

Scoping study for mixed attainment teaching practice in schools in Wales.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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Glossary

Glossary Acronym/Keyword	Definition
A Level	Advanced Level qualifications
All-through school	School for learners aged 3–16/19
CfW	Curriculum for Wales
Coronavirus (COVID-19)	The type of virus that causes the illness COVID-19.
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
EREiS	Embedding Research and Enquiry in Schools
Estyn	Education and training inspectorate for Wales.
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education qualifications
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
Mixed attainment	Groups of learners/students with a broad range of prior attainment. We have chosen to refer to mixed attainment grouping throughout, rather than to make use of the contested concept of 'ability'. Mixed ability has been preserved in quotes from teachers.

NPEP	National Professional Enquiry Project
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDG	Pupil Development Grant
Q (+ numeral)	Survey question number
Set	Learners/students grouped by attainment in a subject for teaching in that subject
Streams	Learners/students grouped for most/all subjects by a general measure of ability
TA	Teaching Assistant
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government
WG	Welsh Government

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a scoping study on mixed attainment teaching practices in schools in Wales.

Background and aims

The aim of the research was to explore current approaches to attainment and mixed-attainment learning and teaching in Wales within primary and secondary schools, as well as across Welsh and English-medium schools.

The research was intended to address the following research questions:

1: What attainment grouping practices and terminology (in relation to their grouping practices) are used in mainstream primary and secondary schools in Wales?

2: Why were these practices adopted?

3: What are teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of attainment and mixed attainment grouping for learners (e.g., attainment gap, behaviour, attendance)?

4: What professional learning would be required for practitioners to be more confident and skilled in implementing mixed attainment grouping?

5: What are teachers' perceptions of the impact of attainment and mixed attainment grouping on learners from lower-income households (those eligible for free school meals)?

6: Are there aspects of attainment grouping which need to be explored further in Wales?

Methodology and Methods

The mixed methods used in the scoping study are detailed in section 2 of the report. In summary, the research combined:

- A literature review
- A survey of primary and secondary schools. Of these 28 complete responses were received to the primary school survey and 14 complete responses from secondary schools.
- 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and middle and senior school leaders in eight schools. Practitioners in two English medium secondary schools and two 3-19 Welsh medium schools were interviewed. Practitioners in four primary schools were interviewed, three English-medium and one Welsh-medium. Two practitioners were interviewed in seven of the eight schools, in each case a senior leader and a classroom teacher. In the eighth school, a secondary school subject teacher was interviewed.

Findings and Recommendations

The research team recommend that these findings provide valuable insight into how practices are used and can inform data collection, and other forms of research, on learner attainment based on grouping in the future.

Attainment grouping practices and terminology (in relation to grouping practices) used in mainstream primary and secondary schools in Wales

- From the literature review, surveys and interviews the project team conclude that there is no single approach to grouping in primary and secondary schools and practices differ significantly in different contexts.

- In addition, the literature review found minimal evidence about grouping practices in Wales, though what evidence does exist suggests that grouping pupils by prior attainment, or perceived ability, is common.
- Research suggests a lack of fluidity between groups and strong teacher belief in the effectiveness of grouping by attainment for the purpose of learner support.
- In the survey, primary school teachers were asked about grouping in reading, writing and mathematics. For reading and mathematics, within-class grouping was the dominant practice for all age groups, while mixed-attainment grouping was the dominant practice for the teaching of writing. Setting and streaming were relatively uncommon, although a small number of respondents reported using setting in mathematics in years 3-6 age groups, and in reading in all age groups. In general, grouping by attainment within or between classes was slightly more common in years 3-6 than in nursery to year 2.
- In the survey, secondary school teachers were asked about grouping practices in Welsh, English, mathematics and other subjects. In general, completely mixed attainment grouping and sets were the most common grouping types, with increased amounts of setting as pupils progressed through secondary school. While mixed attainment grouping was almost absent from mathematics in years 10-11, there were still a few schools using variations on mixed attainment grouping for Welsh and English with that age group. There were relatively high numbers of teachers reporting mixed attainment grouping in mathematics in years 7-9, compared with findings in schools in England (Taylor et al., 2020).

Why were these practices adopted?

- The reasons for the implementation of grouping practices can be broadly separated into primary and secondary phases. For example, in interviews primary school teachers spoke of the perceived need to target learners and therefore, grouping allowed for this targeted approach to occur more easily. Similarly, it was stated that grouping allowed for smaller groups of learners, and that they could therefore be supported by adults appropriately. By planning, smaller groups were created where

pupils could be given more individual attention and inclusion/equitable opportunities.

- By contrast, the grouping in secondary schools combined the perceived difference in nature of the subjects- but also class sizes and budgetary constraints.
- Changes to the system for learners with additional learning needs, that are currently taking place, mean that some learners will not be identified under new arrangements.

Recommendation 1:

Welsh Government should review the feasibility of extending existing opportunities for collaborative professional development and/or designing new opportunities for teachers, middle and senior leaders to meet and reflect on forms of mixed attainment practice.

Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of attainment and mixed attainment grouping for learners (e.g., attainment gap, behaviour, attendance)

- Teachers from both primary and secondary settings spoke of their belief that mixed attainment grouping had a positive impact on the social development of learners.
- Secondary teachers felt that increased motivation as a consequence of mixed attainment grouping was particularly impactful on boys on the C-D GCSE grade boundary.
- However, in interviews, primary and secondary teachers not able to draw direct links between the impact of grouping practices on behaviour and attendance.

Recommendation 2:

Welsh Government should investigate the feasibility of designing and conducting further research, with teachers, on the impact and relationships between grouping practices, behaviour and attendance.

Professional learning required for practitioners to be more confident and skilled in implementing mixed attainment grouping

- There were instances, reported in the interviews, where teachers lacked confidence when teaching a range of learners. In addition, teachers identified a need for further knowledge of, and reflection on, metacognition and their classroom practices.

Recommendation 3:

Welsh Government should review the form and content of additional training and professional development for teachers and middle and senior school leaders on mixed attainment teaching practices integrated into Curriculum for Wales.

