33.6	55.3

**Secondary**

	Low Sets	Middle Sets	High Sets
Low attainment	46.9	37.6	15.5
Middle attainment	20.2	53.2	26.6
High attainment	11.7	31.8	56.5

As expected, there is a significant relationship between prior attainment and setting in both English (Chi Square = 153.4,  $p < .001$ , primary and Chi Square = 162.0,

$p < .001$  secondary) and Maths (Chi Square = 287.5,  $p < .001$ , primary and Chi Square = 310.8, secondary). ). Across both primary and secondary schools, in the high and middle sets over half of students are high and middle attainers respectively. It is also evident, however, that pupils quite frequently are allocated to sets that are not consistent with their prior attainment. Most pertinently, less than half the pupils with low prior attainment end up in low attainment sets. Although prior attainment remains statistically significant, setting decisions are clearly not made on this basis alone. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5 setting decisions are based on multiple considerations that include the National Curriculum test results (which were the basis of the analysis presented here) as well as other internal school tests (e.g. CAT tests, YELLIS, optional National Curriculum tests etc), teacher assessments e.g. markbooks etc. and teacher judgements that are influenced by other factors such as pupil behaviour. Given the earlier analysis above, social class and, to a reduced extent, ethnicity would appear to have a significant influence on teacher judgements and other measures that inform set placement (See also Luyten & Bosker, 2004; Gazeley and Dunne, 2006).

#### **4.4 Modelling the predictors of setting**

The basic research question underlying the model was the extent to which the setting structure reflects attainment, as claimed by the majority of schools and to explore how it is influenced by the other demographic pupil level variables discussed above. In order to explore this question, regression models were used, where the relationship of all the variables in the model with the dependent variable (set placement) could be modelled simultaneously, and the relationships between dependent and independent were modelled taking into account the relationships between the independents in the model. Logistic regression is based on the principle of calculating the probability that an event (e.g. being assigned to the high set) will occur (e.g. what is the probability of being assigned to the high set if I am a boy). Multinomial logistic regression is the extension for the (binary) logistic regression used when the categorical dependent outcome has more than two levels as in setting.

Setting was predicted on the basis of the independent variables, using Multinomial Multilevel Regression Models (MLR). A technical rationale of the approach to the analysis is provided in Appendix IX.

##### **4.4.1 Year 6 numeracy**

The overall model for Key Stage 2 numeracy fits the data quite well, with a Cox and Snell Pseudo R square of .32 suggesting that around 32% of the variance in setting is explained by the model. Prediction accuracy is 53.8%, though prediction of membership of high sets is, at over 65%, more accurate than prediction of membership of the low sets, at around 45% accuracy.

Analysis of the parameter estimates (see Appendix V) that attainment is the strongest predictor of setting decisions and that in this respect, the claim by most schools that setting is based on this variable is accurate. High set is the reference category. Looking at low set probabilities as expected, lower levels of numeracy attainment (standardised category 1 is the lowest, 5 the highest) are more likely to be selected for the lowest set. This is not straightforward as the relationship between set and prior attainment is not entirely linear. The analysis indicates that the three lowest attainment categories are equally as likely to be in the lowest set when compared to category 4, which has a lower probability than 5. All four attainment categories have a higher probability of being put into the middle set than the highest attainment

category 5, and all except the second highest category 4 have a higher probability of being put in the lowest set.

Alongside attainment, however, other independent variables are significant predictors as well. The strongest of these is the ACORN schema. Category 1 here represents 'wealthy achievers', category 2 'urban prosperity', 3 represents 'comfortably off', 4 'moderate means' and 5 'hard pressed'. The relationship between ACORN category and setting probability is non-linear (see Appendix V). Pupils from wealthy achiever households are significantly less likely to be in the low or middle set, as are pupils from the 'moderate means', and, to a lesser extent 'comfortably off' categories. The 'urban prosperity' category is not significantly related to membership of the low set, and only marginally to membership of the middle set, but it has to be noted that this group is not strongly represented in the sample. There is a linear relationship between Free School Meal eligibility and setting. Pupils eligible for FSM are significantly more likely to be in the low set than in the middle or high set, and more likely to be in the middle than in the high set. The same is true of pupils with Special Educational Needs. It is important to remember here, that the impact of differences in the prior attainment of these groups is already taken into account in the model, suggesting the SEN and social class background influence setting over and above the impact of prior attainment, even though this is the strongest predictor. Ethnicity is significant, with Pakistani and Bangladeshi students significantly less likely to be selected for higher sets (all else being equal). Gender is not significant. No significant interaction effects were found between the predictors in these analyses.

#### **4.4.2 Year 6 literacy**

The overall model for Key Stage 2 literacy fits the data less well than that for numeracy, with a Cox and Snell Pseudo R square of .26 and prediction accuracy is 50.0%. Prediction is most accurate for the middle set (59%), while for the high and low sets it is slightly under 50%.

Analysis of the parameter estimates (see Appendix VI) show that prior attainment is again the strongest predictor of setting decisions. The probability of being in the lowest set appears to be linearly related to attainment, though (due to the lower sample size than in numeracy), the difference is only significant for the bottom two attainment categories.

ACORN category is again non-linearly related to setting, with pupils from wealthy achiever households significantly less likely to be in the low or middle set, as are pupils from the 'moderate means' categories. There is a linear relationship between Free School Meal eligibility and setting. Pupils eligible for FSM are significantly more likely to be in the low set than in the high set, though the relationship with the middle set is not significant. The same is true of pupils with Special Educational Needs. It is important to remember here that the impact of differences in prior attainment of these groups is already taken into account in the model, suggesting that social class background and SEN influence setting over and above the impact of prior attainment, even though this is the strongest predictor. In contrast to numeracy, and contrary to previous research, gender is significant here, with females, all else being equal, more likely to be in the lower sets. Ethnicity was just significant, with Bangladeshi students less likely to be selected for the high sets. No significant interaction effects were found between the predictors in these analyses.

#### **4.4.3 Secondary mathematics**

The overall model for secondary mathematics fits the data quite well, with a Cox and Snell Pseudo R square of .33 showing a similar fit to primary mathematics. Prediction

accuracy is 54.2%, though prediction of membership of high sets is less accurate than that of middle or low sets, with no significant differences between sets.

Analysis of the parameter estimates (see Appendix VII) again points to attainment as the strongest predictor of setting outcomes. Pupils in the lowest two prior attainment categories have a higher probability of being in the lowest set than those in the higher three categories, which are linearly related to probability of selection to this set. The three lowest prior attainment categories have a higher probability of being in the middle than the high set, but a lower probability of being in the low set than the middle set.

However, alongside attainment, other independent variables are significant predictors as was the case in the analysis of Key Stage 2 numeracy. The ACORN categories are again the strongest predictor, but the relationship between ACORN categories and the probability of being in the lowest set is, apart from the urban prosperity category, linear. There is a linear relationship between Free School Meal eligibility and setting. Pupils eligible for FSM are significantly more likely to be in the low set than in the middle or high set, and more likely to be in the middle than in the high set. The same is true of pupils with Special Educational Needs. Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils are less likely to be selected for the high sets. Gender is not significant. No significant interaction effects were found between the predictors in these analyses.

#### **4.4.4 Secondary English**

The overall model for secondary English fits the data better than in Key Stage 2 literacy, with a Cox and Snell Pseudo R square of .30 and prediction accuracy is 52.8%. Prediction is most accurate for the high set (60%), and lowest for the low set.

As in the other models, attainment is the strongest predictor of setting decisions. The probability of being in the lowest set appears to be linearly related to prior attainment (see Appendix VIII).

ACORN category is the second strongest predictor other than prior attainment of setting, with pupils from wealthy achiever households significantly less likely to be in the low or middle set, as are pupils from the 'comfortably off' and 'moderate means' categories. There is a linear relationship between Free School Meal Eligibility and setting. Pupils eligible for FSM are significantly more likely to be in the low set than in the high set, though the relationship with the middle set is not significant. The same is true of pupils with Special Educational Needs, and pupils of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin. Gender is not significant. Again, no significant interaction effects were found between the predictors in these analyses.

#### **4.4.5 Discussion**

In the survey, schools indicated that setting decisions are based on prior attainment and ability. In order to test this claim against competing views that posit an impact of factors such as gender, ethnicity and social class, data from the survey were linked to PLASC and NPD data.

Results show that prior attainment is indeed the main predictor of the probability of being assigned to a particular set at both primary and secondary level, for English and Maths. However, although mentioned by respondents as being the main factor in their decisions regarding setting along with ability, it is a relatively poor predictor. For English, for example, over half of pupils with low prior attainment ended up in middle or high sets. There are, however, a number of methodological weaknesses that may

account for this finding. Firstly, there is a significant time lag between the measures of attainment (the Key Stage test results) of up to three to four years. This is not the case for the other predictors. This means that this measure may not take into account changes in performance over time between the last Key Stage tests and the present. Secondly, a number of explanatory variables are missing from these analyses. Most importantly, while Key Stage test attainment can be seen as a proxy for 'ability', the analyses may have been stronger if it had included measures of cognitive ability. Asking schools for these data, if available, was beyond the remit of this research and would have constituted to great a demand on schools. Other explanatory variables that are missing from the survey include behaviour, another factor mentioned by some respondents as a predictor of setting decisions, and a factor that may influence teacher perceptions, and student motivation. These are explored in greater depth in the case study data and analysis in the next chapters.

Social background (as measured through ACORN categories and FSM eligibility) and Special Educational Needs were also significant predictors of probability of set assignment. This suggests that over and above the effect of setting, pupils with no SEN and pupils from higher socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are more likely to be assigned to higher sets and less likely to be assigned to lower sets. Ethnicity was a weak significant predictor as well, with pupils of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin being slightly less likely to be selected for the higher sets. Gender was not significant.

The findings for social class, SEN and particular ethnic groups are of serious concern and require some further discussion. Firstly, we need to refer again to important caveats mentioned above in earlier discussions of the findings for attainment. The time lag that affects the attainment variables, but not SEN, SES or ethnicity, makes the predictive power of attainment relatively weaker in comparison with that of these other variables, which may explain some of their significance. Furthermore, the contested notion of ability and the reference in the analyses only to Key Stage test attainment is problematic. Other proxy measures of cognitive ability (e.g. CATs) might possibly have greater explanatory power although these data were not systematically available in this research.

Other explanations for the effects on set placement are also possible. Firstly, inter-relationships between these variables and others may come into play. It is possible, for example, that social class is related to behaviour problems which may influence decisions about set composition. This may also be the case for pupils with SEN or other social demographic groups. Findings from other studies indicate that selection decisions in education are often influenced by a number of factors most pertinently teacher perceptions and expectations around social class, ethnicity and gender (Luyten & Bosker, 2004; Gazeley and Dunne, 2006)

Another issue of some importance is the biased nature of the sample. A response rate of 41.6% is not that high (though higher than that for many surveys currently undertaken in education due to the high burden placed on schools), and the sample is not nationally representative, having been selected to over-represent disadvantaged areas and areas with significant ethnic diversity. This obviously limits the extent to which conclusions can be drawn nationally, and means that this study refers mainly to the situation in socio-economically disadvantaged areas serving diverse populations. Furthermore, the response rate does mean that potentially a further bias is introduced due to differences between respondents and non-respondents. Looking at the data we found an over-representation of the Bangladeshi ethnic group in the respondent sample compared to non-respondents, and a slight overrepresentation of pupils eligible for Free School Meals. All these

factors mean that generalisability is limited to specific contexts, and should be considered with caution.

#### **4.5 Summary**

- There are a number of possible methodological weaknesses and caveats relevant to the analyses, including the limitations of the sample, time between test results and set placement and difficulties with precise attainment / ability measures which suggest caution is needed when interpreting the findings.
- In the survey, schools indicated that setting decisions are based predominantly on prior attainment and ability.
- The analysis confirms prior attainment as the main, albeit a relatively poor predictor of set placement, for example, with over half the pupils with low prior attainment in English ending up in middle or high sets.
- Social class is a significant predictor of set placement. Pupils from higher socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are more likely to be assigned to higher sets and less likely to be assigned to lower sets, over and above the effect of prior attainment.
- SEN is a significant predictor of set placement with these pupils concentrated in the low attainment sets.
- Ethnicity was a weak significant predictor of set placement, with pupils of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin being slightly less likely to be selected for the higher sets.
- Gender was not a significant predictor of set placement except in Key Stage 2 literacy where, against recent trends, females were more likely to be placed in a low set.
- Other factors including teacher assessments, teacher judgements and pupil variables e.g. behaviour are likely to influence set placement.

## Chapter 5. The Organisation of Pupil Groups

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter begins our report of findings from the case studies making reference to evidence from the survey. The focus for the case studies was practice in Years 5, 8 and 10 in the core subjects. However, information about grouping systems and practices across the whole of Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 was elicited in interviews as background to the main research questions. There are three main parts to this chapter:

- A description of the patterns of organisation of, and rationales behind, grouping systems in the schools; and
- A description of the processes employed for allocating pupils to particular groups and making adjustments.
- A description of those pupils who are placed in low attainment groups.

### 5.2 Patterns of Organisation and Rationales for Grouping Systems

#### 5.2.1 Key Stage 2

During the process of recruiting schools to take part in the case study research, it was more difficult to identify any that were using across-class attainment grouping (setting) systems in Key Stage 2. This was also suggested in results from the survey as shown in Table 5.1, below.

**Table 5.1: Schools using attainment setting in Key Stage 2**

	Percentage <sup>1</sup> of schools that set in numeracy	Percentage of schools that set in literacy
Key Stage 2	43.8	26.6

<sup>1</sup> Percentages are of schools that responded to the survey with provision at the relevant key stage

Various reasons were given for not adopting setting as a method of organising groups. In some cases the decision was taken on principle, for example because setting was felt to be detrimental to (particularly lower attaining) pupils' self esteem and identities as capable learners. One local authority adviser that we approached initially reported that there were very few primary schools in the whole authority that set since it was not a method advocated by advisers to meet the needs of learners. In other cases, there were more practical reasons for not doing so, for example, because pupil movement to different classes during the day was considered to have a negative influence on behaviour, or simply because cohort size made sets impossible to staff. In the light of this last point, it is perhaps not surprising that all the schools in our final Key Stage 2 sample had an average cohort size of at least 1.5 classes, since the allocation of more than one teacher per year group provided some flexibility for across-class grouping.

#### ***Different grouping practices for different subjects***

The predominant context was mixed attainment class grouping, and where schools did set it was sometimes limited to one subject (either literacy or numeracy). Again, this might either be a question of principle or a purely pragmatic decision. The head teacher in one school in our sample [FP1] that set for numeracy but not literacy had reservations about setting as a general rule, believing it to put lower attainers at a disadvantage by not exposing them to the higher order thinking of their peers. Reflecting the views of teachers in other schools, however, she thought that there was an essential difference between numeracy and literacy, which necessitated

setting in the former. She and others viewed numeracy as a ‘sequential’ discipline, building on prior learning in a very systematic way. In contrast, it was said, literacy did not depend on such an ordered acquisition of skills. Moreover, individual pupils might develop at very different rates in relation to different aspects of literacy, making it difficult to allocate them to particular groups. In some schools, on the other hand, setting in literacy was prioritised. The head teacher of one middle school, for example, based this prioritisation on the importance she ascribed to literacy as a foundation skill. Sometimes (as in the last example) schools would have set in both literacy and numeracy had it been possible, but did not have the flexibility within the school timetable to staff sets in two subjects. In these cases, whilst it was not possible to put into practice, the principle of setting as a means of targeting teaching was favoured as a general strategy (at least in ‘academic’ subjects). A proportion of schools subscribing to this principle (including some in our sample) had the means to operate setting in both literacy and numeracy.

It was not possible to select five schools that were all using across-class attainment grouping in both literacy and numeracy in Year 5. The grouping systems in participating schools at the time of the fieldwork are described in Table 5.2, below.

**Table 5.2: Grouping arrangements in case study schools at Key Stage 2**

<b>School</b>	<b>Setting in literacy</b>	<b>Setting in numeracy</b>	<b>Comment</b>
KP1	Yes	Yes	Setting in literacy in Year 3-6 Setting in numeracy in Year 5-6
HP1	Yes	Yes	Setting from Year 3
HP2	No	No	Within class attainment groups in Year 5 for literacy and numeracy
GM2	No	No	Both set in Year 6
FP1	Yes	No	Setting from Year 3 in numeracy

### ***Timing of setting***

Some schools operated setting systems in Key Stage 2 from Year 3 onwards. Others delayed setting until later. A common rationale for the introduction of setting at a particular point in time was to facilitate targeted teaching in preparation for national tests. In one middle school, for example, setting in literacy was introduced in Year 6 in order to ‘bring up the level 5s’ in English. Some schools set in either literacy or numeracy before the other subject, often reflecting the priority given to one or the other subject. In a primary school that operated numeracy setting in Years 5 and 6 only, for example, resources were targeted towards literacy so that setting could be used from Year 3 in this subject. This school operated perhaps the most complex grouping system in our Key Stage 2 sample, creating sets from the combined cohorts of Key Stage 2 based on the *Success For All* attainment grouping methodology.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Flexible grouping arrangements***

Systems in operation at the time of the fieldwork were not necessarily the same as those in previous years. Grouping systems in this key stage, we were told, were subject to relatively frequent alteration because of cohort and funding variation, affecting group size and staffing. It was also not uncommon for grouping systems to change at different times of the year, as the following examples illustrate. One school

<sup>2</sup> Children are grouped across classes and year groups by their reading comprehension level.

[KP1] (with a 1.5 class entry) maintained higher and lower numeracy sets in both of Years 5 and 6 in the autumn term, but for the remainder of the year (with one less teacher) created three sets from the combined Year 5 and 6 cohorts, including a Year 6 'SATS' group. In another school [FP1], the usual grouping system was collapsed in the run-up to national tests in the spring term of Year 6. During this term, pupils reverted to their class groups for the numeracy lesson (previously having been set across classes) to focus on revision for national tests. In addition, the cohort was divided into four or five small attainment groups for additional numeracy and literacy sessions, led by the two Year 6 teachers, a third teacher and members of the support staff. These took place on a rotation basis, and each day some children would be covering science and the foundation subjects in their small groups. The head teacher described the rationale for this in the following terms:

*They're grouped according to their attainment and so some of those groups might have ten children in them, some of them might have six, but they're always based on their attainment and in every group of children they're all working at very much around the same level ... That's when setting's working at its best because you've got very small groups, but it takes an awful lot of resources, human resources, to do it. But the progress the children make in that spring term is amazing. It's very, very focused on their needs, well the needs of that small group ... It certainly suits the lower attainers.*

### **Group size**

In general, where setting was in operation, schools made efforts to keep lower attaining groups smaller than higher attaining groups to maximise the individual attention available to pupils. The potential for keeping lower attaining groups small was greatest in larger schools. One middle school, for example, divided the 5 class cohort into six sets for numeracy, with the lowest attaining set being significantly smaller than others, although in large schools that were oversubscribed this potential was limited. Smaller schools had little flexibility to vary group sizes much, and generally split cohorts into groups which were more similar in size. In these cases, the range of attainment in groups was wider and, particularly where cohorts were split into just two groups, the lowest attaining pupils were in classes with pupils whose attainment could be very similar to those in the higher attaining group. In groups with a broad range of attainment, within class attainment grouping was sometimes adopted as a means of organisation so that support could be targeted at the lowest attainers and extension activities provided for the highest.

### **5.2.2 Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4**

In our case study and survey samples we found that setting was used more extensively in Key Stages 3 and 4 than it was in Key Stage 2. The survey data are shown in Table 5.3 below.

**Table 5.3: Schools using attainment setting in Key Stage 3 and 4**

	Percentage <sup>1</sup> of schools that set in mathematics	Percentage of schools that set in English
Years 7 & 8	100	52.3
Year 10	100	77.2

<sup>1</sup> Percentages are of schools that responded to the survey with provision at the relevant key stage

### ***A range of approaches to pupil grouping***

Mixed attainment grouping also continued, however, particularly for registration (tutor) groups, in which pupils were usually taught for some of the time (to a greater or lesser extent in different schools). Although across class attainment grouping was generally more common, there was considerable variation in the extent to which it was in evidence in different schools. One secondary school [HS1], for example, operated mixed attainment grouping in Years 7 to 10 in all subjects except mathematics, introducing only a limited amount of additional setting in Year 11. At the other end of the spectrum, one school [FS2] operated a quasi-streaming system in Key Stage 3, dividing each year cohort into five bands (two parallel higher attaining bands, two parallel middle bands and one lower attaining band) for almost all subjects.

Banding systems were a common way of dividing up the school population to facilitate timetabling and the deployment of staff. In some cases pupils were divided into higher and lower attaining bands, in others into vertical bands splitting the population into groups with similar attainment profiles. Teaching groups would be drawn from these bands, creating parallel or near parallel structures, including setting systems where they occurred. In our sample there were two schools using vertical banding systems, which deliberately grouped a small minority of pupils in one of two bands. In one case [KS1], this allowed for the creation of a group of pupils in each of Years 10 and 11 who followed a modified vocational curriculum including off-site work experience. In another school [GH1], the lowest attaining pupils were all grouped in one band in Key Stages 3 and 4 so that support could be targeted where it was judged to be most needed. This system was explained in part as a response to the increased presence of pupils who previously would have attended a local special school, which had recently closed. Where pupils were set, this group made up a significant proportion of the lowest attaining set in one band.

### ***Who makes the decision to use setting?***

Schools varied in the extent to which grouping practices were a matter of whole school policy or decided by departments. In some schools broad principles were set at school level and departments had discretion only over the details of organisation, for example, the number of sets in each year group. In other schools decisions about whether or not to group by attainment were devolved entirely. To add to the complexity, some individual subject departments adopted a mixture of attainment and mixed attainment grouping. In one high school [GH1], for example, science was taught in mixed attainment groups in Year 9 and then set in Key Stage 4. The rationale for this was described by the head of department in the following way:

*Now we went mixed ability [in Year 9] for a number of reasons ... There are so many advantages in terms of expectations of students, it's reaped rewards in terms of results, in terms of the SATs, but I think it's really helped with inclusion in Year 9 ...and I think the main thing is students like [statemented student] did feel included in the whole thing ... One disadvantage we did find with that is the higher end do suffer, but we've put a programme in recently to really push our 7s [level 7 in national tests]. ... The students who are low attainers do suffer to a degree in terms of the fact that the work is not totally tailored for them, but hopefully we differentiate enough. ... So it's the old balancing act between inclusion and well, not exclusion, but separation and concentrating on work ... The way we tackle that is, moving into Year 10, we then do have some focused work. So in essence the life of a student from Year 9 through to Year 11 is a mixed one within science ...and I think that's quite a good thing in that they do feel included in Year 9 and then in Year 10 and 11 we instigate the entry level course [for the lowest attainers].*

Across the case studies there was a range of teacher views about setting in which the advantages and disadvantages for teaching, pupil learning and test performance were acknowledged. Nevertheless, on the whole, teachers in the case study schools tended to support their department grouping strategy. Low attaining pupil views tended to vary although none were uniformly against setting. In Key Stage 2 pupils showed limited awareness and/or concern, whereas, in Key Stage 3 and 4 some students expressed a preference for mixed attainment grouping largely for social reasons. There were also pupils who were positive about learning in set groups.

### **Setting in mathematics**

It was more common for the core subjects to be grouped by attainment in both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 than it was other subjects, a tendency noted elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, and most common for mathematics to be set (a finding reflected in the survey). Whilst there were schools in our case study sample that employed only very limited attainment grouping in these key stages, there was none which did not organise mathematics groups this way. In common with teachers in Key Stage 2, teachers in Key Stages 3 and 4 typically viewed learning in mathematics as a distinctive cognitive process. As one put it, "*In maths there is no alternative to setting, because maths is taught by building up step by step.*" Moreover, whilst teachers acknowledged that mathematics was often taught in mixed attainment groups at primary school, their view was that this was increasingly difficult to manage as pupils grew older and pupils' attainment became more diverse.

### **Setting in English**

Some schools set for English throughout Key Stages 3 and 4. Consistent with the survey results, across the case studies, setting in English was less common than in mathematics. In some departments this was delayed until Year 9 or 10 with a greater tendency for a preference for within-class differentiation was manageable and because of its perceived positive effects, for example on pupils' aspirations and teachers' expectations. The trigger for attainment grouping, as we found in Key Stage 2, was often the demands of examination curricula. These, we were told, made it more difficult to teach in mixed attainment groups than might otherwise be the case. It could also be a response to the requirement to meet targets. The head of department in one secondary school [HS2] explained that setting from the beginning of Key Stage 4 enabled the 'G and T' (gifted and talented) and 'most needy' (low attaining) pupils to be pushed to achieve particular targets. By contrast, a teacher in a school with a particularly high attaining intake [GH2] told us that the reason for only very limited attainment grouping in English was that the majority of pupils were likely to meet or exceed national target levels of attainment. There was therefore less pressure than in some schools to focus teaching on different groups of pupils in order to 'get the grades.' This school did, however, reorganise its usual mixed attainment groups into 'booster' groups for a short period to prepare pupils for national tests in Key Stage 3, dividing them according to the levels they were predicted to achieve.

### **Setting in science**

Science fell between the other core subjects in terms of the prevalence of attainment grouping in schools in the case study sample. Practice varied considerably in Key Stage 3, some schools using mixed attainment grouping for the whole or part of the key stage, some grouping in broad attainment bands and some operating more elaborate hierarchical systems. By Key Stage 4, however, most schools had adopted setting in some form. This, we were told, made it easier to operate tiered examination

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ofsted (2006), which also identifies an increasing trend for setting in modern foreign languages.

entry systems and provided opportunities for tailoring the curriculum to individuals, particularly given the variety of GCSE science syllabuses available that could be followed by different groups.

### **Grouping in the broader curriculum**

Generally, the likelihood of pupils experiencing grouping by attainment in the core subjects increased as they entered Key Stage 4. However, this was not the case for other subjects. As pupils' curriculum paths diverged and some subjects became optional, it was quite possible that relatively small numbers of pupils could choose to pursue individual courses. Where this was the case, the characteristics of pupils in teaching groups depended on take-up. Timetabling constraints could mean that groups were 'mixed' rather than set even where a relatively large number of pupils selected a particular option. On the other hand, whilst individual departments might not operate formal setting systems a certain amount of *de facto* attainment grouping was often driven by encouraging different pupils into particular 'pathways.' 'Academic' subject groups were more likely to contain higher attaining pupils than some vocational groups, for example. Even within this general pattern, there could be exceptions, as described below:

*[Low attaining pupil] is doing P.E. so he's in a very socially mixed group for P.E. Art, that's very socially mixed, history ... that actually has the head of history's daughter in it, she's bright. He's in design technology which will be mixed. He's in classics! (Head teacher GH2)*

*In practice [in the work-related group] you get kids of a similar social background – certainly in Year 11 we have. Year 10 is a bit different – it's quite mixed ability. There are some kids in there who are probably going to achieve Bs. (Senior teacher KS1)*

A point of interest in both these examples is the way that the speakers slip easily between terminology relating to 'ability' and language referring to social background in describing diversity within groups. This will be expanded upon in section 5.4 in a discussion of the social characteristics of low attaining pupils. It also has a bearing on 'teacher judgements' as a criterion for set placement discussed in the section 5.3.2. In both the above examples there is a suggested association made by teachers between attainment and the social characteristics of pupils in different groups.

Practice in schools that had operated horizontal banding systems in Key Stage 3 tended to converge with practice in other schools in Key Stage 4 to cater for a variety of curriculum options. Thus, the school that had operated a quasi-streaming system in Key Stage 3 changed to a setting system for the core subjects in Key Stage 4, alongside option grouping decided by individual departments. There were, however, examples of schools that maintained a quite extensive compulsory curriculum in Key Stage 4. In these cases, there were greater opportunities for employing formal attainment grouping systems.

### **Group size**

In common with practice in Key Stage 2, schools aimed to keep low attaining groups smaller than higher attaining ones. In general, the size of groups increased as the attainment levels of pupils in them rose. As in Key Stage 2, larger schools had more flexibility over group size than smaller ones. Teachers in a middle school (GM2), which had a relatively small Key Stage 3 population, told us that keeping low attaining sets small had a knock-on effect on 'middle' sets, which could be quite large. In their view this was creating a challenge in terms of effective teaching and learning in these 'middle' groups. This concern was echoed in other schools.

Particularly in schools that were relatively lower attaining, large 'middle' groups could be problematic for teachers, especially where additional adult support was not available.

### 5.3 How is the Composition of Attainment Groups Decided?

#### 5.3.1 Who makes decisions?

In all three key stages, the allocation of pupils to groups was decided in the main by teaching staff. Where pupils were banded before being grouped for different subjects, senior managers (including pastoral staff) took responsibility for this, as they did for deciding tutor groups. Following this, decisions about grouping for individual subjects were usually made by groups of staff that included subject specialists. In Key Stage 2, decisions were commonly made by the subject coordinator in consultation with teachers with knowledge of the children concerned, for example previous class teachers. In Key Stages 3 and 4 departmental teams often decided groups with the head of department taking a varying degree of responsibility for the grouping in different departments and/or schools. In some cases, when the timetable demanded common groups across subjects, teachers from different departments decided groups collaboratively. Pastoral staff were sometimes consulted to 'fine tune' sets, for example to spot issues relating to the social mix in groups and provide advice about pupils who might be better grouped separately from one another.

Pupils and parents were only occasionally involved proactively in grouping decisions. This tended to happen most as pupils made option choices going into Key Stage 4, but in an indirect way, as discussions took place between teachers, pupils and parents about the most appropriate courses for them, and by implication the groups they would join. Otherwise, any parental input tended to be in reaction to grouping decisions that had been made by school staff, for example, where they felt their children had been allocated to inappropriate groups. Usually this affected only a small number of pupils and responses to parental intervention varied between and within schools. Some teachers welcomed parents' interest and involvement, recognising the particular insights parents could offer about their children. In other cases [GH2], they were less welcome and viewed as an interference with school systems. Where parental reaction to grouping decisions was strongest, this was commonly ascribed to the 'professional' nature of the local population. The head of department in one school described a group of "*very vociferous professional parents*" who were ambitious for their children and perceived a "*status in having children in top sets.*" In other schools it was suggested that "aspirational" parents were more likely than others to question grouping decisions, and commonly when their children were relatively high attainers.

Pupils did not appear to have a significant input into grouping decisions, although in a few cases they reported talking to staff where they felt they needed to be in different groups. Usually this had not resulted in any immediate action. In the main, pupils interviewed thought they were in the 'right' sets. However, we came across a significant minority of pupils who felt they were wrongly placed, as in the following example, in which a pupil is talking about his English group, the lowest attaining group:

*The work is too easy. I finish sooner than everyone. I don't feel in the right set. I would like to be in a higher set where there is more of a challenge.*

(Year 10 pupil)

And in another example:

*But actually I am good at science. I should have been in a set three but you see I were talking to Tracy and so they moved me into set four so it's the only place they could get me apart from her. (Year 8 pupil)*

### **5.3.2 Criteria for allocating pupils to different attainment groups**

#### ***Prior attainment***

Grouping decisions in case study schools were universally taken with reference to some kind of formal attainment data, for example end of Key Stage national test scores. This mirrors the survey analysis, which indicates that prior attainment has a significant relationship with set allocation (see Chapter 4).

In the open-ended survey question too, the vast majority of respondents referred to attainment or test results as key criteria for set placement decision. In response to the survey question about the basis on which setting decisions are made in literacy and English, 20% of respondents specifically mention ability. The vast majority of other responses (73%) refer to attainment or test results, with 3.5% mentioning other factors, such as attitudes and behaviours as influencing setting decisions. Looking at the specific assessments used, this was also evident from the case studies where a broad range of test data was used to inform set allocation. Optional national curriculum tests were the most frequently (42% of respondents) mentioned assessment tools used (by primary schools), but others were CAT tests (most often at secondary level), a variety of subject specific tests and projected national curriculum test results.

Secondary and high schools in our case study sample used data from primary and middle schools to make grouping decisions for pupils on entry, although there was a view that data were not always comparable across feeder schools, particularly since some schools were more efficient than others at 'coaching' children for national tests. However, there were examples of liaison between primary and secondary and middle and high schools with the aim of coming to a greater understanding of the likelihood and nature of discrepancies. One secondary school [FS1] had developed a process of common assessment for pupils coming into Year 7, in order to be able to make decisions about set placement for the core subjects, described here by the head of Year 7:

*This starts at the beginning of Year 6, when I am employed to go to each primary school, and I actually teach a lesson a week to every class that are due to come to us ... That gives me a good idea of the level of ability of the children before they actually come in, so I can identify children's weak areas. So therefore we're not just looking at a SATs level, because SATs levels I really, truly don't feel reflect the true ability of the child. So I teach them literacy, numeracy or I might be in support for some schools and therefore it's observation. I also have an exercise book where I do common work, so I can have some form of common assessment throughout the year with all the primary children, because I deliver the same piece of work .... So that's the first step, and because of that I do have a very good understanding of them, certainly by the time they do their SATs. Their teacher assessments I gather in from each of the teachers and I analyse that because I do like to see what the teacher truly feels ... Then when the SATs results come in I tend to use those results myself and I'll put them into their groups for English, maths and science, and I look at the characteristics of every year group. So, for example, the present Year 7, I knew we were going to have great difficulty with 12*

*children, their academic ability, social and emotional state. Therefore, I constructed a [mathematics] group of 12 children only. Now I think if I hadn't visited the schools maybe there would have been 18 or 20 in that class.*

### **Teacher Assessment**

References were commonly made to the influence of teacher assessment to setting decisions. In the survey, teacher assessment was mentioned as a method of deciding mathematics sets by 30% of respondents, but in 21% of these cases this was alongside reference to optional national curriculum tests. 'Ability' was also referred to as a criterion for set placement more frequently in relation to English than mathematics (22% compared with just over 10% of respondents). However, case study respondents loosely defined this and it appeared to include both more formal teacher assessments such as class tests or mark book records as well as teacher judgements. One English teacher [HS2] described teacher assessment as "*a mixture of looking at homework, attitude, attendance, punctuality and behaviour, coursework*".

### **Teacher judgements**

As suggested above, whilst formal attainment data provided the basis for grouping decisions, they were often supplemented by teacher judgement particularly in the cases of pupils whose formal attainment made them "borderline" in terms of group allocation. The extent to which teacher judgement was taken into account varied between schools, but it was considered important for various reasons, for example, we were told, because some pupils responded better than others to formal assessment and it was therefore necessary to interpret test scores.

Sometimes there was ambiguity about the extent to which judgements related to attainment or 'personality' factors. Similarly, the survey analysis also indicates that factors other than prior attainment are significant to set placement. In one case study school (GM1), for example, two girls had been moved to a low attaining set from a higher attaining group because they were very quiet and it was felt that they might be "drawn out" in the lower group. At the same time a group of boys had been moved to the higher set because they were lively and outspoken and it was felt they would have opportunities "*to speak up and be brought on*", even though their "basic skills" might not indicate that they were performing at a higher level than some others in the low attaining group. The head of a subject department in another school [HS1] implied that potential attainment was a factor in coming to decisions:

*And they [teachers] will pick up [the set list] and they'll say, "She's really bright, just come from Somalia the other day, she's working really hard. Can we put her up to Set 2? And then we will do that.*

As indicated in the survey analysis, sometimes it was evident that judgements were made on the basis of issues unrelated to attainment, as the head of department in one secondary school [KS1] described ('needy' pupils were characterised as requiring a lot of support both within the curriculum and in other respects):

*But then we do a bit of engineering, so we might put some [needy students] in Set 4 because we know they're going to be in a small group with learning support assistants.... and we may put - you know if you've got a very difficult student who's going to be a behaviour problem - then we'd put them in Set 1, even if they should be in Set 3, so that way there's no-one for them to spark off.*

This approach was used with respect to pupil groups as well as individual 'needy' pupils described above. In one secondary school [HS2], for example, the two low attaining sets in English in Key Stage 4 were differentiated by pupils' designation as either 'SEN' or 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL). The survey analysis that shows SEN as a predictor of attainment group membership would suggest that this may also be a wider practice in schools, though less explicitly identified than in the above example.

### ***The influence of pupil behaviour***

Taking pupil behaviour into account in the formation of sets was widespread practice in the case study schools. It was not uncommon for individual pupils who presented significant behavioural challenges to be allocated to high attaining sets, whatever their attainment warranted. This was viewed as a way of isolating their behaviour and providing them with positive role models within a group of highly motivated pupils. On the other hand, in some schools we were also told that some pupils were moved to lower attaining groups for behavioural reasons or because they were considered lazy. A head of department in one secondary school suggested that "underachievers" were quite often allocated to low attaining sets (in some subjects), alongside pupils whose potential attainment was much lower.

Various other criteria were cited for deciding the composition of groups. Sometimes relationships between teachers and pupils were taken into account. A subject leader in one school [GM2], for example, had made a conscious decision not to place 'sensitive' pupils in a group with a particular teacher. Summaries of factors influencing set composition were offered by teachers for example, "*Not just ability, but the motivation, eagerness, hard work and everything else*" (secondary school head of department, HS1). These more nuanced definitions of the criteria influencing set placement were not elaborated in the survey in which only 4.1% of respondents claimed that pupils' attitudes and behaviour were factors in relation to English (or literacy) sets, and less than 3% of respondents suggesting the same for mathematics. It was only through discussion in the interviews that these emerged, even when the initial response by teachers referred only to prior attainment.

### ***Structural constraints***

Structural constraints had an effect on decision making processes about grouping. Where subjects had attainment groups in common, for example, variation between an individual pupil's attainment in different subjects might mean that they could not be placed in the 'right' set for all subjects. In these cases, schools tended to place pupils in the highest indicated set (giving them 'the benefit of the doubt.'). In one school [KS1] the consequence was that some individuals were grouped in higher attaining sets than some of their peers with similar or higher levels of attainment in a particular subject. Least flexibility was afforded in schools employing horizontal banding systems, where core subjects were timetabled within these bands.

### **5.3.3 Adjustments to groups**

Major decisions about the composition of attainment groups in the case study schools were made at the beginning of Key Stages as pupils entered new curriculum phases, even if this did not coincide with a change of school. However, all schools had formal processes for reviewing groupings at intervals ranging from half a term to a year. Schools responding to the survey reported that setting decisions were revised termly in 41% of cases, and half-termly in 23% of cases. In just under 20% of schools decisions were revised 'as necessary', while in another 10% of schools decisions were revised on an "ongoing" basis. In the small remainder of schools revisions were made yearly.

### **Opportunities for movement between sets**

Set adjustments in case study schools could be made as individuals made particular progress (or otherwise), and likely candidates for changing groups were said to include pupils who had joined schools late and been placed in a particular set based on limited information, or pupils who had needed EAL support on arrival in school. Both secondary school HS2 and primary school KP1 had a deliberate policy of initially placing pupils with marked EAL needs in a lower group, to provide a context in which they could focus more on giving them language confidence. In some schools such pupils would 'move through the ranks' (head of department, HS1) as their language improved.

### **Limited movement between sets**

Even though the survey results (see Table 4.9 in Chapter 4) show that set placement relates unevenly with prior attainment, staff in the case study schools generally had confidence in their original setting decisions. There were generally few adjustments and these usually involved a small number of pupils at any one time. Adjustments also became rarer as pupils progressed through a key stage. This comment from the head of department in one secondary school [KS1] was typical:

*And in reality there's very little movement, but because the opportunity's there, we have a meeting and we discuss it, and the students are aware of what's happening, so it's there if we need it.*

Estimates from survey respondents suggested that reviews led to changes in sets on average for 9.4 per cent of pupils in numeracy/mathematics and 10.1 per cent of pupils in literacy/English, ranging between 3 per cent and 25 per cent of pupils across schools. Twelve per cent (in relation to English/literacy) and 16 per cent (in relation to numeracy/mathematics) were not able to estimate change or said that it varied.

Although not directly related to processes of movement between sets, it was also noted by some teachers that some low-attaining pupils tended to remain low attaining and need support throughout their schooling.

### **Reviewing sets**

Although adjustments usually affected only a minority of pupils, the principle of regular review was one which was generally espoused in schools as necessary to the effectiveness and fairness of attainment grouping systems. There was also a common view from teachers that the potential to move 'up' a set acted as a key incentive to pupils in lower attaining sets, counteracting some possible negative effects of being in a 'bottom' group. However, there was variation in the application of this principle between and sometimes within schools. In some cases, for example the school operating *Success For All*, sets were reviewed at frequent intervals to coincide with internal testing schedules and adjustments made in the light of pupils' results. This was termed 'active setting' by a head of department in one high school (GH2). As a consequence, a few pupils we interviewed had regularly moved between sets during their school life.

