

# Grouping pupils for success

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Guidance

Organisation  
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**Primary and  
Secondary**  
*National Strategies*

# Grouping pupils for success

**Leadership teams,  
senior and subject  
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## Introduction

The Government has encouraged schools in successive white papers to consider the merits of grouping by ability, and many schools do, generally, organise pupils this way. At the same time research has been telling us that that effective grouping is assertive, thoughtfully planned and various, and that in-class grouping is the most effective way of all to ensure effective learning.

This document is timely because it moves on from the old ‘for and against’ debates about grouping to a more sophisticated understanding of what it means to group pupils for success. The DfES is keen to learn from research and to raise levels of awareness about what works best in classrooms. I and my colleagues at the DfES hope you find in this booklet food for thought and a stimulus to action.

Pupil grouping is one of the many tools we have for organising education to deliver the most appropriate curriculum to each individual. Along with pedagogy, curriculum and differentiation, it is a way of designing appropriate experiences for pupils that will move their learning on.

Contrary to popular myth, grouping by ability is not the principal way in which we sort pupils into classes. Sorting by age is the almost universal practice except in small schools where this is impracticable. The experience of small schools is worth learning from. Despite their much-reduced choices for pupil grouping, teachers do succeed in offering a well-tailored curriculum by forming and reforming groups to suit the learning objective, sometimes by age, sometimes by ability, sometimes by need, sometimes by choice. Their practice offers us all the key to successful grouping strategies.

Just organising pupils into ability groups, or single sex groups, or friendship groups, or structured mixed-ability groups will not of itself produce positive results. Within each group there will be differences. For example, pupils in the fourth set out of six for English in a secondary school, or children in a literacy set in a primary school, will exhibit a wide variety of strengths and weaknesses, and are not an homogenous group. Some will be articulate talkers and others introverted; some will be excellent readers but weaker writers; some of the writers will have trouble with expression and others with spelling. Working at the same level does not mean they are completely alike. They still need lessons tailored to their unique profile and strategies to stretch pupils with different capabilities.

Ability grouping is commonplace in the core subjects of secondary school, and is frequently used in primary schools. It is less common in the foundation subjects. The scale of secondary schools allows them to separate pupils into classes by ability, and teachers find it easier to pitch the work when they know the ability range in the class. Choosing a set text in English, or moving on to a challenging new topic in mathematics, the teacher can plan with some confidence that most pupils will pick it up and move along. There are some practical benefits too: demanding sets can be made smaller and teaching assistants directed where they are most needed.

There are important flexibilities in every grouping system. Whether one starts with a mixed-ability class or a setted class, pupils need the opportunity to work with other pupils in groupings appropriate to the task and topic. A discussion about a social issue will need a range of voices in it: this is a case for a structured mix of experience and ability. Setting up guided group work based on calculation in mathematics calls for grouping by ability. Allocating parts in a performance for drama will require the close matching of pupils to parts.

And it's not just ability that matters for in-class grouping: the size of the group and the structure of the task are enablers, too. Pairs have to talk. Working in groups of three or four draws out most pupils. Larger groups need chairing. Whole-class groups require high levels of confidence and teaching strategies if most pupils are to contribute.

Any form of grouping must be thoughtfully planned to suit objectives and to offer a variety of experience that promotes positive learning outcomes for all pupils.

**Sue Hackman**  
**Chief Adviser on School Standards**  
**DfES**

## Principles to inform policy and practice in pupil grouping

‘Personalisation is the key to tackling the persistent achievement gaps between different social and ethnic groups. It means a tailored education for every child and young person, that gives them strength in the basics, stretches their aspirations, and builds their life chances. It will create opportunity for every child, regardless of their background.’

‘Grouping students can help to build motivation, social skills and independence; and most importantly can raise standards because pupils are better engaged in their own learning.’

*Higher Standards, Better Schools for All, 2005.*

The following five principles are drawn from research and can be used to support a review of your current practice.