Teachers' perceptions of the impact of attainment and mixed attainment grouping on learners from lower-income households (those eligible for free school meals)

- There appears to be a good understanding by some participants about the impact of attainment grouping on learner identities and teacher expectations, particularly for those in lower groups.
- However, there does not appear to be a consensus, within the scope of the study, of what the impact on attainment may be if learners are from lower-income households.

Recommendation 4:

- To review how to design future research, with teachers, on the impact of grouping practices on learners and how to define 'disadvantage'.
- To design a study that investigates how attainment grouping may impact learners eligible for FSM.

Aspects of attainment grouping which need to be explored further in Wales

- Teachers did not raise specific areas for further research. However, the project team has identified several issues that it recommends are worthy of further investigation

Recommendation 5:

For Estyn and Welsh Government to provide guidance and signal specific, research-informed, examples of good practice that schools can look to embed in their contexts. For

example, to invite schools to provide case studies to share via Estyn's website when good practice is identified during inspections.

Recommendation 6:

To increase engagement with initial teacher education (ITE) providers by continuing to carry out and share research on attainment grouping and to include this in ITE programmes.

Recommendation 7:

We recognise the need to develop understanding of the complexities and risks involved in attainment grouping for student teachers and those at the outset of their careers. For example, misallocating learners to groups based on incorrect interpretations of attainment levels and predicting their consequent progress as well as the challenges of not experiencing mixed-attainment grouping during ITE practicum.

Recommendation 8:

To review the potential for further research on how attainment groupings may interact with language medium, both within the school and at home, and the social and educational factors that may influence these processes.

1. Introduction: Grouping pupils

1.1 There is an increasing consensus that the practice of grouping pupils by perceived ability, or prior attainment, has negative consequences for the equity of an education system (Macqueen, 2013; Francis et al., 2017a; Francis et al., 2020) and mixed evidence as to the effects on some learners. The evidence that it negatively impacts learners in lower sets is now largely accepted (Parsons & Hallam, 2014; Francis et al., 2020b), but there is also evidence to suggest a positive impact on learners placed in top sets (Collins & Gan, 2013; Parsons & Hallam, 2014).

1.2 Consequently, the debate surrounding the practice of attainment grouping in schools is contested. Authors draw different conclusions from the same results; some argue that the potential positive impacts on high prior attainers outweigh the possible negative impacts on low-prior attainers, and others, the reverse. Various studies suggest the causes for these impacts are more complex however, indicating multiple intersecting influences and mechanisms.

1.3 Due to the high prevalence of attainment grouping in the UK, evidence on best practice for mixed-attainment teaching is less well established. In the literature review we present evidence on the prevalence of attainment grouping in Wales along with a brief overview of the effects of attainment grouping on learner outcomes and system performance. From this, we draw some conclusions about practice in the Welsh context and important considerations for educational change.

Paucity of evidence and aims of the study

1.4 Given that research evidence on attainment grouping in Wales is minimal, the aim of this scoping study was to explore current approaches to attainment and mixed-attainment learning and teaching in Wales within primary and secondary schools, as well as across Welsh and English-medium schools.

2. Methodology and methods

The following section firstly details the research design and methods chosen for the study. These combined a literature review with the use of surveys and interviews. Secondly, it outlines the ethical practices used in the research and, finally, processes of analysis.

Research Design

2.1 The project employed a mixed-methods design. The study reviewed literature, gathered quantitative data via a survey which sought to establish the extent of grouping practice, followed by in- depth interviews with a small number of practitioners to yield qualitative data on practitioners' views and the language /terminology they used to describe their practices.

2.2 The survey was conducted in the period from May to June 2023, while the in-depth interviews were conducted July to September 2023. An initial analysis of the survey data was completed to inform the questions used in the in-depth interviews.

Review of the literature

2.3 A systematic review of the academic literature was undertaken to find research articles relevant to grouping practices in Wales. Given that articles specifically relevant to Wales were minimal, researchers identified UK-wide studies that were of relevance, including the Millennium Cohort Study. Key current findings in the academic literature about attainment grouping as a practice were also reviewed, most notably the influential work of Becky Francis and colleagues (2017a).

2.4 A systematic review of grey literature was also undertaken. An advanced search of the Gov.Wales website was used to gain an overview of government literature as well as relevant material from Estyn, the Hwb and third sector. The following search terms were used: 'ability groups', 'mixed ability', 'high ability', 'low ability', 'more able', 'most able', 'least able', 'small groups. This provided 6000 items in total and a review of these suggested that many were documents related to information about more able and talented learners.

2.5 A second search was therefore carried out with the terms 'more able', 'low ability', 'high ability', 'more able' and 'most able' removed, but with the term 'attainment' added. This yielded 2290 items which included a large proportion of lesson plans submitted by individual schools as well as Estyn inspection reports.

2.6 Finally, a search was carried out using only the terms 'mixed ability', 'ability group' and 'attainment group', with the terms 'small groups' and 'least able' removed. A filter was also added to capture material from the last ten years, i.e. 2013-2023. This final search captured 178 items in total, the majority of which were Estyn reports of individual schools and settings. Also included were NPEP enquiry reports that described grouping practices used within inquiry projects. It was evident from an overview of the material, that the terms 'ability' and 'mixed ability' are much more commonly used than the term 'attainment'.

A note on terminology: Streaming, setting, and within-class grouping

2.7 Various different terms were identified in the review. All referred to grouping practices with learners in schools based on their perceived ability in a particular subject area.

2.8 The most rigid version of these is 'streaming' whereby learners are placed in different 'ability streams' within the same school and have several, or all, of their lessons with other pupils in their stream, irrespective of their differing talents in different subjects.

2.9 'Banding' is a term that is sometimes used in the Welsh context and is similar to streaming, though can on occasion be used in relation to specific subjects.

2.10 'Setting' refers to the practice of putting learners into different classes (sets) for different subjects, dependent on their perceived ability in that subject, or their subject-specific prior attainment.

2.11 Finally, within-class attainment grouping refers to the practice of grouping learners, usually at separate tables, according to their perceived ability. This is often accompanied by different expectations of work or levels of support to different groups and may be a permanent or flexible arrangement.