### **Advantages of set stability**

In contrast to this approach, some teachers were reluctant to recommend changes, even where a pupil's attainment indicated that they could be placed in a higher attaining set, because of the unsettling effect this could have. As the head of a department in one secondary school (FS1) explained:

*We like to keep the sets as static as possible, unless there's either, the student has real difficulty behaviour-wise in the classroom - with discussion with parents and pastoral staff we may move them for that reason - or if a student is unhappily either over-achieving or under-achieving and they're not happy about their situation, then I do. But the students that are generally happy and getting on, then I try to keep it as static as possible, the reason being that the lower ability students especially, I find that they like routine, set routines. I think any change can be a bit of a bad thing.*

There was some evidence from pupils of the anxiety that could be caused by the possibility of moving 'down' groups. A pupil in a relatively low attaining group (not the lowest set) told us:

*In science we don't get moved. It's better because you don't have to worry about your marks. I wouldn't want to be moved down.*

We were also cited examples of pupils who were reluctant to move 'up' a group, out of their 'comfort zone', even where teachers believed it was in their best interests. Generally, teachers said that they made the final decisions about what should happen in these cases, sometimes taking into account pupils' and/or parents' views.

#### **Structural constraints to set mobility**

Structural and organisational factors affected mobility between sets. For example, in addition to its influence on initial group allocation, where departments made grouping decisions in tandem, requiring the agreement of different subject staff, this again acted as a constraint. Group size was also a factor in decisions about whether or not to move a pupil. Whilst it was not true in all cases, there was a general reluctance to move pupils to a lower attaining group, and since higher attaining groups were larger than lower attaining ones, this tended to inhibit mobility, with teachers often being concerned that the consequence of moving one pupil 'up', would be that another would have to move 'down.'

The curriculum acted as a significant constraint on the extent to which groups were adjusted, particularly in Key Stage 4, when pupils had embarked on particular pathways. There was more potential for mobility in Key Stages 2 and 3, where pupils followed a broadly common curriculum. In Key Stage 4, however, pupils might be following different examination syllabuses in different sets or preparing for a particular level of entry in public examinations. Whilst this affected all groups, there was a greater chance that pupils in low attaining groups would be following courses that were unique to their set (for example leading towards entry-level qualifications).

#### **5.4 Who are the low attainers?**

##### ***Low attaining population patterns***

Managers and teachers across all case studies, even when asked specifically about such issues, were generally cautious about identifying any patterns in terms of the social characteristics of pupils in different attainment groups. In describing their populations, comments such as "*It depends on the year*" were common. The exception in some schools was EAL with pupils who were not very fluent in English also identified as low attaining, particularly in literacy and literacy-related subjects [KS1, HP2, HS2]. Supporting the findings of the survey, most of the case study schools noted that many (though not all) pupils with special educational needs were predominantly low attaining.

### **Individualised characteristics**

There was a noted preference for many of those teachers we interviewed to focus on individual characteristics when discussing both grouping decisions and low attainers. Low-attaining pupils were characterised across the board as suffering from low self-esteem and lacking in confidence, particularly at primary level. One teacher also thought such pupils were generally emotionally more immature. Teachers agreed low-attaining pupils took longer to complete activities, and were less able to work independently, often needing more attention and teacher support. Several teachers mentioned that low-attaining pupils required more instant feedback by having their work checked more frequently. Poor concentration was another general characteristic across the schools. This came out particularly strongly in the urban primary school's [HP1] research on pupil grouping and in the pupil interviews at that school, where they enumerated a variety of causes of distraction, such as other pupils fiddling with shoe laces, coughing or laughing.

At secondary level some teachers associated “disaffection”, “lack of motivation” and “poor behaviour” with some low-attaining pupils although several teachers pointed out that these characteristics were not exclusive to low-attaining pupils and/or groups. Indeed, some felt that the middle sets often had more behaviour issues since they were struggling to succeed but were without the extra TA support and attention that the smaller bottom sets enjoyed. As one teacher put it:

*If I'm looking at where the problems are coming from across the department I would say that the Set 4s ['bottom set'] there are very few problems because the staffing ratio's so low but when you get up to Set 3, that's usually where, if there are going to be problems, they're going to be in there. [Senior English Teacher, KS1]*

Attendance was another issue raised especially in respect to low-attaining pupils involved in vocational and off-site programmes [HS1, KS1, GH2]. A couple of teachers noted that attendance tended to “drop off” with some very low-attainers in Year 11 once they realised they were not going to get the grades they needed. Other teachers, however, pointed out that poor attenders were not necessarily all low attainers.

### **Social class**

Although social class is a highly significant predictor of set placement in the survey results, respondents in the case studies rarely remarked on social class patterns within the low attainment groups.

As suggested in section 5.2.2, however, it was often implicit. For example, ‘Family background’ was commonly cited as a factor in poor attainment, particularly in primary schools [KP1, HP1, HP2]. Within this umbrella term, difficulties such as poverty, family breakdown, inappropriate parenting, poor diet, lack of sleep and a lack of a culture of learning/reading were listed by various school managers and teachers. In some of the secondary schools [HS1, HS2, GH1] drugs, alcohol and/or gang cultures were cited as affecting a small minority of low-attaining pupils. In one inner-city school [HS1] a senior manager when asked if any particular socio-economic group tended to be low attainers, he replied: “*Socio-economic group is difficult to say for the vast majority of children are from a particular socio-economic group*”. He was, however, unable to provide an estimate of FSM. Various senior staff in the inner-city schools [HP2, HS1, HS2] implied that they saw most of their pupils (including, presumably low-attaining pupils) coming from a working-class background

*School is compensating for working-class families ... cementing the cracks”  
(Senior manager, HS1)*

*The school provides what middle-class families provide at home. (Senior manager, HS1)*

*A learning mentor is an academic tutor a parental substitute – a middle-class parent who would extend the student’s learning across the dinner table – if you see what I’m saying. It’s a bit tongue-in-cheek that part. (Senior teacher, HS2)*

There were exceptions, for example, in school GH2, with a relatively high SES intake but also contained a minority of less advantaged pupils, teachers referred to entrenched social stratification. They described an environment in which pupils identified with particular subcultures (the ‘poshies’ and ‘chavas’), reflecting their different backgrounds. One head of department said that there was a clear relationship between membership of one or other subculture and set allocation, with ‘chavas’ being more likely to be in lower attaining sets, ‘poshies’ in higher attaining ones and some crossover in ‘middle’ groups. In other schools too, where populations were more homogeneous, a few teachers thought that there were differences between the socio-economic backgrounds of pupils in different sets, manifested in secondary schools, for example, in the higher proportions of pupils from their most disadvantaged feeder schools in lower attaining groups.

There was reference in a few schools to some systematic analysis of the socio-economic characteristics of pupils in different attainment groups. Whatever the extent of this, however, there was limited reference to any deliberate strategies adopted in response to perceived imbalances. At the same time, schools often went to great pains to ensure that diversity within the school population was represented in other groups, for example by ‘balancing’ the gender and ethnic composition of mixed attainment tutor groups, and making sure that different feeder schools were equally represented in them.

### ***Ethnicity***

Although less significant than social class, the survey has indicated a relationship between ethnicity and low attainment set placement. In the case studies, however, the over-representation of particular minority ethnic pupils in low attaining sets was not explicitly noted by teachers. The intake population is likely to have a bearing on this as, in some city case studies schools, certain minority ethnic groups were dominant. Nevertheless, like social class patterns of minority ethnic representation in low attaining groups were rarely discussed per se, although other factors associated with low attainment were. For example, poor or erratic attendance was cited as a contributory factor to poor attainment in several schools [HP2, KP1, GH1]. In two of the schools this was ascribed to extended leave to visit family in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Similarly, a number of schools (e.g. KP1, HP2, HS2) implicitly identified pupils from minority ethnic groups by stating that, pupils who were not very fluent in English were often over-represented in low attainment groups particularly in literacy and literacy-related subjects. Although problems with literacy were often related to low attainment, two city secondary schools [HS1 and HS2], for example, singled out *some* Somalians through references to EAL pupils.

Ethnicity was also referred to in combination with social class terms with, for example, working-class<sup>4</sup> White pupils identified as low attaining by staff at some of the city schools [e.g. HP1, HS1 and KS1].

*HT: The key group we're not working well with is white British boys. [...] We do pretty well with black boys but white boys and some white girls and some Afro-Caribbean girls we don't do well with but the rest do really well - regardless of their socio-economic background."*

*Q: Is there a class dimension to that?*

*DH: I would say so and there's an expectation that's missing.  
(Head and Deputy, KS1)*

It should be noted that these views were not necessarily consistently voiced within a school.

### **Gender**

As indicated above, interviewees rarely identified social demographic patterns of low attainment groups, except sometimes in relation to gender. While in broad terms, gender was not significant in the survey analysis, in the case studies, gender imbalance was sometimes perceived as an issue. Although not true in every case, it was not uncommon for teachers to refer to the preponderance of boys in low attaining groups. In several schools some teachers or senior managers thought that low attainment was an issue for some male pupils although this view was not necessarily consistently held within the school [KS1, GM1, KP1]. This tendency was exacerbated in one school [HS2] in which the intake was skewed towards boys in a ratio of 2:1 in Key Stage 4. In the context of this gender imbalance, the potential difficulties for girls finding themselves in a minority in low attaining groups were raised.

There was considerable variation in the views of teachers across and even within schools about the appropriateness of taking gender into account when making grouping decisions. A head of department in one secondary school [FS2], for instance, said that she was very conscious of gender balances in groups and would sometimes adjust them, for example, by increasing the size of a low attaining group so that it encompassed more girls than it would have done if the attainment threshold had been lower. Another head of department in the same school, by contrast, thought that it was unfair to try and create a gender balance in groups when the fundamental criterion for setting was prior attainment. He said:

*If we wanted to balance sets it would disadvantage bright girls. We've got to be fair to individuals, not a gender.*

## **5.5 Summary**

- There was a wide range of grouping practices adopted in the case study schools and these varied by subject, across year groups and over time. There was generally more setting going up the age range and a greater likelihood of setting in mathematics than in English or science.
- Schools varied in the extent to which grouping practices were a matter of whole school policy or decided by departments. In some schools broad

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<sup>4</sup> Although the term 'working-class' was not always mentioned explicitly.

principles for pupil grouping were decided at school level and departments had discretion only over the details of organisation. In other schools, decisions about pupil grouping were devolved to subject departments.

- The trigger for attainment grouping was often the demands of examination curricula. These demands were perceived to make it more effective to teach in attainment groups although organisational constraints (e.g. timetabling, curriculum) did not always facilitate this.
- In general, where setting was in operation, schools made efforts to keep lower attaining groups smaller than higher attaining groups to maximise the individual attention available to pupils. The potential for keeping lower attaining groups small was greatest in larger schools. In groups with a broad range of attainment, within class attainment grouping was sometimes adopted as a means of organisation so that support could be targeted to the lowest attainers and extension activities provided for the highest.
- Schools and teachers took decisions about the set placement of individual pupils. This often involved discussion within subject departments in consultation with pastoral support teachers and SENCOs. While, structural and organisational issues constrained these decisions, neither pupils nor parents were consulted in the process. Appeals against decisions, however, were occasionally made.
- Prior attainment was identified as a key criterion for set placement as also indicated in the survey. Teachers used national test results as well as other attainment data derived from various combinations of previous school records, optional national curriculum tests, CATs, school tests and mark book records.
- Teacher assessment also had a major influence on set placement. Although definitions of what this incorporated tended to be blurred, it included, formal data and evidence, teacher judgements in the interpretation of these data and more personalised judgements of a range of other factors, e.g. motivation, could be taken into account. This is consistent with the survey analysis in which, above and beyond prior attainment, the social characteristics (e.g. social class, ethnicity) of pupils has been found to be significant to set placement.
- Pupil behaviour in particular had a strong influence on the composition of pupil groups. It was common practice for individual pupils who presented significant behavioural challenges to be allocated to sets that did not reflect their prior attainment. In some cases these pupils were allocated to high attaining sets as a way of isolating their behaviour and providing them with positive role models within a group of highly motivated pupils. On the other hand, in some schools we were also told that some pupils were moved to lower attaining groups for 'behavioural' reasons or because they were 'lazy'. This practice may account, in part, for the discrepancy between prior attainment and set allocation found in the survey analysis.
- Schools subscribed to the principle of regular review as part of their attainment grouping systems. However, there was significant variation in the frequency of review and in how school managers addressed any issues arising from it for a number of learning related (e.g. disruption to learning) as well as practical and structural reasons (e.g. timetabling).

- Although the criteria for set placement were a mixture of more objective test measures and a range of less explicit teacher judgements, school staff expressed a general confidence in their set allocation decisions. Evidence, in the survey and the case studies, of the limited pupil movement between sets is consistent with this. In addition, some negative effects on pupils of moving groups and moving down were raised in support of set stability.
- References by classroom teachers to social demographic patterns of low attaining groups were rare, except in relation to gender. Although the survey shows the significance to set allocation of social class and to a lesser extent ethnicity, these were rarely raised directly by teachers in relation to low attainment group composition. Implicit references to both, however, were made. While some school managers were aware of demographic patterns within low attainment sets, details of how these were addressed were less clear. Often these patterns were related to a particular circumstance or time beyond the control of the school.

## **Chapter 6. Key Institutional Strategies Supporting the Learning of Low-attaining Pupils**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter considers the way that school and department level strategies were employed in case study schools to support the learning of low attainers. Grouping systems (as described in the previous chapter) were clearly a key element of the differentiation of provision at the school and department level, but these were nested within a set of other strategies intended to support the learning of different groups of pupils and to 'personalise' provision. Some of these strategies were interdependent with grouping systems. Particular patterns in the organisation and deployment of additional adult support for low attainers, for example, were closely linked to the forms of grouping adopted in individual schools. Other strategies targeted at low attainers were independent of grouping systems; others were not specifically targeted at low attainers but were intended to benefit them alongside other pupils.

The chapter is organised around four main themes:

- Managing resources to support the learning of low attainers
- Curriculum provision and assessment
- Building positive relationships
- External Involvement

### **6.2 Managing resources to support the learning of low attainers**

#### **6.2.1 Investing in support staff**

Investment in support staff was a key strategy in supporting the learning of low attainers (see Appendix X Case study j). Although it was difficult for teachers to gauge to what extent pupil progress was directly related to a particular support intervention, the vast majority of teachers at both primary and secondary level were generally very positive about the benefits of extra adult support. A primary school headteacher told us, for example:

*I believe it's not small classes that make a difference. The most important thing is good teaching and good support. With the right support, a good teacher can teach 30 just as well as 20 (headteacher, FP1)*

The pupils we interviewed at both primary and secondary school were also positive about the support offered by teaching assistants<sup>5</sup> and other support staff.

All the case study schools invested in additional support staff, who could include teaching assistants<sup>6</sup>, learning mentors and sometimes support teachers. Two of the secondary schools [GH2 and GH1] also invested in training sixth formers to support low-attaining pupils. This support was mostly, though not exclusively targeted at low-attaining pupils.

Some of the investment in teaching support was paid for by funding allocated to statemented children, other streams of local authority funding for special educational needs and/or, in the case of some of the city schools with high numbers of pupils

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<sup>5</sup> We shall use the term 'teaching assistant' here (except where a different term has been used by participants quoted directly). In practice, support staff had a variety of job titles. Sometimes these terms denoted different levels of experience or training.

from minority ethnic backgrounds, through EMAG funding. However, it was often topped up by the schools themselves. Where pupils were eligible for different sources of funding (e.g. EMAG and SEN), schools tried to combine funding in order to 'spread' the support around as many pupils as possible.

There was wide variation in the level of resourcing for support across the local authorities and among the schools, which was a key factor in the way support was organised in the schools. One secondary school with "*vast support*" for children with SEN [HS1], according to the SENCO, concentrated its TAs (approximately 30) and support teachers at Key Stage 3, particularly in terms of withdrawals, whereas the school relied more on smaller classes and lower teacher-pupil ratio for groups with low-attaining pupils at Key Stage 4 (see Appendix X Case study i). In another less well resourced secondary school [GH1] all the pupils with designated support were allocated to one of the two parallel half-year groups in order to facilitate resource concentration. In a similarly more resource-constrained secondary school [FS1] staff were planning to teach Year 7 vulnerable children together as a nurture group mainly with one teacher and one TA for all curriculum subjects. In contrast, in a well-resourced primary school [HP1], for example, one TA was allocated to each class, another to support the bottom set in each year group in literacy and numeracy and another to support SEN and statemented pupils, including giving EAL support. As this last example illustrates, attainment grouping was a pivotal way of concentrating resources for low-attaining pupils. Thus, in this case, the teacher of the bottom set for literacy and numeracy had the same three extra adults every day to help support pupil learning.

In addition to appointing support staff, schools invested in their training to varying degrees. In one primary school [HP1], for example, one of the teaching assistants had been trained to manage the newly installed computer database for tracking pupil progress. Another primary school [HP2] had recently funded the appointment of a literacy advisory teacher, who for three days a week was co-ordinating literacy support across the school. The establishment of the advisory post, she maintained, had enabled them to train carefully selected TAs to a "higher level" and to have training more specifically tailored to the needs of the school. It also ensured greater consistency in the delivery of literacy interventions.

### ***Co-ordinating classroom support***

Across the sample there were examples of well integrated school-level strategies prioritising and maximising TA support for low-attaining pupils. In one school [HP1], for example, teachers and teaching assistants clearly worked together as a cohesive unit (see Appendix X, Case study j). Decisions about which low-attaining pupils to support through interventions were said to be taken jointly by the SENCO, the class teachers *and* teaching assistants. During the research visit, the SENCO was frequently seen consulting with class teachers together with their TAs about individual pupils. TA professional development was prioritised and the TAs, although line-managed by the SENCO, had a weekly meeting with the head teacher. When interviewed, the SENCO underlined the importance of good teamwork and communication between the SENCO, teachers, teaching assistants and other staff. This was also evident in the classroom observations and in the fact that pupil files were accessible both to teachers and TAs. In another school [FP1] the importance of TA support was underlined by the inclusion of a TA on the senior management team.

Teamwork around support was less easy to manage at Key Stages 3 and 4, even in the well-resourced schools, due to more complex timetabling arising from greater subject specialisation, more curricular options and higher pupil numbers. One response to this in some schools was to allocate TAs to particular departments to

facilitate communication. Other TAs also specialised in SEN or EAL support, and/or worked in particular years. In one school [HS2] there were also behaviour TAs. The increased numbers of TAs and various specialisations also prompted several schools to have a head TA and/or senior TAs or support teachers to help manage the TA team in addition to the SENCO [KS1, HS1, HS2]. Nevertheless, lack of time and opportunity for teachers and TAs to liaise were cited by several secondary school teachers and TAs as one of the frustrations of supporting low-attaining pupils. One school [KS1] had tried to overcome this by timetabling one non-contact hour per week for TAs to liaise with teachers but, as one of the TAs said “*a lot of time the only time you see the teacher is in the lesson time*”.

In two city schools [HS1 and HS2] there were a number of TAs who had just graduated or were in their gap year, often, as one senior manager put it, “testing the water” to see if they liked teaching. Although, as he also noted, this meant that they often possessed a higher level of subject knowledge than some of the more “traditional TAs”, it also resulted in quite a high turnover. A lunchtime chat with four TAs in one of the schools, for example, revealed that all four were new that September but were not likely to stay beyond the year. This raises questions about continuity for pupils and about the possible return for the school’s investment in their training.

### ***The deployment of learning support***

At both primary and secondary level there tended to be more TA or learning mentor support available in the core subjects, with some pupils receiving support across more curriculum areas, depending on individual need. Decisions about who needed extra support and what kind of support was required were generally made by a member of the senior management team, usually the SENCO, in consultation with the literacy and/or numeracy co-ordinator and the class/form teacher, at Key Stage 2, and the head of department at Key Stages 3 and 4.

Teaching assistants were primarily deployed to provide pupils with in-class support and/or to withdraw them for one-to-one or small group work for specific interventions. Details of these are given in the appropriate section in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Withdrawal generally took place from other curriculum subjects and/or, in the case of some of the primary schools, in registration or assembly two or more times a week although as far as possible pupils were not withdrawn from subjects they really liked or from special assemblies or class events. However, the issue of classroom withdrawal did cause a few problems for teachers.

In addition, TAs acted as important links between teachers and parents/carers, especially since many TAs came from the local community, and were able to communicate parent/carer concerns about their child to the school. Several teachers and TAs acknowledged this role:

*I think sometimes parents feel more comfortable talking to the TA. Then we can talk to the teacher about it. I think parents often feel intimidated and find it more difficult to talk to the teacher. (TA, KP1)*

Similarly, TAs interviewed in another school [FS1] thought that one of the reasons pupils often approached them to discuss their problems was because they were seen as different from teachers. A senior manager in another school [GM2] ascribed the bond between TAs and pupils in the school to the fact that they often moved through the school together.

Though the brief of learning mentors varied across the sample, they were often said to work with pupils who had emotional and/or behavioural problems, attendance issues or difficulties in organising their work. The support often involved working together with families. These were sometimes underachieving rather than low-attaining pupils. Nevertheless, the very presence of learning mentors working in class with other pupils, or withdrawing them from class, is likely to have impacted positively on low-attaining pupils' ability to concentrate in lessons since this commonly identified difficulty was often ascribed to the distracting classroom behaviour of other pupils (see Appendix X Case study j).

Across the sample at primary level TAs were the main implementers of these interventions, usually under the supervision of more senior staff, while in some secondary schools more specialised support teachers were also often involved. Pupil progress was monitored, assessed and reviewed at regular intervals, usually termly, with a major review at the end of the year. Support was adjusted accordingly. Sometimes this entailed altering the type of support – such as small group work rather than 1-to-1; at other times, if the pupil had reached the targets set and it was thought they could manage without the support, another pupil replaced them.

### ***Pupil withdrawal from class***

Most schools operated systems that combined in-class support and withdrawal. Several teachers said they preferred in-class support because it was more inclusive in allowing pupils to work alongside their peers and caused less disruption to the class and to the individual's learning. As one teacher explained:

*I find it difficult because they [pupils withdrawn from class] miss the introduction ... and then when they come back in we're in the middle of work and they've no idea what to do ... so I find it really difficult how to manage and resolve that aspect. (Year 5 teacher, HP2)*

From talking to teachers in a number of schools, it also appeared that in some cases the teachers were not always aware exactly what was being covered in the withdrawals and therefore, as one senior teacher noted, they missed opportunities to make explicit links in the main class with what pupils had covered in the interventions to reinforce their learning.

*One of the things I think is missing at the moment is our link between what is happening in the intervention and what is happening in the classroom. So that I don't know that the teachers know enough about what's going on [in the intervention] to make the [links in class]. (SENCO, HP2).*

This was not always the case (see Appendix X Case study d), however. In one school, for example (GM1), withdrawal was coordinated between teaching and support staff so that small groups of pupils were withdrawn for parts of lessons to practise particular skills whilst the rest of their class completed a discrete activity.

Several teachers also commented on how pupils' confidence and self-esteem often improved through withdrawal for support and that the pupils appeared to enjoy the attention and the fun activities. Children contrasted the calm atmosphere in small group or 1:1 situations with that of the classroom. One told us, for example:

*Because it's a little group there's not so much noise. If we're all bundled together there's quite a lot of noise so it's easier when we're individual [on our own]. (Year 5 pupil, HP2)*

One primary EAL support teacher noted [ KP1] that when withdrawn in a group, pupils could ask questions more easily, which in turn gave them confidence to ask questions in the larger class group.

### 6.2.2 Other resource support

#### ***Allocating teachers to low attainment groups***

At Key Stages 3 and 4, where there was more stratified setting, human resource support for low-attaining pupil groups also included careful selection of teachers for bottom sets. Some schools and departments allocated some of their most experienced or specialised teachers, often in special needs, to the lowest-attaining groups. For example, in one case [HS1], one of the deputy heads always teaches the bottom set mathematics in Year 11. As two heads of department explained in one school [KS1]:

*HoD1: I think it's important that you need to be very mindful of who you allocate to your lower ability sets. I think it's very easy or lazy of a timetabler to give them a more traditional teacher who's going to do the same old thing and possibly a teacher who's not as good as some of the others, rather than give them one of the top sets. I think you've got to ensure a high quality of teaching in the lower ability*

*HoD2: - And flexibility of the teacher to be able to adapt.*

*HoD1 : - Otherwise you've no chance of tackling motivational problems...*

Other schools or departments rotated staff so that, as one head of department put it, “everyone gets a fair crack of the whip” in terms of which sets they teach. In several schools, some teachers actively sought to teach the bottom sets. Only in one school [HS2], according to one head of department, were weaker teachers assigned to the bottom sets at Key Stage 4, whereas the most experienced teachers were allocated to the borderline groups.

*Because of the pressures we have from the senior management team, we have to give our weaker teachers the lower sets ... because of the pressure of getting the middle kids up to Cs you have to put your most experienced teachers with them.*

In a number of secondary schools there were other strategies too to maximise teacher support for low-attaining pupils. In one school [HS2], an extra mathematics teacher was timetabled for each half-year group in Years 7-9 to allow for smaller classes (24), with the bottom sets being considerably smaller (15-16), according to a senior member of the department. The same school at Key Stage 4 formed two special small groups (15-16) for low-attaining SEN and EAL pupils with specialist teachers and additional TA support. The specialist teacher of the Year 10 EAL group interviewed felt that this special group was usually very responsive, which was evident from observation, unlike the official bottom set, which was often “*very difficult to motivate*”. She felt that the fact that she was Bengali and could therefore communicate in Bengali when necessary was helpful. Indeed, one of the mathematics teachers commented that the English department greatly benefited from having several Bengali members of staff within the department, which the mathematics department lacked but which he believed would help support some of the “*quiet Bengali girls*” often found in the bottom set mathematics classes.

In another school [KS1] Year 8 English classes were benefiting from two teachers ‘buddying’ in each class. The original intention had been to set in Year 8, but

although the staffing was adequate, the timetabling had not been possible and so an extra English teacher had been allocated to each Year 8 (mixed-attainment) class. This enabled them to withdraw targeted groups or individuals, including low attainers, for support and was said to be working well.

### **Targeting resources**

The well-funded inner city schools [HS2, HS1] in particular offered substantial extra support in the core subjects, including homework clubs, summer schools in Years 8 and 10, in preparation for national curriculum tests and GCSE exams, and Saturday revision classes in Years 9 and 11 prior to exams. These were available to all pupils.

More generally, targeting support at particular groups rather than across the board, however well intentioned, inevitably includes some while excluding others. In resource-constrained schools such a strategy might result in some (non-statemented) low-attaining pupils receiving less support. So, for example in one school a group of Year 10 pupils interviewed, whether rightly or wrongly, felt lower-attaining pupils were 'missing out' on some of the support on offer in mathematics (although several mentioned they had received extra support in mathematics at other times) and as a result felt negatively towards the subject and the department.

Schools had to make difficult and strategic decisions about who to target for support, especially under the pressure to improve their standing in the school performance tables. This sometimes meant having to prioritise those pupils the school felt would benefit most from support in terms of their likelihood of reaching a grade C against those who most needed support. In the mathematics department at Key Stage 4 in one school [HS2] pupils identified as having the potential to reach a grade C (often underachieving, rather than low-attaining) benefited from a weekly booster class given by the head of department together with one hour's mentoring support a week. The lowest-attaining pupils, however, were not eligible for the support. Indeed one of the school's senior managers felt that the school's drive to improve examination performances overall had resulted in some low-attaining pupils being neglected at times:

*I think that at times we've targeted groups of children to the detriment of our lower attainers and I think that must be quite demoralising for their self-esteem.*

Importantly, now that school performance tables highlight the percentage of 5 A-C grades including English and mathematics there will be even more pressure on schools to emphasise numeracy and literacy support, possibly to the detriment of other subjects, and to be even more strategic about whom they target. Indeed, some teachers complained that pupil withdrawal by learning mentors was problematic in that the pupils got behind with their work in the classes they missed, and they sometimes had to spend time helping them catch up [KS1, HS2].

*Instead of learning history that's not that important you should learn [more] maths and English. (Year 8 pupil, HS2)*

This last comment made by a Year 8 pupil in praise of his mentoring programme is also a pertinent reminder that withdrawing pupils from some curriculum areas for more numeracy and literacy can result in the pupil experiencing a narrowed curriculum while reinforcing an implicit hierarchy in which numeracy and literacy are seen to be more important than other curriculum subjects.

### ***Resources for pastoral support***

Another area several schools invested in was that of pastoral support as they recognised the centrality of pupils' emotional well-being to their ability to focus on learning (see Appendix X Case study b). While emotional distress could affect all pupils, teachers in several schools associated this either explicitly or implicitly with low-attaining pupils. While some of the schools relied more on outside support agencies (see the later section on external support), a few in the sample invested heavily in their own systems. In some cases this was because the support offered by the LA was perceived to be inadequate to meet the school's needs – insufficient availability of the educational psychologist, for example, was highlighted by one school. Again, the different levels of resourcing across the LAs were pertinent.

Nevertheless, several schools demonstrated a variety of different pastoral support strategies. In one primary school [HP1] the head of pastoral support ensured that all staff (including kitchen staff and cleaners) were trained in child protection issues. Another primary school, praised by Ofsted for its outstanding approach to personal well-being and care, [HP2], for example, employed its own counsellor, who counselled children twice a week, sometimes for up to two years and regularly worked alongside teachers in facilitating discussions about classroom issues in circle time. A secondary school [FS1], similarly commended by Ofsted for its pastoral support, invested both in the pastoral support staff and in a centre where vulnerable pupils could spend time working out of classrooms. The various pastoral support staff who were employed by the school and were based in the centre included the assistant head teacher responsible for the Every Child Matters agenda, welfare assistants for each key stage and one for Year 7. There was also an extended school worker and behaviour workers.

### ***Resources for pupil tracking***

Finally, several schools ascribed their success with some low-attaining pupils to their investing in effective tracking and monitoring systems, which enabled them to identify individual underachieving and low-attaining pupils at an early stage. Some of the smaller primary or middle schools [e.g. in HP2, GM1] were able to have IEPs for all their pupils and not just those identified with SEN. Although systems have the capacity to monitor the social demographic character of low attaining groups, this did not appear to result in specific whole school strategies to address the learning needs of those found to be over-represented in the low attainment groups.

While the monitoring and tracking systems helped management and teachers to set targets for individual pupils, concern was voiced by several teachers [e.g GM1] about the potentially negative effects of targets on some low-attaining pupils by putting too much pressure on them to achieve. However, one school [HP2], for example, helped mitigate this through a policy of identifying no more than one point in a piece of written work for pupils to improve on.

Another concern was that target-setting (especially in terms of reaching particular National Curriculum levels) often assumed an even rate of progress whereas in reality, pupil progress was much more erratic. According to one SENCO [GH1], this was particularly the case for low-attaining pupils.

In addition to formal support strategies in schools, there was a significant amount of informal support evident in almost all the schools. Many teachers and support teachers were witnessed giving up time after class in break, lunch or immediately after school to help pupils who were struggling with their work.

## **6.3 Curriculum provision and assessment at Key Stage 2**

### **6.3.1 Curriculum differentiation**

In this section the more generic curriculum strategies that schools adopted at Key Stage 2 are discussed. The levels of curriculum (in the sense of syllabus) differentiation between higher and lower-attaining pupils differed across the sample. Where attainment grouping was the norm in literacy and numeracy many teachers and co-ordinators said that they covered the same topics but at a different level. One or two teachers also thought that setting often obviated the need for much within-class differentiation, which was a matter of concern for some senior managers, particularly at secondary level.

### **6.3.2 Reviewing performance**

In all the schools, National Curriculum levels were used to assess pupils and to inform set allocation, to determine the level pupils were at and/or for diagnostic and remedial purposes. More specific assessments were delivered for low-attaining pupils when schools needed to determine the type and level of extra support needed. Pupil progress in interventions was generally monitored very closely, especially where SEN was identified, through the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and the Annual Review process.

Generally, all pupils were given standardised assessment tests (often previous National Curriculum tests) in Years 5 and 6, irrespective of the set they were in. In one school [HP1], where pupils were given termly tests across the sets, pupils were not given specific marks in numeracy but general class feedback so as not to discourage the low-attainers. However, the co-ordinator explained that if a child performed very poorly, they were taken aside and given more specific feedback, but "*phrased positively*". In this way they addressed a common tension recognised in a number of schools – balancing the need for standardised tests across the sets to ensure appropriate placement of pupils against the need to ensure low-attaining pupils were aware of their learning needs without being discouraged.

### **6.3.3 Literacy**

Literacy was identified as the 'sticking point' for low attainers in some schools and thus was a major focus for the management, which they addressed in very different ways. One school, [KP1], for example, adopted the Success For All (SFA) Literacy Programme (explained below also see Appendix X Case study a), which 'aims to ensure that children born into low income or poorly educated families succeed at school' (successforall.org.uk); another [HP2] had initiated a whole-school emphasis on oracy.

In the SFA system pupils were set vertically in Years 3-6 based on reading assessments. Having pupils with more homogeneous reading levels, it was argued, allowed teachers to target reading more effectively, and thereby enabled students to access the curriculum more easily. The differing writing abilities of students could then be dealt with more readily through in-class support. Additionally, its strong phonics base was aimed at supporting EAL pupils, a substantial number of whom were identified as low-attainers within the school. Nevertheless, as one senior member of staff observed, there was the potential damage to self-esteem for pupils who remained at a particular level with younger children if they did not make much progress, which, other teachers said was outweighed by pupil confidence at being able to do the work. Doubts were also raised (which the lesson observations confirmed) by one teacher about the reliability of the assessment since pupils' reading abilities and rates of progress seemed quite varied within the group.

In the school that had the whole-school focus on oracy [HP2], another key motivational approach was to encourage teachers to try and construct literacy activities which had a purpose and considered audience. An example of purpose was evident in a literacy lesson [HP1] when pupils had to follow instructions (the objective of the lesson) to make a paper plane, which each team then threw in a competition to see which team could get their plane to fly the furthest.

#### **6.3.4 Assessment for Learning**

Although Assessment for Learning (AfL) was adopted in various schools to improve literacy standards more generally, it was considered particularly effective with low-attaining pupils. According to one head teacher [HP2], the application of AfL needed to focus on the process rather than product, encouraging pupils to come up with agreed success criteria (to form a 'What makes Good' chart) on a modelled piece of work. Successful lessons involving AfL were observed in a couple of schools [HP1, HP2].

Another advantage of AfL (as practised in their school [HP2]), according to the head, was that it helped overcome one of the known disadvantages of ability grouping – that of putting a ceiling on certain pupils' aspirations and expectations:

*When looking at the writing we decided that what we'd need to do is actually change our expectations and also that when we set work not to put a ceiling on it so that children were never working towards something that would ever finish - ... so that when we're doing the 'What makes good' it's not 'you and you are doing those bits and you [others] can do all these bits' it actually is for everyone to try and achieve the most they can and that's how you get to do the best you can.*

AfL and the SFA Literacy Programme both encouraged self and peer assessment and co-operative learning.

In most case-study schools at Key Stage 2 very low-attaining pupils, often with very specific learning needs, were withdrawn for some supplementary literacy support either individually or in small groups at certain times during the week. A number of commercially produced programmes were used for spelling and basic reading, such as Accelerate, Accelerite, Word Shark and Spellzone. These were popular with the pupils interviewed, especially those that involved ICT, and could easily be facilitated by TAs.

Jolly Phonics was also used in a number of schools and said to be particularly effective with newly arrived EAL learners. In one school [KP1], the EAL support teacher also liked to use flashcards to help pupils learn vocabulary. EAL pupils in two of the schools with high numbers of EAL learners [HP1 and KP1] also benefited from the EMAG-funded oracy programme Talking Partners. In one of the middle schools [GM1], there was a paired reading buddy scheme, involving some of the lowest-attaining Year 8 pupils with Year 5 and 6 pupils, which recognised what the low-attaining pupils had to offer, thereby raising self-esteem.

#### **6.4 Curriculum provision and assessment at Key Stages 3 and 4**

In this section more general school-level curriculum strategies aimed at supporting the learning of low-attaining pupils are discussed before more subject-specific approaches are considered.

### 6.4.1 Curriculum pathways

There was a limited number of different curriculum pathways offered in some schools at Key Stage 3 for specific interventions, such as Springboard maths or Lexia (a computer-based programme focusing on raising a pupil's reading age). These usually entailed the withdrawal from class of small groups of low-attaining pupils to work on aspects of literacy and numeracy. However, greater curriculum variation was offered at Key Stage 4 across a range of subjects, both through the different levels offered at GCSE, and through alternative qualifications, including more vocational or skills-based programmes.

Most of the secondary schools addressed the perceived curriculum needs and associated loss of motivation by some low-attaining pupils by providing more vocational pathways at Key Stage 4, including off-site work. Class sizes in these groups were generally quite small. The schools usually identified particular pupils as potential candidates for these alternative pathways and then consulted the pupils and their parents/carers. In one school [KS1], for example, these groups followed a reduced school curriculum (English language, mathematics, science, leisure and tourism and IT) for three/two days a week and for the remainder pupils were out of school on work experience placements. Pupils in this group were generally “*of a similar social [working class] background*” and “*often quite disaffected*”, according to one head of department. Senior management was keen to develop more vocational pathways within the school but appreciated the need to work on persuading some parents/carers to value vocational courses.

In another school [GH2], a ‘flexilearn’ course was offered in Years 10 and 11. Again the groups were relatively small and the pupils had a reduced curriculum and in addition some followed the Prince’s Trust bronze award. However, the head teacher noted that the quality of the college learning was variable and depended on the individual tutors involved. Another school [FS1], however, planned to address the problem of variable tutor quality on off-site courses by moving to in-school provision. For example this coming year, they were setting up a beauty salon and employing a teacher to deliver a vocational course. Pupils interviewed who were following the flexilearning courses were very positive about the experience:

*It’s better than being in school. You feel more grown up. They treat you like adults (Year 10 pupil, GH2)*

The SENCO in the school also tried to find long-term work placements for disaffected Year 11 pupils “*who might not last the whole of Year 11*”.

However, teachers from two of the schools commented on the way in which these groups of pupils tended to self-segregate and form sub-cultures with their own identity, separate from the rest of the school.

*It [the work-related group]’s the most challenging group to teach because they perceive themselves to be almost outside the school. ... The guy in charge puts in lots of effort to get them to feel part of the mainstream but they don’t. (head of department, KS1)*

*... very much a gang rather than a group of individuals...(teacher, GH2)*

Doubts were raised in one school [HS1], however, about the benefits of offering vocational courses to low-attaining pupils. One senior manager commented that since pupils, including low-attaining pupils, did well in the school with an academic curriculum, they would have to be sure that any vocational course they offered was

better. Nevertheless, the school was now offering a GNVQ in leisure and tourism but she emphasised that it was open to all and not targeted at any particular group.

The skills-based ASDAN programme was also provided as an alternative at Key Stage 4 in several schools [KS1, GH1, FS1], particularly for low-attaining pupils. A senior manager of one of the schools [KS1] was convinced that it was a good skills-based course which had scope for creativity and so was planning to introduce it further down the school too, in part to help combat disaffection, which she believed started “*to creep in towards the end of Year 7*”. In addition to ASDAN, one school [GH1] was also offering certificated skills courses focusing on communication and numeracy alongside GCSE. However, as a senior teacher in another school [FS1] noted, the ASDAN Gold and Silver awards still include a lot of literacy and numeracy. Hence, the school had introduced other courses in the performing and creative arts, with less emphasis on literacy, in which low-attaining pupils were therefore more likely to succeed. All pupils at Key Stage 4 were taking ICT and Art as core subjects.

#### **6.4.2 Collaboration with neighbouring schools**

One school had also recently established vocational courses for post-16 pupils unsuited to academic progression routes although these were only available for level 2 and 3 attainers and not pupils with the lowest level 1. In order to maximise resources they had joined together with three neighbouring schools to form a virtual college, with each school specialising in a particular curriculum area. This had also secured the school access to additional sources of funding. Moreover, the head teacher explained, historically pupils interested in pursuing vocational options had had to travel considerable distances to the nearest cities and so many had dropped out. Pupils who followed these pathways were usually identified by the schools, followed by discussions between the school and the pupils and their parents/carers.

Another collective school strategy likely to impact on low-attaining pupils, was in a project focusing on SEN pupils initiated by the local authority in which a cluster of schools worked together and shared good practice. This year a lot of the funding had gone on funding speech and language therapists and on training about dealing with conflict. A cross school panel to consider problem cases has as yet had limited impact on access to resources but a SENCO [FS1] involved said that sharing ideas about practice was useful.