- Use data to inform a whole-school approach to groupings designed to meet the needs of all learners and evaluate impact.
- Be prepared to take a flexible and innovative approach to groupings in order to raise standards for all pupils and across the curriculum.
- Secure high quality teaching in all groupings.
- Use additional adults effectively to support grouping arrangements.
- Teach pupils how to work in a variety of groupings.

### Use data to inform a whole-school approach to groupings designed to meet the needs of all learners

- Ensure that groupings are based on potential as well as ability in order to avoid compounding prior underachievement.
- Track the progress of pupils periodically to ensure that the school’s setting and grouping policy is benefiting pupils rather than holding them back.
- Collect pupil data that provides feedback on the impact of grouping on self-esteem and aspirations, particularly in the top and bottom sets.
- Avoid the over-representation of some groups (for example boys, some minority ethnic groups and pupils with SEN), in lower sets by monitoring the composition of sets and groups.
- Track pupils’ experience across the curriculum and over time to ensure that they are experiencing a range of groupings.

## **Be prepared to take a flexible and innovative approach to groupings in order to raise standards for all pupils and across the curriculum**

- Plan a rigorous monitoring and evaluation process in order to be able to assess the impact on pupils' attainment, and be prepared to modify and adjust grouping policy accordingly.
- Construct the timetable in a way that allows for flexibility in grouping: by subject; using vertical grouping; using time-limited groups.
- Regroup classes at times for lead lessons, team teaching or consolidation and extension work.
- Place additional staffing into critical year groups to enable increased flexibility for small-group tuition.
- Consider the advantages and disadvantages of 'withdrawal' groups in terms of the learning gains versus pupils' entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.
- Be prepared to take or change decisions about grouping according to particular cohorts of pupils.
- Build in opportunities for pupils to indicate preferences and choices over grouping, linked to good assessment for learning practice.
- Ensure that the staff continuing professional development (CPD) programme is geared to the changes in teaching that increased flexibility of grouping will require.

## **Secure high quality teaching in all groupings**

'Whether they are in sets or not, all classes contain pupils with a range of abilities and attainments, different interests and motivation, and different home and background circumstances. The best teachers are those who have a real enthusiasm for and detailed understanding of the subjects they teach, and confidence to apply a range of good teaching and learning approaches across the curriculum. It is the passion for a subject, and the pedagogical understanding that underpins this, that is central to providing every child and young person with a tailored education.'

*Higher Standards, Better Schools for All, 2005.*

The composition of groups is critical. The school's grouping policy should:

- enable pupils to benefit from teaching pitched just beyond their level of development;
- enable teachers to tailor their teaching styles and content to meet the needs of individuals, small groups and whole classes;
- develop pupils' higher-order social and academic skills through the talking and thinking that takes place between group members, creating an appropriate challenge and so accelerating their progress;

It is all about securing the highest quality teaching and learning opportunities for all pupils.

## Setting

- Make a careful match of individual teacher strengths with the nature of sets, for example placing a teacher experienced in challenging low attainers with the lowest set or band, to lift attainment.
- Avoid 'teaching to the middle' in mixed-ability classes.
- Monitor pupils' learning to ensure that pupils have opportunities to demonstrate higher attainment, for example in tiered papers in the National Curriculum tests, and that access to the curriculum and resources are not limited by assumptions about ability level.
- Ensure that teaching in top sets creates a learning atmosphere in which it is acceptable to make mistakes, to ask for clarification or repetition.
- Develop inclusive teaching approaches, for example through differentiated questioning or the use of within-class groupings – see below.

## Within-class groupings

These include working as a pair, for example: as talk partners; with an assigned peer partner to support independent assessment for learning; working as a member of a **cooperative/collaborative group** and participating in **guided group work** facilitated by an adult.