2.12 Throughout we have referred to *attainment* grouping rather than *ability* grouping, except where we preserve the language of teachers in interviews. This is to avoid the contested concept of ‘ability’ (see section 3.2)

Survey and sample strategy

2.13 Two surveys were developed – one tailored to examine practice in primary schools and the other designed to capture practice in secondary schools. Surveys were completed anonymously via Qualtrics. See Appendix A for a list of the questions used.

It was adapted for to recognise the educational context in Wales, and circulated in Welsh and English.

2.14 The survey was sent by email to all maintained schools in Wales (1,463 maintained schools of which 1,213 are primary and 178 secondary according to the January 2023 schools’ census). The survey was open to all school-based staff and was promoted via Dysg and through the ITE networks of the participating universities.

In-depth interviews

2.15 In-depth interviews were conducted, with nine schools in the south-west of Wales (primary, secondary, Welsh and English medium). Two interviews were conducted in each school (apart from school G where there was only one). The interviews were designed to develop a more granular understanding of how grouping is approached and discussed in practice. These interviews were conducted with a range of practitioners including school leaders and subject leads/curriculum co-ordinators.

2.16 A diverse sample of schools were recruited according to variables such as urban or rural context, socio-economic context, medium of instruction and school size, high/low eFSM. To facilitate strong and timely engagement, all the schools were recruited from the south-west of Wales as they were all part of the authors’ school research network. It should therefore be recognised that the findings should be interpreted with caution and

may not be representative of schools from elsewhere in Wales. Research sites are summarised in the following table.

Table 1. Interview participants and schools, with details of grouping practices.

School	Participant	Medium	Phase	Role	Subject (if any)	Grouping description
A	1	English	Secondary	Senior leader	English	Mixed attainment initially, moving into sets early in Year 7; English is mixed all through to years 10-11, although regrouped in Year 10 and some do English Language only and not English Literature. Maths in three or more bands/sets.
A	2	English	Secondary	Middle leader	Mathematics	
B	3	English	Primary	Middle leader		Within-class ability grouping for some activities; mixed attainment for others; sets for maths in years 3-6.
B	4	English	Primary	Senior leader		
C	5	Welsh	3-19 (primary focus)	Senior leader		Completely mixed attainment with within-class grouping.

School	Participant	Medium	Phase	Role	Subject (if any)	Grouping description
C	6	Welsh	3-19 (secondary focus)	Senior leader		Set for Welsh/English, mathematics, science and Baccalaureate for GCSE). Mixed attainment for other subjects.
D	7	English	Primary	Class teacher		Mixed attainment with within-class grouping varying by subject; intervention groups; cross-age groups
D	10	English	Primary	Middle leader		
E	8	English	Secondary	Middle leader	English	Mixed attainment in Years 7 and 8, 'engineered' groups for GCSE, with an entry-level group. Mixed attainment form groups with one nurture group and one lower ability group. Mixed attainment in Year 7 mathematics. Experimental approach to grouping.
E	9	English	Secondary	Senior leader		
F	11	English	Primary (small school)	Senior leader		Cross-age groups.

School	Participant	Medium	Phase	Role	Subject (if any)	Grouping description
F	12	English	Primary (small school)	Class teacher		
G	14	Welsh	Primary	Middle leader		Within-class grouping, flexible based on task
G	15	Welsh	Primary	Class teacher		
H	16	Welsh	Secondary (all through)	Middle leader	English	English is mixed attainment in Year 7 and 8, banded into two groups in Year 9 and four sets in Years 10/11.

Research Ethics

2.18 The ethics process governing university research ensures that scholarly investigations adhere to ethical principles, safeguard participant rights, and maintain the integrity of the research endeavour.

2.19 The researchers involved in this project submitted detailed proposals outlining the research design, informed consent procedures, and methods of data collection and analysis to their institutional ethics panels. The panel interrogated these to ensure that the research met the relevant ethical standards, upheld the welfare of participants, and contributed to the advancement of knowledge in an ethically responsible manner.

2.20 Researchers additionally followed these ethical guidelines:

- UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice <https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/media/uwtsd-website/content-assets/documents/research/REICoP-July-2022.pdf>
- UWTSD Research Data Management Policy <https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/media/uwtsd-website/content-assets/documents/strategies-policies/RDM-Policy-2022-v3-28-04-22.pdf>
- The collaborating institutions completed their own ethics processes in accordance with their institutional guidance.
- BERA ethical guidelines <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>

2.21 The following consent protocols were also applied:

- For the national survey, respondents accessed an information page and ticked check boxes to confirm that they were giving their informed consent to participate before they proceed to complete the survey.
- For the interviews consent forms were issued with an information page and tick check boxes to confirm that interviewees were giving their informed consent to participate prior to the interview.

2.22 All participants retained the right to withdraw until the dissemination of the draft project report. clear date will be indicated in all consent protocols, after which the withdrawal of consent cannot be undertaken.

2.23 Interviewees were given an email address of a member of the research team who can be emailed to withdraw their data.

Analysis of Data

The scoping study combined the following methods of analysis:

2.24 Quantitative Data Analysis: Descriptive analysis of the quantitative survey data was carried out in RStudio 2023.03.1 and R4.2.2.

2.25 Qualitative Data Analysis: Analysis of the qualitative data from the survey and interviews was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic qualitative data analysis was developed inductively from the research questions and data was coded in NVivo 12.

3. Review of the literature

The review identified a series of key findings. These first combined different perspectives on attainment grouping, and the debate about ability and attainment grouping, but then emphasised the effects of attainment grouping on outcomes for learners and practices of teachers.

Introduction: Attainment grouping

3.1 Grouping pupils according to past attainment or perceived potential is a widespread educational practice. However, the decision about whether to group learners by perceived 'ability' is more than just a pedagogical one. Debates on this topic go beyond education and include political, cultural, and philosophical considerations. Proponents of the practice tend to suggest that it allows for more targeted teaching and hence improves performance for all learners. Detractors, on the other hand, tend to argue that this practice leads to increased levels of educational inequality.

3.2 The term 'ability group' is commonly used in schools and implies that pupils are grouped based on their underlying 'ability' in a particular subject (in the case of setting) or in general (in the case of streaming). This is problematic. Primarily, 'ability' is not a single entity and cannot be directly observed nor straightforwardly assessed. Schools often use attainment in formal assessments as a proxy for ability, along with other data and teacher judgment. However, research indicates that judgements about someone's ability are subjective and that teachers adjust their expectations of learners according to their perceived ability. For example, research by Hallam and Ireson (2005) and Taylor et al. (2019) argues that secondary school teachers expect pupils in lower sets to achieve less.