#### **6.4.3 Other learning support strategies**

Other strategies aimed at enhancing the learning of all pupils, but which were considered successful with low-attaining pupils, included accelerated learning, personalised learning and assessment for learning. The school that had embraced accelerated learning and learning to learn [HS1] had initially engaged a consultant for the year and subsequently had freed up half timetables of two senior staff to work on improving teaching and learning with other teachers. Learning to learn was being embedded across the curriculum, for example in CPSHE in Years 7-9, and senior managers interviewed were positive about its impact.

*The recent focus on the learning cycle and developing thinking skills provide a new way of delivering the curriculum which will tap into all levels, giving a variety of activities. So I think the new approach to differentiation [for low-attaining pupils] is not death by worksheet and cloze exercises ... but it's much more about engaging and promoting talk and thinking. I still feel there are issues when it comes to written work where pupils still need that scaffolding – you might still use some writing frames. (Senior manager, HS1)*

In addition in Year 8 the school had instituted 'drop days' (funded by a bank) based on the learning-to-learn philosophy and activities. Normal lessons were abandoned for two thirds of a day every two weeks for pupils to work on a six-month project (e.g. a film or a piece of artwork, enhanced through outside facilitation). Groups of 20 pupils were organised according to individual choices with two adult facilitators. Although it was said to be too early to gauge the effect on pupils, teachers and pupils who were asked about the project were universally positive.

There was evidence in certain departments of other schools too of trying out more experiential, problem-solving approaches to delivering the core curriculum, such as the Mathematics Enhancement Project [GM1] and the Gatsby Science Project [HS2], which are discussed further at the department level.

#### **6.4.4 Assessment and examinations**

In terms of assessment for low-attaining pupils, heads of department faced the same dilemma mentioned for Key Stage 2, namely the tension between giving common assessments to ensure equity in terms of set allocation and not demotivating low-attaining pupils when they fared poorly on the assessments. A common compromise in some departments was to give the same test to classes at similar levels.

At Key Stage 4, there was much greater and more overt variation in the final assessments on account of the different courses, although often pupils were assessed on the same previous GCSE papers in order to determine whether to enter pupils for the Foundation or Higher examination. Several teachers and managers had selected programmes with a heavy coursework component because they believed it favoured low-attaining pupils. One senior manager also used the LA's gender-disaggregated statistical analysis of examination performance, ascertaining the likelihood of pupils with different attainments achieving in different subjects, in order to advise pupils on option choices.

In addition, some schools entered the lowest-attaining pupils for Entry Level Certificates in one of the core subjects [KS1 and GH1]. The head in GH1 pointed out that this created some issues for the school because they are not recognised in public assessments of school performance. Similarly, NVQ Level 1 qualifications, which one teacher in FS1 pointed out would suit some low-attaining pupils, did not impact on the performance tables. Thus, schools had to balance what they thought was best for particular low attaining students against the potentially negative effect on public perceptions of the school's performance tables.

Initial decisions about which examination course pupils should pursue were often made in Year 10 although schools generally tried to leave the final decision about which level to enter as late as possible, for example, until after Autumn term in Year 11 in HS1. As several teachers pointed out, this meant that you could still use examination entry level as a motivational 'carrot' for longer. Moreover, it was recognition that some low-attaining pupils made late improvements. However, as several heads of department pointed out, it was often difficult in practice to move people up if different parts of the syllabus had been covered by the other group. One English department [GH1] said they tried to obviate this difficulty by ensuring that there was as much overlap as possible between the entry level and the GCSE groups, by setting common writing tasks, so that individuals could move up a set if they were able.

Thus, across the sample it was evident that the schools were engaged in a range of inter-related strategies aimed at sustaining pupil motivation to want to achieve at school. While some strategies were aimed more specifically at low attainers, for

whom motivation was generally considered to be more problematic, other strategies were aimed at all pupils.

#### **6.4.5 Mathematics**

The greater preference for setting in mathematics across the sample, and shown to be evident more broadly in the survey, allowed for greater curriculum differentiation among groups. Across the sample teachers emphasised the need for variety and the need to appeal to kinaesthetic learning styles, to sustain motivation in low-attaining groups. Thus, mathematics teachers in most schools [e.g. KS1, HS1, HS2, FS1] echoed the views of teachers at Key Stage 2 in championing activity-based learning. Some teachers said they would also like to use more activity-based learning with higher-attaining groups too but that the heavily laden syllabus made it difficult. However, one school [GM2] had managed this by adopting an activity-based programme across the attainment range following the Mathematics Enhancement Project curriculum at Key Stage 3, involving whole-class interactive teaching, and pacy lessons, which differentiated by outcome. The head of mathematics was enthusiastic because while everyone used the same text book, thereby making no group stand out for following a different course, there were questions pitched at different levels and opportunities for low-attaining pupils to be introduced to more complex topics, such as Pythagoras, in a simplified way. Moreover, the head of mathematics maintained that research had shown that the course was most effective with low-attaining pupils.

Across the case studies there were also small group withdrawals at Key Stage 3, and particularly in Year 7, for low-attaining or under-achieving pupils to follow specific mathematics programmes, such as Springboard mathematics, led by a member of the school's support team.

At Key Stage 4, several mathematics departments ran modular mathematics courses, which they thought suited low-attaining pupils. One department's [GH2] modular mathematics programme had an end-of course examination which the lowest attainers took at the end of Year 10 since attendance reportedly dropped off in Year 11. However, this arrangement enabled pupils to retake particular modules and the examination in Year 11, as appropriate, and potentially better their grades. In contrast, in another school [FS1] a linear course with a final examination was favoured over a modular course (which higher-attaining pupils were following) on account of it being less stressful - a concern voiced by a group of Year 10 pupils in another school [HS1]<sup>7</sup>, who said they felt under pressure being tested at the end of each module.

At the same time as differentiating the curriculum one head of mathematics [FS1] thought it was important to have some common aspects of the curriculum., Hence all pupils in the school had an 8-week revision period in mathematics leading up to the examination in Key Stage 4, thus treating lower attainers the same as other pupils, and enhancing their feelings of self worth.

#### **6.4.6 English**

Where mixed-attainment grouping was practised in English in the case-study schools within-class mixed attainment groups were also often advocated. The argument for mixed-attainment grouping was that it benefited the lower *and* the higher-attaining pupils both academically and socially. More specifically, according to some teachers, it enabled them to benefit from peer support, and to see good examples of written work. In addition, as several teachers pointed out [e.g. in FS1, HS2, HS1, GM1]

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that they were middle-attaining rather than low-attaining pupils.

pupils whose written work was poor, could often express themselves better orally. Thus, as one head of department [HS1] explained, increased oracy in English lessons allowed for low-attainers to achieve, thereby helping to raise their self-esteem:

*I think that probably oracy is the key to everything we do in English here. That kind of underpins everything and we're trying to hand the learning over to the pupils. (Head of department, HS1)*

For this reason one school [FS1] offered lower-attaining pupils the option of being assessed orally on their Shakespeare text for GCSE. More generally, teachers in some departments [e.g. HS1, GH1, HS2] were seating pupils in groups (rather than in paired tables facing forward) to facilitate group discussion although concerns were voiced about pupils getting easily distracted and teachers struggling to maintain discipline. Observations and pupil comments also suggested this was a valid concern in some cases.

As pointed out in Chapter 5, even where departments were pro mixed-attainment teaching at Key Stage 3, by the latter stages of Key Stage 4, all schools in the sample set, primarily to allow for more focused examination preparation. Specifically, several heads of department underlined the point that setting allowed them to select set texts more appropriate for the level of the class [e.g. HS2]. In contrast, in one school [GM2] it was felt important to ensure that some or all of the set texts and assignment tasks were the same across sets, in part, so as not to damage the self-esteem of low-attaining pupils. One school [KS1] further supported the bottom set in accessing the curriculum by buying a class set of cartoon-strip versions of the text. In another school [FS1] all teachers in English at Key Stage 3 followed the same scheme, teaching the same topics at the same time but differentiating by outcome, which enabled teachers to share resources and ideas and to ensure consistency in assessment.

There was a noticeable concentration of literacy support for low-attaining pupils in Year 7 in a number of schools [e.g. GM1, HS1, HS2]. As with mathematics, there was a range of both within-class and withdrawal support in English across the case-studies, which depended in part on the funding available. These included a computer-based programme called Lexia [GM1] for very low-attaining pupils in Years 6-8, which they followed for 30 minutes each day and which aimed to improve their reading ages so that they could access the curriculum. Pupils who were dyslexic were also provided with laptops for lessons.

The two inner city schools followed a particular literacy programme. One school in particular [HS1] had had impressive results with the programme. About 15 pupils (a mixture of EAL and SEN pupils) are taken out mid-way through the first term of Year 7 and follow the alternative curriculum for the rest of the year although they are reintegrated into the mainstream if their reading level improves sufficiently. The head of English explained that some teachers initially had reservations about the programme, as did a learning support teacher in the other inner-city school. Nevertheless, out of 29 pupils who had followed the course in the first cohort, 28 got Level 5 at Key Stage 3. In Year 8 in the same school, selected low-attaining and/or underachieving pupils were withdrawn for 20 minutes three times a week from a variety of lessons to work on specific targets with a learning mentor, following the DfES Writing Challenge course.

### 6.4.7 Science

Among the case-study schools there were a range of curricular strategies which were proving successful with low-attaining pupils. One school, for example, said their science results had improved for low-attaining pupils at Key Stage 3 because they had switched to teaching in mixed-attainment groups. Another school [HS1] had just become involved in the Gatsby Science Enhancement Programme at Key Stage 3, which involved shared curriculum development among several schools in the LA, with each school developing schemes of work for allocated topics. Despite it involving a lot of extra work, the senior member of the science department interviewed was enthusiastic, saying it was more activity-based, involving more critical thinking and problem-solving skills and greater use of ICT and assessment for learning. Although the aim was to improve science teaching for all pupils, he felt it was likely to be particularly successful with low-attaining pupils.

*It's a lot more active. It's a lot more – it allows the pupil to grasp the concepts a lot easier than book work sitting in their seats. A lot of the low-ability pupils are very kinaesthetic and they just can't sit still and that's why they are low-ability pupils. They just don't work like that. And the new schemes of work has got a lot of that in it – it has got a lot of activities for teachers to think about and try out in their class. So if we can get that going that will make a massive difference.*

A third school [HS2] felt their success in terms of science results (approximately 90 percent getting a Grade C equivalent at GCSE) at Key Stage 4 was due to low-attaining pupils following a vocationally-oriented course based purely on coursework (BTEC), which enabled them to achieve (see Appendix X Case study i). This was coupled with a literacy focus within the subject, with an emphasis on assessment for learning. As a senior member of the science department explained:

*In terms of low-attaining groups I think it's [BTEC's] fantastic. In GCSE they would get an E, whereas you can tell them exactly what they need to do to get a C. ... We've got a course which well it's vocational, it's course work-based, the kids can revisit the work that they do – they can go over it again and again and we give a huge amount of feedback – we're constantly remarking and giving booster classes and so at Key Stage 4, in terms of getting a Grade C, which is a pass at GNVQ, many many of our kids can achieve that so we get something like 90 plus percent [through]– [Senior science teacher, HS2]*

A group of low-attaining Year 10 pupils backed up this assessment:

*Science is OK. I find the coursework easy and I always complete it before the deadline ...but when you go to the computer and type in our coursework that's the best thing about it ... because he [the teacher] marks and corrects and that's how we learn about it. (Year 10 pupil, HS2)*

However, it was also recognised that a course based purely on coursework could tempt teachers to dedicate much more time to the topics on which pupils had assessments, especially given the time given over to assisting pupils with drafting and redrafting written work, rather than on other non-assessed aspects of the curriculum. Thus, pupils in lower sets could potentially be exposed to a more limited understanding of science.

## 6.5 Building positive relationships

As discussed in Chapter 2, lack of self-esteem and poor motivation are frequently cited as potential negative consequences of setting for pupils in lower sets. One of the ways in which the schools tried to overcome this was through a strong school ethos which explicitly valued all children, irrespective of attainment, and worked to build self-esteem. In one school [ KP1] the weekly ethos statement, such as 'I will co-operate with others in work and play', provided a discussion focus in class aimed at furthering understanding of a particular aspect of the school's nurturing and inclusive values (see Appendix X Case study f). The emphasis on school ethos was evident in most of the schools at both primary and secondary level.

### 6.5.1 School ethos

In most of the primary schools, various staff members emphasised the importance of establishing a nurturing environment that ensured all pupils felt valued and cared for and had opportunities to develop their various potentials in a range of areas (see Appendix X Case study a).

#### ***Consulting pupils about their learning***

This was very evident in the primary school [HP2] where they had employed a counsellor. Another key feature of the school's ethos was listening to pupils and taking their views into consideration in a number of ways, such as through the action research on pupil grouping that the school was engaged in at the time of the visit. This involved soliciting Key Stage 2 pupils' views through focus group discussions on classroom groupings and how they learned best (see Appendix X Case study b). The findings were providing the basis for an INSET day the following term, and the Year 5 teacher intended to discuss them further with her own class. The head also emphasised that they tried to include pupils' input in discussions about their work at parents' evenings and pupils were also encouraged to resolve disagreements at school themselves, though with adult guidance where necessary.

The low-attaining Year 5 pupils interviewed had clearly benefited from such approaches since, notwithstanding their relatively low attainment, they spoke confidently about their own learning and that of others and were able to reflect maturely on how it could be improved. For example, one pupil talked about her preference for within-class mixed attainment grouping so that pupils who found the work easier could help her initially:

*...and then I'll do the rest on my own. It's all I need - help for, to help me for a little bit of work and I can do the rest. Yeah. I'm not telling them to do it for me and everything. I just need help. (Year 5 pupil)*

Another recognised the recent improvement in his writing through being withdrawn for extra literacy:

*I think it's really improved my writing 'cos I'm getting used to it now – going with her [the TA] – and she gives us homework and I'm getting used to my handwriting [tasks] as well. (Year 5 pupil)*

Across the secondary sample, school ethos was equally important although the emphasis was slightly different and more varied among the schools. Teachers and school managers emphasised the importance of building and maintaining good teacher-pupil relations in order to sustain pupil motivation.

*[Pupil] progress depends upon the relationship between students and staff  
(Head teacher, GH1)*

### **Building strong teacher–pupil relationships**

Similarly, staff in two of the smaller schools [GM1, FS1] made the point that at school level having smaller pupil numbers meant that all staff, including the head teacher, could get to know individual pupils well and understand their individual circumstances, including home background, which helped to forge staff-pupil relationships. One of these schools [FS1], as highlighted earlier, had a pastoral care centre, thus highlighting the centrality of pastoral care to the school ethos.

Very different approaches to establishing teacher-pupil relations were exemplified in the school ethos of the two inner-city secondary schools, where the relatively high levels of resourcing were also significant. One school aimed to sustain pupil motivation [HS2] primarily through the school's visible focus on learning, for example through making a vast number of PCs available for extra study, having a learning centre open long hours, and holding numerous subject-specific homework clubs, revision classes and summer schools. Good teacher-pupil relationships, one senior staff member argued, were forged in part because pupils appreciated the extra effort teachers made to help them with their learning both inside and outside class.

*The extra support works and the kids see you're putting the extra effort in.  
(Mathematics teacher, HS2)*

Pupils' views generally confirmed this although some felt that non-academic achievements were insufficiently valued in the school.

*P1: I didn't really like the new teacher. It's OK now. I'm doing well and I'm keeping up with my coursework.*

*I: What do you think has helped you make progress?*

*P1: I dunno. Sometimes I stay after school with the teacher and she would help me and you'd start to think even though she's new here she's quite a nice person.*

*P2: If you want help or you can't finish your coursework the teacher helps us in lunchtime or after school. (Year 10 pupils, HS2)*

The other approach [HS1] was to get pupils interested in school and to strengthen teacher-pupil relationships in the early years through an extensive extra-curricular programme, such as residential courses, outward bound and school trips (see Appendix X Case study g). Although there were also academic-focused revision classes and summer schools, particularly higher up the school, the overall ethos in the school was different. As one of the senior management team member explained, and several other teachers reinforced:

*There are more teaching resources available for the upper school, but more energy and activities working on school ethos and aspiration lower down the school. Year 7 kids go on a residential, and there's lots of outward bound.... There's a need for hooks for kids to buy into schooling and also to broaden pupil experiences.*

Another senior manager emphasised the inclusiveness of the school:

*I think 'Why do we do so well by weak ability children?' and partly it's because we do so well by everybody and we make sure they're part of that everybody - an ethos as much as anything else.*

### ***Raising pupil and teacher aspirations***

Management in both schools, however, emphasised the importance of working at raising aspirations within the school communities. These were implicitly categorised as working class families which lacked the social capital of putative middle-class families, and teaching staff, against which they were implicitly measured.

*The school provides what middle-class families provide at home. (Senior manager, HS1)*

*School is compensating for working-class families ... cementing the cracks (Senior manager, HS1)*

*A learning mentor is an academic tutor a parental substitute – a middle-class parent who would extend the student's learning across the dinner table – if you see what I'm saying. It's a bit tongue-in-cheek that part (Senior manager, HS2)*

However, it was reportedly very difficult to motivate low-attaining pupils, whom the head implied were mainly from working-class backgrounds, in a school [GH2] which was predominantly populated by higher-attaining pupils from wealthier, middle-class backgrounds. Some teachers in the school also recognised that being a low attainer was a relative term that might negatively influence both pupil and teacher aspirations.

*If we took some of the lower attaining students in this school to an inner city school, we might find them much more able than we might give them credit for. (Science teacher, GH2)*

The school attempted to overcome this difficulty by prioritising staff-pupil relations, which came across as positive in the general atmosphere of the school and in the observations.

### **6.5.2 Discipline/reward systems**

School reward systems were also seen as crucial to raising pupils' self-esteem and achievement in all schools at both primary and secondary level. Further, primary level reward systems relied more on certificates, praise and sharing achievement and endeavour with parents/carers whereas secondary level reward systems were additionally characterised by more material incentives in some schools.

Rewards at both primary and secondary level were generally given for different combinations of achievement, effort, behaviour, attendance, extra-curricular success (and even participating in this research!). - in short, not necessarily for high academic attainment, thus affording low-attaining pupils the possibility of reward. Some rewards were individual and others were collective; some were one-off while others were cumulative, awarded at the end of the week, month and/or year (see Appendix X Case study k). Attendance prizes were a feature of some primary schools with an attendance cup competition among classes instituted in one school [HP1] since, as the head teacher noted, '*Absence is going to have a big impact on achievement*'.

Several primary schools had achievement assemblies when every effort was made to celebrate the achievement of lower and higher-attaining pupils. At one school [KP1] each class teacher made a weekly nomination for 'Star of the Week', who received a certificate in assembly. Additionally, teachers awarded team points to particular tables (teams) during lessons, which were totalled at the end of the week and the winning teams were applauded in assembly. Once again a range of criteria were used to ensure that reward was possible for all pupils. From the observations, the

pupils were keen to gain team points. The head teacher maintained that such incentives constituted the main strategy aimed at low-attaining pupils:

*I think the key strategy is to make them love school, to make them think there's somewhere where they can be successful. If you don't get kids to enjoy learning it doesn't matter what strategies you put in place (Head teacher, KP1)*

Certainly, the Year 5 low-attaining pupils interviewed across the sample nearly all seemed to enjoy school and although a number expressed frustration at some of the difficulties they were having with different aspects of their studies, they appeared motivated.

At secondary level, there seemed to be general agreement across the case-study schools that rewards such as merit points, housepoints or stamps were generally more motivating lower down the school, such as in Years 7 and 8 and for lower-attaining pupils. Several teachers noted that as pupils got older, as several teachers put it, it became "uncool" to get a reward but that nevertheless the lower-attaining pupils often still appreciated the praise, albeit it more covertly. A teacher in one school got over this by putting the award stickers surreptitiously in the pupils' books:

*I started last year doing these stickers with my name - merit awards and pupil of the week - I usually just do them to Key Stage 3 but decided to carry on but it's very different from what I do with Year 10 young adults, I'll very quietly sidle over, open their planner, stick it in, close it and walk away again because they would hate to be identified as doing something positive but they very quietly love having that. You know they're going to go home and say, 'Look what I got'.*

Several secondary schools [e.g. HS2, KS1, HS1] had cumulative awards: in one school you got an award visit, for example to a theme park, at the end of the year if you had earned sufficient merit points, though these were withheld if there had been serious behaviour issues. A visit to a theme park was also an award for high attendance at summer school, though again serious misbehaviour would jeopardise that. In another school, a certain number of merit points earned you a raffle ticket for a termly prize draw to win an iPod. Smaller prizes in the schools included vouchers for I-tunes, mobile phone top-ups, cinema and theatre vouchers and cash prizes. One school [FS1] was using cash vouchers as an incentive to pupils to encourage them to attend the examinations for which they were entered. Teachers in one school [KS1] felt that pupils with behaviour issues (who were often low-attaining pupils) were generally given more rewards to reinforce positive behaviour.

Pupils' comments generally confirmed that rewards could enhance motivation:

*Pupil : When I got a lot [of merit points] even though I didn't behave I still went on [a trip] because I improved after I got told off.*

*I: So being told off helped you think about the need to focus?*

*Pupil: So I was like 'Oh great we've got a trip coming on' so I was like I really need to get this done and everything and I got back on top of my things. (Year 8 pupil, KS1)*

Disciplinary systems among the primary schools were generally based on positive behaviour policies with an emphasis on mutual tolerance and respect. In one school [HP2], pupils were encouraged to sort out disputes with each other with the aid of an adult. Across the secondary sample there were different approaches to discipline, particularly with older, more disaffected low-attaining pupils. The management of the inner-city school with the strong emphasis on academic achievement and endeavour

[HS2] felt that the key to pupils attaining highly was strict discipline for *all* pupils. The head teacher explained that very strict disciplinary measures had been revised and introduced in agreement with parents/carers in order to provide an atmosphere which was conducive to learning (see Appendix X Case study i). As one of the senior management team explained:

*A lot of our students in the school do very very well in this school because they know there are clear boundaries within the school. ...Parents from other areas of [the city] send their kids to this school because local schools are perceived to be more tolerant and they like the ethos that the staff are very much in control in this school... There is a high-profile senior management team and visible patrolling of the main corridors by the head teacher and senior pastoral staff... It takes the confrontation away from the teachers and allows them to focus on the teaching. (Senior manager, HS2)*

Another head [GM1] felt similarly: “*Strong discipline [is needed] so that teachers can take risks and teach well.*” In contrast, several teachers in some schools [e.g. HS1, KS1, GH2] held the view that at the classroom level teachers needed to be more flexible as regards discipline and negotiate more with low-attaining pupils. Pupils’ views on discipline were also mixed. This is discussed further in Chapter 7.

## **6.6 External Involvement**

In the final sections of this chapter we focus on the ways that schools invited and utilised support for outside the school itself to support the learning of low attaining pupils. We first discuss the formal and informal ways that parents /carers were involved and then we consider other external agencies.

### **6.6.1 Parents/carers**

The schools’ attempts to involve parents/carers and other family members in supporting learning constituted another strategy which was deemed particularly important for low-attaining pupils (see Appendix X Case study b). In the case of pupils who were statemented, or identified as School Action or School Action Plus, parents/carers were involved in regular meetings with the school as part of the support process. Similarly, in the case of ‘problem’ pupils with poor attendance, there was usually more contact with the school’s family liaison officers or attendance and welfare officers.

More generally though, in addition to the usual formal means of communicating with parents/carers, such as through representation on the PTA and on the board of governors, by newsletters and parents evenings, a few of the primary schools were experimenting with other forms of involvement.

Encouraging greater parent/carer involvement in homework was one strategy. As one senior manager [HP2] said, when asked what would most help low-attaining pupils:

*Get[ting] parents to read with their children at home and tell them stories and talk to them.*

Across the sample, predominantly at Key Stage 2, home support for literacy was seen as crucial, generally through homework tasks. In one school, Spellzone was encouraged at home through the internet [GM1] and a reward scheme was established for doing this although clearly families without internet access would be

excluded. Praise letters were sent home in Year 10 English at one secondary school [FS1] as a positive way to inform and involve parents/carers in their child's progress.

Some schools also put on classes for parents/carers [e.g. HP1 & HP2], some of which involved teachers working with both parents/carers and their children. English classes, in particular, were aimed at families where English was not the first language. While such classes were reportedly popular, views varied as to their effectiveness in increasing parental/carer participation in supporting pupil learning. One family and school liaison officer, however, felt that she could already see the impact of the classes in increased levels of confidence and self esteem among some low-attaining pupils on account of the greater parental/carer involvement in their learning (see Appendix X Case study i).

Classes in several schools covered different curriculum areas, focusing on sharing ideas of how parents/carers could support their child's learning in this area at home. One school [HP1] had successfully introduced a programme involving a small group of adults reading with *other* people's children. Three of the six adults had then gone on to become teaching assistants.

Another school [HP2] had a 'sharing assembly' once a week, when parents/carers could come in and view children's work. They also had a book and a toy library, lending toys and activity packs for parents/carers to use at home. Previously this had really only been used by White parents but the head said they had "revitalised it" and were now getting more minority ethnic parents to use it. One of the aims of these libraries was to provide children with more opportunities to practise more oracy at home, which was seen as central to improving literacy.

One of the Success For All strategies [KP1] which one of the TAs noted had really helped improve her own son's reading was the 'read and respond' initiative, which required pupils to read either to themselves or to an adult at home every day and get their book signed. Pupils were encouraged to participate by being awarded raffle tickets, which were entered for a weekly draw for the whole school. Another component of SFA was the establishment of a family support team which entailed targeting the parents/carers of pupils who were falling behind with their work, focusing on 'promoting parental involvement, developing plans to meet the needs of individual children who are not making progress and implementing attendance plans' (Family Support Team Policy) (see Appendix X Case study a).

In one LA there was a major numeracy-focused initiative at secondary level, aimed at getting parents/carers involved in homework activities, often based on games and puzzles. It was considered by a mathematics teacher at one participating school [HS2] to be particularly successful with low-attaining pupils, in part because of the brightly-coloured worksheets and the fun games. He had also had positive feedback from parents. The programme involved an annual school-based workshop, run by members of the project team working with parents/carers and their child, followed by regular tutorials/workshops with them. Although initially intended for Year 7, the programme had been expanded to include Years 8 and 9.

### **6.6.2 External agencies**

All the schools had access to a whole range of specialist services to support the learning of children with special educational needs, some of whom were low-attaining. The availability and the quality reportedly varied across the sample with some schools investing more on providing additional in-house support. Liaison and referral to outside agencies was usually co-ordinated by the SENCO. Services

included speech and language therapists, behaviour support officers, psychologists and language and communication support officers.

Several of the inner-city schools had also initiated schemes with local business communities to support learning. In one school [HP2], business partners came in once a week at lunchtime to do drama, music, extra mathematics (such as Number Shark on the computer) or ICT with selected children. The head, in consultation with class teachers, said they tried “*to target children who probably don’t get listened to at home just to build on their experience*”. This potential for external support was clearly dependent on school location, but one more rural school [GM1] did receive some funding from a local trust that was used to fund a TA for 15 hours a week. In another [GH1] income generated by the school farm was received by the school.

As mentioned above, EMAG funding provided EAL support in the city schools. In one school, it paid for an EAL advisor one day a week, who concentrated primarily on newly arrived immigrants and asylum seekers and pupils in Key Stage 1. She had also trained an EAL TA, who was implementing the Talking Partners programme, for EAL pupils struggling with oracy in English [KP1, HP1]. This entailed withdrawal of three pupils from class three times a week to work with one adult, which she felt allowed them to develop their fluency and increase their confidence. One school [HS2] used EMAG funding also to support ‘enrichment activities’.

The city schools in the study were able to access funds from the Excellence in Cities initiative and also harnessed local business support for various school projects, which low-attaining pupils benefited from, even though some were targeted at a broader range of pupils. One school [HS1] was running an increasingly popular business mentoring scheme for pupils from Year 10 onwards (also running in another inner-city school [HS2]), in which all pupils that wanted to participate were paired with a business mentor, whom they met on average once a fortnight. From only a dozen mentor/mentee pairings when the scheme first started, at the last count there were between 40-50 pupils in the school who had requested and been allocated mentors. One teacher explained that business mentors often focused on CVs, careers advice and preparing pupils for the transition from school to college or work. He described their mentoring as “less academic” but more wide-ranging than that of the ex-pupil academic mentors (see below), and noted that it had had a positive impact on the attitude and attainment of some of the pupils, including some low attainers (see Appendix X Case study g).

In the same school [HS1] a bank was funding a cine-club for underachieving Year 9 boys and there was a three-year business partnership with a major retail firm’s academy, targeting 24 Year 8 pupils each year across the attainment spectrum whom they believed “*[would] gain increased academic motivation from the project*” (senior manager). Local businesspeople were also involved in several schools’ vocational programmes.

Another successful scheme entailed recruiting and training ex-pupils from the school [HS1, HS2] to become academic mentors for pupils and help them with their academic work. As one senior teacher said the advantage of ex-pupils over TAs and teachers is that they have “street cred” with the pupils. A couple of pupils questioned over the scheme were very enthusiastic. In another school [GH2], an externally-funded youth worker had worked successfully with some low-attaining pupils, which, the head teacher suggested, was also partly due to their being visibly located outside the school, dressed in jeans and speaking more in the pupils’ language.

## 6.7 Summary

### ***Managing resources to support the learning of low attainers***

- In almost all cases, resources were allocated to keep the class size of low attainment groups small to allow the concentration of resources and more individualised teaching and learning.
- In all the case study secondary / high schools, resource allocation and curriculum provision for low attaining pupils at Key Stage 4 was in tension with schools' efforts to improve their profiles in the performance tables.
- The use of teaching assistants, as well as learning mentors and support teachers, to support the learning of low attainers was a key strategy across the case studies schools. They were used in a wide variety of ways to support both the teacher and teaching as well the pupil and learning.
- Support for the learning of low attainers was most effective when it was co-ordinated and the TAs and teachers worked together as a team, and TA professional development was prioritised. More consistent levels of support were in place at Key Stage 2 but school size and timetabling complexities made this more difficult at Key Stage 3 and 4.
- The teachers in low attainment groups in the vast majority of cases were as experienced and well-qualified staff as those of higher attaining groups. Nevertheless, pupils usually enjoyed and benefited from the support of teaching assistants although by Key Stage 3 and 4 some pupils were sensitive about very focused attention by a teaching assistant in the classroom.

### ***Curriculum, provision and assessment***

- In many subject departments similar topics were covered in different attainment groups albeit with differentiated materials. This worked to facilitate set flexibility and to ease transition from one set to another.
- Pupils' progress and set placement were monitored using National Curriculum test results, a range of other school tests / assignments and teacher judgements. In many cases, the results of tests were used to identify learning difficulties which were often fed back individually to pupils.
- At Key Stage 4, low attaining pupils were often provided with alternative curriculum programmes either in specific subjects or through a comprehensive vocational programme that included parts of the week outside the school in college or on work-based placements.
- There were explicit attempts to vary approaches to teaching in low attainment groups to provide activity-based learning, to appeal to different learning styles and to sustain pupil motivation.
- In many schools, curriculum texts, classroom arrangements and testing formats were often adopted to enhance the learning experiences and outcomes for low attaining pupils. Assessment for learning was widely promoted as a way to provide clear specific feedback on learning and as a motivational device for low attaining pupils.

### ***Building positive relationships***

- In all schools there was an explicit school ethos that provided an inclusive and nurturing environment. This included valuing the positive but often non-academic related achievements of low attaining pupils.
- Although schools adopted different and often contrasting approaches in their efforts to improve learning they all used prizes and awards for achievement, effort and attendance to motivate pupil engagement in their learning.
- Consulting pupils either through action research or in parents' evenings was an effective way to encourage pupils to take more responsibility for their learning.

### ***External involvement***

- Involving parents / carers was generally thought to be effective in improving the learning of low-attaining pupils. This was encouraged in a variety of ways including outreach to homes, inviting parents / carers in to school and through homework activities and reading schemes.
- Some schools hosted classes for parents / carers, especially in EAL, which was reported to have positive effects on their children's self-esteem and confidence.
- All schools had access, to varying degrees, to specialist services for low attaining pupils, including speech and language therapists, behaviour support officers, psychologists and language and communication support officers who were usually co-ordinated by the SENCO.
- Although these were not specifically targeted at the low attaining pupils, some schools enjoyed the involvement of local businesses supporting learning in a variety of curricular and extra-curricular sessions, schemes and activities. These opportunities were usually more available in the city schools that could also draw on other resources, including EMAG and Excellence in Cities.

## **Chapter 7. Key Classroom Strategies Supporting the Learning of Low-attaining Pupils**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides examples of classroom practices from the case-study schools seen to be doing well with low attaining pupils. The main purpose was to look at classroom practices that maximised the advantages and minimised the disadvantages of attainment grouping although we have also included more general classroom strategies that were found to support the learning of low attainers. The focus of data collection was pupils in low-attaining groups in literacy/ English, numeracy/mathematics in Key Stages 2, 3 and 4 and science in Key Stages 3 and 4.

The discussion is organised around the three themes: resources, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and interpersonal relations, at the classroom level.

### **7.2 Resources**

#### **7.2.1 Deploying TA support**

The use of TAs was a key strategy to support the learning of low attainers across all schools. By using attainment groups, schools allowed the concentration of TA support for low attaining pupils (see Appendix X Case study k). As indicated in section 6.2 the positive impacts of this were maximised where the support was co-ordinated. The size and organisational constraints in secondary schools made this co-ordination more difficult although the city schools, in particular, had made strenuous efforts to maximise its quality and coherence.

In the study there were several examples of teachers maximising human resources to support low-attaining pupils in the classroom. For example in one school [GM2], the teacher took the lowest-attaining pupils out of the bottom set class once a week to work on their basic numeracy while the 3 TAs took them for two lessons to do follow-up work. The head teacher felt this only worked because of the high quality of the TAs although there was concern expressed by another staff member about the pupils not being taught by a teacher twice a week. This problem was overcome in another school [HP2], where because there was a support teacher available on Mondays, the mixed-attainment numeracy class could be divided into lower and higher attaining pupils and the class teacher could teach the two groups separately (with TA support in addition) while the support teacher taught the remainder ICT. The class teacher viewed this as particularly useful at the beginning of the week when it was usual to begin a new topic (see Appendix X Case study b).

At primary level in particular, however, some teachers and TAs raised concerns that where pupils were accustomed to having a TA on their table, it was encouraging too much dependency and that sometimes pupils did not necessarily concentrate when listening to the teacher's instructions because they knew the TA would explain to them afterwards. One teacher [HP2] tried to counteract this by not allocating support to a particular table until after she had held an introductory plenary with the pupils gathered together on the carpet at the front, thus trying to ensure that they concentrated on what she had to say.

Pupils in the secondary schools, on the other hand, generally seemed more self-conscious about receiving in-class support than pupils at primary school. Thus successful TAs at secondary level needed to demonstrate sensitivity towards those

students who felt uncomfortable about having in-class support. A couple of TAs said they got round this by making themselves available in class but not making it too obvious that they were attached to a particular pupil. This was witnessed in several observed classes.

While in some of the lessons observed there appeared to be the potential for low-attaining pupils to receive less of the teacher's attention when they have a teaching assistant supporting them constantly on their table, in several classes teachers showed awareness of the need to spend time with every table and sometimes give the TA an opportunity to work with other pupils.

*I don't always want her to work with the [lowest-attaining] group – it's not good for them or her and I also need to see how the kids are doing. (Year 5 teacher, HP2)*

Within-class attainment grouping on tables of 4-6 pupils often provided an effective means of targeting adult support at the classroom level. Most Year 5 teachers practised some sort of within-class attainment grouping in literacy and numeracy even when the classes were already set, though not necessarily for other curriculum subjects. Thus, one TA would be allocated to the 'SEN table' while other TAs or learning mentors, where available, were directed at other target groups – other low-attaining pupils or underachieving pupils, for example. At other times TAs were more free-floating, like the teacher. In primary classes where TAs and teachers were clearly used to working together, TAs and teachers split classroom management tasks, which otherwise the teacher would have to do alone, thereby freeing up more time for teaching and learning. For example, in a literacy class [KP1] the teacher took the register while the TA organised the pupils' access to library books and collected in the 'read and respond' books, which she checked off while the teacher conducted the preliminary lesson plenary.

### **7.2.2 Views on support interventions**

Although it was impossible for teachers to gauge to what extent pupil progress was directly related to a particular support intervention, the vast majority of teachers at both primary and secondary level were generally very positive about the benefits of extra teacher or TA support for low attaining pupils.

A minority of teachers, however, were less sure and said it depended to a great extent on the individual TA and their ability to bond with the individual pupils. In addition, some teachers also pointed out that a few pupils did not like to be taken out of class, either because they felt embarrassed or, in the case of some pupils, because it meant missing a lesson they enjoyed. In one school [FP1] a teacher said that a child needing extra support avoided the stigmatisation of being taken out of class to work with a TA by being given extra teacher support during assembly time.

The quotes below reflect the range of teachers' views on extra learning support:

*TAs are excellent but because of the lack of continuity they very often are coming in [to class] blind (teacher, [KS1])*

*You're always going to encourage somebody to come and sit with a kid and help them and it helps the kid focus, just having someone sat next to them who isn't another child but in terms of the intervention sometimes it can be .... it's not great but at other times you've got some fantastic people (senior teacher, HS2)*

*We get learning mentors, TAs and special needs teachers. Sometimes they work well; sometimes they don't. ... It depends on the TA and the relationship with the student. (teacher, HS2)*

*I think having TAs in the class is very helpful especially with lower-ability kids 'cos they don't monopolise teacher time. Otherwise the temptation is to stay with lower-ability kids. (teacher, HP1)*

*It [withdrawal] gives them more confidence. (teacher, KP1)*

The low attaining pupils we interviewed at both primary and secondary school were also positive about the support offered by TAs and learning mentors. Positive comments in favour of withdrawal interventions at primary level included highlighting the fact that they were able to concentrate more in smaller, quieter groups, that they enjoyed the activities, which they felt helped them to improve. At secondary level a number of low attaining pupils noted that the support had helped them to improve their grades.

*When I go out with Mirza [TA] it's so calm and I can do anything I want and do activities. (Year 5 pupil, HP2)*

*Because it's a little group and there's not so much noise. If we're all bundled then together and there's quite a lot of noise so it's easier when we're individual [on our own]. (Year 5 pupil, HP2)*

I: *Have you had a learning mentor?*

P1: *[...] I saw one once every two weeks – It was useful. I got from Level 3 to Level 5 in Maths.*

I: *Anyone else?*

P2: *I had help in Maths and Science. It was helpful helping me in exam questions and things like that.  
[...]*

P3: *I had one in Year 9 – it was helpful because I did improve in my grades. (Year 10 pupils, HS2)*

*I like doing lessons 1-to-1 with the teacher - but not all the time but most of the time I do. 'Cos there's like no-one inside the room you can tell personal things, like you can explain to her [the teacher] and they'll give you advice or they can just help you (Year 8 pupil, HS1)*

Although in some cases interventions were evaluated formally, in others, teacher comments suggested a more informal, intuitive evaluation. These cases could probably have benefited from a more formal evaluation especially in the light of Ofsted's (2006) concern about the ineffectiveness of many withdrawal interventions, as noted in Chapter 2.

As regards in-class support, pupils at primary level liked the fact that TAs could help them when they got stuck and could clarify the teacher's instructions. It was certainly obvious in several observations that valuable learning time was lost when pupils had not understood the task and a TA or teacher was not immediately available to clarify. However, one of the interesting findings in the school that was researching pupil views on grouping was that "nearly all the children said that if we don't understand something it's better for the children to explain it to us" (Head teacher, HP2)

In the same school research project pupils judged 1-to-1 contact to be the most effective form of intervention, as a result of which management was considering whether to have individual support once a week rather than small-group interventions five times a week.

*In an ideal world it [what would most help low-attaining pupils] would be one-to-one time with the children to really help unravel their blocks and difficulties. (Year 5 teacher, KP1)*

In addition to appointing support staff, schools invested in their training to varying degrees. In one primary school [HP1], for example, one of the teaching assistants had been trained to manage the newly installed computer database for tracking pupil progress. Blatchford et al.'s (2004) study had concluded that the training opportunities for TAs were insufficiently focused on the pedagogic aspects of their role. However, one primary school [HP2] had recently funded the appointment of a literacy advisory teacher, who for three days a week was co-ordinating literacy support across the school. The establishment of the advisory post, she maintained, had enabled them to train carefully selected TAs to a "higher level" and to have training more specifically tailored to the needs of the school. It also ensured greater consistency in the delivery of literacy interventions. This initiative occurred in response to a concern that some TAs were being asked to support pupils who had very complex learning needs yet they had had a fairly limited academic education themselves. Several other teachers in secondary schools [HS1, KS1, GH1] raised this issue not only in relation to TAs but also to teachers. This, several noted, had come about through the policy of inclusion, which the pressures that teachers were under to address the very specific learning needs of some pupils in the name of inclusion.