- Plan all groupings on the basis of 'fitness for purpose' for the intended learning outcomes and monitor for positive impact on learning.
- Establish flexibility, by providing opportunities for pupils to work in varied groupings for different activities on the basis of a range of criteria, for example: ability, gender, shared first language, friendship.
- Support pupils in understanding and articulating the reasons why they work most effectively with some peers so that these opportunities can be maximised.
- Arrange seating that is conducive to the ways in which pupils are expected to work. Wherever possible, rearrange seating to suit the activity.
- Consider how within-class groupings might maximise learning – of the subject, of 'learning to learn' skills and those of working in groups.
- Consider which parts of the subject, tasks and phases of the lesson are most suited to work in particular groupings.
- Plan carefully for the roles that additional adults can play in supporting specific groups, ensure that they are fully briefed and avoid stereotyping a group by constantly assigning a particular type of adult support to the same group.

## Use additional adults effectively to support grouping

Since a teacher can only interact with one small group or pair of pupils at a time, effective use of other adults is crucial. As a consequence of workforce reform, more adults are working alongside the teacher in classrooms. This creates opportunities to develop more varied, flexible and responsive ways of structuring and enhancing learning in and outside the classroom. In particular, it means using supported grouping arrangements imaginatively, strengthening the role of additional teaching staff, teaching assistants and learning mentors.

- Make more effective use of time in order to work systematically with pairs or small groups while another adult (where appropriate) supervises the rest of the class.
- Exploit opportunities afforded by the availability of additional teaching staff, for example team teaching, partnership teaching.
- Identify a clear role for additional adults at the planning stage and plan evaluation of the impact of the support.
- Ensure that all additional adults are clearly briefed about their role when working with small groups.
- Ensure that CPD for all adults includes working with different grouping arrangements.

## Teach pupils how to work in a variety of groupings

Group work requires the development of a range of skills: communication; listening; turn-taking and adopting a range of roles; the capacity to draw in others; empathy and sensitivity to others.

In **cooperative/collaborative group work** pupils work together on an investigation, problem or other learning task that requires collaboration.

In **guided group work**, pupils work with an adult who guides their learning through a planned sequence of tasks and discussions. Guided group work offers opportunities for focused teaching and assessment, with the small number of pupils involved allowing the teaching to be fine tuned to particular needs and for the level of challenge to be pitched appropriately.

Pupils may also, from time to time, work as a member of a highly personalised group created for the purpose of providing **targeted intervention** support as part of 'Wave 2' or 'Wave 3' provision.

Whatever the type of grouping, the following principles are key to a positive outcome.

- Ensure that tasks are clearly defined to pupils, with an agreed timescale and success criteria related to the intended learning outcome.
- Help pupils to recognise the importance of working together and to understand how it helps both learning and social skills to develop.

- Teach pupils specific group work skills, for example taking notes of what people say; chairing effectively; making an effective contribution; managing disagreements and conflict.
- Rotate opportunities for pupils to take different group roles such as 'scribe', 'spokesperson', 'chair', 'task guardian' and 'time guardian'.
- Teach pupils explicit strategies for self-monitoring how they work together.

Appendix 1 provides some additional guidance to support consideration of the benefits and limitations of different kinds of within-class groupings.

## Pupil grouping: summary of research

| Type of grouping | Advantages  | Disadvantages  | Intelligent use of setting and grouping involves  |
|------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>Setting</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows effective targeting and matching of resources to pupils' needs.</li> <li>• Is a flexible system as pupils are grouped according to their ability in different subjects.</li> <li>• Reduces heterogeneity of the class so that the curriculum and teaching methods and pace can be tailored to the class.</li> <li>• Pupils' individual needs can be addressed.</li> <li>• Pupils can be appropriately challenged and can be motivated by peers of similar levels of ability.</li> <li>• Reduces the effects of labelling as pupils are likely to be in some different sets for different subjects.</li> <li>• Can play to the strengths and experience of individual teachers.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unless carefully planned, its use in one subject can determine a pupil's placement in another.</li> <li>• Individual differences between pupils may be ignored.</li> <li>• Once categorised, pupils tend to perform according to the set to which they are assigned.</li> <li>• Pupils may not know the basis for their being in a particular set, and assume it is on the basis of behaviour.</li> <li>• The allocation to set may be linked to a predicted attainment level (including tiered papers for Key Stage 3 tests), and thus limit achievement.</li> <li>• Pupils in lower sets may lack positive role models and can develop negative attitudes.</li> <li>• There may be a tendency for more experienced and highly qualified teachers to be targeted to top sets.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing a system of regular review and adjustment of sets and groups.</li> <li>• Producing clear explanations to pupils and their parents/carers for the sets and groups they are in.</li> <li>• Listening to feedback from pupils about the impact of setting and grouping on motivation, aspiration and self-esteem.</li> <li>• Securing the highest possible quality of teaching in lower sets and groups in order to maximise progress for lower-attaining pupils.</li> <li>• Monitoring the composition of sets and groups for gender, ethnicity and social class to ensure a good balance.</li> <li>• Collecting systematic data on the impact of setting on self-esteem, aspirations and standards of work.</li> </ul> |