3.3 The notion of 'ability' may also support 'fixed ability thinking' (Hart & Drummond 2013) in teachers. This is the idea that learning is fundamentally the result of the internal resource of the learner, which is fixed at birth. The belief sustains the notion that pupils in schools have 'high ability', 'moderate ability' or 'low ability', but overlooks important external influences on learning, such as the quality of instruction, the availability of resource and the nature of learning relationships (Alvunger et al. 2017).

3.4 Fixed ability thinking is considered particularly problematic for inclusive education since learners taught in low attainment groups, which typically include a high proportion of

learners with additional learning needs, tend to fare less well in systems that are structured by attainment (Florian 2012; Cullen et al. 2020). It is also the case that positive teacher beliefs about learners and open-ended expectations about what they can do have been found to be critical factors in the development of inclusive classrooms (Brennan et al. 2022). The next section of the review addresses research evidence about these practices for pupils and their learning in Wales.

Research evidence about attainment grouping in Wales

3.5 Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study suggests a complex picture in relation to the practices of setting and streaming in Wales. This study, which included 1204 Welsh pupils in 434 schools, found that Wales came only second to Scotland in terms of the lowest proportion of learners aged seven (Year 2) set for literacy and maths. A quarter (25.6%) of Year 2 pupils in Wales were set for literacy, whilst 28.5% of pupils were set for maths, and this compares to 29.0% and 35.0% of pupils respectively in England and 39.5% and 35.3% of pupils respectively in Northern Ireland (Hallam and Parsons 2013a). It is notable, however, that this study indicates increased use of setting in primary schools overall in UK nations since the turn of the century which, Hallam and Parsons (2013b) suggest, reflects increased pressure on schools to raise standards.

3.6 In a parallel study of streaming based on data from the Millennium Cohort Study, Hallam and Parsons (2013b) found that the highest percentage of children aged seven (Year 2) were streamed in Wales (19.5%), compared to England (16.8%), Scotland (15.6%) and Northern Ireland (11.2%). These authors conclude that schools adopting streaming are more likely to be large in size, have mixed age classes and have an intake that includes higher proportions of minority ethnic learners, pupils deemed behaviourally challenging and pupils whose mothers have lower levels of education. Lack of relative movement between streams (compared for example to sets) may also mean that pupils remain in these groups once assigned to them (Hallam and Parsons 2013b).

3.7 Millennium Cohort Study data on secondary schools is not disaggregated by country for secondary schools in the same way as it is for primary schools (Hartas 2017), so it is not possible to comment on the situation for secondary schools in Wales. Recent research in the south Wales region, however, suggests that the most frequently used group across primary and secondary phases for learners was mixed attainment (94% and 91%

respectively), but for English/Welsh and mathematics in both age phases was attainment-based (Welsh Government, 2023). The reported figure for secondary age learners taught in attainment groups for mathematics (82%) and Welsh/English (82%) is on a par with figures found elsewhere in the UK.

3.8 A survey of south Wales schools across age phases found a range of grouping practices which had the primary purpose of support for academic learning (Welsh Government, 2023). This was the case for learners in lower attaining groups and those with additional learning needs but also for higher attaining learners, with grouping described as an effective way of ensuring pupil progress across all learners. In this research, learners reported remaining in the same set or stream once assigned so indicating a general lack of fluidity of groups (Conn et al., 2024).

3.9 Research evidence suggests that the incidence of attainment grouping increases with age in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023) as it does elsewhere in the UK (Hallam et al., 2003). One small study that explored young children's perceptions of attainment grouping, found that grouping by perceived ability for English/Welsh and mathematics exists even in years 3-7, and that very young children may be acutely aware of this practice (John 2022). A Wales-wide survey of teacher beliefs about inclusive education found that, though there was a broad commitment to inclusive education as an ideal, many respondents expressed strong belief in attainment grouping as a practice. The belief was expressed that teaching mixed attainment groups was challenging in terms of planning and delivery and often detrimental to learners as a whole (Knight et al. 2022).

Review of grey literature relevant to this area

3.10 In the grey literature, there was minimal information about patterns of grouping practices used in schools in Wales or guidance on this. Some evidence of the use of attainment grouping in secondary schools was found. For example, Estyn's 2022 Annual Report, which covers the experience of Covid-19 in schools, describes pupils being taught in mixed attainment classes for all subjects during the pandemic and 'not in their usual sets or bands' (Estyn, 2022, 30). Estyn's Good practice guidance in maths in years 7-9, states that many schools group pupils for maths in attainment bands or sets, especially after Year 7 (Estyn, 2015). Pupils are described as being placed in groups based on teacher

assessments at the end of Key Stage 2 and National Numeracy test results, or alternatively, based on end of term assessments after entry to secondary school.

3.11 In this document, as in other Estyn documents, language associated with 'ability' is routinely used, including terms such as 'ability spectrum', 'ability range', 'least able' and 'most able'. Some Estyn documents associate mixed attainment grouping with possible frustration for higher attaining learners because of the slower pace of lessons and challenge for teachers in relation to learners who require additional support (see for example Estyn, 2021). However, some guidance on working with more able and talented learners recommends the organisation of flexible groups for learning including for those deemed 'higher ability' (see for example WAG, 2008)

The effects of attainment grouping on outcomes

3.12 Research indicates that attainment grouping has advantages for those in higher sets, but disadvantages those in lower sets (Collins & Gan, 2013; Ireson et al., 2002; Ireson et al., 2005; Parsons & Hallam, 2014). The association of attainment grouping with increased educational inequality of pupil performance and outcomes has been replicated in studies across the globe (Higgins et al, 2022; OECD, 2016). In a large-scale Education Endowment Foundation study of secondary schools in England, Hodgen et al. (2022) found that, even for learners with similar prior attainment at the end of primary school, those allocated to high sets for maths and English made significantly larger gains in learning. This relative impact of attainment grouping makes it important, therefore, to distinguish between higher attaining learners and learners who are placed in higher sets, and to see attainment grouping as a practice that contributes to the widening of the achievement gap.