*Where it becomes difficult is that if the kids aren't allocated that [TA support] then it's all down to the teacher. And I think we're getting to a level where that's getting too difficult to some extent. You know, in the name of inclusion we've got some kids in our classes who we didn't train to teach. We're not qualified to teach. I'm not qualified to teach a kid with a reading age of 5. I wasn't trained for that, you see what I mean? (teacher, HS1)*

### **7.2.3 Maximising the use of material resources**

Schools across the sample were resourced to different levels, nevertheless, all the schools were fairly well resourced at the classroom level and generally pupils had equal access to the many materials that supported learning, such as individual whiteboards, calculators or reading books. In one school [KP1], where two classes shared a classroom with an interactive whiteboard, it was allocated to the lower sets in literacy and numeracy for three out of the five days, as an added incentive. Where other materials were shared, a set of materials was put in the middle of the table and observations suggested that in general pupils shared materials without too much trouble. Teaching staff were quick to intervene if there were any disputes about whose turn it was to use particular equipment.

There were occasions, however, when some pupils had to share texts. In several cases, there were insufficient reading books or textbooks for pupils to have one each, so some pupils shared and in other lessons pupils in a whole group shared a photocopied text, which they then had to discuss. It might be that in the latter example text-sharing was part of encouraging group/pair co-operation. However, given the poor reading levels of some of the children, squinting at a text sideways or even reading it upside down, probably proved difficult. In fact in the lessons observed, some of the pupils clearly gave up trying. In several lessons, however,

[e.g. in KP1] teachers showed awareness of the need for low-attaining pupils to be able to focus on the task in hand so seated them at the front near the board.

### **7.3 Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment**

#### **7.3.1 Addressing the needs of low attainers in the classroom**

Whether a school and/or department espoused mixed attainment teaching or whether they preferred attainment grouping had a direct bearing on the types of classroom strategies advocated for low-attaining pupils. Thus, for those schools/departments adhering to setting, teachers across the sample highlighted targeting low-attaining groups with a more appropriate, and generally less demanding, syllabus and particular pedagogical strategies aimed at providing more scaffolding to pupils' learning and at sustaining motivation. These included slower instructions, more practical interactive activities, greater use of *realia* and visual stimuli, more examples, more recycling of ideas and reinforcement, more regular feedback and individual support, and breaking down activities and/or concepts into manageable stages (see Appendix X Case study b). Interviews with pupils at primary and secondary level confirmed that they found these strategies helpful and/or enjoyable. The careful lesson planning implied in the above, according to a number of teachers across the sample, meant that they often had to invest more time in planning for lower sets.

In contrast, teachers practising mixed-ability teaching (generally more English and science across the case studies) championed similar classroom techniques but also emphasised other aspects of pedagogy aimed at low-attaining pupils, such as increased emphasis on oracy and group work, allowing for all abilities to participate in class, and within-class differentiation by task and/or by outcome (see Appendix X Case study g). They also highlighted how they did not "dumb down", as one teacher put it, to the low-attainers but rather enabled them to achieve better, often through peer support in mixed-attainment table groupings. Whether teaching set or mixed-attainment groups, variety in activities was advocated, appealing to different learning styles, as was praise and encouragement. This was more in evidence in the primary classroom. Some of the classroom strategies mentioned above are discussed in greater detail in this section.

#### **7.3.2 Differentiating and ensuring success**

Differentiating classroom pedagogies was a key strategy to support low-attaining pupils both within and across classes. Some of the pedagogical differentiation occurred in the extra support programmes in literacy/English and numeracy/Mathematics, for which the lowest-attaining pupils were withdrawn from class, often employing a lot of interactive ICT and games. In addition, most teachers said they adopted different pedagogical approaches when teaching higher and lower-attaining sets. For example in primary numeracy, as one teacher explained, a lower-attaining group might be given the 3 x table to work with, while a higher-attaining group might do the 8 x table. In another class observed, the fractions were easier: for example, putting in size order  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{8}$  rather than,  $\frac{2}{7}$  and  $\frac{3}{5}$ , which the teacher said she would give to a higher-attaining group.

However, even when classes were set, there was some within-class differentiation evident in a number of cases, either by task, by level of support, by material or by outcome (or through a combination of them) (see Appendix X Case study d). In the lessons observed at Key Stage 2, pupils were frequently given the same work but the teacher differentiated by outcome and/or level of adult support, except in a few cases where sometimes the lowest-attaining pupils, generally identified as SEN, worked on alternative materials with a TA. For example, in one literacy class [HP1] where there

were two pupils who were new to the country and spoke minimal English, the TA worked on a separate table with them doing a programme of phonics while the class were working on an activity. However, whenever the teacher addressed the whole class, the TA would stop the activity so that the pupils had the opportunity to improve their auditory skills by listening to the teacher and got accustomed to different voices.

One of the disadvantages of differentiating curriculum and/or pedagogies between lower and higher-attaining pupils was the potential to put a ceiling on the attainment of a lower-attaining pupil by not challenging them cognitively, as mentioned above. This was obviated in numeracy lessons observed in one primary school [HP2] in which the teacher allowed pupils to self-select their level of difficulty. The teacher put a sheet on the board with many examples at differing levels to calculate - in one case fractions, in the other, multiplication sums. The easier examples were on the left and the harder ones were in the right-hand column. Pupils were then told they could select the sums they wanted to attempt. They were encouraged to try a couple of easy ones first, and then to try something harder if they had found the task easy. As the teacher went round, she encouraged pupils to select something harder, or easier as appropriate. This allowed all pupils to succeed and to level themselves, rather than to be labelled or levelled by the teacher. As another teacher explained:

*I like to give all pupils the same level of work because they do surprise you – some children who you would think would not get it as quickly they pick it up like that (Year 5 teacher HP1).*

Allowing pupils to select their own tasks also avoided any potential stigmatisation by peers for being given an easier worksheet. However, the teacher did give extra homework sheets to struggling pupils [HP1]. Staff in secondary schools also highlighted the need for pupils to succeed in the classroom:

*If they [low-attaining pupils]’re failing [in mathematics] then they’re behaving badly so they have to have continuous success happening and they just have a wider range of activities than they might have. So those teachers use IT a lot, use, one of them has more kinaesthetic stuff going, more just different things happening than they might normally do in a higher set (SENCO, HS1).*

*We use a lot of interactive materials - interactive whiteboards and the internet - and we use a lot of Key Stage 2 games, because they can access them quite easily. (senior member of mathematics department, KS1)*

Both primary and secondary teachers also generally concurred that low-attaining pupils needed more scaffolding and clearly structured activities, broken down into stages. Slower instructions were also needed; indeed, difficulty in following instructions and understanding what to do was highlighted by a number of primary pupils in interviews. It was also obvious both from some pupil interviews and observations that class time was lost for some low-attaining pupils when waiting for an adult to be available to help them to understand the task, particularly at Key Stage 2 (see Appendix X Case study c). One Year 5 teacher said that for this reason she tried to ensure mixed-attainment table grouping in the afternoon (when she had less adult support available) to ensure “*that at least one person on each table knows what they’re doing*” and can support the others. At secondary level pupils more often were able to go onto the next activity or question until they could access some support although this was not always the case.

### 7.3.3 Varying forms of learner engagement

There was less agreement, however, about the effectiveness of repetition as reinforcement. Some teachers thought that for some very low-attaining pupils they needed constantly to go over the same material to enforce understanding. Others thought that this could easily lead to boredom and that they needed greater variety of materials and approaches. As one teacher put it in relation to support interventions, “*there’s a need to think outside the box*”. A senior teacher in another school thought similarly:

*By the time they get to Year 5, Year 6 the intervention has to be something kind of very very specifically streamlined for those kids for it to be effective I think. Otherwise it feels like you’re throwing more of the same at them and one of the things that ...some of the children [in the research] were saying in the grouping interviews is that it’s just more of the same. (senior teacher, HP2)*

To help address this issue in one school [FP1] professional development was focused on urging teachers to be “creative” with literacy and numeracy strategy materials and to this end they encouraged peer observation and collaborative planning between paired teachers:

*I think it is very important that teachers don’t plan in isolation. In isolation a teacher may not be as skilled as two together at thinking, for example, about providing challenge. (head teacher FP1)*

At Key Stage 2 a greater range of materials were provided in a number of schools to help low-attaining pupils to grasp mathematical concepts, such as personal whiteboards, interactive whiteboards, bead lines and building blocks. Although primarily aimed at low-attaining pupils, they were often made available to all pupils. In one school [HP2] this was to avoid possible stigmatisation which might occur if they were given only to low-attaining pupils. This practice was observed in a lesson in which the teacher introduced the topic of division. First she gave an example, which was presented in several ways: by using a bead line, by drawing the stages in the process on the whiteboard and by using a grid, thereby appealing to different learning styles while reinforcing the process. When the pupils went back to their tables, they were then encouraged to use the method they preferred to use and to select any materials they wanted to aid their calculations. However, the teacher persuaded those pupils who successfully negotiated the first couple of examples to try further calculations without them.

Personal whiteboards were particularly popular with several primary numeracy teachers for a variety of reasons. These included their being perceived to be less threatening than exercise books and being useful for teachers to see pupils’ calculations. As one teacher [HP1] pointed out, and demonstrated in her lesson:

*I like to try and understand pupils’ workings and understand their ways of working. Even if the answer is wrong you can incorporate some of their ideas into your formal teaching.*

#### **Encouraging classroom participation**

To encourage verbal participation in their learning, some teachers were attentive to the ways they asked questions in low attainment groups. Observations of the lowest attaining mathematics set in [FS1] showed the teacher adopting the following approaches:

- If a pupil answers a question incorrectly asking a follow-up that they can get right;
- Leaving time for pupils to think before giving answers;
- Praising after correct answers;
- Asking mostly closed questions that build up answers step by step;
- Teacher not answering their own questions;
- Addressing questions to pupils who had not previously put up hands.

An associated tactic to encourage verbal participation was observed in lessons [HP1 & HP2], in which teachers allowed pupils extra thinking time by giving advanced warning that they would come back to particular pupils for their views on a specific issue.

Getting low attaining pupils to articulate how they arrived at particular answers was highlighted by a few teachers as being an important teaching strategy in numeracy/mathematics.

Another way to engage low attaining learners was through co-operative learning in which pupils discussing in pairs, then in teams before debating as a whole class. As the SFA co-ordinator [KP1] pointed out, "*Children are much more confident because they've had a practice with their partner*". Moreover "*It can keep the lesson pace quicker because you've got children who've spoken about what they want to say so they're prepared rather than firing questions at individuals.*" This was observed in a lesson during which pupils discussed a reading text in pairs before the teacher elicited answers from a number of pairs in a plenary.

Lack of verbal participation in class by some Bengali girls was an issue of concern in the school which had a marked gender imbalance in pupil numbers [HS2], as it was in the two case-study primary schools in the area, though to a slightly lesser extent. Several teachers acknowledged the problem and it was evident in the lesson observations, where in one class there were only two girls together with 13 boys.

This provides a good example of the way that broader school context influences the classroom learning environment. In the above case, the school management had started to address the issue by actively trying to recruit more female pupils for the school and to help build their confidence by segregating girls and boys in the playground and having separate entrances to the school, which the female pupils interviewed really appreciated.

*We found that when we changed and split the girls and boys in the playground and also in PE and games and so on and they started to have their own space so-to-speak we actually noticed the girls were far less shrinking violets ... We found far greater participation in lessons. (senior manager, HS2)*

Although as a result classroom participation may have improved overall in the school, from the lesson observations and from some teachers' comments, it was still clearly an issue of some concern.

### ***Practical and interactive approaches***

Examples from lesson observations where there were varied interactive activities in lower sets included a Year 10 lesson on fractions [HS2] in which the teacher demonstrated how to convert improper fractions into mixed fractions by using coloured fraction segments on the whiteboard, which were visually added or taken away and the pupils could count. In another Year 10 class [KS1], the teacher invited individual pupils up to the interactive whiteboard to divide a polygon into triangles for

the whole class to measure the angles. In another lesson in one school [FS1] the mathematics teacher taught averages through drama, which the SENCO reported observing – “*the number of SEN pupils who came out knowing the meaning of mode, median and mean was amazing*”. In another school mathematics lesson [FP1] on angles the teacher had the pupils showing angles by using their hands. She explained:

*I try to play a few games, especially with the mental practice. They are the kind of children who like to be hands on. They don't just want to listen. So showing angles was part of that.*

Various low-attaining pupils, especially younger ones, confirmed that they enjoyed and learned more from more activity-based lessons and that they particularly enjoyed using the computer and the interactive whiteboard.

The motivational potential of practical work in science for all pupils, and particularly low attainers, was recognised by many science teachers across the sample.

*One of the motivators that we do have in Science as opposed to other subjects is practical work. We do still try and maintain a high level of practical work in the lower ability groups because I think it keeps them interested in the subject (head of science, KS1).*

When science was mentioned as a favourite subject by the pupils interviewed it was often on account of the draw of practical work.

*The [science] teachers are great and there's great Harry-Potter-style equipment. (Year 10 pupil, HS1)*

*Some people just copy out of textbooks in science but we don't. We do experiments. (Year 8 pupil, FS1)*

One teacher said he deliberately tried to increase the practical work for low-attaining pupils. Thus, in one Year 8 lesson [HS2] in order to investigate the chemical reaction of different metals with acid, the teacher had the pupils test several different metals, whereas with a higher-attaining group he said he would have demonstrated with water and then given the pupils periodic tables to calculate the rest. In another Year 8 science lesson, on 'forces' [HS1], the teacher broke off a writing activity, which pupils were struggling to focus on, to revise the topic by getting volunteer pupils to blow up and release balloons and explain what was happening. As well as being motivating, practical work was considered to appeal to kinaesthetic learners, which many teachers interviewed associated with low-attaining pupils (see Appendix X Case study k).

Despite many teachers' and low-attaining pupils' acknowledged preference for games and interactive activities, some secondary teachers noted it was important to be seen not to be taking a childish approach to learning. One science teacher [GH2] recounted an incident when he had used a video which used puppets with different groups. The higher-attaining group had “loved it” whereas the lower-attaining group had felt “insulted”. Similarly, in an observed entry level science lesson, in which most pupils were enthusiastically engaged in building houses out of cardboard to illuminate using their knowledge of electric circuits [GH1], a few reacted negatively, considering the activity to be “stupid”. These examples demonstrate that there is potentially a fine line between what might be considered stimulating fun, practical activities and what might be viewed as childish and therefore unmotivating.

In addition to the teaching strategies already mentioned, a couple of teachers emphasised the need to relate issues to pupils' own experiences and to use visual stimuli. Several good examples of these strategies were observed. For example, in a Year 8 lesson [HS2] on persuasive writing in advertising, the starter included pupils looking at pictures of four advertisements and individually writing a persuasive sentence for each picture. Various pupils then volunteered to read out their sentences while the rest of the class were asked to identify and comment on the persuasive words/phrases in their sentences. In another Year 10 lesson [HS1], as a precursor to discussing a poem about water as a precious resource, the teacher asked pupils each to write down what water they had used that day, which both personalised the topic and prepared them for the poem. This was followed by a group-work activity in which pupils had to associate various picture prompts on a handout with lines from the poem and prepare to explain their choices. This open-ended task was accessible to all pupils in the class and the visual stimuli in particular saw most pupils engaged in the task. In another English department a set of cartoon strip versions of the set text had been ordered. (see Appendix X Case study g).

#### **7.3.4 Expectations and challenge**

Several secondary heads of department underlined the importance of teachers having high expectations no matter which set they were teaching (also see Appendix X Case study e).

*There's the need to be professional and push students no matter what set they're in (HS2)*

*I have the same expectations. I really believe in not dumbing or simplifying things down for kids. I have the same expectations. I actually set the same essays for all of my pupils as well. (HS1)*

However, an alternative view put forward by a senior teacher in another school [GH1] was that the level of challenge needed to be varied so sometimes she found activities that low attaining pupils could do easily and so experience a sense of achievement and at other times she wanted to stretch pupils' higher order thinking and reading skills as in the observed lesson about evaluating their own work. Some of the secondary pupil interviews and lesson observations suggested that some pupils were not being sufficiently challenged in their low sets.

Improving the quality of low-attaining pupils' written work was identified as a priority in a number of the schools at both primary and secondary level (see Appendix X Case study h). There was variation across the schools, however, as to whether low-attaining pupils should be given the same writing tasks, differentiated by outcome, or different tasks or a mixture of both. In both cases, greater scaffolding was often advocated such as providing more structure, perhaps by using writing frames, giving simplified texts and/or worksheets, bullet points and/or cloze and gapfill exercises. However, one head of department cautioned against making low-attaining pupils too dependent on writing frames.

*I may sometimes give writing frames to some of the really weaker pupils but I try to get them to do it without because I think you kind of make them dependent and kind of take away their independence if you keep on giving them writing frames the whole time. I think you disable them if you do that. (HS1)*

#### **Teacher and peer feedback**

In one secondary school [HS2] smaller numbers (16) in the low-attaining Year 10 EAL group (in addition to the two TAs) meant that the teacher could help improve written work by offering specific feedback and encouragement on an individual basis once a week, which she felt really helped. In another lesson [GH1], a class, led by the teacher, went together through a poem written by one of the pupils, and then pupils continued using the model of what was required to evaluate their own work individually. Assessment for learning, especially peer marking and identifying success criteria, was identified by some as a helpful strategy in this regard [GM1]. One teacher noted that despite initial difficulties, the peer marking of lower attaining pupils had improved with practice, and the pupils were now more able to pick out good features, which had helped them to focus on particular aspects of their work. It had also assisted in target setting.

Just as some teachers thought low-attaining pupils could feel overburdened with targets, so some cautioned against giving too much feedback. For example a teacher in one school [GM1] that had adopted success criteria stickers said that the pupils had found the notes too complicated and hard to read, and that they could be demotivating, even if the pupil had obtained a good grade. This would seem to provide further support for the primary school policy (mentioned earlier) of teachers highlighting only one point for improvement on a piece of written work.

### ***Sustaining concentration***

A number of the pupils interviewed mentioned concentration was often difficult when in a full class. Recognising this, some primary teachers in particular made deliberate attempts to create conditions conducive to pupils maintaining their focus in class. In one Year 5 numeracy class [GM2] the teacher ensured that pupils were seated round the front desks and that they could all see the interactive whiteboard, which was bright and clear. This was in contrast to a number of observed classes across the sample where the projections onto the whiteboard were not particularly clear, (even when enlarged to maximum), especially for pupils at the back of the room. In a numeracy lesson in another primary school [KP1], the teacher tried to maintain pupils' concentration by emphasising active listening. When class concentration was wavering, the teacher called out 'active listening' and put her hand up, which was the cue for all the pupils to stop talking and writing, face her and raise their hand to indicate they were ready to listen. This helped refocus the group's attention.

## **7.4 Interpersonal relations**

### **7.4.1 Teacher-pupil relations**

#### ***The importance of teacher pupil relations***

As mentioned in the previous chapter, section 6.5.2 on discipline and rewards, teacher-pupil relations were identified by many teachers as being crucial to the success of teaching and learning at secondary level, especially with groups of low-attaining pupils (see Appendix X Case study b and l). This, a couple of teachers mentioned, was often easier with pupils in the bottom sets because the smaller numbers allowed you to spend more time with individual pupils and therefore could get to know them better.

Teachers from several schools argued that the teaching-learning process was much more of a negotiation with lower sets, as the following comments demonstrate:

*T1: I have a completely different relationship with them [bottom set Year 10] than I do with the majority of my other groups and where I'm more strict.*

- T2: *It's a working relationship, you tend to have to make it more team work rather than me telling them what to do so that they're all kicking against that.*
- T1: *Being more understanding of what they aren't able to do rather than 'come on, you can do better, stop messing about'. 'Ok, well how could you look at this, what would you do?' ... You do vary your approach. It's negotiation because a lot of them don't want to be there and will do nothing if they can, so getting something out of them is better to me than nothing at all.*
- T2: *And sometimes they will use behaviour to do nothing [T1: yeah] if they feel that you're being really harsh with them.*

(teachers, KS1)

In secondary science lessons practical work was used as part of this process of negotiation, as a motivational 'carrot' and a 'stick'. In a couple of observations the teachers encouraged pupils to finish their writing task in order to do an experiment or watch a demonstration [KS1, HS1]. Conversely, in other science lessons [FS1, KS1] the teachers threatened to stop (and in one case did) the experimental work on account of disruptive behaviour. Pupils interviewed in two schools reported this. As one pupil put it: "*We don't do practicals in our class because people are hooligans.*"

### ***Pupils' views on teacher discipline***

Some pupils felt that discipline was more relaxed in lower sets:

*In lower sets you can get away with more stuff (Year 10 pupil, GH2)*

*In the higher sets the teacher was a lot more strict. If you're in a higher set they think you can do things a lot more and if you're not doing it they think you're not achieving. They just want to push you. (Year 10 pupil, KS1)*

Yet opinion was divided among pupils whether a strict or a more relaxed environment was more conducive to learning. Interestingly, even pupils who had been observed engaging in disruptive behaviour in class themselves desired stricter discipline, provided it was perceived to be fair:

*We have a very strict teacher, pushing us all the time so we get a good mark and that (Year 10 pupil, FS1)*

*I don't like [Teacher X] cos we always get detention for the whole class but the girls don't do anything. (Year 8 pupil, HS2)*

*[The behaviour policy]'s just right because Year 9s need it and we all need it - we need strict rules so to not get us into trouble - because I was always getting into trouble before (Year 8, KS1).*

While the more relaxed approach to teaching low-attaining groups was often driven by a desire to build positive teacher-pupil relations, there was clearly a tension between teachers having a relaxed learning environment and one where there was sufficient discipline to enable pupils to concentrate. Both teachers and pupils in several of the schools highlighted poor concentration in class as a major barrier to learning while some pupils ascribed it to some teachers' inability to control the class, which was also evident in a few observations (see also Appendix X Case study i).

*I get distracted in my classes and I don't like it when I get distracted and then I don't concentrate on doing my work 'cos everyone around me is like talking and*

*every time I tell them to shut up the teacher has a go at me and says 'You're not supposed to be talking. You're supposed to be concentrating' and I keep telling the teacher I can't concentrate when people are talking around me. (Year 8 pupil, KS1)*

One teacher [FS1] who seemed to strike the right balance, according to one pupil, was "sweet and kind .... If anyone did anything wrong she didn't shout, she gets her point across in the right way." (Year 10 pupil, FS1). Similarly, in another school a respected teacher was "not dead strict. She does have a bit of fun ... but she keeps people in order". She used calming music at the beginning of the lesson to get pupils relaxed but was able to focus pupils and used humour. Striking this balance was important to a number of pupils who were interviewed.

### ***Building positive relationships***

Nevertheless, across the sample, interviews and observations demonstrated that teachers had a variety of teaching styles which entailed relating to pupils in different ways; some were more distant and formal, others more informal and chatty, cracking jokes. In fact, humour was mentioned by several teachers and pupils to be important in cementing good relations and was evident in several of the classroom observations involving teachers who were clearly popular with the pupils. Pupil descriptions of 'good teachers' varied too. However, whatever the teaching style and whatever the disciplinary approach, successful classroom relations seemed to be based on mutual respect (see Appendix X Case study l and m).

A number of the teachers at secondary level talked about individual groups having particular class cultures so that while there was often recognition that top, middle and bottom sets differed in general, there was also recognition by some that similar sets were very different and that the mood of a class could be different from day to day. Being able to judge the mood and being flexible to respond to it, even if it meant abandoning or altering the lesson plan, was seen by several teachers to be important to the success of teaching low-attaining groups (see Appendix X Case study l).

### ***Encouraging positive peer relations***

Another reason mentioned by teachers for having good class relations was to create a positive environment that allowed pupils to make mistakes [FS1, KS1].

*I think with that particular [work-related] group especially, relationships are really important. ... building that relationship and that trust and the willingness to actually offer an answer. They don't want to look stupid so have to have trust amongst them so that they can take risks in terms of their learning. (science teacher, KS1)*

Related to this was the drive by several school managers to crack down on pupils who were abusive towards low-attainers, for example by calling someone 'thick'. Such an occurrence was witnessed in a secondary science lesson [HS1] when one pupil was laughed at by peers, after giving what was considered to be a ridiculous answer to a question. The teacher was quick to reprimand the other pupils and remind them to value all contributions.

Praise and encouragement were also said to be key ingredients to successful teacher-pupil relations, especially for low-attaining pupils (see Appendix X Case study m). At Key Stage 2 there was a lot of praise evident in classes and in assemblies and in several of the observed classes pupils were actively encouraged by the teacher to applaud the good work of peers. At secondary level giving praise in class was also mentioned as important by several teachers and this was witnessed in

several observations, but was not as widespread as at Key Stage 2 perhaps because, as a couple of teachers pointed out, [FS1, GH2] you had to be careful not to seem childish or patronising to pupils in lower sets.

In a couple of lessons in HS2, teachers tried to encourage a couple of very quiet girls to interact more verbally by encouraging them to help two male pupils who were struggling with the work although arguably this was disadvantaging their own learning since the two boys had severe cognitive and behavioural difficulties. This, in turn perhaps raises the wider question about the extent to which in bottom sets, which are more likely to have greater concentrations of pupils with specific learning difficulties, low-attaining pupils can be expected to give peer support to pupils with serious learning difficulties without disadvantaging themselves.

#### **7.4.2 Peer relations**

##### ***The importance of peer relations***

The effective teaching and learning of all pupils was seen by some to be as dependent on peer relations as much as on teacher-pupil relations. Indeed one senior manager [GH1] considered positive peer group dynamics to be the single most important on pupils' effective learning in the classroom. Several managers and teachers also said they worked on engendering a culture of mutual respect among pupils. In the lessons observed and in the interviews, pupils in the schools generally interacted positively although on occasions there was low-level disruption by particular groups within a class though not necessarily aimed at peers.

While peer relations in the classes observed appeared generally positive, and teacher and pupil interviews confirmed this in the main, many of the pupil interviews, at both primary and secondary level, revealed the importance of within-class pupil grouping to their ability to concentrate and/or enjoy their learning. In particular, the low attaining pupils expressed a desire not to work with people who were "*not serious*" or who "*mess about*" even when they themselves were observed being disruptive in class. Generally, the low attaining pupils preferred to work with their friends although some of the pupils recognised the fact that the teacher had needed to move them because they were getting distracted in the pair they had been placed in. When not with other pupils whom they felt comfortable with some of the pupils interviewed said they found it difficult to work well. Several pupils mentioned not liking particular subjects because they were separated from their friends.

##### ***Social composition***

To varying degrees teachers were aware of different social groups within a school intake but, apart from gender, these were rarely explicitly discussed with respect to in-school issues, low attainment groups or peer relations. In the city schools, some teachers said that although there was racial tension and segregation outside the school, pupils generally got on well with each other in school and where there were conflicts it was generally due to a clash of individual personalities rather than a racial incident and these happened more outside in the playground than in the classroom:

*I think as a school we're quite good at getting pupils to leave their problems outside school when they come in. (teacher HS1)*

There were also very few occasions when teachers referred to social class differences in peer relations (see Chapter 6). Similarly, pupils also did not refer to ethnicity or social class with respect to the social context of their classroom. Gender was the most common characteristic referred to by teachers and low attaining pupils and for some of them the gender mix was important. One group of pupils [KP1] liked the fact that that their teacher had compromised in allowing them to choose one

friend (therefore likely to be the same gender) before selecting the other pupils to be on the table. In another school [HP2] the pupils interviewed empathised with one boy's distress at being the only male pupil on his table in both literacy and numeracy.

### **Social stigma and low attainment**

The issue of mixed attainment or similar attainment groupings also seemed important and drew mixed, and sometimes inconsistent, responses from pupils:

*P1: In maths you can do a lot in one lesson because they're at the same standard and level.*

*P2: But in maths because you're working with people your level you kind of look at other people - you can't like either help other people or other people help you (Year 8 pupils, HS1).*

At secondary level, teachers in a couple of schools felt that the problem sometimes was stigmatisation by peers rather than being placed in a low set in itself. This they tried to act upon, but felt that once the pupils were settled in the class the problem was forgotten.

*I have that problem now. They get me to close the door so they can't be seen in the room [by other students] with students known to have specific learning difficulties. ...However, once the door is shut then there's not a problem with it. (head of department, KS1)*

As regards within-class attainment grouping at primary level, some pupils were seemingly unaware, while others were. In one school [KP1] the pupils interviewed did not express dislike of being assigned to low-attaining tables, yet it clearly affected their self-esteem. One pupil noted how he felt "humiliated" at being on the 'bottom table' and then expressed elation at being 'moved up'.

*[Those pupils]'re over there [on the SEN table] because they're not really a 100% good at Mathematics. I was on there but I started getting a bit smarter so then I got moved over to there [another table].*

Another pupil responded as follows:

*I: Do you know why you're on that table?*

*P: Yes because I'm not good at Maths - I have to do the easy work – and never will be in a higher class. I've always been in a lower Maths group – I won't!*

*I: But does that bother you?*

*P: Yeah because I have a hard time. And everyone else knows but I don't.*

The desire to 'move up', however, was seen by many teachers to be a potential motivator for lower-attaining pupils and several secondary teachers, in particular, said they actively encouraged pupils in this regard.

### **Peer support for learning**

In the primary school [HP2] that was conducting research into pupil grouping the pupils interviewed all agreed that they preferred mixed-attainment grouping so that they could get help more easily from other pupils. However, what the school research showed more generally was that the pupils did not want to be confined to the same pupils or in the same grouping arrangements (i.e. in pairs, fours or sixes) all the time.

*Basically the children don't think the [fixed] groups work often because they like to mix around who they work with. They don't like to be constrained with certain children. (head teacher, HP2)*

Irrespective of the type of class grouping, overall, there seemed to be a tension between teachers' needs to separate pupils who distracted each other and prevented each other from concentrating, not to mention the need to maintain discipline at secondary level, and the emotional disturbance some pupils claimed they felt when being separated from their friends, which some maintained affected their ability to focus.

Pupils' sensitivity to peer relations in classroom activities has serious implications for learning, especially with the reported increased emphasis on pair or group work, be it through AfL, SFA or a general heightened emphasis on oracy. The fact that pupil responses varied across the sample highlights the usefulness of conducting school- or even classroom-level research into pupils' views on grouping and other aspects of learning, as conducted by one of the schools in our study.

## **7.5 Summary**

### **Resources**

- Teaching assistants were used in a wide variety of ways to support the learning of low attainers. The imaginative use of TAs extended their role beyond their attachment to, and focus on, the learning of one or two identified pupils. Strategies were also employed to encourage some independence from the TA and to facilitate focused teacher attention on the learning needs of the low attainers.
- Low attaining pupils were assured equal access to learning materials and media through the organisation of school and class sharing systems. This was especially important in the less well-resourced schools.

### **Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment**

- Teachers addressed the learning of low attainers by considering both the cognitive demands and affective outcomes. Strategies employed included a slower pace of delivery, increased scaffolding, reduced levels of challenge, peer-support and more feedback and praise.
- Differentiated materials were used to specifically address learning needs of low attaining pupils although in many cases teachers attempted to cover the same topics across the attainment range.
- To avoid the potential to impose limits to attainment through differentiation, some teachers gave pupils opportunities to select and vary the level of challenge in their learning. Pupil selection of learning task also worked to reduce stigma associated with pupils being given easier classwork tasks.
- Reinforcement was emphasised by teachers as important to effective learning by low attaining pupils. There was less consensus about whether this was better accomplished through repetition or through new learning activities. Many teachers, however, tried to present low attainers with a range of unthreatening ways to understand, engage with and practice new concepts.

- Practical and interactive approaches, often involving ICT and/or the interactive whiteboard, were popular with pupils and often used by teachers to motivate low attainers and as a reward for good behaviour.
- The balance between providing pupils with appropriate challenge, opportunities for success and maintaining high expectations was particularly difficult in low attainment groups. AfL and peer-evaluation were identified as effective strategies in achieving this balance.

### ***Interpersonal relations***

- Teacher-pupil relations were widely regarded as highly significant to the effective learning of low attaining pupils. Teachers described their approach as more negotiated with low attainers in which practical, interactive or fun activities were used as a reward for good behaviour and/or task completion.
- Low attaining pupils recognised an often more relaxed disciplinary environment in their classrooms as well as the difficulties of maintaining order experienced by some teachers. Although there were mixed opinions, most pupils preferred explicit disciplinary context to help them avoid distraction and disruption.
- Many teachers went out of their way to cultivate positive relations with low attaining pupils and made efforts to respond flexibly to provide a positive learning environment that encouraged pupil participation. This was accomplished through the use of praise, treating mistakes as part of learning, careful questioning techniques and paying attention to cultural sensitivities.
- Teachers and pupils alike regarded peer relations as having an important influence on learning. In the classroom most pupils were more sensitive to gender than to ethnic differences.
- Although social stigma and low self-esteem were associated with being identified as a low attainer, most pupils seemed less disturbed by this once settled into their class and engaged in their learning.

## **Chapter 8. Effective Teaching and Learning for Low Attaining Pupils – an overview discussion.**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In this chapter we return to the main purposes of the research by relating the main findings, presented in the previous four chapters, to the research questions. Whereas the summaries at the end of Chapters 4-7 have been presented as bullet points, here we adopt a more discursive style, bringing analyses across these chapters to bear on about the complex issues addressed by this research.

The research questions were:

1. What are the population characteristics of pupils in low attainment sets?
2. What practices and processes do schools use to identify and organise low attainment groups?
3. How do schools and teachers motivate and inspire pupils in low attaining pupils to learn?
4. Are different approaches used for pupils from specific social groups (minority ethnic/social class/ gender) who are over-represented in low attainment groups and/or 'at risk' of low educational outcomes?

We will address each research question separately in the rest of this chapter. It is important to point out that examples of good practice within low attaining pupils in different school and classroom contexts have been emphasised in this study. These are illustrated in detail in Chapters 6 and 7 as well as within the case studies in Appendix X.

### **8.2 What are the population characteristics of pupils in low attainment sets?**

Results from the survey found that social class is a significant predictor of set placement. Pupils from high SES backgrounds have a higher probability of being placed in higher sets and vice versa. SEN is another significant predictor of set placement and these pupils are concentrated in the low attainment sets. Ethnicity is a weaker predictor of set placement and within our survey sample, pupils of Bangladeshi origin were less likely to be selected for the higher sets. These social class and SEN results are consistent with research findings elsewhere. The findings in relation to Bangladeshi pupils, is in line with broader research that has reported on the education of other Black minority ethnic pupils. (refer to Chapter 1).

Classroom teachers did not identify social demographic patterns of pupils in different attainment groups and they rarely explicitly raised this in discussion. If addressed at all, more indirect references about home background and conditions as well as EAL were more common. There was evidence that school managers had a broader view although they often tended to associate demographic patterns in low attainment groups with circumstances external to the school. With few exceptions, the teachers' own cultural character was not referred to and neither was it raised as significant to the social dynamics of teaching and learning.

Gender was not a significant predictor of set placement although the relationship between being female and low attainment set placement in Key Stage 2 literacy contradicts other recent research findings. In general, the schools, teachers and pupils were more explicitly aware of gender patterns. Though it was found not to be statistically significant in our survey, teachers in schools were more prepared to acknowledge and discuss the over-representation of boys in low attainment groups.

This research offered the important opportunity to combine and analyse the PLASC and UPN data, although there are some methodological limitations and caveats to the statistical analysis. The skewed nature of the sample, in particular is an important limitation to bear in mind, as are the small sample size of some minority ethnic groups. Some groups were over-represented and others too small for robust analysis.

Finally while some of the population characteristics of pupils have been shown to be significant to set placement, prior attainment, was the main (even if a relatively poor) predictor. This raises important questions of setting practices in schools that were addressed by the research and discussed in the next section.

### **8.3. What practices and processes do schools use to identify and organise low attainment groups?**

The initial focus of this research was on effective teaching and learning of pupils in low attainment groups. It was clear from the outset, however, that the classroom context was influenced by a number of broader school decisions and processes. As a result the research included a focus on how those schools, seen to be doing well with low attainers, organise pupils in attainment groups. The discussion of these findings here is divided into two parts: the first focuses on what the grouping practices were in the schools and the second on the processes through which set placements were made.

#### **8.3.1 Pupil grouping practices**

##### ***A range of grouping practices***

There was a wide range of grouping practices in operation across the case study schools. Even in those schools with the most widespread setting practices, pupils in low attainment groups also enjoyed opportunities to learn in different kinds of groups, for example, in their form group or other mixed attainment groups and through various in-class grouping arrangements.

Whatever the configuration of pupil grouping practices, these usually resulted from compromises in operational and / or ideological terms. The former related to structural and organisational constraints, for example, class and year group size, availability of staff. The latter reflected the perceived tensions between improving performance standards and social inclusivity.

Schools varied in the extent to which grouping practices were a matter of whole school policy or devolved to subject departments.

##### ***The rationale for setting***

Where there was support for attainment grouping, a general rationale for it existed in relation to the learning of low attainers. This was articulated in terms of the opportunities to target their needs through the use of particular teaching approaches and curricula as well as in the concentration of human resources for learning support where it was most needed. In this context, some schools and departments went to great lengths to facilitate the creation of low attaining groups. At Key Stage 2, for example, different year groups were combined and then set to provide attainment sets drawn from two year groups.

##### ***Increased setting in secondary schools***

There was generally more setting in secondary schools. Even with greater subject department autonomy, the organisation of teaching groups had to be negotiated

within the constraints of timetabling, staffing and other structural complexities. While different levels of school and subject department autonomy produced a variety of grouping systems, in all cases these arrangements retained certain levels of flexibility that made them distinct from a more rigid form of streaming.

### ***Setting in core subjects***

Numeracy / mathematics was the subject area most commonly taught in attainment sets and in some schools was the only subject in which setting was used. It was often cited as a particular case in which the nature of the subject demanded attainment grouping to facilitate differentiated teacher responses to individual learners. English was set the least and science had more variation across schools.

### ***Grouping practice as a strategy to increase exam grades***

The overall performance of the school in publicly-reported performance measures played a part in shaping decisions about set composition. While all schools wanted to provide the best conditions for optimal learning for all pupils, they were also aware that school performance measures focused on the proportions of pupils reaching particular threshold levels – some of which were seen as beyond the reach of the school's lowest attainers.

It was evident that setting practices and levels of stratification generally increased towards Key Stage 4. Subject options with small pupil numbers were an exception in which where there was only one viable teaching group it included pupils from a broader range of attainment. On the other hand, *de facto* sets were formed where particular subject options were chosen disproportionately by low attaining pupils – notably in the more vocational subjects.

### ***Review of grouping arrangements***

Schools undertook reviews of the appropriateness of their grouping arrangements from time to time. In addition, the set placement of individual pupils was also reviewed at least annually. These reviews potentially facilitate mobility between groups, however, the extent to which these reviews resulted in set changes for individual pupils, varied and depended on organisational constraints (e.g. timetabling) and learning related concerns (e.g. disruption to learning). These factors, together with teacher confidence about their set placement decisions, tended to militate against set mobility.

As discussed in the first research question, the grouping reviews were rarely used to raise questions about how school practice and process contributed to the demographics of low attainment groups. These patterns were either associated with factors external to the school or obviated by a focus on individualised personal pupil characteristics.

## **8.3.2 Identifying low attainers**

### ***Use of prior attainment data***

School managers and teaching staff (as opposed to parents or pupils) have a dominating influence on the operational composition of pupil groups. As indicated earlier the allocation of pupils to groups was decided primarily with reference to prior attainment. Teachers in the case study schools drew heavily on National Curriculum tests in making their decisions. However, they also maximised the range of prior attainment data that informed the set placement of individual pupils by drawing on a broader range of assessments and test results. The latter include formal teacher assessments.

Prior attainment, however measured, reflects previous schooling experience as well as social class, ethnic and gender differences. Some teachers we spoke to were aware of this, but there were no systematic approaches to taking these relationships into account. On the contrary, 'attainment' was frequently equated unproblematically with 'ability' rather than being seen as the social product of a complex set of factors.

### ***Use of teachers' judgement in set allocation***

To varying degrees, teachers also used their judgement to interpret this prior attainment data when making decisions about individual pupils. In addition, a range of other factors was often taken into account when grouping pupils, for example, behaviour, in-class performance or the particular social dynamics of a group. This increased the potential for sensitive decisions to be made about the best placement for particular pupils. It also seems to have increased the possibility that aspects of pupils' backgrounds might also play a part in decision-making that may offer some explanation of why the survey analysis suggests that social class, SEN and to a reduced extent ethnicity are predictors of low attainment set allocation. These teacher judgements may account for the uneven relationship between set allocation and prior attainment indicated in the survey.