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| <p><b>Mixed ability</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality of opportunity to the curriculum and resources can be guaranteed.</li> <li>• Encourages greater cooperation and social integration.</li> <li>• Avoids problems associated with setting and streaming/banding.</li> <li>• Promotes teaching matched to individual needs and requires teachers to make good use of assessment data and information.</li> <li>• Reduces competition and labelling of pupils. Low-ability pupils can benefit from other role models, both in learning and behaviour.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes greater demands on the teacher, to cater for a full spectrum of ability.</li> <li>• Planning, preparation and resourcing for lessons becomes a more complex and time-consuming task.</li> <li>• Teachers can spend much of their time managing pupils' activities and responding to demands rather than teaching.</li> <li>• Danger of teaching being 'pitched to the middle' and thus failing to meet the needs of both higher-ability and lower-ability pupils.</li> <li>• Danger of devoting too much attention to higher-attaining pupils.</li> <li>• Can limit pupils' motivation and lead to low expectations.</li> <li>• Valuable teaching time can be wasted working with individuals, while whole-class supervision is poor.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing inclusive teaching approaches so that all pupils are engaged in learning.</li> <li>• Making effective use of other adults in the classroom, both to support specific groups and individuals and to enable the teacher to devote time to guided work.</li> <li>• Regrouping pupils at times for lead lessons, or consolidation or extension work.</li> </ul> |
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| <p><b>Flexible/ short-term arrangements across year groups</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupils' specific learning needs can be targeted.</li> <li>• The short-term nature of the group sends a positive signal to pupils that their learning needs are being met.</li> <li>• Maximises flexibility so that group size and composition can be carefully tailored.</li> <li>• Enables a department to direct content, materials and teaching style to groups of pupils – for example running catch-up classes at the same time as extension work for the most-able pupils.</li> <li>• Teaching assistants and other adults can be deployed in a targeted way to support groups drawn together with the same needs.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unless carefully planned, can be disruptive to timetabling.</li> <li>• Overuse of withdrawal groups can disrupt pupils' entitlement to the whole curriculum.</li> <li>• Although pupils often make good progress in the specific group, they may not transfer the skills and apply them in other contexts.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making detailed use of data to ensure that pupils are appropriately placed.</li> <li>• Reviewing the timetable to ensure that appropriate blocks of time are created for targeted intervention or booster sessions for small groups.</li> <li>• In secondary settings, blocking the timetable for departments so that they have the flexibility to establish different grouping arrangements at key points in the year – for example to create revision or consolidation classes that focus on critical aspects of learning.</li> </ul> |
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| <p><b>Within class</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The needs of individual pupils can be better met through careful modification of teaching objectives, materials, tasks set and level of support offered.</li> <li>• Encourages peer support and a culture of independent working within groups, releasing valuable teaching time.</li> <li>• Creates opportunities for 'instructional dialogue' with pupils that can deepen learning.</li> <li>• Cooperative learning can increase pupils' motivation.</li> <li>• Encourages social interaction between pupils, and supports the development of communication skills.</li> <li>• Promotes flexibility as groups can be changed regularly.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where groups are ability-based, this may still perpetuate issues of low self-esteem, negative attitudes and poor behaviour associated with other grouping practices.</li> <li>• If overused as an approach to differentiation, it may place unreasonably high demands on teachers to plan, prepare and resource lessons.</li> <li>• Friendship as the basis for grouping can lead to the creation of an anti-work culture in the group.</li> <li>• If overused, within-class grouping can reduce the amount of time available for direct instruction.</li> <li>• May foster over-dependency on additional adults where a particular adult always supports the same group.</li> <li>• Pupils in bottom sets may lack positive role models and can develop negative attitudes.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Varying pupil groups so that pupils experience working in a number of different groupings, rather than being in a set within the class.</li> <li>• Varying the size of groups according to the phase of the lesson and the nature of the task.</li> <li>• Varying the criteria on which pupils are grouped – ability, friendship, gender, other.</li> <li>• Encouraging pupils to be open about who they work well with and factor this into grouping decisions.</li> <li>• Developing a school policy on classroom organisation and seating arrangements to allow for flexible groupings and whole-class teaching.</li> <li>• Establishing a programme to teach pupils the skills they need to work well in different groups.</li> </ul> |
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## Appendix 1