3.13 There has been extensive research on attainment grouping outside of Wales and below we briefly summarise the literature on the effects of attainment grouping using the influential work of Francis and colleagues (2017a). They suggest seven main issues related to the practice of attainment grouping, which are set out next:

Misallocation of learners to groups

3.14 The practice of separating pupils in terms of perceived ability is clearly reliant on the capacity to make accurate judgements of 'ability' and to use those judgments to allocate pupils to appropriate groups. Several studies that investigate allocation whilst controlling for

prior attainment suggest that this process could be biased (Archer et al., 2018). Taylor et al. (2019) found that teachers in secondary schools based their judgements about learners on a range of factors which included prior attainment, but also the availability of resource, financial factors, and assumptions about learners in terms of their potential for progress. A study by Connolly et al. (2019) reported that nearly a third (31.2%) of the 9301 students sampled from English secondary schools had been misallocated when allocation was compared to their Key Stage 2 results. Of particular concern was the secondary analysis which suggested that Black pupils were on average 2.4 times more likely to be misallocated into lower sets than their white counterparts (Connolly et al. 2019).

3.15 Some studies suggest that the impact of attainment grouping also differ by other pupil characteristics, including socioeconomic status and gender. Muijs and Donne (2010) found that secondary school pupils receiving free school meals (an indicator regularly used as a proxy for SES) were over-represented in lower sets and under-represented in higher sets. In relation to gender, studies in England suggest that boys are more likely to be misallocated up for maths and misallocated down for English, and girls to be more likely allocated down for maths (Connolly et al. 2019; Francis et al., 2020b). Campbell's (2021) analysis of Millennium Cohort Study data (N=4463) suggests that placing boys in high attaining groups at age 11 had a positive impact on their maths self-concept, even if they had scored poorly on a maths cognitive test at age seven. In contrast, girls who may have been misallocated up (i.e. they are in a higher set at age 11 but scored poorly at age 7) were more likely to have negative beliefs about their maths abilities.

Lack of fluidity of groups

1.16 Whilst fluidity is often reported as an important element of attainment grouping, several studies have provided evidence that this is obstructed by multiple factors (Allebone 2006; Blatchford et al., 2008). Higher sets regularly progress through the curriculum more quickly than other groups, meaning that teachers feel it would be unfair to move a pupil from a lower set into the top set as they would have missed certain content (Macqueen, 2013). Though teachers and schools tend to overestimate the fluidity of groups in their setting (Hallam & Ireson, 2005), research indicates that once a pupil is assigned to a group they tend to stay there irrespective of their progress (Dunne et al., 2011).

Quality of teaching for different groups

3.17 There have been suggestions that one of the causes of the widening gap between higher and lower sets could be caused by the practice of assigning 'higher quality' teachers to higher attaining sets (Kelly, 2004; Francis et al., 2019). Investigating the uneven distribution of teachers within secondary schools, Francis et al., (2019) found evidence to suggest that teachers of higher sets are more likely to have a degree-level qualification in the subject which they are teaching. Whilst by no means a guarantee of high-quality teaching, there are some studies which have suggested that higher levels of teacher education led to improved student outcomes (Nilsen & Gustafsson, 2016)

Teacher expectations and related pedagogy

3.18 Teacher expectation of student achievement is regularly reported as a significant predictor of actual achievement (Hattie & Yates, 2013; Peterson et al., 2016; Inan-Kaya & Rubie-Davies, 2022). Teachers also tend to adjust their teaching according to these expectations, with teachers of higher sets presenting more challenging work and teachers of lower sets providing slower-paced tasks whilst employing a narrower range of teaching styles (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Francis et al., 2017a). In lower attaining groups in secondary schools, teachers have been found to carry out more repetition, revisit topics more frequently, provide more structured and practical tasks, keep learners on task more, and spend more time with learners in one-to-one interaction (Mazenod et al., 2019).

Impoverished curriculum and qualifications

3.19 An Education Endowment Fund report found that learners in lower attaining groups are more likely to have access to a reduced curriculum, be taught by a teaching assistant, and be supported in ways that increase their dependency on support (Sharples et al. 2015). There is evidence that pupils in lower sets may be given fewer curriculum opportunities, for example, to work independently (Mazenod et al., 2019). It appears to be the case that the label of 'low attaining' has an enduring effect with learners deemed this early in their school career continuing to have this label in the long-term (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018) with a ceiling placed on progression pathways and qualification routes (Ireson et al., 2005; Dunne et al., 2007).

Experiences of attainment grouping and the impact on learner identities

3.20 Research into the views of learners indicates they have mixed feelings about attainment grouping as a practice. Learners in middle and higher attaining groups express some support for mixed attainment teaching, seeing it as fairer and more equitable (Tereshchenko et al., 2019), whilst learners in lower attaining tend to have the most negative feelings about non-mixed groups (Archer et al., 2018). They tend to be more positive about mixed attainment grouping as a practice, seeing it as a way of creating spaces for collaboration and community that benefit all learners.

3.21 There is some research to suggest, however, that lower attaining learners in secondary schools experience lower sets as less intimidating learning environments and places where they feel more competent and not 'left behind' (Hallam & Ireson 2006; Tereshchenko et al. 2019). It also seems to be the case that the smaller class sizes offered by many lower attaining groups are supportive of the development of strong teacher-learner relationships that support progress (Mazenod et al. 2019).

A self-fulfilling prophecy

3.22 However, other research indicates that attainment grouping has an impact on learner identities, and in turn, on pupil achievement. Research has repeatedly suggested that pupils internalise the external perceptions of others about their capabilities as learners (Scherer, 2016). Studies have found a strong link between labelling for sets and general impact on learner self-confidence, with learners in top sets for maths found to be significantly more confident about their learning generally compared to those in middle sets, and learners in lower sets significantly lower in self-confidence (Francis et al., 2017b, 2020b). Similarly, studies in primary schools have found negative impact on learner self-concept (Campbell, 2021) and increased feelings of shame and isolation (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020) for learners in lower attaining groups.