## **8.4 How do schools and teachers motivate and inspire low attaining pupils to learn?**

The effective teaching and learning of pupils in low attainment groups was the central focus of this research. This focus has been expanded to include effective practice for low attaining pupils in other grouping contexts and within the wider school environment. While this has been detailed in Chapters 6 and 7, in this section we provide a summary of how in case study schools, with positive Value Added scores and improving test performance profiles, teachers motivated and inspired low attaining pupils to learn. This allows us to draw together, where appropriate, findings around similar themes from across the previous chapters. We also discuss the issues arising from these practices as well as the strategic and practical tensions faced in these contexts.

The extensive qualitative data sets were analysed using the framework on Table 3.3. From this process we have identified three main dimensions through which the advantages of attainment grouping for low attainers are maximised and its disadvantages are minimised. These are:

- concentration of resources;
- customisation to specific learning needs
- creation of a positive learning environment.

We used these to structure this discursive summary.

### **8.4.1 Concentration of resources**

#### ***Relative size of attainment groups***

Attainment grouping enabled the concentration of resources for pupils in low attainment groups. Teaching groups were arranged so that the lowest attainment sets were smaller than other higher attaining sets. Teachers were then able to focus teaching and learning at the appropriate level and pace and offer more personal learning support and attention. It also enabled them to better control the class dynamics and deal with any behavioural issues and disaffection often associated with low attainment groups especially in the older year groups.

In the secondary schools, in particular, targeting resources in this way often depended upon agreement across subject departments. In these schools there was some tension, especially at Key Stage 4, between resource allocation for low

attaining pupils and schools' efforts to improve their standing in the performance tables.

### ***Allocation of teachers to attainment groups***

Teachers in low attainment sets were usually as qualified and experienced as in other sets, and included advanced skills teachers and senior managers. In secondary schools, each teacher's timetable included a variety of year groups and attainment sets which usually rotated year on year. There were some exceptions including a teacher who enjoyed the particular challenges and rewards of low attainers as well as school managers allocating highly regarded teachers to higher attaining pupil groups on the GCSE grade C threshold.

### ***Learning support staff***

There was widespread use of human resources to support the learning of low attainers. These included Teaching Assistants (TAs), Learning Mentors (LM) and in some cases more senior pupils and support teachers (these are qualified teachers who supported the main class teacher). School management and teachers devised and arranged multiple learning support strategies for low attainers. TAs were engaged in learning activities with different numbers of low attainers, in a range of formats both within class and withdrawn. They also assisted teachers in a range of teaching and management tasks to maximise the quality of learning support for low attainers.

The use of LMs also had a positive influence on low attaining pupils with behavioural and / or emotional difficulties. They often supported pupils outside the classroom and so minimised behaviour distracting other low attaining pupils in the lesson. LMs also facilitated pupil-focused home- school communications.

### ***Co-ordination of staff inputs***

The support provided by a TA/LM was most effective where it was co-ordinated and negotiated with teachers. In some schools the TA team was well co-coordinated and managed although the structural complexities of large secondary schools made it more difficult to sustain effective support for low attaining learners. Some teachers also found difficulty in organising the most effective use of TA/LM time and effort.

### ***Classroom resources***

On the whole, material resources were of a good standard and schools all adopted creative ways to use resources to support the learning of low attainers. The use of technology was widespread with low attaining pupil groups. Curriculum materials were drawn from multiple sources including those produced commercially. Considerable efforts were made to tailor and adapt curriculum materials to the learning needs of low attaining pupils. This often involved collaboration and sharing within and between schools.

### ***Other resources for learning support***

The nature of the school intake was significant to the availability of resources as SEN, EMAG and/or EIC funding often supplemented the school budget. Nevertheless, all schools had access to specialist services for low attaining pupils that were usually co-ordinated by the SENCO. In addition, by drawing TAs / LMs from the local community, school – community communications and understandings were often improved. The involvement of parents/carers to support learning were seen to have positive effects on the confidence and self esteem of low attaining pupils. Schools both put resources into these communications and drew resources from the parents/carers and the broader community to support learning.

### **8.4.2 Customisation**

Curriculum differentiation, in its broadest terms, is a fundamental dimension of educational provision and practice for low attaining pupils. In this section, we summarise the main themes for each of the interacting dimensions of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy.

#### ***Curriculum materials***

Curriculum materials were drawn from multiple sources and customised to meet the learning needs of low attaining pupils. To sustain some set flexibility, in many cases, these materials focused on similar topics and assignments to those in the higher sets. Often materials incorporated a range of cognitive demands used to allow pupils to select the level of challenge. Low attainers were often motivated by the range and structured use of materials in their lessons. Through these practices, schools and teachers were balancing the positive potential of common curriculum provision with efforts to personalise learning.

School and teacher collaborations in the customisation of curriculum materials and sharing resources considerably reduce demands on teacher preparation time and effort.

#### ***Curriculum breadth***

To address the key learning needs for low attainers a focus on improving literacy and numeracy infuses their curriculum provision. Less literacy based subjects e.g. art, are also highlighted as providing positive learning experiences in which a range of low attaining pupil talents and capabilities can be acknowledged and developed. These are positive attempts to improve the self-confidence and esteem of pupils in low attainment groups.

#### ***Maintaining equity in accessing the curriculum***

In both Key Stages 2 and 3 the curriculum offered to all pupils was broadly similar although differentiated in class for low attainers. National test level entry decisions were often left as late as possible both to allow for late pupil progress and for motivational purposes. Similarly, curriculum tracking decisions were often delayed. These approaches were seen as important in counteracting some of the negative effects of attainment grouping e.g. disaffection.

At Key Stage 4, however, curriculum options and pathways become more restricted and movement between teaching groups less likely.

#### ***Vocational routes***

The predominant curriculum route offered to low attainers at the upper secondary level was vocational. Schools and teachers usually initiated access to the vocational curriculum pathway and negotiated this with pupils and their parents/carers. Teachers and pupils highlighted the positive motivational effects for many low attaining pupils.

There were a range of different programmes offered that varied in terms of school curriculum and attendance in addition to college attendance or work placements. The quality and co-ordination of provision off-site is less clear, sponsoring some schools to plan and develop more in-school vocational options.

The link between low attainment and vocational tracking remains a concern. Apart from the broader national debates, there is a particular issue in that social class is a significant predictor of low set placement and it is these low attaining pupils who are

channelled into vocational curricula. This pathway retains a strong social class character.

While there was some evidence to suggest a gendering of vocational options e.g. comparing Health and Beauty with Motor Mechanics there was no evident pattern for ethnicity.

### ***Examinations***

Public examinations, especially at the end of Key Stage 4 clearly have a dominating influence on curriculum provision in secondary schools. For both academic and affective reasons, schools were keen for low attaining pupils to gain formal accreditation of their learning achievements through examination success and qualifications. In this context, some schools adopted alternative curriculum programmes and qualifications specifically targeted at the lower attainment groups. There are benefits for low attaining pupils and for the school performance profile. Curriculum programmes with strong coursework components or with modular tests were regarded as better for low attaining pupils.

### ***Tracking progress***

School monitoring systems for tracking pupil progress were cited as important to success with low attainment groups. Given the uneven progress often made by low attainers, teachers were less convinced about individual attainment targets and suggested that it was more positive to highlight learning processes. In this context, with the persistent tension between standardising in-school testing (which is useful for set placement decisions) and providing more tailored assessments (which is more appropriate to personalisation), most schools opted for a series of tests at different levels.

Attempts to soften the potential negative effects of assessment and to personalise learning included the increased use of self-assessment, co-operative learning, peer marking and assessment, as well as course work and modular tests.

### ***Teaching strategies***

Most teachers attempted to structure their lessons to maximise the advantages of teaching in attainment sets. Many acknowledged that they approached teaching and learning in low attainment groups in different ways from other sets. They addressed the learning of low attainers by considering both the cognitive demands and affective outcomes. Strategies employed included a slower pace of delivery, increased scaffolding, reduced levels of challenge, peer-support and more feedback and praise. They were aware of the specific need to balance teaching and learning routines with creative approaches to the subject content and configurations of individual / group work in these sets.

In all cases, however, teachers pointed out that planning specifically for teaching and learning of low attaining pupils, whether in set or mixed attainment classes, demanded a substantial investment of their time.

### ***Focusing on learning***

Using a range of pedagogical strategies facilitates access to the curriculum. A variety of techniques help to focus the attention of low attaining pupils on the specific learning objectives especially at the start of lessons. In low attainment groups there was often more scaffolding and direction in the particular learning tasks. The pace of learning is often sustained by shorter activities, staged development and frequent review of progress in lessons. In low attainment groups this can lead to a focus on task completion rather than the level of learning challenge.

### ***In class groups***

Teachers use a range of in-class group arrangements to promote active pupil engagement with their learning and to encourage focused oral participation. These groups were often varied at different stages of the lesson to reinforce the same learning point and to motivate the pupils. The use of in-class groups, peer support and TAs, assist teachers in addressing the challenges to personalisation in low attainment groups with diverse learning needs.

### ***Withdrawing pupils from the classroom for extra support***

In many schools withdrawal of pupils for specific purposes, generally for literacy and numeracy, was widely used to address individual needs of low attainers, for example oracy work with EAL pupils. Most pupils were positive about these periods away from the more distracting classroom setting, though it carried the danger of narrowing pupils' curriculum experience and reducing their access to the curriculum in non-core subjects.

### ***Pupil engagement***

The benefits of attainment grouping are maximised by teachers balancing the need for routine with creative use of materials. They attempted to construct a positive environment in which a pupil could make mistakes without any ridicule or disruption by peers. Positive peer relations were encouraged as part of the supportive learning conditions in which active participation and relevant oral contributions were encouraged. Practical, interactive and fun activities often motivate learners and provide different learning contexts for praise and reward. They are popular with low attaining pupils even those who appear more disaffected. These approaches are compromised by poor pupil behaviour and may be withdrawn or avoided on this basis. These militate against teachers' attempts at personalisation and result in a more homogenised approach to teaching and learning in low attainment groups.

### ***Personalising pupils' learning***

Attainment grouping allows low attaining pupils to experience distinctive pedagogies and degrees of personalisation that were not available in mixed attainment groupings. Assessment for learning, personalisation and accelerated learning were cited as having particular positive effects with low attaining pupils. Some teachers emphasised the value of frequent feedback to low attaining pupils although this was often given at the whole class level without much personalised relevance, particularly for the low attaining pupils. In some cases, broader generic learning issues for low attainers, e.g. problem-solving skills, critical thinking, learning to learn, were addressed.

Teachers in general recognised different learning styles and made explicit attempts to address the individual learning needs and styles (especially kinaesthetic) in low attainment groups.

### ***Giving pupils' autonomy in their learning***

Providing low attaining pupils with some responsibility for their learning allows them to focus on their own learning. Letting pupils select learning tasks helps to avoid the stigma of certain kinds of differentiation and choosing other pupils to work with also could be conducive to their learning. Nevertheless, this requires teacher monitoring to ensure appropriate levels of challenge and focus. Some pupils also expressed a preference for more explicit teacher direction and control of both these aspects.

### **8.4.3 Positive learning environment**

#### ***School ethos***

The general school ethos can promote mutual respect and value for the contribution of all pupils irrespective of attainment group. Clearly established behaviour codes and the acknowledgement of a range of different pupil achievements can contribute to a positive environment to motivate low attainers and build self-esteem. Schools have innovative ways to motivate learning and good behaviour through points, prizes and material rewards.

#### ***Different approaches***

Schools adopted a range of distinctly different approaches to providing an environment conducive to the best cognitive and affective outcomes for all pupils and especially the low attainers. While both aspects are built-in, contrasting approaches have a primary emphasis on learning or the affective. These are negotiated within ideological, professional and structural constraints in each school.

#### ***Teacher and pupil relations***

Good teacher and pupil relations are vital in motivating low attaining pupils and sustaining a learning focus in all Key Stages. Although this is more difficult in Key Stages 3 and 4, teachers make efforts to establish good relations and motivate low attaining pupils in lessons, extra-curricular programmes and in more informal ways.

Reduced class size in low attainment sets facilitated the strengthening of teacher-pupil relations. Enabling teachers to get to know their pupils better, assisted with the management of potentially troublesome behaviour and/or in pre-empting such behaviour.

#### ***Sustaining motivation***

Many low attaining pupils are positive about their school experiences and remain motivated to learn. The stigma and embarrassment of being in low attainment groups for some pupils meant that sustaining motivation and avoiding disaffection can become more problematic for some as pupils get older. This is predominantly addressed through strengthening teacher-pupil relations in and out of class and improved communications between schools, teachers, pupils and their communities.

#### ***Discipline***

Schools and teachers in the case study sample were acutely aware of the importance of classroom management and the potential for behaviour difficulties in the lower attainment sets. In some cases the efforts were to construct a positive environment through more relaxed disciplinary regimes in class with emphases on participation and teamwork. The more flexible approach was to enable them to address emergent cognitive and affective barriers to learning. Contrasting approaches to discipline were also evident across the case studies. Some schools strictly enforced a strong disciplinary code with high visibility policing by school managers.

#### ***Rewards***

Formal and informal feedback to low attainers was frequent and on going. Teachers use praise and positive affirmation to encourage and motivate active pupil participation and engagement in learning. There are, however, tensions between the focus on learning targets and attempts to personalise learning for low attainers. Many teachers also acknowledged pupil effort and learning achievement in class through the use of praise and other rewards. Despite some signs of disaffection, these were often highly valued by pupils in the low attainment sets including those in Key Stage

4. On the other hand, access to the wide range of learning experiences, such as practical activities, was sometimes denied or cut short for particular individuals, or for the whole class, as a punishment for unacceptable behaviour by some pupils.

### ***Listening to pupils***

Where low attaining pupils' views are solicited they are used in productive ways to inform teachers and school change to provide a more conducive and comfortable environment, sensitive to divergent needs and a positive force for more effective teaching and learning for low attainers. Some schools made special efforts to explore and formally research pupil views on their learning.

### ***Specialist support***

Co-ordinated multi-agency support and involvement are important in the supporting and addressing the learning needs of low attainers and disaffected pupils. They can also improve school and teacher understandings of the general conditions and circumstances of particular low attaining pupils.

### ***Community support***

The support of parent/carers, the community and local businesses are drawn in as important contributors to a positive and motivating learning environment, especially for low attainers. These relationships are seen to inspire more sustained engagement in learning and higher attainment. The connection between home and school is most evident at Key Stage 2 but in all schools resources were used to improve communications. Members of the local community were also often employed as TAs working within low attaining pupils.

## **8.5 Are different approaches used for pupils from specific social groups (minority ethnic/social class/ gender) who are over-represented in low attainment groups and/or 'at risk' of low educational outcomes?**

Across the case studies there were abundant examples of good practice with low attaining pupils yet answers to this research question remain difficult and limited.

### ***Individualisation***

The dominant approach to low attainers was individualisation. With few exceptions, particular learning challenges were rarely explicitly related to social demographic groups. Social and cultural nuances or differences between and within pupils and teachers were rarely invoked by teachers as significant to the educational experiences, progress and outcomes of low attaining pupils. This is encouraged in the educational context of personalisation.

Nevertheless, teachers did recognise broad social demographic distinctions in the school population which were used to describe the general school context rather than explain differences in learning progress and outcomes. Teachers appeared less aware of their own social and cultural distinctiveness and its bearing on classroom interactions and learning. Social demographic distinctions were more indirectly referred to, e.g. EAL or home life, and externalised from school or classroom. With the exception of gender, they were cast as background effects rather than as issues for the school or teachers to address in teaching and learning.

### ***The whole school level***

There was evidence of whole school strategies and specific changes to routine to provide a better learning environment for some minority ethnic groups (e.g. having a dedicated EAL TA or providing some gender segregated space around school).

School managers and teachers to describe school populations used social class, minority ethnic and gender categories. While school managers were also generally aware of patterns of attainment, these did not seem to be used to promote concerted efforts to address the learning the needs of the low attaining social groups in classrooms.

***Engaging parents/carers***

Although part of a general strategy to support the learning of low attaining pupils in particular, the efforts to engage and sustain relationships with parents/carers provided avenues through which the social and cultural character of the pupils was amplified in the schools. Although this did not directly introduce specialised approaches to teaching and learning it was regarded as generally beneficial especially for minority ethnic pupils and their families.

## **Chapter 9. Implications of the study**

### **9.1 Introduction**

In this final chapter we consider the implications of this research for policy and practice aimed at improving the educational outcomes of pupils in low attainment groups. We also reflect on the gaps for further research.

The illustrations of how schools and teachers maximise the benefits of attainment grouping and mitigate its disadvantages are central to the aims of this study. While this research highlights examples of what appears to be good practice with pupils in low attainment groups in schools with improving performance profiles and positive value added scores, it has adopted a broader view that goes beyond the classroom. These wider concerns will also be considered within this chapter. Firstly, however, we engage with the debate about attainment grouping in advance of brief discussions of selected implications of this study for practice, policy and research.

### **9.2 The grouping debate**

There has been much debate in recent years about whether children do best when they are taught in attainment groups or in mixed-attainment groups. Typically, these debates have been somewhat polarised, with advocates of each form of grouping pointing to the disadvantages of the other form.

We have no difficulty with the argument that the question of how pupils are grouped in schools cannot be divorced from matters of principle, to do with what we see as the purposes of schooling, what sorts of institutions we want our schools to be, and, ultimately, what kind of society we wish to create. Polarisation on these questions may be inevitable. However, grouping practices also raise empirical questions, to do with who achieves most under different kinds of grouping, how grouping affects social development, self-esteem and friendship formation, and what kinds of grouping contribute most to enhanced school performance.

The research literature we reviewed in Chapter 2 suggests that the polarisation of the grouping debate does not reflect the available evidence, at least in relation to these empirical questions. Rather than pointing towards the overwhelming superiority of one form of grouping over another, it suggests that different forms of grouping are effective for different 'types' of pupils, in relation to different kinds of outcomes. The decision, therefore, about whether to group by attainment, either has to be seen as a matter of principle, where empirical evidence is of limited relevance, or else has to be regarded as one that is complex and may even be too close to call.

We can add to this complexity in terms of three findings from our fieldwork:

1. There is no single form of attainment grouping. Different schools adopt different practices, and the same schools may adopt a range of practices for different subject areas or different year groups, and which may differ from year to year. Moreover, different schools work with different pupil populations, so that the composition of low attainment groups might be quite different even where schools adopt similar grouping practices.
2. Schools' grouping practices are rationalised in terms of the supposed advantages of grouping for particular pupils or 'types' of pupil. In practice, however, schools operate under a wide range of practical constraints which

mean that the 'ideal' pupil grouping may be impossible to create. Typically, for instance, schools try to create groups in which pupils with similar levels of attainment can be taught together. Equally typically, however, low attainment groups contain a wide range of pupil attainment and overlap greatly with other, 'higher' groups.

3. Pupil grouping takes place within a complex context, shaped by the type of curriculum and teaching on offer, the classroom management skills of the teacher, the level of support available, the learning resources being used, the disciplinary system of the school, the sets of pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher relations in the school, and so on. Low attainment groups, created in similar ways, therefore, might function and be experienced quite differently in different contexts.

All of this suggests that seeing the issue in terms of attainment versus mixed-attainment groups may be too simplistic. Debates on matters of principle are important, as is empirical evidence about the overall effects of different types of grouping especially on particular groups of pupils. Equally important, however, are questions about the specifics of how grouping systems operate – what happens in this school and in this classroom, with this group of pupils. Although this study has not set out to quantify classroom level effects, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they will be significant, and may well be greater than the overall effects of grouping systems in themselves. While, therefore, low attainers may tend to do better in mixed attainment groups, it seems highly likely that they might do much better in a well-run attainment group than in a poorly-run mixed attainment class. By the same token, of course, high attainers may do much better in a well-run mixed attainment class than in a 'top set' that is poorly taught.

### **9.3 Practice**

In this context, the details of practice are, if not quite everything, then at least highly significant. In the previous chapter, we used three main headings: concentration of resources, customisation and learning environment, to discuss some of the main practices. These illustrate the ways in which teachers and schools maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages of low attainment groups. In considering the implications of these findings we suggest five principles: flexibility, breadth, support, involvement, and responsiveness.

#### ***Flexibility***

The creation of low attainment groups need not mean condemning pupils to a career in 'bottom sets' from which there is no escape. Typically, our case study schools tried to achieve some degree of flexibility. They placed pupils in low attainment groups for particular parts of the curriculum, or at particular stages of their school career, or for particular purposes. They reviewed placements regularly, and had means, albeit limited at times, of transferring children between groups as and when this seemed appropriate. The low attainment group, therefore, became only one of an array of contexts in which pupils were placed and only part of a diverse set of experiences.

#### ***Breadth***

Flexibility of grouping may well be linked to breadth of curriculum and pedagogical style. A significant danger in the creation of low attainment groups is that they are accompanied by a narrowing of the curriculum, a lowering of learning expectations, and/or a restriction of pedagogical styles. We noted particularly how some Key Stage 4 provision tracked low attainers into narrowly-conceived vocational pathways or placed ceilings on their examination attainments. On the other hand, it is clear that

low attainment groups offer opportunities for exploring innovative ways of accessing the curriculum which do not necessarily sacrifice breadth and have the potential to raise rather than lower expectations.

### ***Support***

A major justification for creating low attainment groups is the potential it offers for concentrating support on those pupils who need it most. In practical terms, this might mean keeping group sizes small to maximise teacher contact, or deploying additional adults in the classroom. However, it is not only the level of support on offer that matters. Equally important is the quality of that support – the nature of pupil-adult interactions, the teamwork of teachers, classroom assistants and other adults working with pupils, and the quality of teaching itself. Moreover, not all support is offered by adults. Low attainment groups create the potential for pupils with similar levels of attainment to support each other on shared tasks without generating a sense of stigma. There is, however, a trade-off in that low attainment groups inevitably deny pupils access to their higher attaining peers who might both help them most effectively with their work and act as learning role models, as indeed some pupils noted.

### ***Involvement***

In most cases, placement in low attaining groups is something that is done *to* pupils, rather than something in which they play a part. However, it is clear that many pupils experience high quality provision in such groups positively, and are by no means certain to object to such placements. Moreover, they often have clear views about what they do and do not find helpful about the groups in which they are placed. The implication is that pupils (and, indeed, their parents/carers) could be more involved in making decisions about where they are placed, and in offering feedback about the quality of their placements.

### ***Responsiveness***

Listening to pupils' views about grouping is part of a wider characteristic of schools which emerges from our research as desirable. That is the ability of schools to monitor the impacts of their grouping practices and to respond to them through a cycle of improvement. As we argued earlier, the evidence as to the overall effectiveness of different grouping practices is far from clear, and, in any case, such practices vary significantly from school to school. It is essential; therefore, that schools have some robust means of understanding how their practices impact on pupils in their particular situations. This is partly about listening to pupils. It is also about looking for impacts on pupil progress and attainment, and about monitoring the quality, breadth and flexibility of provision.

Beyond this, schools have to look at the wider implications of their grouping practices. As we have seen, low attainment groups are disproportionately populated by children from poorer backgrounds and by children from particular ethnic groups. The corollary, of course, is that such pupils are under-represented in other groups. Schools have to ask themselves about the cost of such under- and over-representation in terms of educational opportunities, life chances, the social cohesion of the school, and the social cohesion of the wider community. Such issues are likely to be particularly significant where schools serve areas that are marked by concentrations of poverty and/or by ethnic segregation. Moreover, schools have to ask themselves whether the creation of low attainment groups is the most appropriate response to pupils' difficulties if those difficulties are systematically associated with social class, ethnicity or gender. It is notable that in some of the case study schools, the use of attainment grouping or mixed-attainment grouping was

simply part of a wider strategy for rethinking curriculum, pedagogy and ethos in the light of the characteristics of the school's population.

#### **9.4 Policy**

We highlight three significant policy implications in our work:

##### ***The nature of guidance***

Given the potential significance of grouping practices for pupils' achievements and experiences, it is understandable that government and its agencies should wish to offer authoritative guidance to schools on the matter. The evidence from the research and this study, however, suggests that such guidance needs to be carefully balanced. Blanket prescriptions in favour of one or other form of grouping do not match the research evidence, do not match the variations in school circumstances, and do not take into account the impact of detailed practices within grouping systems rather than of the systems themselves.

The most helpful guidance would not prescribe one or other form of grouping, but would:

- alert schools to the potential advantages and disadvantages of different forms of grouping;
- set out for schools the ways in which they could maximise advantages and minimise disadvantages; and
- advise schools on how they could best monitor the impacts of their particular practices and of the criteria on which grouping decisions are based.

##### ***Implications for education policy***

In the current context, many schools operate low attainment groups, and are likely to do so for the foreseeable future. It seems sensible, therefore, that other aspects of education policy enable schools to maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages of this form of grouping. For instance:

- Current means of assessing school performance rely heavily on identifying the proportions of pupils achieving threshold levels. As we found, this may create a perverse incentive for creating low attainment groups, not to benefit the children in those groups, but to free teachers to focus on pupils around the threshold levels of attainment. Recent moves towards assessing schools in relation to the progress made by *all* their pupils might be important for removing this perverse incentive.
- The development of a coherent 14-19 curriculum and a drive for enhanced vocational education may well bring benefits to lower attaining pupils who are unlikely to follow an academic route. However, our evidence suggests that some care will have to be taken to ensure that low attainment groups are not channelled into unimaginative or low quality vocational provision, and that vocational education does not become the preserve of such groups.
- The personalisation agenda promises flexible and individually-responsive provision in every school. Some thought will need to be given, however, to the role of attainment grouping within such an agenda. Some of the practices we have outlined in this report create low attainment groups that are well taught, highly focused and highly supportive. As such, they could become an important building block in personalisation. By the same token, it is not difficult to see how a perverse interpretation of personalisation could be used to justify separate tracking, restricted experiences and limited opportunities.

There is a fine line between personalisation and individualisation that needs careful distinction.

- A further policy focus on low attaining pupils would support the government's policy agenda for higher standards and for educational and social inclusion. This study highlights a broad range of practices as institutions struggle with the emergent tensions in these two national policy imperatives. It may be that a review of provision in this area would give a clearer sense of direction to schools.
- Policy guidance could improve the use of in-class support for low attainers. Training and advice for both TAs and for teachers could have significant positive effects on more co-ordinated and effective use of these important human resources with multiplier effects on the experiences and outcomes of low attaining pupils.
- The key part played by teachers in educational provision for low attainers highlights the need for all the above policy issues to impact on the standards for teacher education. In particular, there appears to be a need for teachers to be supported in thinking through the impacts of their decisions, listening to pupils, and assessing in detail the dynamics of their classrooms.
- Likewise, school leaders are ultimately responsible for, and often heavily involved in, school grouping practices. Their preparation and in-career support might usefully familiarise them with the complexities of these issues and equip them to assess balances of advantage and disadvantage.

### ***Wider social policy***

It is appropriate that government and government agency guidance to schools on grouping should primarily be concerned with the impact of grouping on pupil achievement. However, our findings about the skewed populations of many low attainment groups raise questions for government as well as for schools about how grouping practices impact on wider social issues. The Government is rightly concerned about social mobility and social cohesion. While our study was not designed to assess the impacts of grouping in these areas, it seems clear that there is the potential – to put it no more strongly – for certain forms of low attainment grouping to exacerbate problems in these areas. If, in the worst cases, children from particular social and ethnic backgrounds have limited contact with peers from other backgrounds, experience narrow curricula and encounter low expectations, it seems that this will have some implications for their future mobility and the way they view and are viewed by those from other backgrounds.

It seems, therefore, that Government might wish to consider its stance on pupil grouping in the light of its implications for these other areas of policy, as well as for pupil achievement.

## **9.5 Research**

This study has been concerned with identifying those practices which promise to maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages of low attainment groups. In this research we located this focus on classroom practice within school procedures and wider social patterns. While this research has resulted in important findings it has also raised a number of further questions that would help us to understand the wider

impacts and implications of attainment grouping especially for different social groups. We highlight five:

- It is important to know not only about 'good' practices in 'good' schools, but about typical practices in typical schools. This study does not allow us to say what the experiences might be of the majority of pupils placed in low attainment groups. It may be that what we saw was in fact typical. Of course, it is also possible that low attainment groups more usually offer poor experiences to their pupils.
- It is important to be able to associate practices around low attainment groups more clearly with outcomes for children, for schools, and, indeed, for wider social well-being. Whilst research tells us a good deal about who benefits or loses from different grouping practices overall, it is less good at identifying how the detail of practice leads to particular outcomes. This demands more extensive research than was possible here, probably drawing on case study work and the analysis of large databases, and almost certainly longitudinal (or quasi-longitudinal) in nature.
- Some comparative research would be informative. For example, rather than looking only at low attaining sets, as in this study, much could be gained from looking at the same teachers in different sets. Given the ways that different set placement influences outcomes of pupils with similar prior attainment an exploration of the ways that teachers moderate their approach to teaching in different attainment sets would be worthwhile. This could be usefully linked to a related series of questions on how teacher assumptions and interpretations of classroom behaviour are combined with prior attainment and linked to the institutional processes of set formation.
- The social class effects of attainment grouping and educational outcomes are ripe for further exploration despite the demise of social class from the educational research agenda. More recent theorisations of social class as process, rather than simply outcome, would have much to contribute through questions about how institutional and classroom processes come to assume a social class dynamic through which low socio-economic status maps on to low attainment. Intersectionality is significant here, as socio-economic status is cut through with gender and ethnic differences. All are important in understanding the influences on the pathways to low attainment.
- As some of the case studies schools have already demonstrated, there is ample room for school based action research through which forms of institutional reflexivity that might be formalised. These also offer the potential for more immediate impact within schools. Extending the themes of this study on low attaining pupils, these projects might usefully focus on the development of personalisation through pupil voice and explorations of the ways that parent / carers might best support and improve their child's learning.

Whilst such research is resource intensive, it seems likely to represent a good investment at a time when low attainment groups are so widespread, yet our knowledge of how they work is so limited.

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**Appendix I. Case study sample**

<b>Name</b>	<b>School type</b>	<b>Year Groups researched</b>		
FP1	Primary	5		
KP1	Primary	5		
HP1	Primary	5		
HP2	Primary	5		
GM2	Middle	5	8	
GM1	Middle		8	
FS1	Secondary		8	10
FS2	Secondary		8	10
KS1	Secondary		8	10
HS1	Secondary		8	10
HS2	Secondary		8	10
GH1	High			10
GH2	High			10

## Appendix II. Survey Instrument

### Effective Teaching and Learning for Pupils in Low Attainment Groups

1. Do you set students by attainment in the following years and subjects?

*Please tick the appropriate box if you set in the following classes*

<i>YEAR</i>	<i>ENGLISH</i>	<i>MATHEMATICS</i>
7		
8		
10		

2. What criteria are used when deciding which set students are allocated to?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. At what time of year are setting decisions made?

.....

.....

.....

4. How often are setting decisions reviewed?

.....

.....

.....

5. Can you please provide us with the Unique Pupil Number (UPN) for the students in the each set in the years in which students are set for English and Maths. Please provide us with information on which pupils are in which set. You can use the grid below, or provide the information in electronic form or in the form of print outs.

<b>YEAR 7</b>					
<i>ENGLISH</i>			<i>MATHS</i>		
<b>Low Set</b>	<b>Middle Set</b>	<b>High Set</b>	<b>Low Set</b>	<b>Middle Set</b>	<b>High Set</b>

<b>YEAR 8</b>					
<i>ENGLISH</i>			<i>MATHS</i>		
<b>Low Set</b>	<b>Middle Set</b>	<b>High Set</b>	<b>Low Set</b>	<b>Middle Set</b>	<b>High Set</b>

<b>YEAR 10</b>					
<i>ENGLISH</i>			<i>MATHS</i>		
<b>Low Set</b>	<b>Middle Set</b>	<b>High Set</b>	<b>Low Set</b>	<b>Middle Set</b>	<b>High Set</b>

## **Appendix III. Interview Schedules**

### **a) HEADTEACHER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

#### ***Introduction to the project (including clarification on issues of confidentiality and anonymity)***

##### *School background*

What are the characteristics of the school's intake?

What is the background of the teaching staff (gender, ethnicity, experience)?

How long have you been in the school?

How would you describe the school and how it's doing?

Are there any recent developments that would be useful to know about (e.g. school merger, government funding initiative)?

##### *Policy on grouping*

Is there a school policy on grouping practices?

If so, what is it and how often is it reviewed? (process and timing)

If not, who decides and how?

What's the rationale?

##### *Curriculum and assessment*

How is the curriculum differentiated for lower-attaining pupils?

What are the strengths of this?

Are there any issues that arise from this?

What assessment systems are used with low-attaining pupils and how is success recognised?

##### *Progress of low attainers*

How is the school doing with low attainers?

Does the VA reflect how you're doing?

Which subjects are low-attaining pupils doing particularly well in? Why?

Which subjects are low-attaining pupils not doing so well in? Why?

What systems does the school have for monitoring and evaluating the progress of low-attaining pupils?

How does this inform decisions about provision for low attainers?

Are the views and opinions of pupils sought to help inform decisions?

##### *Support for low attainers*

Are there any specific strategies (in-school and outside agencies) to support low-attaining pupils?

How successful are different strategies?

How are resources allocated to support low-attaining pupils? What is the rationale for resource allocation? (human and other)

To what extent are families/carers engaged with low-attaining pupils' education? How does their involvement help?

What strategies are used by the school to secure their involvement?

How successful are they?

##### *Pros and cons of attainment grouping*

What are the positive effects of teaching in attainment groups?

What are the negative effects?

How do you minimise them?

Do you notice any differences between the ways that different departments maximise or minimise the positive and negative effects?

##### *Pupils in low-attaining groups*

To what extent does the composition of the low-attaining groups reflect the composition of the school population as a whole? (e.g. in terms of characteristics such as ethnicity, social class and gender)

Does this differ between subjects (especially English, Maths and Science)  
Why do you think this is?  
Is it different in particular year groups (especially Years 8 and 10)?  
If there are differences, why do you think this is so?  
Is this something about which the school is concerned or not? Why?  
If there are concerns, has the school taken any steps to address the issue?  
If so, what?  
To what extent have they been successful? If not, why not?

**b) SENIOR TEACHER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (Head of Department, Head of Year)**  
***Introduction to the project (including clarification on issues of confidentiality and anonymity and seeking permission to record the interview)***

*Grouping policy and practices*

How many groups are there currently in Years 8 & 10 in your department / year group?  
Are there any extra classes (e.g. SEN) in addition?  
What is the department policy on attainment grouping?  
What's the rationale?  
Who makes decisions about allocation to groups?  
When are decisions made and how often are they reviewed?  
On what basis are decisions made?  
How much movement up/down is there?  
Are there any differences (e.g. in class-size, staffing, resource allocation) between the groups?  
How are teachers allocated to particular groups?  
Are there any differences between teaching low-attaining groups and teaching other groups?

*Curriculum and assessment*

Is the curriculum differentiated for lower-attaining pupils? If so, how?  
What are the strengths of this?  
Are there any issues that arise from this and how are they being addressed?  
What assessment systems are used with low-attaining pupils and how is success recognised?

*Progress of low attainers*

How does the progress made by low attainers in your subject compare with the progress made by higher attainers?  
How does your department monitor and evaluate the progress of low attainers?  
How does this inform decisions about provision for low attainers?  
Are pupils aware of the progress they have made and what they need to do progress further?  
Is Assessment for Learning used with low-attaining pupils?

*Support for low attainers*

Does your department have any specific strategies for supporting low-attaining pupils?  
If so, what?  
How successful are different strategies?  
How are resources allocated to support low-attaining pupils?  
To what extent does your department have discretion over the allocation of resources to support low-attaining pupils?  
If it does, what is the rationale for resource allocation?  
What contact (if any) do members of staff in the department have with families/carers of low-attaining pupils?  
If there is contact, how does this help?  
If there is little contact, why?

*Pros and cons of attainment grouping*

What are the positive effects of teaching in attainment groups?  
What are the negative effects?  
How do you minimise them?  
Do you notice any differences between the ways that different teachers maximise or minimise the positive and negative effects?

*Pupils in low-attaining groups*

To what extent does the composition of low-attaining groups reflect the composition of the school population as a whole? (e.g. in terms of characteristics such as ethnicity, social class and gender)?  
Is there any significant variation in this, for example between year groups (particularly Years 8 and 10)? Why?

If there are differences, does it matter?  
Has the department taken any steps to address the issue?  
If so, what?  
To what extent have they been successful?  
If not, why not?

### **c) OBSERVED TEACHER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

***(Introduction to the project (including clarification on issues of confidentiality/ anonymity and seeking permission to record the interview)***

#### *Pupils in group*

(If possible, go through list of pupils present in the lesson and annotate re characteristics, e.g. SEN, FSM, ethnicity on the seating plan)

Was attendance in the lesson fairly typical for this group?

Are there any poor attenders in the group? If so, how many?

Who are they (characteristics)?

If there are poor attenders, what do you think are the reasons for this?

How does attendance in this group compare with attendance patterns generally in the school?

To what extent does the composition of this group reflect the composition of the school population as a whole? (e.g. in terms of characteristics such as ethnicity, social class and gender? Why/why not?)

#### *Progress of low attainers*

How does the progress made by pupils in this group compare with the progress made by higher attainers?

How do you monitor and evaluate the progress of pupils in this group?

How is information from monitoring and evaluation used?

How often are pupils moved up/down? Who decides?

Are pupils aware of the progress they are making?

Is Assessment for Learning used with low-attaining pupils?

#### *Teaching low-attaining groups*

Was the lesson affected in any way, positively or negatively, by the availability/quality of material resources?

How does the availability/quality of resources for this group compare with other groups?

Is the curriculum differentiated for this group? If so, how?

What is the rationale for this?

Was the level of challenge in this lesson fairly typical for this group?

Are you happy/unhappy with this level of challenge? Why?

Were pupils' levels of involvement/application in this lesson fairly typical for this group?

Can you explain any differences between members of the group in this respect?

How do you encourage involvement/application?

How successful are you?

How typical was the organisation of this lesson for this group (e.g. seating arrangements, lesson structure)?

How does it compare with the organisation of lessons with other groups?

How typical were the teaching methods (e.g. group work, question and answer, use of feedback)?

How does it compare with methods used with other groups?

How does the teaching style used with this group (e.g. formal/informal) compare with other groups?

How typical were teacher-student relations in this lesson of lessons with this group more generally?

How typical were peer relations in this lesson of lessons with this group generally?

How does this compare with other groups?

Do you employ any particular strategies with this group that you do not employ/employ less with others?

#### *Support for low attainers*

(If additional adults were present in the lesson) what are their roles?

How often are they present?

How typical were any support interventions in this lesson of what happens generally in this group?

What are the procedures for getting additional support for particular pupils?

If any pupils were withdrawn in this lesson, who were they, what were the reasons for this?

What were they doing during the lesson? Who with?  
What contact (if any) do you have with families/carers of pupils in this group?  
If there is contact, how does this help?  
If there is little contact, why?

*Pros and cons of attainment grouping*

What are the positive effects of teaching in attainment groups?  
What are the negative effects?  
How do you minimise them?  
Which groups present the most difficulties for you? Why?  
Which groups present fewest difficulties? Why?  
Does the use of attainment grouping have any effect, positive or negative, on peer group relationships?

#### **d) PUPIL GROUP INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

*[Introduction to the project, including clarification on issues of confidentiality and anonymity and seeking permission to record the interview.]*

##### **Grouping practices**

Which subjects are you set for in your year?  
Do you know which sets you are in for English, Maths and Science?  
When were you put into sets?  
How much movement up/down is there in the three subjects?  
Who decides what groups people are in?  
How do they decide and when?  
Were you or your parents/carers involved in any of the decisions about grouping?  
Do you think the process is fair? Why?/ Why not?  
Do you always have the same teacher for English/Maths/Science?  
How many teachers have you had since you have been in your current English/Maths/Science groups?  
How does this compare with other subjects?

##### **Pupil progress**

Do you feel you're making progress in English/Maths/Science?  
Why? Why not?  
What feedback do you receive about how you are doing?  
If so, do you find this helpful?