### Choosing and selecting groups

Choice of groups for within-class group work may be predetermined to a certain extent by any setting of classes that has already taken place. Your grouping of pupils might be based on a number of different criteria linked to the outcomes of the activity in which the groups are engaged. You may consider, at different times, factors such as ability, communication skills, social mix, behaviour, gender, SEN, disability and EAL.

### Benefits and limitations of different grouping criteria

The grid below shows a range of different criteria and sizes for grouping, with some benefits, limitations and considerations for use.

| Grouping                | Benefits   | Limitations   | When to use   |
|-------------------------|--|---|---|
| <b>Friendship</b>       | Secure and unthreatening.  | Pupils slip into their social roles, which may hinder learning. | When sharing and confidence building are priorities.  |
| <b>Ability</b>          | Work can more easily be pitched at the optimum level of challenge.   | Visible in-class setting.                                       | When differentiation can only be achieved by task.  |
| <b>Structured mix</b>   | Ensures a range of views.<br><br>Enables pupils to scaffold each other's learning.                               | Can be difficult to get right.                                  | When a social or academic mix is likely to enhance learning.  |
| <b>Random selection</b> | Builds up pupils' experiences of different partners and views.<br><br>Opens up new and different group dynamics. | Can lead to awkward mixes and 'bad group chemistry'.            | As a temporary grouping, part of a strategy to create different groups for different purposes during a teaching sequence. |
| <b>Single sex</b>       | Socially more comfortable for some.<br><br>Essential in some contexts for sensitive topics.                      | Can reinforce stereotyping in some circumstances.               | When this will increase equality of opportunity and access to the curriculum.   |

|   |   |  |   |
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| <p><b>Pair</b></p>                        | <p>Guarantees maximum participation in a whole class.</p> <p>Improves the quality of responses by allowing time to rehearse thinking.</p> <p>Easily accommodated into classroom set-up.</p> | <p>Less challenge and less opportunity to learn from different viewpoints.</p>                         | <p>When you want to encourage exploratory talk or quick responses are called for.</p> <p>To place two EAL learners together so that their first language can be used.</p>   |
| <p><b>Small group (three to four)</b></p> | <p>Allows diversity of opinion.</p> <p>The total knowledge of the group can be greater than that held by any individual.</p>  | <p>Can result in off-task chat and behaviour.</p> <p>Danger that some may be left out.</p>             | <p>For group problem solving.</p> <p>To increase social interaction in the class.</p> <p>To enable more effective inclusion of individual pupils.</p>   |
| <p><b>Large group (six or more)</b></p>   | <p>Can extend diversity of ideas, experience and opinion.</p>   | <p>Requires flexible arrangement of the room.</p> <p>Can be dominated by a small number of pupils.</p> | <p>For discussion requiring a range of views and ideas.</p> <p>To support the development of higher-order skills of group work and discussion.</p> <p>To build up common understanding, by gradually increasing the size of groups.</p> <p>For developing teamwork.</p> |

## **Acknowledgements**

*Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More choice for parents and pupils*

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