3.23 The multiple factors described above work together to cause what Francis and colleagues have described as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Francis et al., 2017b). Hargreaves et al. (2021) reported that low attaining primary school pupils were both 'cognitively and physically separated' from their relatively higher attaining peers. This academic and social exclusion significantly impacts the opportunity for low attaining pupils to make the necessary progress to 'catch-up' with their peers.

3.24 Additionally, the authors highlighted learners deemed lower attaining seeking to protect themselves from hurtful and damaging labels by refusing to engage. This arguably rational response further damages educational progress, however, and leads to an ever-widening achievement gap. The development of negative learner identities associated with being placed in lower sets is an impediment to learning and can lead to reduced progress, further exacerbating the differences that underpinned the initial setting (Buchanan et al., 2020; Francis et al., 2020b; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020).

Complexities associated with grouping as a practice

3.25 It is important to grasp some of the complexities that operate in this area and the ways in which different parts of an education system interact. Teacher belief is clearly an important consideration in the practice of attainment grouping and a dominant perception of mixed attainment teaching amongst teachers is that it involves more effort and harder work (Araújo, 2007). However, research indicates that teachers working in mixed attainment classrooms may hold persistent beliefs about the fixed ability of learners (Marks 2013), whilst teachers who believe in mixed attainment teaching as an ideal may nevertheless feel pressured into grouping by attainment due to external pressures such as accountability.

3.26 Towers et al. (2020) report on a mixed methods study with 217 schools which highlighted the process of negotiation and compromise teachers go through when balancing the needs of the student with the pressures of assessment in schools. Similarly, McGillicuddy and Devine (2018) describe how teachers, despite knowing about the negative impact of grouping by attainment, still carry out this practice if it is legitimised by the wider school system and culture.

3.27 These studies highlight the importance of both within-school leadership to enable teachers to act according to their professional values and of systems of accountability which support rather than disempower teachers. Given that many of the effects of attainment grouping are hidden and unconscious, it is important to raise awareness across the education system of the risks associated with fixed ability thinking and attainment grouping, particularly for low prior attainers. It is vital that teachers and leaders understand the purpose of grouping as a teaching technique and the importance of using it flexibly and judiciously to ensure maximum benefit and minimal harm.

3.28 Complexity is also inherent in the practice of attainment grouping itself which recent research indicates is a more nuanced practice than previously thought. A national survey of secondary schools by Taylor et al. (2022) found that schools with disadvantaged intakes were more likely to group learners by attainment, but evidence from the survey also suggests a range of practices that move beyond the simple binary of mixed attainment and setting. Variation in types of groups used and the employment of these across subject areas was described by schools, including partial mixing where classes were taught within mixed attainment groups, but with a top set and/or bottom set or nurture group operating as well.

3.29 The authors of this study conclude that the diversity of practice they found possibly suggests a willingness to experiment in this area and to be persuaded by research evidence to increase the equity of practice for the benefit of all learners. This is something that we would like to endorse, particularly with reference to priorities set out in Welsh Government post-COVID-19 recovery plans (2021). Notably, these emphasise improving pupil well-being and closing the achievement gap between different groups of learners to ensure the best outcomes for all learners in Wales.

Conclusions

3.30 The review of evidence about the use of mixed/non-mixed attainment grouping in schools in Wales has revealed that this is an under-researched area. Minimal evidence exists about practice in this area, though what evidence does exist suggests that grouping pupils by prior attainment or perceived ability is common. This seems to be particularly the case for English/Welsh, mathematics and science and may extend across primary and secondary phases, appearing to increase as a practice with pupil age.

3.31 Research in the Welsh context suggests a lack of fluidity of groups and points to strong teacher belief in the effectiveness of grouping by attainment for the purpose of learning support. Related to this, and of note in Wales, is the operation of 'fixed ability thinking' as an organising concept at all levels of the education system that means learners are routinely categorised as of 'low ability', 'moderate ability' and 'high ability'.

3.32 These findings are significant given the evidence base on attainment grouping outside of Wales, which we have also briefly reviewed and summarised. This evidence points to the practice of attainment grouping as problematic leading to the widening of the achievement gap between groups of learners. Research indicates that lower attaining pupils

tend not to fare well in education systems organised around perceptions of ability and that this has negative consequences for the equity of the system overall.

4. Findings

Having reviewed literature on attainment, the following section first outlines those schools who participated in the scoping study. It then presents findings from the surveys conducted and interviews designed to examine current approaches to attainment and mixed-attainment learning and teaching in Wales within primary and secondary schools, as well as across Welsh and English-medium schools.

Survey respondents

4.1 There were 28 complete responses to the primary school survey and 14 complete responses to the secondary school survey. Further detail is provided in Table 2 below.

4.2 Whilst there were 146 responses to the primary survey and 87 responses to the secondary survey the majority of respondents did not continue past the consent page to enter their school details. Only respondents who supplied their school details and completed the survey are included in the following analysis.

**Table 2. Respondents by school type
(detailed)**

Nursery to year 2	1
Years 2- 6	2
Nursery to year 6	25
Years 3-6	0
Middle (3-16)	0
Middle (3-19)	1
Secondary (11-16)	2

Secondary (11-19)	11
Total	42

Schools were located in 17 local authority areas. These are summarised, with a breakdown by school sector, in table 3 below.

Table 3. Respondents by Local Authority area and Sector

		Primary	Secondary	Total
North Wales	Isle of Anglesey	0	0	0
	Gwynedd	1	1	2
	Conwy	4	2	6
	Denbighshire	1	0	1
	Flintshire	1	0	1
	Wrexham	2	0	2
South west and mid Wales	Powys	1	1	2
	Ceredigion	0	0	0
	Pembrokeshire	0	1	1
	Carmarthenshire	1	1	2
	Swansea	3	0	3
	Neath Port Talbot	1	0	1
	Bridgend	3	1	4
Central south Wales	Vale of Glamorgan	2	1	3
	Rhondda Cynon Taf	4	1	5

	Merthyr Tydfil	0	0	0
	Cardiff	2	3	5
South east Wales	Caerphilly	0	4	4
	Blaenau Gwent	1	0	1
	Torfaen	0	0	0
	Monmouthshire	1	1	2
	Newport	0	0	0

4.3 A breakdown of schools by language medium is provided in Table 4. In total there were responses from 6 Welsh medium schools, and 36 English medium schools.