##### **Classroom experiences**

Who do you sit and work with in your English/Maths/Science lessons?  
Who decides where you sit and who you work with?  
How much does it matter who is in a group together?  
How do people in your English/Maths/Science groups in general get on?  
Is it different across subjects?  
If so, in what ways?  
How does this lesson (observed) compare with lessons in subjects where you are not set?  
Do people help each other in English/Maths/Science?  
If they do, how?  
How does this compare with lessons in subjects where you are not set?  
(Ask about particular features of lessons observed, e.g. gender balance, group size, activities)  
Do you find the work in English/Maths/Science too easy, just about right or too hard? Why?  
How does this compare with lessons in subjects where you are not set?  
How well are you able to concentrate in English/Maths/Science? What helps you/hinders you?  
How does this compare with lessons in other subjects?  
Does your English/Maths/Science teacher do anything in particular that helps you to learn?  
Does your English/Maths/Science teacher do anything in particular that makes it more difficult for you to learn?  
Who gives you help with your work in English/Maths/Science?  
How do they do this?  
Do you find it useful?  
Is there enough help?  
How does the help you receive compare with lessons where you are not set?  
If you go out of English/Maths/Science lessons sometimes for extra help, what do you do in these sessions? Are they useful? Are there any problems about going out for extra help?  
Do you receive any help with your work at other times from other people, e.g. parents, mentors? (Follow up as necessary)  
What one thing would you change about your English/Maths/Science lessons to help improve your learning?  
(Ask specific questions about lessons observed to amplify)

**Pros and cons of attainment grouping**

Do you prefer being taught in sets or mixed attainment groups or a mixture of the two? Why?

If there are good things about being in sets, what are they?

If there are bad things about being in sets, what are they?

Are there ways of making the bad things less bad?

**e) PARENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

*(Introduction to the project and clarification on issues of confidentiality and anonymity.  
Note if the parent is of one of the shadowed pupils. Where possible record the age,  
gender and ethnicity.)*

How much contact do you have with the school? What about?  
Would you like more contact/involvement?  
If so, in what way?

Are parents consulted about pupil grouping (i.e. classes, sets)?  
If so, in what way?  
If not, would you like to be more involved in the decision-making?

Are you aware of what kind of progress your child is making at school?  
(especially in English, Maths & Science) and do you know how you can support your child to  
make further progress?  
If so, how is this communicated to you and how often?  
If not, is this a matter of concern?  
How could communication be improved?

Does your child receive any extra support to help them progress in these subjects?  
If so, what kind of support?

If not, what further support do you think would help?

**f) EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

(This will be adapted according to the interviewee)

***(Introduction to the project and clarification on issues of confidentiality and anonymity.)***

What is your involvement in supporting pupil learning in the school?

How does it work in practice?

(procedures, numbers of pupils involved, amount of time, place etc)

Which staff members do you work with in the school?

Who are the pupils you generally support?

(e.g. in terms of social class, ethnicity, gender, SEN)

Are they in particular year groups and subjects?

What impact do you think your involvement has on pupil learning?

What are the most successful aspects of your work?

How does your work contribute to the pupil's learning in the classroom?

How do you think the impact of your work could be further enhanced?

**g) OBSERVATION SCHEDULE (to be completed at the time)**

School:	Date:	Time (from-to):
Year group/class set:	Subject:	
Lesson focus:		
Teacher:		
Other adults:		
No. of pupils present (incl. F/M):		
No. of pupils on register (incl. F/M):		
Pupils withdrawn for any purpose:		

**Classroom layout:**

Indicate seating once lesson settled, marking position of researcher, shadowed pupils, other adults and general position/movement of teacher, where possible.

(draw new groupings on reverse if groupings alter during the lesson)

General contextual information on classroom environment:  
(e.g. condition of classroom, wall displays, space, facilities, ambience)

Time	Teacher activity	Pupil activity	Comments (focusing on shadowed pupils and key research themes)

## Appendix IV. ACORN Categories

**'Wealthy Achievers'** live in high status areas, usually in detached houses, 90% are owner occupiers, work in managerial occupations or own their own businesses, and have high incomes and high levels of saving and investment.

**'Urban prosperity'** includes well educated and mostly prosperous people living in major towns and cities. They may be younger professionals in apartments, as well as older wealthy people living in exclusive areas of big cities, and some well educated but less affluent people, such as graduates in their first jobs. They are cosmopolitan in outlook and eat out, go to cinemas and theatres and pursue other aspects of urban culture.

The **'Comfortably Off'** are not very wealthy but have few financial worries. All life stages are represented in this category, including young singles, stable families and pensioners. Within this group 80% own their own home, semi-detached or detached, and they are employed in professional, managerial, clerical and skilled occupations. Educational qualifications are in line with the national average.

**'Moderate Means'** contains much of what used to be the industrial heartlands, with many employed in traditional blue collar occupations, or in service and retail jobs. Some areas have low levels of qualification with some isolated areas of unemployment and long term illness. Most housing is terraced, with two or three bedrooms and includes many former council houses bought by their tenants in the 1980s. Some neighbourhoods have high concentrations of Asian families on low incomes.

The **'Hard Pressed'** contains the poorest areas in the country. Levels of qualification are low and those in work are likely to be employed in unskilled occupations. Incomes are low and there are high levels of long term illness. Housing is a mix of low rise estates, purpose built flats and high rise blocks. Properties are small and there is overcrowding. Over 50% is rented from the local council or from a housing association. In some neighbourhoods in this category, there are high numbers of Black and Asian residents. These people are experiencing the most difficult social and economic conditions in the country and appear to have limited opportunity to improve their circumstances.

**Appendix V. Analysis results of Key Stage 2 numeracy**

<b>Set</b>		<b>B</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
	<b>Intercept</b>	-.198	.641
	<b>[zmaths=1.00]</b>	2.785	.000
	<b>[zmaths=2.00]</b>	2.757	.000
	<b>[zmaths=3.00]</b>	2.769	.000
	<b>[zmaths=4.00]</b>	1.251	.000
	<b>[zmaths=5.00]</b>	0	.
	<b>[gend_05=0]</b>	-.026	.860
	<b>[gend_05=1]</b>	0	.
	<b>[fsm_05=0]</b>	-.695	.000
	<b>[fsm_05=1]</b>	0	.
<b>Low</b>	<b>[AcornCategory=1]</b>	-1.708	.000
	<b>[AcornCategory=2]</b>	-.278	.318
	<b>[AcornCategory=3]</b>	-.692	.004
	<b>[AcornCategory=4]</b>	-1.391	.000
	<b>[AcornCategory=5]</b>	0	.
	<b>[senyesno=.00]</b>	-.753	.000
	<b>[senyesno=1.00]</b>	0	.
	<b>[ethrecb=1.00]</b>	.279	.567
	<b>[ethrecb=2.00]</b>	-.493	.179
	<b>[ethrecb=3.00]</b>	.678	.058
	<b>[ethrecb=4.00]</b>	0	.
<b>Middle</b>	<b>Intercept</b>	.571	.097
	<b>[maths=1.00]</b>	1.514	.000
	<b>[maths=2.00]</b>	1.815	.000
	<b>[maths=3.00]</b>	1.579	.000
	<b>[maths=4.00]</b>	1.052	.000
	<b>[maths=5.00]</b>	0	.
	<b>[gend_05=0]</b>	.053	.677
	<b>[gend_05=1]</b>	0	.
	<b>[fsm_05=0]</b>	-.010	.948
	<b>[fsm_05=1]</b>	0	.

<b>[AcornCategory=1]</b>	-2.034	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=2]</b>	-.468	.042
<b>[AcornCategory=3]</b>	-1.430	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=4]</b>	-1.540	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=5]</b>	0	.
<b>[senyesno=.00]</b>	-.120	.565
<b>[senyesno=1.00]</b>	0	.
<b>[ethrecb=1.00]</b>	-.136	.736
<b>[ethrecb=2.00]</b>	-.600	.054
<b>[ethrecb=3.00]</b>	-.034	.904
<b>[ethrecb=4.00]</b>	0	.

## Appendix VI.

## Analysis results of Key Stage 2 literacy

Set		B	Sig.
	Intercept	-1.844	.108
	[english=1.00]	3.460	.002
	[english=2.00]	2.508	.017
	[english=3.00]	1.888	.075
	[english=4.00]	.374	.756
	[english=5.00]	0	.
	[gend_05=0]	.474	.004
	[gend_05=1]	0	.
	[fsm_05=0]	-.596	.001
	[fsm_05=1]	0	.
Low	[AcornCategory=1]	-1.218	.000
	[AcornCategory=2]	-.226	.464
	[AcornCategory=3]	-.255	.322
	[AcornCategory=4]	-1.011	.000
	[AcornCategory=5]	0	.
	[senyesno=.00]	-.868	.000
	[senyesno=1.00]	0	.
	[ethrecb=1.00]	.590	.251
	[ethrecb=2.00]	-.021	.958
	[ethrecb=3.00]	.962	.015
	[ethrecb=4.00]	0	.
Middle	Intercept	-.034	.959
	[english=1.00]	1.702	.009
	[english=2.00]	1.596	.004
	[english=3.00]	.808	.151
	[english=4.00]	1.160	.053
	[english=5.00]	0	.
	[gend_05=0]	.291	.042
	[gend_05=1]	0	.
	[fsm_05=0]	.031	.852
	[fsm_05=1]	0	.
	[AcornCategory=1]	-1.759	.000

<b>[AcornCategory=2]</b>	-0.314	.216
<b>[AcornCategory=3]</b>	-1.386	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=4]</b>	-1.501	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=5]</b>	0	.
<b>[senyəsno=.00]</b>	-.393	.075
<b>[senyəsno=1.00]</b>	0	.
<b>[ethrecb=1.00]</b>	-.161	.707
<b>[ethrecb=2.00]</b>	-.285	.356
<b>[ethrecb=3.00]</b>	.129	.674
<b>[ethrecb=4.00]</b>	0	.

Appendix VII.

Analysis results of secondary mathematics

Set		B	Sig.
	Intercept	-.181	.582
	[zmaths=1.00]	2.713	.000
	[zmaths=2.00]	2.804	.000
	[zmaths=3.00]	1.324	.000
	[zmaths=4.00]	.691	.000
	[zmaths=5.00]	0	.
	[gend_05=0]	-.013	.894
	[gend_05=1]	0	.
	[fsm_05=0]	-.705	.000
	[fsm_05=1]	0	.
Low	[AcornCategory=1]	-1.710	.000
	[AcornCategory=2]	-.201	.184
	[AcornCategory=3]	-1.389	.000
	[AcornCategory=4]	-1.010	.000
	[AcornCategory=5]	0	.
	[senyesno=.00]	-.587	.000
	[senyesno=1.00]	0	.
	[ethrecb=1.00]	.245	.589
	[ethrecb=2.00]	101	.678
	[ethrecb=3.00]	.468	.409
	[ethrecb=4.00]	0	.
Middle	Intercept	.601	.126
	[maths=1.00]	1.874	.000
	[maths=2.00]	1.754	.000
	[maths=3.00]	1.258	.000
	[maths=4.00]	.985	.000
	[maths=5.00]	0	.
	[gend_05=0]	.049	.702
	[gend_05=1]	0	.
	[fsm_05=0]	.098	.842
	[fsm_05=1]	0	.
	[AcornCategory=1]	-1.645	.000

<b>[AcornCategory=2]</b>	-0.228	.064
<b>[AcornCategory=3]</b>	-1.328	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=4]</b>	-1.349	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=5]</b>	0	.
<b>[senyəsno=.00]</b>	-.169	.487
<b>[senyəsno=1.00]</b>	0	.
<b>[ethrecb=1.00]</b>	.087	.856
<b>[ethrecb=2.00]</b>	-.421	.109
<b>[ethrecb=3.00]</b>	-.172	.758
<b>[ethrecb=4.00]</b>	0	.

**Appendix VIII. Analysis results of secondary English**

Set		B	Sig.
	<b>Intercept</b>	-1.025	.162
	<b>[english=1.00]</b>	2.897	.000
	<b>[english=2.00]</b>	2.315	.000
	<b>[english=3.00]</b>	1.952	.000
	<b>[english=4.00]</b>	.281	.518
	<b>[english=5.00]</b>	0	.
	<b>[gend_05=0]</b>	.124	.485
	<b>[gend_05=1]</b>	0	.
	<b>[fsm_05=0]</b>	-.609	.000
	<b>[fsm_05=1]</b>	0	.
<b>Low</b>	<b>[AcornCategory=1]</b>	-1.422	.000
	<b>[AcornCategory=2]</b>	-.341	.410
	<b>[AcornCategory=3]</b>	-1.200	.000
	<b>[AcornCategory=4]</b>	-.951	.000
	<b>[AcornCategory=5]</b>	0	.
	<b>[senyesno=.00]</b>	-.710	.000
	<b>[senyesno=1.00]</b>	0	.
	<b>[ethrecb=1.00]</b>	.322	.301
	<b>[ethrecb=2.00]</b>	-.152	.642
	<b>[ethrecb=3.00]</b>	.410	.189
	<b>[ethrecb=4.00]</b>	0	.
<b>Middle</b>	<b>Intercept</b>	-.046	.854
	<b>[english=1.00]</b>	1.620	.000
	<b>[english=2.00]</b>	1.451	.000
	<b>[english=3.00]</b>	1.200	.000
	<b>[english=4.00]</b>	1.214	.000
	<b>[english=5.00]</b>	0	.
	<b>[gend_05=0]</b>	.105	.428
	<b>[gend_05=1]</b>	0	.
	<b>[fsm_05=0]</b>	.121	.401
	<b>[fsm_05=1]</b>	0	.
	<b>[AcornCategory=1]</b>	-1.251	.000

<b>[AcornCategory=2]</b>	-0.299	.201
<b>[AcornCategory=3]</b>	-1.106	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=4]</b>	-1.112	.000
<b>[AcornCategory=5]</b>	0	.
<b>[senyəsno=.00]</b>	-.259	.128
<b>[senyəsno=1.00]</b>	0	.
<b>[ethrecb=1.00]</b>	.201	.602
<b>[ethrecb=2.00]</b>	-.098	.841
<b>[ethrecb=3.00]</b>	-.071	.902
<b>[ethrecb=4.00]</b>	0	.

## **Appendix IX. Technical rationale for the analytical approach**

As a dependent variable, the three-category variable, setting, can be seen as either multi-category nominal variable or an ordinal variable, depending on the interpretation of the variable. If setting is considered as purely providing appropriate but equivalent provision for students with different levels of ability, setting is a nominal variable where none of the categories (low, middle or high set) can be said to be 'more' than the other. However, if one considers sets to be hierarchical, i.e. a higher set being somehow 'better' than a lower set, an ordered structure exists making setting an ordinal variable. The decision made on this has consequences for analysis, as multinomial logistic regression (MLR) would be most suitable for a multicategory nominal variable, while ordinal regression methods such as Polytomous Universal Model (PLUM) are more suitable for ordinal dependents.

The view that setting is an ordered variable is in accordance with the view of most schools that set (see Chapter 5) i.e. that setting is based on ability and/or attainment, and therefore higher sets contain more able and/or higher attaining pupils than lower sets. The setting structure therefore theoretically mirrors distribution of a desirable trait [ability/attainment] that can be hierarchically ordered. Analysis of the data showed us that the hypothesis of parallelism that underlies ordinal regression analysis (the assumption that the regression coefficients are the same for all three categories) was rejected. We have therefore analysed the data using Multinomial Logistic Regression (MLR). However, as a check, data were reanalysed using ordinal regression (PLUM) models. No major differences occur, one being that pseudo R-squares are somewhat higher when using MLR than in the PLUM model, again suggesting that the PMR models the data more accurately.

All variables were entered into the equation, as use of stepwise methods runs the risk of capitalising on chance. Two-way interactions between the explanatory variables were tested, but no significant interaction effects were found. The dataset did not include EAL.

## Appendix X: Case studies

### a) SCHOOL KP1

- Focus:**
- i. promoting an inclusive school ethos
  - ii. the adoption of the **Success For All (SFA) Literacy Programme.**

#### School background

The primary school (when in its original location<sup>8</sup>) is situated in an education action zone in a deprived area of a northern city in England. It was described by the most recent Ofsted report as 'one of the most socially deprived areas of the country' with 40% of pupils eligible for free school meals. According to senior management, unemployment was high among parents/carers, who included a significant number of parents struggling with drug and alcohol abuse and single-parent families. The school had approximately 320 pupils, around 50% of whom were from minority ethnic groups, predominantly from the immediate area of the school's usual location. The school regularly took a number of asylum seekers or travellers and had a unit for hearing-impaired pupils. The teaching staff were predominantly white British and female, as were the TAs.

Results showed that the school had been performing at below the national average and below the average for the LA across the core subjects although the head emphasised that:

*in terms of achievement [the school is] doing very well. The children make a great deal of progress – when you take the circumstances into consideration of their home lives and you take into consideration the transitional nature of the school at the moment and the transitional nature of the staff within the school - because the whole leadership is in the process of changing.*

They considered themselves "a successful school" on account of providing a stable, calm environment with diverse cultural activities. The most recent Ofsted report confirmed this by describing the school's ethos as 'caring and inclusive' and a place where 'pupils of all backgrounds benefit from the school's provisions of opportunities to learn'.

The school population was said to be quite mobile, with up to 20-30% moving away within the city in some year groups, according to the head teacher. The area was often the "first port of call" for newly arrived immigrants on account of labour opportunities in the local hospital, the existence of established immigrant communities and cheap housing. The nature of the school's intake was said to be changing. Previously, pupils of Pakistani and other South Asian background had predominated and although their numbers were still high, there were now increasing numbers of asylum seekers or immigrants from Africa, the Philippines or central Europe. The Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) team officer was supporting 13 asylum seekers in the school at the time of the visit but there were also a substantial number of other pupils with EAL needs, which teachers and managers agreed caused difficulties for many in literacy. Senior managers agreed that minority ethnic

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of the field work it was on a temporary site at some distance from its usual location.

pupils who lacked fluency in English had particular difficulties accessing the curriculum and were mostly commonly found in lower sets. Long-term absences from school by some South Asian pupils who went for extended stays to visit relatives in their country of origin were also identified as being detrimental to pupil progress.

The school had a very positive feel about it. The fact that the staff had managed to make the school premises very bright and welcoming was particularly impressive given that they were in temporary accommodation for the year. School corridors and classroom walls were decorated with a mixture of pupils' work (writing and artistic representations) photographs, wall charts etc. These reflected the cultural diversity of the intake. All the staff who were interviewed were enthusiastic about their work and positive about their pupils.

Key strategies in the school aimed at assisting low-attaining pupils included: the adoption of the SFA Literacy Programme, which 'aims to ensure that children born into low income or poorly educated families succeed at school' (successforall.org.uk) (see below); the in-class and withdrawal support of the EMA team officer and the EAL TA, whom she had trained, including the implementation of the Talking Partners programme; and the promotion of a positive inclusive school ethos.

### **Grouping systems used in the school**

#### **General**

At the time of the research visit the school had a 1.5-form intake. Consequently, form classes comprised mixed-attainment groupings across the year groups, with Years 1-2 combined, 3-4 combined and 5-6 combined. Pupils were taught in these groups for all subjects except for literacy and numeracy, for which they were set. Setting practices differed in numeracy and literacy, as described below.

#### **Literacy**

The school practised vertical setting in literacy. In accordance with the SFA Literacy Programme, pupils from Years 3-6 were primarily grouped according to attainment in reading. Pupil numbers and pupil behaviour were also considered and sometimes parallel groups were formed. At the time of the visit there were 12 SFA groups.

*When I group I look at children behaviour-wise with other children - I don't want them in the same group - so there may be a parallel group. ... Also, when I group it may be that one group is far too big and I will look at their writing level, I will look at their reading level, I will look at their progress made and I may choose to put them in a lower group or I may choose to stretch them and put them in a higher group. So it's not purely on levels. (senior manager)*

The Year 5 teachers interviewed organised class tables in literacy and numeracy primarily according to attainment and behaviour and to maximise any support. Both teachers said they placed pupils who struggled to concentrate and who needed keeping on task near the board and the teacher, at the front of the class. Table groupings, however, were reviewed periodically.

#### **Numeracy**

Classes were combined according to the range of pupil attainment and teacher availability. Thus, at the time of the field work, there had been two Year 5 and two Year 6 classes up until the end of the first term (a higher and lower set in each year). Thereafter, with only three teachers, there was one Year 6 group for the higher-attaining pupils who would all take the National Curriculum tests, together with one higher and one lower-attaining numeracy group. The latter included some Year 6

pupils who were working below National Curriculum levels. The class size of the lower group was smaller. It was generally agreed that the two sets comprised overlapping bands. A senior member of staff said it was important to have broad bands so that pupils would be challenged and have goals to aspire to. If they are too narrow, she explained, the teacher will only teach to that band and not “*pull pupils up*”. Progress was reviewed annually.

According to one of the teachers, the setting had wholly been done by the head and deputy head that year. Previously, teachers had organised the groups among themselves with some involvement from the head.

### **Key strategies to support the learning of low-attaining pupils (in depth)**

#### **i. Promoting an inclusive ethos**

The school promoted an inclusive school ethos in which pupils were made to feel valued and were encouraged to value and respect others, backed up by a non-elitist reward system and a positive behaviour policy, emphasised in the prospectus, highlighted in the Ofsted report and visible in classroom observations.

*I think the key strategy is to make them love school, to make them think there's somewhere where they can be successful. If you don't get kids to enjoy learning it doesn't matter what strategies you put in place. (head teacher)*

This was confirmed by the Year 5 low-attaining pupils who were interviewed and who all seemed to enjoy school. Although a number expressed frustration at some of the difficulties they were having with different aspects of their learning, they appeared motivated.

Lots of positive reinforcement and praise was encouraged across the school (and observed) to build confidence. Praise and rewards were given in class for endeavour, attendance, homework, good behaviour or being kind to peers, as much as for attainment, thus making rewards accessible to all. For example, each class teacher made a weekly nomination for ‘Star of the Week’, who received a certificate in assembly. Additionally, teachers awarded team points for a similarly broad range of criteria, to particular tables (teams) during lessons. These were totalled at the end of the week and the winning teams were applauded in assembly. From the observations, this constituted a successful motivational strategy.

Another striking feature of the school’s inclusivity was the weekly ethos statement, such as ‘I will co-operate with others in work and play’, which was displayed in the classroom and provided a discussion focus in class aimed at furthering understanding of a particular aspect of the school’s nurturing and inclusive values. One such a discussion was observed at the beginning of a lesson. In preparation the teacher put on some very soothing, relaxing music to calm down the pupils after break and to get them into a more reflective and contemplative mood for the discussion.

#### **ii. The SFA Literacy Programme**

The adoption of the SFA Literacy Programme was another key strategy in addressing the needs of low-attaining pupils. Teaching was done in eleven-week blocks (previously eight-week blocks) to fit in with teachers’ performance management targets concerning pupil progress. At the end of each block, students were tested and regrouped by the SFA co-ordinator, in consultation with the head. Teachers then

fed back in the first few weeks of the cycle if they thought pupils were misplaced. The tendency to 'overtest' pupils and move pupils a lot – one of the criticisms of the SFA programme - had been addressed by extending the time blocks to ensure less testing, less rearranging of groups and greater stability in relationships. This was going to be reduced to only one mid-year assessment point the following year.

Reading rather than writing ability was assessed, in the belief that it was more important for pupils to have more homogenous reading levels, allowing teachers to target reading more effectively, thereby enabling students to access the curriculum more easily. The differing writing abilities of students, it was argued, could be dealt with more easily with in-class support.

In terms of classroom pedagogy, SFA encouraged a co-operative learning model which provided opportunities for pupils' exploratory talk in pairs and groups before speaking out in class, in order to give pupils confidence. SFA also involved self and peer-assessment. In one literacy lesson<sup>9</sup>, for example, pupils read a text out loud to each other and assessed each other's reading according to set criteria. They also discussed answers to comprehension questions in pairs before selected pairs were called to give their answers in a plenary. These increased opportunities for oracy were particularly important for pupils with EAL needs, to help them improve their skills in English as well as build self-esteem.

One of the concerns about SFA was how older pupils might feel working alongside younger pupils. Teachers interviewed thought that generally older pupils did not mind since more importantly they gained in confidence from being able to access the work.

*I thought it would have an effect on some of the older children being grouped with some of the Year 3 children but I've not seen any problems with that. I've found that children's confidence has certainly improved. (teacher)*

Moreover, pupil withdrawal from class for extra literacy support aimed at ensuring that as far as possible pupils did not 'go down' a group in literacy. For pupils remaining in the same SFA attainment group, different activities, such as games, were used to teach the same learning points to maintain motivation.

An innovative SFA strategy which promoted parental/carer involvement in pupils' reading was the 'read and respond' initiative. This entailed children reading to themselves or to an adult every weekday evening and recording it in their 'read and respond' books. This, one TA said, had improved her own son's reading. In the Year 5 literacy class that was observed these books were checked on a daily basis by the TA. The school offered an incentive to parents/carers to participate in that if they read every day with the child, they were entered for a weekly raffle draw.

Another strand of the SFA programme was the establishment of a family support team, which worked with families to address the needs of low attainers struggling with issues of 'attendance, punctuality, behaviour and educational needs' (Family Support Team flier)

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<sup>9</sup> The SFA group which contained the majority of the low-attaining Year 5 pupils was observed.

## b) SCHOOL HP2

- Focus:**
- i. organising school support, especially in literacy;**
  - ii. effective classroom pedagogy;**
  - iii. looking after the emotional needs of children; and**
  - iv. community links.**

### **School background**

This relatively small primary school is located in an education action zone in an area of high socio-economic deprivation in an inner city area? although the intake was described in the last Ofsted report as 'coming from a range of backgrounds, living in a mix of private and social housing'. Of approximately 290 pupils, a large percentage came from ethnic minorities where English was not the home language. Families of Bengali origin constituted the majority ethnic group in the school (almost 50%), followed by white UK pupils (approximately 28%) and a sizeable number of Black African and Caribbean heritage pupils. However, more recently, according to the head, the school had been accepting increasing numbers of pupils from central Europe.

The last Ofsted report indicated the school also had above average numbers of pupils entitled to free school meals and a similarly high percentage of pupils with special educational needs. One teacher thought this was partly due to the school's reputation for being caring and inclusive, which attracted a number of "*needy or difficult*" (senior teacher) children from outside the usual catchment area. Averaged over the last few years attainment was roughly par for the LA and for the country as a whole.

The school was housed on three floors of an old brick building with two staircases at either end of the building with halls linking the two, off which the rooms fanned. The walls and display boards were well decorated with student work and commercial posters. The themes reflected the cultural diversity of the intake and the wide variety of school activities being offered to pupils. Classrooms were well equipped though playground space and rooms for small-group work were limited.

The ethnic diversity of the support staff in particular reflected the ethnic diversity of the intake. The head and deputy head/SENCO, along with other key members of staff, had both been in the school many years and said that they had built on the work of the previous head, who had established strong links with the community (see below).

It was obvious from the visit that the school had a strong sense of identity and that all staff were committed to a shared ethos of what the head termed "*holistic learning*". She added that although the school "*has always had a reputation as a kind, caring, child-centred school*" it had recently become "*more efficient, more focused*" in its strategies to enhance learning. For example, in recognition that literacy was a common difficulty facing low-attaining pupils in the school had initiated a whole-school drive toward increasing oracy across the curriculum as a bridge to literacy both in the classroom and at home. In practice, the head explained, this meant teachers were being encouraged to practise assessment for learning (AfL), include more discussion-based activities and employ a three-week oracy to literacy cycle on topics (whatever the subject) to improve literacy. The cycle involved reading, talking

and “doing” (through drama and visual literacy) building up to the main writing task at the end.

In addition, there were various other interlinked core school strategies which supported low-attaining pupils, which included the following: investment in improving the quality of support interventions, especially in the area of literacy; an emphasis on addressing the emotional needs of pupils that could inhibit learning, including listening to and taking account of pupils’ views; accommodating different learning styles in class; and encouraging the involvement of parents/carers in pupils’ learning.

## **Grouping systems used in the school**

### **General**

The school was 1.5-form entry but in a couple of classes entry was capped at 30. In Key Stage 2 Years 3 and 4 were mixed whereas Year 5 and Year 6 were single-form year groups.

While there was no formal grouping policy, and teachers were allowed to make their own decisions, senior management was in favour of mixed-attainment teaching.

Thus, whether teachers generally grouped by attainment or not within class, they encouraged teachers to have a mix of table arrangements, accommodating different group sizes to address pupils’ different learning styles. This was a research-based decision, which has subsequently been confirmed by the school’s own recent research (explained more fully below). If teachers preferred attainment grouping, the following was advised:

*I encourage them [teachers] to be flexible so that people move between groups so that they don’t become set in the beginning of the year and then they don’t move from then on, to be aware of the self-esteem issues and that it might not work in the grouped tables. And something we’re trying to work on is by having the differentiation either by outcome or by task but by being allowed to sit with someone who supports you and you feel good about.(head teacher)*

### **Literacy**

In Year 5 literacy was taught as a whole class with seating arrangements primarily determined by attainment grouping for most (but not all) activities. The fairly fixed seating plan within the class at the time of the field work was partly due to the class having been selected to be the ‘control’ class for a term in the school’s own research on pupil grouping. The grouping was therefore likely to change in the light of the school’s grouping research findings.

### **Numeracy**

The Year 5 class was taught as a whole group with within-class attainment grouping from Tuesday to Friday. On Mondays the class was split into an upper and lower group since there was an extra support teacher, who took each half of the class out for ICT while the class teacher taught numeracy. The teacher viewed having reduced numbers in numeracy on a Monday as particularly useful since that was often when she introduced a new topic.

## **Key strategies supporting low-attaining pupils (in depth)**

### **i. Organisation of support – especially in literacy**

In addition to employing a team of TAs, the school had also invested in four extra support teachers (all qualified teachers) in the school. Each class was allocated a support teacher for one day a week. Although not specifically assigned to assist low-

attaining pupils (sometimes they worked with a specific target group), much of their work was with groups of low attainers.

The presence of the Year 5 support teacher on a Monday enabled the class teacher to split the mixed-attainment numeracy class into lower and higher attaining pupils and teach the two groups separately (with TA support in addition). The support teacher then taught the remainder ICT. The class teacher viewed this as particularly useful at the beginning of the week when it was usual to begin a new topic; the smaller numbers and the narrower attainment band at that crucial stage in introducing new concepts allowed for more individual attention and for the topic to be introduced “at an appropriate level” (teacher). The three pupils interviewed concurred, all preferring the numeracy lessons when there was only half the class because it was quieter and therefore allowed them to concentrate more.

A key investment in human resources involved the appointment of a literacy advisory teacher to improve the quality and ensure greater consistency in the delivery of support interventions. As one senior manager put it:

*We've got some TAs who have been here for, you know, 15 years and when they started they were cleaning out the paint pots. Now they've developed in their trade – we've trained them but actually maybe they don't have quite the academic understanding – so to be able to provide a really good intervention programme for English you've got to have quite a high level of skill so we decided to train a few TAs to do intervention programmes across the school.*

The literacy advisory teacher adapted the generic TA training to suit the specific circumstances of the school, and devised intervention programmes that dovetailed with what was going on in the classroom. Three more qualified TAs (the Key Stage 2 literacy TA, for example, was a graduate and a trained youth worker) had been trained to a higher skills level to work with the literacy advisory teacher to deliver these interventions across the school. The Key Stage 2 literacy TA (who was of Bengali heritage) worked with the three Year 5 pupils interviewed, who were full of praise for the support and felt that it had made a difference to their English in the main class.

*When I go out with Shamina it's so calm and I can do anything I want and do activities (Year 5 pupil)*

P: *I like the activities – I've been learning to trace handwriting and learning to do joined up writing.*

I: *Has it made a difference to writing in your big class?*

P: *Yeah – but it's a bit too big – I'm trying to make it smaller. (Year 5 pupil)*

School action pupils generally worked in small groups (3-4) and school action plus pupils had 1-to-1 support. Both groups were withdrawn for support 3-4 times a week. The advisory teacher together with the deputy head/SENCO identified pupils for support by looking at their SEN file, considering their National Curriculum levels and class work and by talking to class teachers. Pupil progress within the intervention was reviewed every half term by the TA and the literacy advisory teacher.

The Year 5 pupils interviewed, who had all experienced withdrawals for literacy, were very positive about its benefits.

*I think it's really improved my writing cos I'm getting used to it now – going with her [the TA] – and she gives us homework and I'm getting used to my handwriting [work] as well.*

*Because it's a little group and there's not so much noise. If we're all bundled there together and there's quite a lot of noise so it's easier when we're individual.*

The very recent slight 'gender gap'<sup>10</sup> in attainment in literacy referred to earlier had prompted the school to ensure the library stock was broadened to appeal to more boys and teachers were being encouraged to ensure more kinaesthetic activities were included in their teaching.

## **ii. Classroom pedagogy - having high expectations, using teaching aids and varying groupings**

Classroom pedagogy was heavily emphasised within the school and good practice evident in the lessons observed. In addition to maximising the use of the extensive support offered by support teachers and TAs, management also encouraged teachers not to “*put a ceiling*” on low-attaining pupils' aspirations or experiences.

A Year 5 numeracy lesson on division exemplified this principle. The teacher put up a range of calculations on the board at different levels: the easier examples were on the left, moderately hard ones in the centre and the more difficult ones were on the right. Pupils were then told they could select the sums they wanted to attempt. They were encouraged to try a couple of easy ones first, and then to try something harder if they had found the task easy. As the teacher went round, they encouraged pupils to select something harder, or easier as appropriate. This allowed all pupils to succeed and to stretch and level themselves, rather than to be labelled or levelled by the teacher.

In addition to varying groupings in the classroom and focusing on oracy, addressing different learning styles was central to school policy in the classroom. This again was evident in the numeracy lesson on division. In illustrating the concept, the teacher presented it in several ways: by using a bead line, by drawing the stages in the process on the whiteboard and by using a grid. When the pupils went back to their tables, the teacher ensured that the same range of materials were available for low-attaining pupils to choose from to assist them in their understanding. Although the teaching aids were primarily aimed at low-attaining pupils, the teacher deliberately made them available to *all* pupils on all tables to avoid possible stigmatisation by peers which might occur if they were given only to tables with low-attaining pupils. Simultaneously, this guarded against the teacher assuming that pupils on particular tables would, or would not, be able to do the calculations without support materials.

## **iii. Looking after the emotional needs of children**

Another important school strategy which was aimed at all pupils, but which clearly had an impact on a number of low-attaining pupils, was addressing the emotional needs of children that can inhibit learning. The school had a reputation for being inclusive and caring and the most recent Ofsted report described its commitment to pupils' 'personal development and well-being [and] care, guidance and support' as 'outstanding'. Observations and interviews with pupils confirmed this.

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<sup>10</sup> Management did not want to read too much into it at this stage since the numbers were low and possibly skewed by several boys with specific special needs.

A crucial part of the school's emotional support was the school counsellor.

*Emotions we think are completely integral to how people and how children function and how a child is feeling will determine how they can engage in the learning tasks.*  
(school counsellor)

Part of her job was to counsel individual or pairs of pupils (with occasional small groups), which was always negotiated with parents/carers. Support was usually twice weekly and sometimes for as long as two years. Progress was reviewed twice a year and endings were usually negotiated with the pupils. Pupils were selected who were not able to access outside support, such as through the child mental health service. Another key role for the counsellor was to facilitate circle time in class, generally once a week for each class. She explained that the school had developed its own form of circle time, which was sometimes structured, sometimes unstructured.

*[It's] about providing a space to talk about classroom issues. The message is: This is a time to talk; this is a time to listen; this is a time to be heard. So it's time to give respect to others and to say, what's happening here?*

The most common issues that arose in circle time that could affect learning were having nobody to play with or playground disputes.

In addition, the school had suggestion boxes for pupils, a home-school liaison officer and had cultivated strong links with families (see below).

The school ethos of listening to pupils' opinions aimed to address both the learning needs of pupils and their emotional needs, in part through building self-esteem. The school's continued preference for carpet work assisted in this regard in that for the plenary sessions in the Year 5 classes observed, pupils were gathered together round the front and so could more easily hear and respond to others' contributions in discussion. The head also emphasised that they also tried to include pupils' input into discussions about their work at parents' evenings.

A striking example of listening to pupils' views lay in the school's recent action research project on pupil grouping. This had involved soliciting Key Stage 2 pupils' views through focus group discussions on classroom groupings and how they learned best. The findings were providing the basis for an INSET day the following term, and the Year 5 teacher intended to discuss and act on them further with her own class. The findings included: pupils preferring 1-to-1 work above all; not wanting to stay in fixed groupings round tables; concerns about being distracted when working in groups; and often preferring other pupils to explain when they did not understand rather than adults.

The low-attaining Year 5 pupils interviewed had clearly benefited from opportunities to listen to each other and give their opinions since, notwithstanding their relatively low attainment, they interacted well together, spoke confidently about their own learning and that of others and were able to reflect maturely on how it could be improved. The earlier comments from pupils and the following comment by a pupil talking about her preference for within-class mixed attainment grouping illustrate this:

*...and then I'll do the rest on my own. It's all I need - help for to help me for a little bit of work and I can do the rest. Yeah. I'm not telling them to do it for me and everything. I just need help.*

#### **iv. Working with the community**

Working together with parents/families within the community constituted another key strategy for supporting learning. The senior management team said school-community relations were excellent, as evidenced in the almost 100% attendance at parents' evenings (according to senior management), which the Ofsted report confirmed. Community trust was also strengthened, the head believed, because children of some of the staff were attending the school.

Parental involvement was identified as vital in supporting pupil learning generally, and oracy and literacy in particular. For one senior manager getting pupils to read at home with parents/carers was the most important step that could be taken in improving learning for low-attaining pupils. To this end there was a toy and book library, lending books and learning activity packs, and a second-hand book stall, which families were encouraged to use. The toy library had initially only attracted white parents but was now being "revitalised" to attract other parents.

A large number of parents' classes were also offered during school time either involving teachers or external parties: English classes for Bengali mothers, Maths or reading with your child, emotional intelligence, massage, healthy eating. While they were viewed as an integral part of building positive school-community relations, some teachers were less sure of their impact in increasing parental involvement in pupil learning.

There was a monthly newsletter to parents and a weekly "sharing assembly", when parents/carers could come in and view their children's work, which was observed during the research visit. In addition, there were annual Eid and Christmas shows, both of which were said to involve pupils of all faiths and to be similarly well attended by parents/carers regardless of faith. There was also an annual whole-school day trip involving staff, pupils and their families.

## **c) SCHOOL FP1**

**Focus:** approaches to numeracy at Key Stage 2

### **Background**

#### **General context and school population**

FP1 is a junior school for children aged 7 to 11 with a population of approximately 180. It is located in an ex mining village and draws from an economically deprived area. Its intake is predominantly White British. At the time of the fieldwork, 2 per cent of the school population had statements of special educational needs (close to the average) and the proportion of pupils with special needs (without statements) was 25 per cent (slightly higher than average).

#### **Pupils' progress**

The percentage of pupils achieving expected levels of attainment has varied annually over the last four years but the trend is stable overall. Historically, the school has been particularly successful in supporting the achievement of lower attainers, who have made comparatively better progress than higher attainers.

### **Numeracy – organisation and classroom practice**

#### **Grouping systems**

The school has a two class intake and pupils are organised into mixed attainment class groups. Across class attainment grouping is used in numeracy, but not literacy, from years 3 to 6, and pupils are divided into two 'sets'. Numeracy is viewed as distinct from literacy in being a 'sequential' discipline, building on prior learning in a very systematic way. Setting in numeracy is therefore adopted as a means of facilitating teaching and learning at a pace that allows pupils to master skills and knowledge before moving on. Higher attaining sets are usually larger than lower attaining ones, but the lower attaining year 5 set observed during fieldwork still contained 23 pupils (compared with 27 in the higher attaining one).

During the spring term in year 6 pupils are split into groups of between six and ten pupils for some of the time each day for lessons in a range of curriculum areas, including numeracy. Groups are taken by class teachers, an additional teacher and teaching assistants. This is regarded as a very successful way of finely targeting teaching and support to pupils' needs but demands high levels of resource and is not sustainable for longer than a term.

#### **Supporting the achievement of low attainers**

Some strategies that support the learning of low attainers are designed to promote achievement for all pupils. For example, the school places a high priority on professional development to improve teaching and learning for all and on the continuous evaluation of classroom practice. As part of this, teachers have been encouraged to develop ways of using literacy and numeracy strategy materials to plan lessons creatively and to 'really get under the skin of differentiation' (headteacher). The next section will focus on the ways that this general approach to pedagogical development has been translated into practice in a lower attaining year 5 numeracy set.

## Teaching and learning strategies in the classroom

The examples included below illustrate some of the ways that teaching was tailored to the characteristics of pupils in the group observed.

### *Within class differentiation*

Although it was a lower attaining set, there was a range of attainment within this group, from five pupils who were operating at level 3c to one who had recently achieved a low score on an optional national curriculum practice paper aimed at year 4 pupils. In this context, the teacher was very aware of the need to differentiate teaching and learning within the group. Ways of doing this included:

- 1 Adopting within class attainment grouping so that pupils could be assigned different tasks
- 2 Focusing support interventions from the teaching assistant on the lowest attaining pupils, though not exclusively
- 3 Differentiating questions

### *Scaffolding learning*

The teacher of this set paid careful attention to the processes through which pupils built new learning upon existing skills and conceptual knowledge. For example, during explanations he regularly broke off to check pupils' understanding through questioning. When questioning pupils he gave them time to work out answers, and where they were unable to do so he suggested strategies that might help. Breaking up tasks in this way also helped to sustain pupils' concentration and develop their listening skills, things which the teacher identified as particular challenges with lower attainers. One girl described his step-by-step approach in the following way:

*Mr J. [teacher] splits things up. He will give us part of a task in a column, wait for us to finish and check we are ok, before asking us to go onto the next column.*

### *Responding to pupils' preferences for types of learning activity*

The teacher tried to select activities which pupils would enjoy, thereby holding their attention, and which would support their learning at the same time. In his view, practical activities and games were very successful with lower attainers and in observations pupils were seen actively participating in them. In the teacher's words:

*I try to play a few games, especially with the mental practice. They are the kind of children who like to be hands on. They don't just want to listen. So, showing angles with hands [practical activity in observed lesson involving children in using their arms to indicate angles] was part of that. I use the computer suite sometimes for games. The children like interactive activities on the computer. They don't think of them as maths. They think of them as games.*

Practical activities were facilitated by the availability of equipment – large dice were used for times tables practice in one lesson, for example.

**Pressures**

In common with others in this school and elsewhere, the teacher of this group emphasised the importance of reinforcing skills and knowledge with low attainers. He felt, however, that the demands of the numeracy curriculum did not always allow as much time as he would have liked for pupils in his group to grasp concepts and skills before moving on.

## d) SCHOOL HP1

**Focus:**        i. **well-integrated TA support system and**  
                      ii. **effective classroom pedagogies.**

### **School background**

The primary school is located within an education action zone in a deprived area of a city in the south of England. Traditionally the intake was split between pupils of Bengali origin and pupils from white working class families of UK origin. According to senior management, however, the nature of the intake was changing with an increase in the percentage of Bengali pupils (approximately 55-60% at the time of the field work, according to the school) and a recent influx of central European, Chinese, South American and African-Caribbean pupils.

The local community was characterised by several senior managers as “*an area of socio-economic deprivation*” reflected in the fact that approximately 60% of pupils were eligible for free school meals. One senior manager expanded on this:

*Pupils often come from families with limited formal schooling or from poor families – families with unhappy home lives – cases of abuse or disruption, or newly arrived families in the country.*

Nevertheless, according to the very recent Ofsted report, there was ‘some variation’ in social background as small, but increasing, numbers of pupils from professional families were sending their children to the school - possibly in part because of the school’s increasing success.

The teaching staff, though predominantly White British, also included three members of staff of Bangladeshi origin, including a senior staff member. The TAs, on the other hand, had been traditionally white of British origin but had recently managed to recruit one or two TAs of minority ethnic origin. There was a stable teaching force with some key members of staff who had been there for many years. It was apparent that there was a strong team ethos among all staff.

Management said there was some resentment within the community at the substantially more affluent neighbouring business district. The school, however, had started to make some links with one of the local businesses to provide some support in the school. It was also noted that the school was also benefiting from the recent high level of funding in the LA and that they were able to tap into community funding.

As the school was doing very well (It was highly acclaimed in all respects in its latest Ofsted report), it was oversubscribed, with classes and classrooms at capacity. Attainment was much higher than both the national average and the average within the LA and the Value Added figures were very high. Its current population was about 360 pupils. The Ofsted report also noted that the percentage of pupils at an early stage of speaking English was higher than in most schools and management was therefore planning further EAL training for staff. The percentage of pupils with learning difficulties was also ‘well above average’.

Management’s only slight concern was the frequent absence by a small number of pupils, which was said to have a major impact on their achievement. One of the senior members of staff monitoring said there was “*a correlation between poor*

*attendance, late attendance and underachieving*", although they noted that 30% of the cases being monitored at the time were high-achievers. At the time of the research there was a strong drive on addressing the issue through awarding a monthly class attendance cup and an annual individual award for each year group, in addition to the home contact and follow-up visits by the head of pastoral care and the home-school liaison officer.

Security was strict to get into the school building but once inside there was an evident warmth about the environment and a visible shared enthusiasm and commitment to the pupils by all members of staff and the children came across as happy and enjoying school. Facilities were good and classroom noticeboards and corridors were brightly decorated with a mixture of pupils' work and commercially produced posters and flashcards.

Attainment was a core school strategy aimed at improving the attainment of all pupils but which *"has impacted most on the SEN and statemented children"*, according to the head teacher. She explained that setting had first been introduced in numeracy and literacy in Year 6 a few years previously and *"the results improved dramatically across the board"*. As a result, setting has gradually been introduced lower down the school. The school was also investing heavily in TA support, including the professional development of TAs.

Some of the initiatives involving the home-school liaison officer were in their early stages but were already showing some tangible positive effects. She had already successfully introduced a programme involving a small group of adults reading with *other* people's children, which had resulted in three of the six adults going on to become teaching assistants, including the school's first TA of Bengali heritage. She felt that the increased parental involvement through that initiative and through her courses for parents/carers (which focused on sharing ideas for supporting learning at home) had already had a positive impact in improving the self-esteem of those particular low-attaining pupils. Her work had prompted some positive comments in the school's comments/suggestions book.

Another strategy was a formal school-wide reward system which recognised achievement and endeavour in all sorts of activities, not just in the academic arena. Rewards included a fortnightly 'star of the class award' and merit book awards given out in assembly, in addition to the earlier mentioned attendance awards. Thus, praise and reward was available to all pupils irrespective of their academic attainment levels.

## **Grouping systems used in the school**

### **General**

Form classes comprised mixed-attainment groups. The approximately 360 pupils in the school were divided into 12 form classes (three per year) of around 30 pupils, with slightly more boys than girls. Literacy and numeracy were set whereas other subjects were taught in mixed-attainment form groups. At the time of the field work, pupils were set for literacy and numeracy from Year 3. The head felt that since the other lessons were taught in form classes, there was still plenty of scope for cross-curricular work.

### **Literacy**

Literacy sets were formed later in the term in Year 3 than in Years 4, 5 and 6. According to the literacy co-ordinator, all teachers were involved in organising the sets at the end of the summer term to hand on to the following year's teachers. They

also met at the end of each term to discuss moves. Sets were said to be determined primarily by attainment using standardised tests in reading and writing done every term but gender, pupil numbers and behaviour were also taken into consideration. Every half term setting was reviewed. However, teachers agreed that pupils were generally only moved if, to use the words of one teacher, "*someone sticks out like a sore thumb*," for example in the case of a new arrival, who would stay in the set taught by their form teacher in the first instance before being moved if considered out of place. There was said to be less movement by Year 5 because "*teachers knew the pupils better and had got the levels sorted*" (teacher). Movement was also constrained by class size.

### **Numeracy**

The school also set in numeracy from Year 3, based on Key Stage 1 National Curriculum test results in the first instance and then by using the results from standardised bought tests set every half term. However, as with literacy, there was teacher discretion to adjust the sets in the year group if, for example, "*the teacher believes particular pupils have underperformed, or they believe they've copied*" (senior teacher). As with literacy, teachers in each year group arranged the sets for the following year's teachers.

The co-ordinator said that although there was some movement at the beginning of the year, they tried not to have too much movement and groups were "*fairly settled by Year 5*". As in literacy, classes were said to be very full (generally 30), which made movement difficult. However, the school was currently experimenting with reducing the class size to 26 in the bottom set and having 30-32 in the middle and top sets.

### **Key strategies to support the learning of low-attaining pupils (in depth)**

#### **i. A well-integrated TA support system**

One of the key strategies in the school aimed at addressing the needs of low-attaining pupils was the well integrated, cohesive TA system. TAs were involved in both in-class and withdrawal support, predominantly for low-attaining pupils. Each class teacher had one TA for support. A second TA was allocated to support the lowest set in each year group in literacy and numeracy. Another TA's brief was to support SEN and statemented pupils, including giving EAL support, especially in the afternoons. The head also pointed out that for children who were very slow at writing and were eligible to have a scribe in their National Curriculum tests, arrangements were made in the middle of Year 5 and trained TAs started to work with them so that they started to get used to the process well in advance.

Decisions about which low-attaining pupils to support through interventions were said to involve the SENCO/inclusion co-ordinator, the class teachers *and* teaching assistants. Every term each individual class teacher, following discussion with the relevant TAs, had a 'highlighting meeting' with the SENCO, during which they went through the class lists, and looking at test results and reviewing cases as to whether they needed additional or less individual support.

In addition to investing in the appointment of TAs, the school stood out for prioritising TA professional development and for visibly acknowledging their importance, which is likely to have impacted positively on their effectiveness. For example, in addition to the general TA training, one TA had been trained to manage the new LA-wide database for tracking pupil progress in literacy and numeracy. Moreover, all the TAs, along with teachers and other school staff (including the cleaning and catering staff), had been trained in child protection issues. Further, the TAs, although line-managed

by the SENCO, had a weekly meeting with the head teacher. Pupil files were accessible both to teachers and TAs in a filing cabinet in the staff room (which was secure since it could only be entered with a pass key).

When interviewed, the SENCO underlined the importance of good teamwork and communication between the SENCO, teachers, teaching assistants and other staff. This was evident during the research visit when the SENCO was frequently seen at break/lunchtime or before class consulting with class teachers together with their TAs about individual pupils.

Similarly, in the classroom observations, teachers and TAs were often observed in discussion prior to, and during, the lessons.

One TA was allocated to each form teacher while another supported the bottom set in each year group in literacy and numeracy. Thus, the teacher of the lowest-attainment group in literacy and numeracy generally had at least the same two extra adults every day to help support pupil learning. TAs also provided a lot of the supplementary curriculum in literacy and numeracy for the lowest-attaining pupils, often with EAL or SEN. In the morning TAs took groups of low-attaining children for direct phonics during assembly or registration periods four times a week, with an extra 1-to-1 catch-up session once a week if necessary. Reading groups and basic numeracy groups for low-attainers were identified in each year cohort, and were also held twice a week at this time although it was ensured that pupils did not miss special assemblies. For afternoon withdrawal, TAs worked with up to three pupils on a set programme twice a week. The Talking Partners programme was provided for EAL pupils struggling with oracy in English, which allowed them to develop their fluency and increase their confidence. Teachers selected the times for pupil withdrawal so that they did not miss their favourite subjects. At other times, the same TAs worked in the class with the class teacher. TAs kept records of their withdrawal sessions to help the SENCO and teachers review progress and revise individual targets.

One of the lessons of the Year 5 lowest-attaining literacy set provides a good example of teacher and TAs working well together. Three pupils who were new to the country the previous week and spoke minimal English were seated on a table with a TA. Although they were primarily following a separate support programme, they were taught in the class to make them feel included. They were following a programme of phonics with the EAL support TA while the rest of the class were ordering a set of written instructions. A second TA was working on the table with six of the lowest attainers (all pupils designated SEN) on the main class activity. If the teacher thought the new arrivals could access the activity she said she sometimes provided a differentiated version of what the rest of the class was doing for the TA to work through with the pupils. In the observed lesson, whenever the teacher addressed the whole class, the EAL TA would stop the phonics activity so that the new arrivals had the opportunity to improve their auditory skills by listening to the teacher and to get accustomed to different voices. The teacher explained that while the class was engaged in pair or group-work activities, she sometimes swapped with the TA to work with the phonics group (while the TA worked with another table) so that she could assess their progress.

## **ii. Effective classroom pedagogies for low-attaining pupils**

The teachers interviewed were also aware that the lack of mobility between sets (and the large class numbers) could also mean that attainment grouping notwithstanding,

pupils covered quite a spread of attainment and that they therefore needed to provide an appropriate level of challenge for all pupils, even in the lowest sets. The maths teacher achieved this by generally giving all pupils in the class the same work, initially, as she explained:

*I like to give all pupils the same level of work because they do surprise you – some children who you would think would not get it as quickly they pick it up like that.*

However, as observed in the lessons, she put extension activities in the form of more difficult calculations on the board if pupils were finishing early and finding it easy and gave extra homework sheets to pupils struggling with a particular topic.

At the same time both teachers felt they needed to employ pedagogies which suited low-attaining pupils, such as more structured activities, more pair and group work to give opportunities for improving oracy and more physical and visual stimuli – the latter two strategies particularly addressed at low-attaining pupils with EAL needs.

Both teachers noted the lack of oral participation by some quiet Bengali girls as a cause of concern, and it was very evident in the observations. One teacher got round this difficulty by identifying a girl in advance for a question/comment, then telling her she would come back to her in a few minutes, thereby giving her time to think. This was observed to be a successful strategy in one lesson. The high level of pair and group work observed in the lessons also gave them opportunities for more safe exploratory talk before speaking up in front of the whole class. For example, in the second literacy lesson on instruction texts, the teacher asked pupils to revise what they remembered about features of good instructions by discussing in pairs for a few minutes before eliciting the features from volunteers/selected pupils from the whole group.

One teacher also thought that “*perhaps more strategies to get the kids hooked on the lesson*” were needed for low-attaining pupils. A combination of the above strategies was exemplified in the two Year 5 bottom set literacy lessons on instructions.

## **e) SCHOOL GM2**

**Focus:** challenge in the curriculum and pedagogy

### **Background**

#### **General context and school population**

NM2 is a larger than average middle school for children aged 9 to 13 with a population of approximately 600. It is located on the outskirts of a city and the majority of pupils come from relatively affluent homes. Its intake is predominantly White British. Most pupils enter the school with attainment well above average. At the time of the fieldwork, one per cent of the school population had statements of special educational needs (below average) and the proportion of pupils with special needs (without statements) was six per cent (below average).

#### **Pupils' progress**

The percentage of pupils achieving expected levels of attainment at Key stage 2 has increased steadily over the last four years at a slightly greater rate than in schools in the local authority and nationally. There has been a particular increase in the percentage of pupils achieving above the expected level over the last three years.

#### **Grouping systems**

Pupils are organised into mixed attainment class groups on entry to the school and are taught in these groups for some lessons in all years (5 to 8). Across class attainment grouping is introduced at different stages for the core subjects: in mathematics from year 5; in English from year 6; and in science from year 7. Pupils are also grouped in this way in modern foreign languages in Key Stage 3.

#### **Supporting the achievement of low attainers**

Because it is larger than average there is flexibility within this middle school for keeping lower attaining sets small in both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. Favourable adult/pupil ratios are enhanced by the deployment of teaching assistants to work mainly with low attaining groups. With higher levels of one to one attention potentially available to them, teachers aim to offer lower attaining pupils a challenging curriculum that has a significant degree of overlap with that followed by pupils in other groups.

#### **Challenging lower attainers**

#### **Common curricula**

In all the core subjects there is deliberate overlap between the programmes followed by different attainment groups. For example, in years 7 and 8 all mathematics groups use the same text book (produced by the Mathematics Enhancement Project). Differentiated questions within this allow work to be targeted whilst there are opportunities for lower attainers to cover the same topics as higher attainers, where appropriate. One aim of this is to prevent low attaining pupils from feeling that they are following a reduced curriculum and the knock-on negative effect of this on their self-esteem. It also reduces the risk of a ceiling being placed on their attainment. At the time of the fieldwork, some pupils in a lower attaining year 8 science group had achieved higher scores on a recent common module test than some in higher attaining groups. Their teacher's view was that they would not have achieved the same scores in a higher attaining group, where they would have 'struggled' without

support. With the level of attention available to them in the lower attaining group, however, they had been able to master the same skills and knowledge as pupils in different groups.

### **Pedagogical approaches**

A common view across schools is that lower attainers have difficulty with concentration. One response to this is to sustain pupils' attention by keeping lessons pacy and breaking them up into different activities. This carries some risks, however, one of which is that pupils do not learn to engage in sustained processes of learning, another that practising skills is emphasised at the expense of the development of conceptual understanding. The following examples illustrate two ways in which teachers of lower attaining groups managed to engage pupils in some challenging learning activities in ways they enjoyed.

#### *Example 1 - verbalising methods and concepts*

This example is from a year 5 numeracy lesson with a lower attaining set. There were twelve pupils present (seven boys and five girls) seated around two tables at the front of the classroom. The lesson began with some times tables practice before moving on to the topics of coordinates, area and perimeter. The group had practised using coordinates in the previous lesson and were revisiting area and perimeter for the first time in year 5.

This part of the lesson began with the teacher reminding pupils of key concepts and knowledge. Over ten minutes she used an interactive whiteboard to demonstrate these, building up these concepts and knowledge step by step and checking pupils' understanding through question and answer. Following this, the teacher presented the class with a series of problems on the IWB and asked individuals to come out to the board to solve them whilst describing their methods to the rest of the group. She was careful to give pupils time to think and work out solutions through trial and error. Although pupils needed some help to verbalise their methods, they were able to manage this with some prompting (For example, 'Can you explain what you are doing now?'). All pupils were keen to participate, evidently enjoying the opportunity to use the IWB and the individual attention.

#### *Example 2 – writing as an extended process*

The teacher of this group aims to make the learning involved in any writing task explicit. She said:

*Basically, I like the groups to understand the context of what they're doing and that there is a process they have to go through before getting to the writing outcome. I always do this for every piece of writing. It's learning how to learn.*

Pupils are used to spending sustained periods (for example, all lessons over a week) on preparation for writing. Preparation can involve a variety of activities, for example identifying useful resources, making notes, art work and small group discussion. Pupils enjoy the variety of tasks, which help them to develop their ideas before they attempt the writing itself, something that pupils in this group find difficult. At the beginning of any piece of written work pupils record a summary of the process they have been through to produce it, as in the following example:

### **Characterisation**

**For this piece of writing we took a character from the Demon Headmaster – Miss Wilberforce and invented her character we began by gathering**

**information about our character to get to know her. We then produced a character board. We also used an adjective bank and included actions, mannerisms etc to show what she would be like.**

**Pressures**

Approaches which focus on processes of learning may require pupils (and teachers) to move out of a 'comfort zone' of skills practice and immediate outcomes.

## **f) SCHOOL GM1**

**Focus:** Valuing pupils and providing opportunities for all

### **Background**

#### **General context and school population**

NM1 is a middle school for children aged 9 to 13 with a population of approximately 200. The headteacher described it as 'deeply rural,' drawing mainly from five villages within a 300 square mile area. Its intake is predominantly White British and the level of economic disadvantage in the school population relatively low. At the time of the fieldwork the proportion of pupils with special needs (without statements) was nine per cent (lower than the national average) and four per cent of the school population had statements of special educational needs (higher than the national average). The relatively high proportion of pupils with statements of special educational needs reflects a growing population of pupils on the ASD spectrum, some of whom travel long distances in order to attend the school.

#### **Pupils' progress**

The percentage of pupils achieving expected levels of attainment has varied annually over the last four years but the trend is stable overall. The school's own analyses suggest that no particular group of pupils (for example higher or lower attainers) makes better or worse progress than others.

#### **Grouping systems**

Pupils are organised into mixed attainment class groups and taught in these groups for most lessons. Within the school there is support for 'setting' in 'academic' subjects, where resources and staffing allow, and at the time of the fieldwork across class attainment systems operated in English and mathematics in years 6, 7 and 8. However, grouping systems vary over time depending on the characteristics of particular year cohorts. Some years, for example, pupils are set in year 5 if attainment levels within the intake vary particularly widely. The number of 'sets' for individual subjects also varies. The year 7 cohort, for instance, was divided into three sets for English, because of the number of children with literacy difficulties, but two for mathematics.

### **Valuing pupils and providing opportunities for all**

#### **Supporting the achievement of low attainers**

As an organisation the school prides itself on being responsive to the individual needs of all children. Resources are therefore targeted carefully and responses to low attainers are encompassed within this overall approach. Across class attainment grouping is viewed as one way of targeting provision, as is directing some additional adult support to low attaining pupils. To some extent awareness of pupils' needs is based on the collection and analysis of attainment data at individual pupil level, but it is also supported by more informal knowledge of children from relationships with them and their families. This is facilitated by the relatively small size of the school.

#### **Promoting an inclusive ethos**

A risk of targeted approaches is that lower attaining pupils may be stigmatised, for example because of the sets they are in. As one way of counteracting this danger, the school has sought to develop a strongly inclusive ethos, within which all children

are valued, whatever their characteristics. Some of the strategies for promoting an inclusive ethos are listed below:

- All parents and children are told the school motto, that pupils are expected to be 'the best they can be.'
- The head teacher provides strong leadership in relation to the school ethos. For example, she has taken assemblies on the theme of 'Difference is good,' in which the achievements of lower and higher attainers have been highlighted and celebrated.
- Name calling on the basis of 'ability' is actively discouraged and confronted.
- Work completed by low pupils in lower attaining groups is displayed alongside work completed by pupils in other groups and teachers take opportunities to use selected pieces as good examples.

Alongside an ethos of valuing all, as many opportunities as possible are provided for pupils to achieve success in different ways. One way of doing this is by offering a broad range of extra-curricular activities and clubs, for example in music, art and P.E. The school has analysed participation in these activities and found that they are attended by pupils whose attainment in core subjects is relatively low as much as by others with higher attainment.

### **Pupils' responses to targeted approaches**

A group of Year 8 pupils were interviewed about their maths lessons in a lower attaining group. They were generally very positive about their experiences and said that they learned a lot from the teacher. They were also positive about additional support, talking appreciatively about the teaching assistant who worked with them in their mathematics lesson. One pupil said:

*In maths she sometimes describes things better to you, especially if you missed the explanation because people were messing. She describes it a lot better than what I heard. She's very good I think, yes.*

The school works hard to promote this positive view of learning support, and it is not regarded as only for lower attainers. For example, pupils identified as 'gifted' are withdrawn for additional support in English and mathematics. Some pupils said that they enjoyed the opportunity to work in small withdrawal groups (for example, 'a little maths club' after school). However, there were exceptions to this general pattern. One girl said, for instance, that she had not enjoyed being identified for an after-school mathematics programme because she felt 'picked out for being stupid.' Despite best efforts to counteract it, therefore, there would seem to be a remaining stigma associated with being a lower attaining pupil, at least in some cases.

## **g) SCHOOL HS1**

- Focus:**
- i. An inclusive school ethos – an extensive extra-curricular programme**
  - ii. Investment in pupil support - mentoring**
  - iii. 'Mixed-ability' teaching and classroom pedagogy in English**

### **School background**

This secondary school is a larger than average-sized comprehensive located in an education action zone in a deprived area of a city in the south of England, where, according to the most recent Ofsted report, free school meal entitlement was 'well above average'. The report also noted that 'the area has historically been one of high deprivation and low aspiration' and senior managers in the school repeatedly talked about the importance of raising the self-esteem and the aspirations of pupils and their families. Ofsted also commented that in the area surrounding the school a larger than average number of families lived in overcrowded households, and that 'often the circumstances for pupils outside the school, both economically and socially, provide very unfavourable conditions in which to study.' This was also confirmed by various members of the school support team.

At the time of the Ofsted report, approximately half the school's intake was of Bangladeshi origin, a third was of white British heritage and the rest were from other minority ethnic groups. One senior manager said that approximately 25% of the school population was designated as having special educational needs, which were predominantly learning related.

The school had a very high Value Added figure and the average number of pupils achieving 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent aggregated over the last few years was higher than the LA and national averages and continuing to rise.

The school comprised a mixture of modern and old buildings in good condition and a small, but creatively landscaped, recreational area for pupils to enjoy at break and lunchtime. The school had a very positive and dynamic feel about it. There was a clear shared commitment by staff to give pupils the best they could in all respects of their education – the extra-curricular provision for pupils was particularly impressive (see below) and, as Ofsted noted, pastoral care provision was very good. The school's multi-cultural and inclusive ethos was reflected in a general espousal of 'mixed-ability' teaching (also discussed below) and an emphasis on social cohesion. The social backgrounds of the staff (teaching, administrative and support (TAs in particular)) reflected to some extent the ethnic diversity of the intake.

This inclusive ethos, which constituted a pivotal strategy in the support of low-attaining pupils, also included investment in new curricular activity and process-based initiatives such as accelerated learning and learning to learn. Learning to learn was being embedded across the curriculum, for example in CPSHE in full in Years 7-9. And in Year 8 the school had successfully sought sponsorship for 'drop days' based on the learning to learn philosophy and activities. Normal lessons were abandoned for two thirds of a day every two weeks for pupils to work on a six-month project (e.g. a film or a piece of artwork, enhanced through outside facilitation). Groups of 20 pupils were organised according to individual choices with two adult facilitators. Although it was said to be too early to gauge the effect on pupils, teachers and pupils who were asked about the project were universally positive.

## Grouping systems used in the school

### General

As mentioned above, the school had a strong commitment to mixed-attainment (including a balance of gender, ethnicity and SEN pupils) teaching, which was practised across the subjects for most years, except in mathematics, which was seen as a special case (see below), and some experimental setting in Year 9 in modern and foreign languages. Most subjects were taught in form groups, of approximately 30 pupils at Key Stage 3, although smaller cross-form mixed-attainment 'practical groups' of about 24 were formed for certain subjects, such as science, ICT and design and technology. Group sizes were deliberately kept smaller at Key Stage 4 since, as one member of the senior management team observed, "GCSE is the passport" to opportunities post 16.

School managers agreed that mixed-attainment grouping provided greater social benefits for *all* pupils and could still deliver good results (as the school's recent attainment figures proved), especially for low-attaining pupils. The constraints of the exam curricula, however, made it necessary to practise attainment grouping to some degree as pupils neared GCSE. By then, as the head teacher argued, "*pupils are more ready and in a position to label themselves – They are more aware of what they can and can't do.*" On the other hand, he explained: "*If you set at an early age, the school then has to expend a lot of energy trying to combat the negative effects of being in a bottom set.*"

### English

As a senior member of the English department explained, pupils were taught in mixed-attainment groups from Year 7 until Christmas in Year 11, when they were divided into exam preparation classes for Foundation and Higher GCSE. This was because in the literature exam there are different texts to study and different exam skills which need to be practised. At Key Stage 3, pupils were taught in form groups but in Years 10 and 11 mixed form groups were constituted because the class sizes were smaller (approximately 24). These groups were based on teacher assessment.

*First of all we decide who shouldn't be together and then we try to get a balance of attainment levels and gender. Then we look at the classes and juggle to get a balance of ethnicity, SEN and behaviour* (senior member of English department)

The department policy for within-class grouping was for mixed-attainment groups of six in general (borne out by lesson observations and interviews with other teachers), but with different grouping options for different activities.

However, midway through the first term in Year 7 about 15 children with a reading level below 7 were identified and withdrawn, with agreement from parents/carers, to follow an alternative programme for the rest of the year. Individual pupils were reintegrated back into the mainstream classes earlier if their reading level improved sufficiently. A senior member of the English department noted the success of the first cohort of withdrawn pupils following the alternative curriculum in Year 7, the Ruth Miskin literacy programme. Out of 29 pupils 28 gained Level 5 at Key Stage 3.

### Maths

Although was not taught in mixed attainment groups, senior staff members were adamant that maths "tiered" or "banded" but did not set. and suggested a wider attainment range As a senior manager explained, the school had formerly had good results teaching in mixed-attainment classes but the move to attainment grouping was "*in response to national curriculum demands and staffing issues.*"

In addition, since practising attainment-grouping, the department had increased the number of A and A\* grades.

In Year 7 pupils were put into higher/lower “tiers” within the four timetable slots. A range of information was used to determine the groups: information from primary schools, National Curriculum test results at Key Stage 2, teacher comments, in addition to the school’s own internal tests, such as CATS. Other criteria were also considered, as a senior department member explained: “*not just ability but the motivation, eagerness, hard work and everything else*” in order to create a classroom atmosphere where everyone could work. A gender balance was preferred though was not always possible.

In Years 8 and 9 maths was timetabled in two rather than four slots, thus allowing for two half-year groups, which were each divided into four classes: an upper tier, a lower tier and a middle tier, which comprised two “*more mixed*” classes to allow for more flexibility – to take behaviour, for example, into account, or to have flexibility in the size of class. “*Groups are much more fluid than in traditional setting*”, the senior department member explained, so that pupils who had recently arrived in the country, for example, could find their language improving, enabling them to access the curriculum more easily and therefore “*move through the ranks*”.

At Key Stage 3 most classes had 30 pupils on the register. In Years 10 and 11, in line with the general school policy of concentrating resources at Key Stage 4, each half-year group had five classes: two Foundation classes, two Intermediate classes and one Higher class targeting pupils who were aiming to get A/A\* at GCSE. Class sizes were toploaded, that is Foundation and Intermediate groups usually had 24/25 on the register whereas Higher groups generally had 28/29. In practice it was said that the Foundation groups were much smaller, with only 20 pupils in class at times because some of the low-attaining pupils would be away on off-site courses.

Groups were reviewed every half term and two/three pupils might be moved per class per term. However, one maths teacher noted that since classes were often very full, you could often only move a pupil up if there was someone else to move down.

## **Science**

As a senior member of the department explained, science was taught in the mixed attainment ‘practical groups’ of approximately 24 pupils (see above) from Years 7 to 10 inclusive. The composition of the practical groups was initially organised by the Head of Year 7, to get a mix of attainment, gender and behaviour, and was reviewed annually by the relevant heads of department together with the head of year. In Year 11 pupils were set on account of the GCSE exam curriculum although with the new curriculum mixed-attainment groups would now be retained in Year 11.

## **Key strategies to support the learning of low-attaining pupils (in depth)**

### **i. An inclusive school ethos – an extensive extra-curricular programme**

An overarching theme in the support of pupil learning was the emphasis on inclusivity and school ethos, which was seen to be particularly important for low-attaining pupils.

*I think ‘Why do we do so well by weak ability children?’ and partly it’s because we do so well by everybody and we make sure they’re part of that everybody - an ethos as much as anything else. (senior manager)*

This emphasis was apparent in various ways. Three of the most apparent were the school support system, the extra-curricular programme and the commitment to good ‘mixed-ability’ teaching.

Much of the work on ethos came through the extensive extra-curricular programme of “enrichment” activities, particularly in Years 7- 9, such as residential courses, outward bound and school trips and numerous sporting, cultural and charity fund-raising activities.

*I do think it sounds cheesy – but the whole ethos of breadth of enrichment is also important for pupils of all ability but I think particularly for pupils of low ability (senior manager)*

While providing broader educational opportunities, these activities also helped to strengthen teacher-pupil and peer relations, and help motivate pupils to want to be and stay in school. As one of the senior management team member explained, and several other teachers reinforced:

*There are more teaching resources available for the upper school, but more energy and activities working on school ethos and aspiration lower down the school. Year 7 kids go on a residential, and there’s lots of outward bound.... There’s a need for hooks for kids to buy into schooling and also to broaden pupil experiences.*

All the pupils interviewed were enthusiastic about the school.

## **ii. Investment in pupil support - mentoring**

One of the ways in which the school ensured that pupils felt included was to provide an extensive support network to provide support where it was needed. The school invested heavily in pupil support, which took a variety of forms. They included the engagement of a full-time counsellor; in-class or withdrawal interventions by members of the support department; a strong pastoral system managed through the heads of year, who moved through the school with a particular year group and so got to know the pupils and their families well; numerous exam revision and booster classes; and various forms of mentoring – the focus here.

The school had won various awards and had been praised by Ofsted for its mentoring. In addition to the work of the school’s learning mentor, the school was recruiting and training ex-pupils to become academic mentors for pupils and help them with their studies, giving either in-class or out-of-class support, particularly in the core subjects and to help with exam preparation in year 11. As one senior teacher emphasised, the advantage of ex-pupils over TAs and teachers is that they have “*street cred*” with the pupils. A couple of pupils questioned over the scheme were very enthusiastic (as were the ex-pupils encountered) and one of the teachers felt that pupils had been “*quite responsive*” and that it “*had probably helped raise attainment*”.

The school was also running an increasingly popular business mentoring scheme for pupils in Years 10 and 11, in which all pupils that wanted to participate were paired with a business mentor, whom they met on average once a fortnight. From only a dozen mentor/mentee pairings when the scheme first started, at the time of the field work, according to one teacher, there were between 40-50 pupils in the school who had requested and been allocated mentors. The teacher explained that business mentors often focused on CVs, careers advice and preparing pupils for the transition from school to college or work. He described their mentoring as “less academic” but “more wide-ranging” than that of the ex-pupil academic mentors, and noted that it had had a positive impact on the attitude and attainment of some of the pupils, including some low attainers.

There was also a three-year business partnership with a major retail firm's academy, targeting 24 Year 8 pupils each year across the attainment spectrum whom they believed "[would] gain increased academic motivation from the project" (senior manager).

### iii. 'Mixed-ability' teaching and classroom pedagogy in English

In terms of the curriculum and pedagogy, as stated earlier, the pursuance of mixed-attainment grouping across most of the school was seen as central to the success of low-attaining pupils. As a senior member of the English department explained:

*I think generally our low-ability kids do really well and I think it's because we teach mixed ability; actually we're not dumbing down to them. They're working in groups; they're having to think at quite a high level at times and they're getting support with that. ...I really believe in not dumbing or simplifying things down for kids. I have the same expectations. I actually set the same essays for all of my pupils as well. I may sometimes give writing frames to some of the really weaker pupils but I try to get them to do it without because I think you kind of make them dependent and kind of take away their independence if you keep on giving them writing frames the whole time. I think you disable them if you do that.*

An emphasis on oracy in English lessons was an important aspect of classroom pedagogy which enabled low-attaining pupils to achieve, thereby helping to raise their self-esteem:

*I think that probably oracy is the key to everything we do in English here. That kind of underpins everything and we're trying to hand the learning over to the pupils. ... getting away from trying to teach what students should know at GCSE - and the last couple of years we've been trying to get them to use different thinking skills and questioning and I think that's why our GCSE results have improved. (senior member of English department)*

A Year 10 English lesson on poetic devices, such as simile, metaphor, rhythm etc., provided a good example. It involved a lot of oral work and group discussion, starting with more personalised, open-ended tasks and progressively becoming more demanding and focused in preparation, ultimately, for a written assignment. As a precursor to discussing a poem, *Blessing*, about water as a precious resource (which pupils were already familiar with), the teacher asked pupils each to write a sentence on what water they had used that day. This both personalised the topic and helped prepared them for the poem. This was followed by a group-work activity in which pupils had to associate various picture prompts on a handout with lines from the poem and prepare to explain their choices. An open-ended task, it was accessible to all pupils in the class and the visual stimuli in particular saw most pupils actively engaged. After this, the teacher asked various pupils (picked from a mixture of volunteers and teacher selections) to explain their choices. In some cases the teacher asked the pupil to name the poetic device being used so that by the end of the task all pupils were aware of what the key poetic devices were. The teacher then adjusted the table groupings to ensure there were five groups of four and each group was asked to look for other examples of a specific poetic device (e.g. simile), describe the effect it had, and try to recall further examples in other similar poems they had been reading in class the previous week. The teacher monitored as the pupils engaged in the activity and presented their findings to the class after a certain time, with other pupils encouraged to add any other points.

This emphasis on oracy was part of the larger recent schoolwide investment in accelerated learning and learning to learn.

*The recent focus on the learning cycle and developing thinking skills provide a new way of delivering the curriculum which will tap into all levels, giving a variety of activities. So I think the new approach to differentiation [for low-attaining pupils] is not death by worksheet and cloze exercises ... but it's much more about engaging and promoting talk and thinking. I still feel there are issues when it comes to written work where pupils still need that scaffolding – you might still use some writing frames. (senior manager)*

## **h) SCHOOL FS2**

**Focus: supporting achievement in writing in Key Stage 4**

### **Background**

#### **General context and school population**

FS2 (with around 750 pupils) is a relatively small, 11 - 18 secondary school serving a large, mainly rural catchment area. Its intake is predominantly White British and pupils are drawn from a wide range of social backgrounds, including some relatively affluent families and some families living in areas of significant economic disadvantage. Attainment on entry to the school is slightly below the national average. At the time of the fieldwork, the proportion of pupils with special needs (without statements) and the percentage with statements were both slightly lower than the national average (15.3 and 1.7 per cent respectively).

#### **Pupils' progress**

Attainment, measured in terms of the percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A\*-Cs (or equivalent) including English and mathematics GCSEs has been rising faster than in other schools locally and nationally over the last three years. Within this overall pattern, the school is recognised by the local authority as one which achieves good results for lower attaining pupils.

#### **Grouping systems**

On entry into the school, pupils are allocated to one of three bands depending on their attainment (high, middle or low). This is decided based on pupils' combined scores in national tests in English, mathematics and science at the end of Key Stage 2. Pupils are taught within these bands for almost all subjects and teaching groups are drawn from them. The lower attaining band is smaller than the other two and forms one teaching group in each year. There are two groups in each of the other bands, with an equal spread of attainment. Currently this system encompasses pupils in years 7 and 8, but is gradually being extended to the whole of Key Stage 3.

In Key Stage 4 (and year 9 at the time of the fieldwork) pupils are grouped by attainment for the core subjects. Sets are decided by individual departments.

#### **Supporting the achievement of low attainers**

The school's grouping system is viewed as a key factor in supporting the progress of lower attainers, facilitating a curriculum tailored to their needs and the deployment of somewhat scarce resources for in class support from teaching assistants and teachers in a support role. In Key Stage 3 pupils in the lowest attaining band have additional English and mathematics lessons and reduced time for modern foreign languages, for example. In Key Stage 4 lower attainers are directed towards a vocationally oriented curriculum alongside the core subjects. Some pupils continue to be timetabled for additional English and mathematics, which is made possible because they follow a single science GCSE course.

### **Approaches to writing in Key Stage 4**

#### **Curriculum differentiation**

This case study focuses on approaches to teaching writing with low attainers in Key Stage 4. All pupils follow GCSE syllabuses, but the curriculum for lower attainers is different from that followed by pupils in middle and higher attaining groups. In the

latter, pupils are entered for GCSE English and GCSE English Literature, complete their coursework in year 10 and prepare for exams in year 11. Lower attainers are entered for one GCSE only (English). In year 10, the main focus of teaching is improving skills and most coursework is completed in year 11. Some pieces are completed as practice in year 10. The example below illustrates the way that teaching was tailored to the characteristics of lower attaining pupils in an observed lesson with a year 10 group.

### **An example of targeted teaching – supporting planning**

The theme of the lesson was descriptive writing and the specific objective was ‘using appropriate architectural language in Gothic writing’ (this objective was displayed on a whiteboard). Thirteen pupils were present. Although a teaching assistant sometimes provides support to this group, she was not timetabled for this lesson.

The lesson was part of a series of lessons with this focus. Pupils had begun a piece of writing in an earlier lesson, but the teacher thought they had ‘lost their way.’ He had therefore decided to revisit the stage of planning for the writing. His aim was that pupils would spend some more time on this and use new plans to redraft their first attempts at the task. This lesson followed another in which they had begun this process.

#### *The lesson starter*

The lesson began with ten minutes spent recapping on the aims of the writing task and generating some vocabulary that might be useful. This was achieved through question and answer. Some questions were quite general (for example, ‘What are we looking for in the writing?’) but the overall focus was on concrete detail (for example, ‘Give me two colours you associate with Gothic scenes...’). The teacher used a game to involve all pupils in this activity, which entailed throwing a soft ball to the individuals he wanted to answer particular questions. This was clearly engaging for pupils, who were enthusiastic about joining in, and also allowed for differentiated questioning. Pupils recorded some of the vocabulary that had been generated and some examples of descriptive phrases from earlier lessons to use in their planning as appropriate.

*The main task (35 minutes)*

Pupils had begun this task in a previous lesson. They each had a large sheet of paper, which they had divided into a minimum of eight boxes. Each box was to be used for planning part of their description and ideas could be expressed in writing or pictures. The rationale for using pictures in addition to writing at this stage was that pupils in this group often found it easier to visualise a scene in pictorial terms than through writing.

As pupils worked, the teacher prompted them to use some of the vocabulary that had been discussed. He also drew their attention to various pictures of Gothic scenes that he projected on the whiteboard as additional stimuli. Periodically he engaged in discussions with pupils about their work, for example he talked about the use of metaphor with one boy. Discussions arose from pupils' work and focused on the way that different effects could be achieved. The teacher avoided abstract technical explanations.

There were a range of responses from pupils to these approaches. Some spent more time drawing than writing and vice versa; some included more of the example vocabulary than others; some paid no attention to pictorial stimuli and some were interested; some engaged in discussion about their work, some did not; some were able to work independently and some needed regular prompts to remain on task. However, all were able to make progress, albeit at different rates.