Table 4. Respondents by language medium and sector

	Primary	Secondary	Total
Welsh medium	4	2	6
English medium	23	13	36
English with significant Welsh	1	1	2
Bilingual	0	1	1

4.4 Through matching to data from Stats Wales, free school meal tertiles were identified for all schools. Tertiles were first constructed for all schools in Wales (primary and secondary together) using the data from Stats Wales (3 year average % pupils eligible for FSM, 2021-22) and labelled from Q1 (lowest quintile) to Q5 (Q3) (highest quintile). These data are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5. Respondents by FSM tertile

	Range	Primary	Secondary	Total
Q1	1.5%-15.2%	8	6	14
Q2	15.2%-26.7%	8	5	13
Q3	26.7%-77.5%	10	5	15

4.5 Through matching to data in the address list of schools, tertiles for school size were created separately for primary and secondary schools. Tertiles were labelled from Q1(smallest number of pupils) to Q5 (Q3) (largest number of pupils). These data are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6. Respondents by school size tertiles (number of pupils)

	Primary		Secondary	
	Range	Number	Range	Number
Q1	9-141	8	316-808	6
Q2	141-246	11	808-1080	5
Q3	246-733	9	1080-2430	5

Primary schools: A summary of grouping practices

4.6 In the survey, teachers were asked about grouping in reading, writing and mathematics. Categories of grouping practices are summarised in figure 1 and findings are summarised by year group and subject in tables 7-9 below. For reading and mathematics, within-class grouping was the dominant practice for all age groups, while mixed-attainment grouping was the dominant practice for the teaching of writing. Setting and streaming were relatively uncommon, although a small number of respondents reported using setting in mathematics in years 3-6 groups, and in reading in all age groups. In general, grouping by attainment within or between classes was slightly more common in years 3-6 than in nursery-year 2.

4.7 Further analysis was carried out to look at patterns of grouping in relation to FSM tertile and school size tertile, but small numbers of respondents meant that patterns were unclear. These tables are included in Appendix.

Table 7: Categories of grouping practices in the primary school survey

Fully mixed	All mixed attainment groups within a mixed attainment class
Within class groups	Ability groups (these could be arranged in table groups) within a mixed attainment class.
Sets	Attainment 'sets' between classes in the same year group (e.g. children in all year 4 classes are placed into high, middle and low 'sets' in maths based on their attainment in maths).
Streams	Children assigned to a class according to their overall attainment where they remain consistently for all subjects.
Other	Variety of practices determined by teacher and school

Table 8. Grouping practices for reading in primary schools

	Rec	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Fully mixed	7	4	3	1	2	2	3
Within class groups	12	15	15	19	17	18	19
Sets	2	3	3	1	1	1	1
Streams	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Other	4	4	5	4	3	2	1
Don't know					1	1	1

Table 9. Grouping practices for writing in primary schools

	Rec	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Fully mixed	15	12	10	8	8	7	8
Within class groups	9	13	15	14	12	13	14
Sets	0	0	0	1	2	2	2
Streams	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	2	2	2	2	2	2	1
Don't know							

Table 10. Grouping practices for mathematics in primary schools

	Rec	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	Y5	Y6
Fully mixed	15	9	7	8	7	6	7
Within class groups	9	14	14	11	11	11	11
Sets	0	1	2	3	3	4	5
Streams	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
Don't know							

Teachers' grouping practices in primary schools

4.8 Respondents were invited to make brief comments about their school's grouping practices. A small number of teachers highlighted alternative grouping practices, such as the following:

There is a mix of fully mixed attainment and within class attainment depending on learning activity.

All children sit in the class seats/table but work to there [sic] own ability level with work differentiated for them.

Although they are in ability groups within the class, there are times where we have mixed ability sessions and good practice at any level is shared with the whole class.

Some teaching of reading is individual.

4.9 In interviews, teachers described using predominantly mixed attainment grouping, often combined with within-class grouping for particular subjects or activities, e.g. reading. Setting was used rarely, and only with older children in mathematics. Small schools reported using mixed-age grouping. A teacher from a Welsh-medium school reported using language ability to group pupils for language instruction. 'Mixed ability' groups can be very deliberately planned, based on prior attainment. There is variation in how much pupils move between groups – in some cases mixed attainment groups were seen as relatively static, while in other schools teachers talked about fluidity of movement between (within-class) groups.

4.10 The majority of primary school groups were not overtly labelled by ability, although teachers sometimes used 'ability' labels amongst themselves, e.g. 'confident'. Generally mixed attainment groups were not referred to as such or as ability groups, but labelled with colours, river names, teacher names or other descriptors:

We have Group Bendigedig, Group Ffantastig, Group Gwych etc, and similarly in maths they have maths names to group the children, so they're called the Pentagons or the Squares or the Circles. (Participant 4).

I never, ever use 'top', 'middle', 'bottom', never, ever, ever. (Participant 12).

Primary teachers and their reflections on grouping practices

4.11 Although one school was very happily using ability labels, most primary teachers reported a desire to avoid explicit ability labelling of children:

On the classroom floor, we don't use 'able and talented' and we don't use 'needs' or 'weak group'. We tend to keep away from that terminology on the classroom floor because children are all ears (Participant 15).

4.12 However some teachers articulated that children were aware of their ability, even when it was not made clear to them:

They are aware of their different abilities because as... you know, children are like... "Miss, we're the top group." "Are you? Since when? What 'top group'?" (Participant 14).

One teacher expressed concern about the impact of awareness of group labels on children's self-esteem:

For maybe the children who are in what is perceived to be the top groups, the top ability settings, I think they've got greater self-esteem about being in that group, and if they are moved down, which can happen and is foreseen as being moved down, then I think that's pretty detrimental to their self-esteem (Participant 4).

4.13 When asked about how grouping practices are described to parents, most teachers reported explaining it in terms of the work their child was currently doing and their progress toward targets.

Parents are not necessarily aware [of grouping practices], but parents would be aware of where their child is at in terms of their progress and attainment. (Participant 4).