*Closing activity*

The lesson ended with ten minutes of spelling practice. The teacher again used the soft ball to ask different pupils how to spell different words from a bank of Gothic vocabulary. Again, pupils were keen to participate and all pupils had a turn at answering questions.

**Pressures**

Sustaining motivation and concentration during longer activities (such as the main task in this lesson) can be a challenge in low attaining groups. In this lesson a minority of pupils needed very regular prompting to remain on task in addition to the prompts and stimuli offered to the class as a whole.

## **i) SCHOOL HS2**

**Focus:**

- i. school ethos, including discipline and rewards;**
- ii. targeting support through setting;**
- iii. curriculum differentiation in science; and**
- iv. community links.**

### **School background**

This secondary school was located in a deprived area of a city in the south of England, where, according to the last Ofsted report, free school meal entitlement was 'well above the national average'. Most of the school's intake was drawn from the local community. Historically the school population had predominantly comprised pupils of Bengali heritage; now the school was celebrated as multi-cultural. Although pupils of Bangladeshi origin still constituted the largest ethnic group, pupils of African-Caribbean origin comprised the next largest. According to the Ofsted report, the most common first languages of pupils were Bengali, Somali and Turkish. The report also noted that pupil mobility was 'quite high'. There were many more boys than girls, particularly in the older years of the school. The head explained that this was due in part to a number of Muslim parents preferring to send their daughters to the two girls' schools in the area.

The school celebrated its ethnic diversity, for example through faith-based, though not faith-specific, assemblies. In addition, the composition of both teaching and support staff reflected the ethnic diversity of the intake. On account of most pupils coming from minority ethnic backgrounds, the school received a large EMAG grant to help support enrichment activities. The last Ofsted report also noted that community languages, some of which were offered at GCSE, were positively valued in the school. This was also apparent during the visit.

From a near failing school the school had been turned around by the current head, together with some of the senior management team. Ofsted described the head's leadership as 'outstanding' and the leadership and management of the school in general as 'excellent'. In recent years the school had been recognised as one of the most improved schools in the UK with the average percentage of pupils gaining 5 A-C grades well above the LA and national averages. The English and maths results, however, were, at the time of the last Ofsted report, noted to be below the national average on account of the EAL needs of many pupils. At that time over 75% of pupils were classified as EAL. The school had a very high Value Added, which the head said was "*significantly higher for all groups*" whatever their attainment.

Senior managers were adamant that pupil behaviour management and discipline were central to the successful improvement within the school. Disciplinary measures had been revised in agreement with parents/carers. At the same time, the school had a strong ethos and focus on learning, which involved encouraging the academic aspirations of *all* pupils, often through material incentives. Other key strategies supporting the learning of low-attaining pupils included building strong community links and setting. Setting allowed for: more targeted support for low-attaining pupils; differentiated curriculum, particularly in science; pedagogies more suited to low-attaining pupils, such as incorporating more kinaesthetic and interactive activities, and greater oracy.

## **Grouping systems used in the school**

### **General**

Generally setting was preferred in the school, which allowed for smaller groups and a concentration of TA support in the lower sets. There were also generally smaller classes at Key Stage 4 than at Key Stage 3.

### **English**

Years 7-9 were taught in mixed ability forms (which also included a mix of gender and ethnicity) in two cohorts for timetabling reasons based on Key Stage 2 National Curriculum test results and teacher assessment. One member of the department thought that mixed ability was important *“so that students did not miss out on the benefits of peer support”*. They said it was necessary to set in Years 10 and 11 (with two special groups for SEN and EAL pupils) because the work was more focused on the requirements of GCSE and that it was better for pushing both the *“G and T”* and the *“most needy”* pupils to achieve particular targets. In Years 10 and 11 classes were timetabled at the same time.

Sets were formed using the assessment data and teacher assessment, which included looking at homework, attitude, attendance, punctuality, behaviour and coursework. Sets were reviewed formally three times a year but a pupil could be moved at other times if perceived to be wrongly placed. However, it was said that in practice it was difficult to move pupils once they had started on their GCSE programme because the work covered in one class might not be the same as in another class.

### **Maths**

Maths was set from Year 7. The maths teachers interviewed agreed that setting was the best way to organise groups and most could see no disadvantages to it. All years were formally tested twice a year. For Years 7 - 9 previous National Curriculum test papers were used whereas in Years 10 and 11 past GCSE papers were used. Different exams were used for different sets but the same exams were used for parallel sets across cohorts. The setting was based on these results. It was thought that the testing was quite accurate since a number of pupils moved up and down between two sets. It was estimated that there was 5-10% mobility among sets.

### **Science**

In science pupils were set after the first term in Year 7. At the time of the research there were seven sets in Year 7, and eight in Years 8 and 9, in two parallel half-year groups of four sets in each group for timetabling and staffing purposes. In Year 9 there were six sets of 30, which were divided into eight sets of about 25 in Years 10 and seven sets in 11. In Years 10 and 11 the sets were all taught at the same time. There were therefore more sets, each covering a narrower attainment band at Key Stage 4. The classes were also smaller at Key Stage 4 as part of a deliberate school strategy to give more teacher support higher up the school. Classes were tested with *“SATS-style tests with the four units they’ve done every end of term. They all get the same test so they can be levelled”* (senior member of science department), allowing for set adjustment if necessary.

## **Key strategies supporting low-attaining pupils (in depth)**

### **i. School ethos – focus on learning and strict discipline**

The school did not specifically focus on low-attaining pupils, rather, school management maintained, it attempted to succeed with *all* pupils through a strong school ethos, which emphasised learning throughout the school, exemplified in

teachers having high expectations and engendering academic aspirations in all. As the head explained: *[We've] prioritis[ed] the top 60% - guaranteed 40% and then we've looked at the next 20% and moved them on* and *"in addressing their needs and creating an atmosphere which was clearly conducive to learning for them"* an atmosphere has been created which is conducive to the learning of *all* pupils.

Central to this conducive learning environment, according to various senior managers, were the *"strict rules and regulations"*, which allowed both teachers and pupils to concentrate on teaching and learning.

*A lot of our students in the school do very very well in this school because they know there are clear boundaries within the school. ...Parents from other areas of [the city] send their kids to this school because local schools are perceived to be more tolerant and they like the ethos that the staff are very much in control in this school... There is a high-profile senior management team and visible patrolling of the main corridors by the headteacher and senior pastoral staff... It takes the confrontation away from the teachers and allows them to focus on the teaching. (senior manager)*

Part of the behaviour management system was the relatively recent initiative to appoint behaviour TAs, whose aim, according to one member of the support staff, was:

*to target children whose behaviour is poor in lessons and the reasons behind that. And a lot of the reasons behind that are learning reasons – they are children who are low-attainers ... some of them are combined factors – EAL or SEN factors but there are also things to do with personal organisation etc.*

Pupils who were eligible for support by behaviour TAs were referred by the heads of year after having been observed in a range of lessons by behaviour TAs using an observational grid. It was said to be too early to be able to assess the impact of the intervention.

The strong disciplinary school ethos worked in tandem with the school's constant emphasis on creating and maintaining a culture of learning, epitomised, for example, in the wide availability of IT (several hundred PCs in the school), in the study centre's extended opening hours and in various extra opportunities to reinforce learning available to all pupils.

Extra opportunities to reinforce learning included summer schools in Years 8 and 10, in preparation for Key Stage 3 National Curriculum tests and GCSE exams in the core subjects, and Saturday revision classes in Years 9 and 11 prior to exams. The previous year there had also been a Year 11 weekend residential involving *"maths and fun activities"*, which a senior member of the maths department said *"had a huge effect on the results"*. There were also various homework clubs, which business mentors also assisted with.

At Key Stage 4 there was particular emphasis on low-attaining pupils who were deemed to be underachieving (generally not the lowest-attaining) and who were thought to have the potential to reach a grade C at GCSE in maths or English with extra support. Thus, in the maths and English department, these pupils benefited from a weekly booster class given by the head of department and many were also selected for one hour's mentoring support by the 20-strong team of full-time learning

mentors in the school. This particular group of pupils also did an extra maths course – Maths Plus, instead of another option.

The school focus on learning was further reinforced through an extensive reward system. The school's annual prize-giving, at which cash prizes were generally awarded to over half the pupils, aimed to motivate all, including the low-attaining pupils. This was because prizes were potentially achievable by all as they were awarded for academic and non-academic achievement and endeavour - not just for attainment. In the lower school merit points were collected throughout the year for awards. Pupils were also rewarded with a weekend at a theme park for attending and "showing willing" at the summer camps, which were open to all Year 8 and 10 pupils.

## **ii. Setting as a means of targeting support**

Setting was also a key strategy in enhancing learning for low-attaining pupils because across the core subjects bottom sets were much smaller (15-16 pupils) compared to higher sets (24-30 pupils, depending upon the year and the subject), allowing for more individual teacher attention and more targeted TA support.

*What I wanted to say about the setting in the school is that it does favour the 'less able' - the lower attainers but when you get into the smaller groups you also put the expertise for learning and development in those groups so they get more focused support – so it's benefited them in two ways – one it's more focused because you've got more resources in there and two, it's much smaller so it's more conducive to learning. (head teacher)*

In Years 10 and 11 in English two special low-attaining EAL and SEN pupil groups, which meant that particular English teachers who specialised in either SEN or EAL support could be allocated to these classes. The small numbers (15-16 pupils) in addition to the two TAs in the EAL class observed allowed the teacher to help improve written work by offering specific feedback and encouragement on an individual basis once a week, which she felt really helped.

Although teachers reported that some pupils in bottom sets were difficult to motivate at times, several teachers thought that many low-attaining pupils remained motivated in the school because they were aware of the extra support they received in terms of smaller classes, extra adult support (e.g. TAs) and extra out-of-class tuition. This also ensured that low-attaining pupils still felt that they could attain well.

Pupils' views generally confirmed this:

*P1: I didn't really like the new teacher [at first]. It's OK now. I'm doing well and I'm keeping up with my coursework.*

*I: What do you think has helped you make progress?*

*P1: I dunno. Sometimes I stay after school with the teacher and she would help me and you'd start to think even though she's new here she's quite a nice person.*

*P2: If you want help or you can't finish your coursework the teacher helps us in  
lunchtime or after school. (Year 10 pupils)*

## **iii. Curriculum differentiation in science**

Attainment grouping enabled teachers to differentiate curricula and classroom pedagogies to suit the needs of low-attaining pupils. This was particularly true at Key Stage 4, when the courses were more exam-oriented towards the different

requirements of Foundation and Higher. Thus, in English, for example, teachers could choose more accessible set texts for low-attainment groups.

In science a particularly successful curricular strategy at Key Stage 4 was the school's decision for most pupils to follow BTEC. Since it was purely based on coursework, a member of the science department explained, it enabled many to achieve who with GCSE might otherwise not achieve. Teachers within the department, it was said, devoted a lot of time to helping pupils draft and redraft work. An emphasis on literacy and assessment for learning at Key Stage 3 in science was also thought to help low-attaining pupils.

*In terms of low-attaining groups I think it's [BTEC's] fantastic. In GCSE they would get an E, whereas you can tell them exactly what they need to do to get a C. ... We've got a course which, well it's vocational, it's course work-based, the kids can revisit the work that they do – they can go over it again and again and we give a huge amount of feedback – we're constantly remarking and giving booster classes and so at Key Stage 4, in terms of getting a Grade C, which is a pass at GNVQ, many many of our kids can achieve that so we get something like 90 plus percent [through]– (senior science teacher)*

One of the Year 10 pupils interviewed also voiced their appreciation of the course :

*Science is OK. I find the coursework easy and I always complete it before the deadline ...but when you go to the computer and type in our coursework that's the best thing about it ... because he [the teacher] marks and corrects and that's how we learn about it. (Year 10 pupil)*

#### **iv. Community links**

Various staff members highlighted the strong links the school had with the community as important in supporting learning. They were attributed in part to the high-profile, active home-school liaison officer, who was from the Bengali community.

Parents/carers were said to come to the school if there were problems and, as one teacher commented, parents/carers had become increasingly more supportive as the school's results had improved. In particular there was said to be strong parental/carer backing of the strict school behaviour policy, which had been revised in consultation with them.

One of the school-parent/carer initiatives that was highlighted by several teachers was the Ocean Maths project. This was funded by the LA and involved outside project facilitators coming into the school to work with the pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9 and their parents/carers. The content was activity-based involving games and puzzles and was aimed at getting parents/carers more involved in their child's homework. There was an annual workshop for all pupils and parents/carers, followed by weekly tutorials. Two members of the department thought it was effective. One teacher thought it was good for parents to “*get a flavour of the maths we're doing*” and considered the project particularly successful with low-attaining pupils, whom, he said, liked the coloured worksheets and the games. He had also had positive feedback from parents.

## **j) SCHOOL GH1**

**Focus:** the deployment and roles of learning support staff

### **Background**

#### **General context and school population**

GH1 is a relatively small, 13 - 18 secondary school serving a very large rural catchment area. Its intake is predominantly White British and pupils are drawn from a wide range of social backgrounds, including some relatively affluent families and some families living in more deprived areas. A large proportion of pupils live in two country towns and some in remote farming or ex-mining areas. Approximately eight per cent of pupils, living in these remote areas, board during the week.

There is a broad spread of attainment levels in the intake to the school; 7.2 per cent of pupils have statements or are on School Action Plus, and 8.2 per cent are supported at School Action. The low attaining population has changed in recent years since the closure of a nearby special school so that it now includes more pupils with very low levels of attainment (working below level 3 on entry in year 9). The school and staff members have needed to adapt to this changing population and to learn to work with some pupils with specific learning disabilities.

#### **Pupils' progress**

Attainment, measured in terms of the percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A\*-Cs (or equivalent) including English and mathematics GCSEs is rising faster than in other schools locally and nationally. Within this overall pattern, the school's own analyses of attainment data suggest that the most significant variations in patterns of attainment are between departments or between classes taught by different members of staff. Where pupils generally make good progress so do low attainers. Low attainers make good progress in the core subjects, for example, because department leaders and teachers in these departments work together to promote achievement for all pupils.

#### **Grouping systems**

For the purpose of timetabling, the school population is divided into two almost equivalent bands with near parallel groupings in each half. The main difference between the two bands is that pupils with designated support, who are mostly low attainers, are grouped in one of the bands, which facilitates the deployment of teaching assistants. Because identified pupils are concentrated in one band, a single teaching assistant is more likely to be allocated to a group where they can support more than one pupil at a time. This is particularly the case where pupils are in low attaining sets.

Pupils are assigned to mixed attainment tutor groups and may be taught in mixed attainment groups or sets for subject lessons. Whether or not to group by attainment in individual subjects is a decision taken at department level and the extent of setting varies across subjects.

### **Supporting the achievement of low attainers**

A range of strategies for supporting achievement are intended to have an impact all pupils, including low attainers. For example, there is an ongoing programme of refurbishment of the ageing school buildings in the belief that a good environment has a positive effect on learning. The roles of senior staff have recently been refocused so that there is a greater emphasis on supporting learning than pastoral activities. The responsibilities of the Director of Key Stage 4, for instance, include the coordination of study skills programmes for all pupils, delivered as part of the PSE curriculum. Strategies for supporting achievement have increasingly been informed by data analysis. New systems mean that details in patterns of attainment can be identified and action taken in response to any issues. Analyses of results at Key Stage 4 are carried out against the Key Stage 3 predictor and targets for improvements are linked to performance management.

Alongside general strategies for supporting achievement, some are targeted at different groups of pupils. This case study will focus on the ways that the deployment of learning support staff and their role in classrooms supports the learning of low attainers.

### **Low attainers and learning support**

Most targeted support for low attainers takes the form of in-class leaning support delivered by teaching assistants.

### **The deployment of teaching assistants**

The school employs ten teaching assistants, half of whom work twenty-five hours a week, and the rest less than this. The Special Needs Coordinator (SENCO) leads the team of teaching assistants and has overall responsibility for their deployment. In the box below she describes her rationale for staff deployment. Although deployment is guided by the needs of identified (mostly low attaining) pupils, teaching assistants are encouraged to have an overview of pupil needs in the classes to which they are allocated. This broader view of their role is underpinned by arrangements for linking the support system into general school structures.

*SENCO:* I feel that the assistants are our biggest resource in terms of supporting very low ability students.

*Interviewer:* So how do you decide on their allocation?

*SENCO:* We work it in various ways because we believe that the assistants should be a whole school resource as well as a special needs resource. The assistants are linked with form groups and they're also linked with departments so that they get to know enough about the curriculum in that department and they get to know the staff in that department. In year 9 when the new intake comes in we link them with form groups because then they get to know the students who are on the register in each form. So their 'job,' if you like, to start with, will be to get to know the students on the register that are in their form, and then that means that we have a kind of established staff in charge system, so that those assistants will keep an eye on those students, and where possible we would also then allocate them to a lesson with the students who are in their form group.

### **Team working**

Working in an integrated way with teachers from particular departments supports team working and teachers described the confidence they had in teaching assistants.

One head of department, for example, said that she would trust the assistant who generally worked with her in lower attaining classes to teach the pupils as well as she could. Another said that he found that teaching assistants were able to provide particular insights about teaching approaches and resources that worked well with low attainers, based on their observation of pupils across the curriculum.

### **General approach to practice**

The general approach to support in classrooms was described by the SENCO. The main aim is to help pupils become independent and to engage in lessons. In order to provide pupils with opportunities to develop this independence teaching assistants do not work continuously with individuals. This leaves them free to help others whilst monitoring pupils with identified needs so that they can intervene when necessary. Although practice shares common principles, teaching assistants have their own styles and techniques for supporting pupils. Some are 'strict,' for example, whilst others 'bargain' with pupils to encourage them to remain on task. These differences can be a strength of the system and provide scope for matching teaching assistants with teaching groups or particular pupils. Whatever the differences, however, both staff and pupils emphasised the importance of constructive relationships between teaching assistants and pupils, described by one pupil as having 'someone genuine to talk to.'

Teachers generally recognise the skills required by teaching assistants to provide effective classroom support. Some teaching assistants find it hard to keep in mind the need to develop independence as a main aim and tend to prioritise the completion of work. The most experienced, however, are very skilled at asking prompt questions and exerting the right amount of pressure to encourage pupils to think for themselves.

### **Some examples of classroom strategies**

Two examples from observations in classrooms are included here to illustrate something of the role played by teaching assistants in classrooms.

#### *Example 1 – maximising resources*

This example is from a year 10 science lesson with a low attaining set. There were thirteen pupils present (six girls and seven boys), seated around three benches, and the lesson had a practical focus, involving the construction of electrical circuits. There were two teaching assistants in the lesson with the teacher, one of whom provided general support, and the other of whom worked closely with the two lowest attaining pupils, who had particular learning disabilities.

The assistant providing general support spent most of the time around one work bench where there was a group of pupils that included a boy who was sometimes disruptive in lessons. She kept an eye on him whilst providing practical assistance with the set task to various pupils as requested, and chatted informally to them. The pupils clearly had a good relationship with her and welcomed her assistance. The second assistant was able to support the two pupils with learning disabilities (seated at another work bench) at the same time. They needed regular and specific instructions in order to progress with the task. One of them got quite excited about the activity and she was able to keep him focused on what he was supposed to be doing. Other pupils in the group were able to work independently, with help from the teacher as necessary.

*Example 2 – defusing potentially confrontational situations*

This example is from a year 10 English lesson with a low attaining set. There were fourteen pupils present (six girls and eight boys) and the focus of the lesson was redrafting poems. Two teaching assistants provided support, one of whom took a group of pupils out of the classroom part of the way through the lesson to do some of their redrafting in the computer suite. The remaining assistant worked with pupils in the classroom alongside the teacher. Some of the time she worked closely with a pupil identified for support and at other times she circulated, responding to requests for help. Most of the pupils in this lesson completed the work set, but maintaining motivation is always a challenge with this group.

Three quarters of the way through the lesson, when two girls came back from the computer suite, one of the boys in the classroom group asked if he could take one of their places. The teacher asked him first to complete some preparatory work, showing proposed changes to his draft poem, and prompted him with some questions he could ask himself. He was reluctant to do this and asked the teaching assistant to help. The teacher asked him to work by himself and he then tore up some of his work. The assistant came over to him and asked him not to tear up the rest. Her manner was sympathetic and encouraging. She sat down with him and he engaged in conversation with her, suggesting phrases he could add to his poem. She then wrote them down. Meanwhile, the teacher was able to continue helping other pupils with their work. At the end of the lesson the assistant, pupil and teacher agreed that this strategy represented a reasonable compromise between working independently and being helped and the teacher praised the work the boy had produced.

**Pressures**

A key pressure arises from the limits to the resources available for learning support. In the view of the SENCO, resources are stretched, and whilst she and her team are 'constantly trying to spread it [*support*] around as much as we can ...' some pupils require and are entitled to intensive support, which means that there are constraints on the time available for assistants to support low attainers generally.

## k) SCHOOL KS1

- Focus -**
- i. setting as a means of targeting support;**
  - ii. classroom pedagogy, especially in science; and**
  - iii. the school ethos and reward system**

### **School background**

The school was an above average-sized school located in the outskirts of a large city in the north of England. At the time of the last Ofsted report, free school meal entitlement was 'below average' yet the report noted that 'students do not generally come from advantaged backgrounds.' There were an above average number of pupils with learning difficulties, in part because the school had a speech and language resource centre.

The school was strongly multi-cultural and multi-faith and had received national recognition for its work on race relations. Ofsted rated the 'learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' within the school as 'outstanding'. There were above average numbers of pupils with English as an additional language. White British pupils comprised the majority ethnic group (approximately 60%), according to the school's 2006 data, among whom was a substantial Jewish community. The main minority ethnic group comprised pupils of Indian heritage (approximately 10%), followed by Pakistani-heritage pupils (approximately 6%). Staff were predominantly white British, as were all but one of the teaching assistants, who were also almost all female.

In terms of attainment, over the last few years the percentage of pupils achieving five Grade A-Cs or equivalent at GCSE had been rising steadily and was above both the national average and the average for the LA. Most of the school's pupils stayed in full-time education post-16. The school management felt they provided a "*good Value Added to all students*".

The school buildings were quite old and some of the classroom space was constrained, as various staff members and pupils noted. However, classrooms were generally fairly brightly decorated, where there were sufficient noticeboards and extensive new building work was projected. The school also had fairly extensive playing areas outside. Importantly, the school had a welcoming and warm atmosphere and an obvious commitment to supporting low-attaining pupils in particular. As the head teacher put it: *The school's emphasis is on supporting the bottom end.*

There were a variety of school strategies to support the learning of low-attaining pupils. First there was a strong inclusive school ethos, apparent in the accessible school reward system. In addition, through setting, the lowest-attaining pupils were allocated the most human resource support. There was also a strong drive in the school to adopt classroom pedagogies in lower sets that appealed to low-attaining pupils' learning styles. Finally, the school was developing more vocational pathways. These included a work-related option at Key Stage Four, in which pupils followed a reduced school curriculum (English language, maths, science, leisure and tourism and IT) for three/two days a week and for the remainder of the time they were out of school on work experience placements. The school usually identified particular pupils as potential candidates for these alternative pathways and then consulted the pupils and their parents/carers. The school management hoped to expand its vocational

pathways but felt that some work was needed to persuade some parents of the value of vocational education. Senior management was also hoping to introduce ASDAN in full programmes further down the school too as part of the school's drive to personalise learning.

## **Grouping systems used in the school**

### **General**

All year groups were divided into two parallel halves for timetabling/staffing purposes. In Years 7-9 there were four mixed-attainment form groups (and therefore sets, when practised) in each half. In Years 10 and 11 one half had four classes/sets, the other had three classes/sets, in addition to the work-related group mentioned above. However, as one head of department pointed out this meant that in one half-year group, Set 3 had a wider range of attainment and some of the "weaker students", in order to be moved into a Set 4, then had to be transferred across into the other year group and therefore change all their classes. In future years, therefore, the school intended to have four classes in each half-year cohort in Years 10 and 11 as well as the work-related group, to make it easier for staffing. Grouping decisions were generally made at the department level.

### **English**

English had mixed-attainment groups in Years 7 and 8 and attainment grouping in Years 9-11. The department had wanted to set from Year 8 but although they had sufficient staff, they were not able to timetable it. As a temporary measure, to maximise the extra staffing, a supplementary English teacher was allocated to each Year 8 class so that most classes had one session per week in which usually the weaker students were taken out of class and taught separately. In one class a newly arrived girl from Iraq was being taken out for 1-to-1 English by the 'buddying' teacher. Although the system was in its first term, the teachers interviewed were positive about its impact. However, the department intended to set in Year 8 the following year.

Set sizes varied deliberately to give the lowest-sets a better teacher-pupil ratio. Set 4 usually contained about 15 pupils; set 3 usually had approximately 23 pupils, set 2 had 28-29 pupils and set 1 usually had 32 pupils. According to a senior member of the department, there was some movement between sets, though more at Key Stage 3 than Key Stage 4 on account of classes covering different aspects of the curriculum at different times in Years 10 and 11. There was a half-termly review in Year 10 to see if anyone was severely misplaced. Setting was primarily based on assessment data but there was some scope for consideration of social factors, such as a pupil's need for extra support, or pupil behaviour.

### **Maths**

In maths pupils were set from Year 7 (two parallel groups of four sets) on the basis of their Key Stage 2 National Curriculum test results. As with English the aim was to have the bottom sets as small as possible throughout the year groups – generally 15-16 pupils and to increase class size in the higher sets, with the largest class being set 1.

There was potentially some movement but, according to a senior member of the department, though more at Key Stage 3 than at Key Stage 4 although the opportunity to take GCSE was still there as a 'carrot' for all pupils.

*There is some movement. There is more movement in Year 8 than there would be in Year 10, particularly as we get to the end of Year 10. We tend to find that*

*those students who are lower attainers tend to remain lower attainers, do stay in lower groups. But there is scope for movement and there is the opportunity to take GCSE. We don't say to them in Year 10 that's it, you're not going to achieve a Grade G.* (senior member of maths department)

## **Science**

In Year 7 pupils were taught in mixed-attainment tutor groups but set from Year 8. Similar to Maths and English at Key Stage 3 the department aimed to get the bottom sets as small as possible, usually around 14-15 pupils, with larger classes for the higher sets.

### **Key strategies to support the learning of low-attaining pupils (in depth)**

#### **i. Setting as a means of targeting support;**

The three core subjects all preferred attainment grouping. Through this they said they helped address the needs of low-attaining pupils. First, they made the 'bottom' sets much smaller, allowing for much more individual attention. This, in turn, as noted by several teachers, allowed teacher to get to know pupils much better, which tended to obviate any potential behaviour and motivational difficulties commonly associated with bottom sets.

*HoD: My feeling is that it [being in the bottom set] doesn't really affect their motivation. I've currently got some of my most motivated students in the current set 4 in Year 11, who are really looking to raise their achievement.*

*I: What's being done to make them feel very motivated?*

*HoD: I think they feel they got a lot of my attention. If you've got a group of 14 you can take a real interest in students. You get a better relationship because you have a lot more time for them.* (Head of department)

As a result, according to this head of department, occasionally pupils were put in set 4 not necessarily because they had the lowest attainment but because they would benefit from the extra teacher and TA support, or with extreme disruptive behaviour they could be placed in a higher set "*because that way there's no one for them to spark off and they get through all right.*"

Attainment grouping also allowed TA support to be concentrated in the lower sets. Additionally, as one head of department pointed out, because the class sizes of the bottom sets were considerably smaller, there was more time for liaison between the teacher and the TA and therefore probably more effective use of TA support.

*There tends to be more support for lower attaining students and they're probably better used in lower groups because the groups are smaller and the teacher and teaching assistant have time to talk about individual students and often the teaching assistant is with that student in all their lessons, and therefore have better knowledge and so we do use the teaching assistant's knowledge of the student to work with them and help support them.* (head of department)

Setting also facilitated the allocation of strong, innovative and flexible teachers to low-attainment groups, which two of the heads of department emphasised.

## ii. Classroom pedagogy for low-attaining pupils in science

The school emphasised the importance of adapting classroom pedagogy to ensure low-attaining pupils achieved and remained engaged. There was cross-department agreement that low-attaining pupils needed more visual and kinaesthetic activities, by using the interactive whiteboard or the internet, for example. The managers and teachers interviewed also advocated, and demonstrated in their lessons, a wide variety of activities and more reinforcement exercises. They also agreed that for low-attaining pupils teachers needed to provide more scaffolding, such as by using essay templates, providing gapfill worksheets, or breaking down processes into manageable 'chunks'.

Science teachers noted that in science lessons it was particularly important to maintain a high level of practical work in groups of low-attaining pupils to sustain motivation. The appeal of practical work was apparent in the two science lessons observed<sup>11</sup>: in one, a Year 10 work-related class on extracting iron from its ore, the teacher gave a practical demonstration of a more reactive metal (aluminium) displacing a less reactive metal from its compound (iron oxide); in the other, a Year 8 lesson on a healthy diet, pupils worked in groups to carry out food tests. In both classes pupils were actively engaged.

The Year 8 science lesson on the topic of a healthy diet incorporated various pedagogical techniques judged to be effective with low-attaining pupils: it included a variety of activities, with an emphasis on the visual and kinaesthetic; it got the pupils moving and included appropriate reinforcement.

As a warmer, the teacher asked pupils to work in pairs and recollect the seven nutrients needed for a healthy diet. She then gave them a word puzzle (displayed on the interactive whiteboard) containing anagrams of the seven nutrients which the pupils had to solve and write down in their exercise books. While their exercise books were open the teacher dictated their homework task. She then gathered the pupils round the front bench, where she explained the purpose of the three food tests (for starch, protein and glucose) and demonstrated the experiment. Pupils were then divided into four groups of 5-6 round a bench and asked to draw the experiment table from the board while the teacher handed out the pre-prepared trays of equipment – one to each group. Pupils then carried out the experiment – fully engaged and with support from the teacher and the TA where necessary – and wrote up the results in their tables. After the experiments had been carried out, the teacher held a quick multi-choice revision test on the lesson using the interactive whiteboard. After each question, she asked for a show of hands by pupils to indicate their response, thereby quickly checking who had learnt what during the lesson.

## iii. School ethos and the reward system

The school promoted an inclusive reward system that aimed to encourage all pupils but was deemed particularly effective with low-attaining pupils. The reward system, which was heavily emphasised across the school by teachers and managers, aimed to encourage *all* pupils, irrespective of attainment, that they could achieve. In addition to a lot of praise, which was evident in nearly all the classes that were observed, there was a system of merits (stamps) given in pupils' exercise books at the end of lessons. If pupils had gained a sufficient number of them during the year, they were eligible to go on an award visit, such as to a theme park. However, as both pupils

<sup>11</sup> They involved set 3 in Year 8 and the work-related group in Year 10, which included mainly low-attaining pupils.

and teachers pointed out, this was forfeited if there had been serious behaviour issues. New Key Stage 3 rewards had also been introduced, awarding vouchers for iTunes and top-up vouchers for mobile phones.

Other than classroom praise, stamps were the most common reward given in class. Some of the classes observed all pupils had their exercise book stamped at the end of the lesson, but one or two were singled out for 'extra stamps'. The teachers interviewed generally thought that stamps worked better as an incentive lower down the school and with lower-attaining pupils. As one teacher explained:

*...because a lot of them don't see a lot of success so if you highlight the success they do see they go away feeling good about themselves, which is what we're about at the end of the day.*

Several teachers also felt that they often gave more stamps to children "who are on the edge in terms of behaviour" to reinforce positive behaviour.

*I totally believe in the reward system. The only irony of it is though that the people who often have behavioural issues can potentially get more stamps because when they are [behaving well], you're reinforcing positive behaviour, so they're getting much more than average students but it is probably because they respond very much better to it. (teacher)*

There was also a feeling among some teachers that stamps did not work so well as incentives for older pupils because it was not seen as "cool" to get them, prompting a new prize draw, which one staff member anticipated would be a better incentive for Year 10s. However, one teacher felt that you could continue rewarding pupils with stamps higher up the school but that they needed to be awarded more covertly:

*I'll very quietly sidle over, open their planner, stick it in, close it and walk away again because they would hate to be identified as doing something positive but they very quietly love having that. You know they're going to go home and say, 'Look what I got'"*

Pupil comments in the Year 8 interview group confirmed that rewards could enhance motivation and one pupil proudly insisted on showing the interviewer all his stamps.

*Pupil : When I got a lot [of merit points] even though I didn't behave I still went on [a trip] because I improved after I got told off.*

*I: So being told off helped you think about the need to focus?*

*Pupil: So I was like 'Oh great we've got a trip coming on' so I was like I really need to get this done and everything and I got back on top of my things. (Year 8 pupil)*

## I) SCHOOL GH2

**Focus:** relationships to support learning

### Background

#### General context and school population

GH2 (with around 1350 pupils) is a larger than average, 13 - 18 secondary school serving a market town and the surrounding rural area. Its intake is predominantly White British and the proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is smaller than average. Pupils' attainment on entry to the school covers a wide range and the population includes some very high attainers. At the time of the fieldwork, the proportion of pupils with special needs (without statements) was much lower than the national average (3.2 per cent) and the percentage with statements was close to the national average (2.1 per cent).

#### Pupils' progress

Attainment, measured in terms of the percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A\*-Cs (or equivalent) including English and mathematics GCSEs has been rising steadily over the last three years and is relatively high (68% in 2006). Within this general context, low attainers achieve as well as other pupils relative to their starting points.

#### Grouping systems

The school uses a two step grouping process. For the purpose of timetabling, the school population is first divided into two equivalent attainment bands with parallel groupings in each half. Then, within each band, pupils can be assigned into a variety of groups. Pupils may be taught in mixed attainment groups or in sets for subject lessons. Whether or not to group by attainment in individual subjects is a decision taken at department level and the extent of setting varies across subjects. All pupils are assigned to mixed attainment tutor groups.

#### Supporting the achievement of low attainers

The school has particular strategies for supporting low attainers' learning, including the deployment of in-class support and offering a flexible curriculum to pupils at Key Stage 4. As part of this, low attaining pupils have the option of participating in vocational courses at a local FE college and working towards the Prince's Trust (Bronze) award. Senior teachers believe, however, that a crucial factor on which the progress made by all pupils depends is the nature of classroom interactions. Underpinning constructive classroom interactions, they told us, are positive staff/pupil relationships.

#### Relationships to support learning

##### The cultural context

In the headteacher's words, one of the challenges in this school is 'to keep the hopes of the lower attainers alive.' In the context of what is generally a high attaining population, lower attaining pupils have a tendency to 'write themselves off.' Addressing this issue is therefore key to the success of approaches with them. A senior teacher said:

*I think a lot of it is relationships. It's which members of staff can engage those lower attainers and can make those lower attainers believe in themselves and can make them aspire to better things.*

### **Classroom relationships**

To support a culture in which positive relationships can thrive, teachers are allowed a good deal of flexibility in terms of the style and the teaching approaches they adopt in classrooms. This means that they can adapt to different contexts. One teacher, for example, contrasted his 'laid back' approach with lower attaining groups with the way that he kept 'middle' groups 'on the straight and narrow.' Teachers described the way they presented a 'human' side to low attainers through relationships that tended to be relatively informal, with some time spent in general conversation alongside interactions focused on learning tasks. Commonly, teachers of lower attaining groups said that they adopted non-confrontational approaches, and this was the case in observed lessons.

Teachers also said that it was important that relationships were built on mutual respect, a view shared by pupils interviewed. An important aspect of this was for teachers not to seem to be taking a childish approach with low attainers. One teacher described a video he had used with different groups in which puppets were used to explain a topic. Higher attainers had 'loved it' but the lower attainers were 'insulted'.

Relationships are also reinforced in incidental contacts outside the classroom. A senior teacher explained:

*It's little things, like we stop and talk to them on the corridor. You know, '[Pupil name], I notice you're not doing as well as you have been. Why? Come and talk to me about it.' It's those little individual things where you wouldn't actually say it was a strategy or a programme but you're making a child feel special and that [a member of staff] is taking an interest in them.*

### **Pressures**

In a context where teachers aimed to develop constructive relationships with pupils they had to maintain a delicate balance between a supportive environment and challenge. One teacher, for example, described the way he maintained positive relationships with pupils in a low attaining group by balancing high expectations with realism – 'You are lowering expectations, but not too low.' A boy commented on his lessons with this teacher:

*You get distracted because your mates are in, but it makes you work more. In lower sets you can get away with more stuff – talking ... and that.*

## **m) SCHOOL FS1**

**Focus:** a holistic approach to support

### **Background**

#### **General context and school population**

FS1 (with around pupils) is an average sized 11 - 16 secondary school serving a disadvantaged town in an area that has experienced economic decline. Its intake is predominantly White British and the proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is above average. Attainment on entry to the school is below the national average. At the time of its last Ofsted inspection (2005), the proportion of pupils with special needs (without statements) was reported to be higher than the national average and the proportion of pupils with statements to be lower than the national average.

#### **Pupils' progress**

Attainment, measured in terms of the percentage of pupils achieving 5+ A\*-Cs (or equivalent) including English and mathematics GCSEs has shown a marked improvement since 2005. Within this overall pattern, the school is recognised by the local authority as one which achieves good results for lower attaining pupils.

#### **Grouping systems**

On entry into the school, pupils are allocated to one of two bands depending on their combined attainment in the core subjects (higher or lower). Within these bands, pupils are subdivided into attainment groups (higher, middle and lower) for the core subjects and some other subjects. Teaching groups for different subjects are decided at department level. This system continues through Key Stage 3. In Key Stage 4, the banding and setting system continues to operate for the core subjects. The number of groups for optional subjects and the characteristics of pupils within them varies, depending on take-up.

#### **Supporting the achievement of low attainers**

This school takes the view that academic achievement goes hand in hand with general well being and therefore that attainment is best supported in the context of a holistic approach to all pupils' development. At school level this is reflected, for example, in well developed support systems for pupils experiencing a range of difficulties affecting achievement and at risk of low attainment, including a 'Pathways Suite,' that provides a base for a team of staff concerned with promoting pupil wellbeing.

The 'Pathways suite' was set up with the aim of addressing barriers to learning that include problems with attendance, illness and emotional and behavioural difficulties. Pupils are referred to the service through heads of year and interventions are planned in response to these referrals. Interventions are tailored to need. Pupils may be offered adapted timetables where they are experiencing difficulties with particular subjects, which could include time spent working in the suite with support from welfare assistants (work is set by subject teachers so that pupils continue to cover the curriculum). They may be offered intensive full-time support for a time-limited period, for example two or three weeks. While pupils are accessing the suite they also receive structured support to address their difficulties, for example social skills training or courses in anger management. The suite is staffed by a permanent team that includes three welfare assistants, an extended school worker and behaviour workers and is coordinated by an assistant head with specific responsibility for the

Every Child Matters agenda. It provides a point of access for other services and funded initiatives, whose staff 'drop in' on a planned basis. Support is therefore available from (amongst others) youth workers from the local community centre, a nurse, and the Youth Inclusion Programme (which works with young people at risk of offending).

The 'Pathways Suite' also works on the assumption that influences external to school affect pupils' achievement and therefore works with families to address issues. Multi-agency meetings take place on a monthly basis where individual cases are discussed and plans made for supporting pupils and their families, for example to direct them to appropriate support services.

### **Curriculum guidance**

Alongside systems for supporting pupil well-being there are systems for guiding pupils' curriculum choices, particularly at the transition between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. The holistic approach to pupil development that lies behind support systems also underpins these, the aim of which is to find out 'what makes pupils tick' and to maximise their opportunities for success. Every pupil is interviewed individually about their choices by senior members of staff. In these interviews, staff and pupils consider various factors that might affect their success in a particular subject, for example the balance between assessment by examination or coursework. Discussions are also informed by analyses of data provided by the local authority that suggest the likelihood of different groups of pupils achieving success in different subjects, and by school data on historical patterns of attainment. These include analyses relating specifically to low attainers.

### **Classroom approaches**

At the classroom level, supportive relationships between teachers and pupils are encouraged, based on an understanding of the circumstances of pupils' lives. Heads of year keep teachers informed of any difficulties individuals may be going through. Low attainers may be particularly vulnerable to low self-esteem and teachers described ways in which they took this into account in their approaches to low attaining groups and tried to create a positive classroom environment. One teacher listed the following strategies, for example:

I try to make pupils think they are a lot more successful than they really are.

I tell them if something is wrong it's ok, they can learn from it. I tell them not to be afraid to get things wrong.

It's important to be amongst the students. You have to get to everyone. People fail if they set them [*pupils*] off and expect them to get on.

I offer help, I don't wait for them to ask. If the class get on by themselves I feel a bit uneasy – I check on them.

I give constant verbal praise, without being patronising.

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