4.14 However, openness was felt by some teachers to be the best policy when asked directly about grouping:

I've got a little girl in my class and I'm a year three/four class and only a few weeks ago did the parent realise that there were year threes and fours in the class, and she was, how does that work? [...] I said, no not at all, it doesn't mean that she's in our lower ability groups, children are grouped entirely on their progress within that specific topic or over the year really. (Participant 3).

Secondary schools and their grouping practices.

4.15 In the survey, teachers were asked about grouping practices in Welsh, English, mathematics and other subjects. The categories of grouping practices used in the secondary school survey are defined in figure 2 below. In general, completely mixed attainment grouping and sets were the most common grouping types, with increased amounts of setting as pupils progressed through secondary school. While mixed attainment grouping was almost absent from mathematics in years 10-11, there were still a few schools using variations on mixed attainment grouping for Welsh and English with that age group. There were relatively high numbers of teachers reporting mixed attainment grouping in mathematics in years 7-9, compared with findings in schools in England (Taylor et al., 2020).

4.16 Again, small numbers of respondents meant that it was difficult to discern patterns of grouping by FSM or size tertile, or by language medium.

Table 11: Summary of grouping practices in secondary school

Completely mixed	All teaching groups include children from the full attainment range for the year group.
Mixed + top	The highest attaining students are taught in a separate group. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.
Mixed + bottom	The lowest attaining students are taught in a separate group. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Mixed + top + bottom	The highest and lowest attaining students are taught in separate groups. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.
Sets	Students are grouped by attainment.
Streams	Students are grouped for most or all subjects, by a general measure of ability.
Other	Teachers and schools determine variety of own practices

Tables 10-13 provide a summary of grouping practices in secondary schools in English, Welsh and Mathematics.

Table 12. Grouping practices for English in secondary schools

	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11
Completely mixed	9	6	2	2	2
Mixed + top	0	0	0	0	0
Mixed + bottom	1	1	1	1	1
Mixed + top + bottom	1	1	2	2	2
Sets	3	7	10	11	11
Streams	1	1	1	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0

Table 13. Grouping practices for Welsh in secondary schools

	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11
Completely mixed	10	6	5	3	4
Mixed + top	0	1	0	1	1
Mixed + bottom	0	0	0	0	0
Mixed + top + bottom	1	1	1	2	2
Sets	1	4	6	10	9
Streams	4	4	4	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	0	0	0	0	0

Table 14. Grouping practices for mathematics in secondary schools

	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11
Completely mixed	7	4	1	0	1
Mixed + top	0	0	0	0	0
Mixed + bottom	0	0	0	0	0
Mixed + top + bottom	4	5	4	2	2
Sets	4	5	9	12	13
Streams	1	2	2	1	
Other	0	0	0	0	0

Table 15. Grouping practices for subjects other than English, Welsh and mathematics in secondary schools

	Y7	Y8	Y9	Y10	Y11
All grouped by attainment	1	1	1	0	0
Some grouped some mixed	6	9	11	11	10
All mixed	9	6	4	5	5
Don't know	0	0	0	1	1

4.17 Teachers were also asked about whether they had any plans to change grouping practices in Welsh, English or mathematics in the future. Findings suggest that schools were very settled in their practices and did not intend to change (see Table 14).

Table 16. Intention to change grouping practices.

	Welsh	English	Maths
Yes	2	1	1
No	14	15	15

The grouping practices of secondary teachers

4.18 In the survey, teachers were invited to make additional free text comments about grouping practices at their schools. There were not many comments provided that added to the quantitative data, but two comments related to grouping for Welsh language teaching:

Possibly looking at a Welsh first language group

Top set for Welsh school entry.

4.19 Two comments shed light on decisions in schools around grouping in subjects other than Welsh, English and mathematics:

Lots of classes in GCSE are based on options, so interest based and mixed attainment.

I teach HSCCC (Health, Social Care and Childcare) so my groups have very challenging and vulnerable students who are not able to be in the same classroom together so have split into 2 groups.

4.20 In secondary school interviews, where teachers described grouping for subjects other than Welsh/English, mathematics and science it was entirely mixed attainment, often based on registration groups. Year 7 and 8 were often reported to be taught in mixed attainment groups for English/Welsh and mathematics, with setting increasing as pupils moved up the school. One teacher mentioned having a nurture group and a lower ability group:

We've got an eight-form entry generally, of which six of the forms are mixed ability, then we've got one nurture group because they're rather timid children, normally of lower ability but not necessarily always, plus one other group then that really needs differentiated work so they are of lower ability. It was a case of we want to teach mixed ability wherever possible, but where the need was such that we're differentiating too low in a way, then we've kept those two groups out. (Participant 9)

4.21 In that same school, mathematics had until recently been taught at two group levels ('a top and a bottom') but they had recently experimented with mixed attainment, which had been found to work well. Another school however had struggled with mixed attainment during COVID and had returned to setting in mathematics. Grouping for options classes (GCSE and A levels) was driven by pupil choices and subject entry criteria, rather than by grouping on the part of the school, although one teacher described efforts to influence pupil option choices:

Our option subjects are taught mixed ability, however we do give them a lot of guidance in making the correct choices for their ability. You will tend to find that the pupils studying history are expected in the main to be able to achieve a grade C in the main, C to A. [...] We've got some lower end courses if you like which can only get you as high as a B kind of equivalent to GCSE we try and guide our top-end pupils away from that because they're missing out on what they could achieve an A grade (Participant 9).*

4.22 As in primary schools, ability grouping was sometimes described for Welsh language classes:

At Key Stage 4 certainly there is. We've got the settings there, then we've got sets in science, sets in English, sets in maths, sets in Welsh. We've also got a first language Welsh class as well (Participant 9).

4.23 Another secondary teacher described 'engineering' their classes to achieve greater balance of pupil characteristics, including free school meals, and greater engagement of pupils, as well as distributing key groups of pupils (e.g. higher attainers, C/D GCSE borderline) across teachers.

4.24 In general groups in secondary schools were referred to according to how they appeared on the timetable, e.g. with a letter to denote the year group half or side, and a number to denote the group or set number. One teacher said that teachers referred to a 'support group' but that they wouldn't use that terminology with pupils. Where mixed attainment groups were used, they might be referred to by a teacher's initials.

4.25 Teachers reported that set levels were easily inferred by pupils, either from the group name ('the problem is classes are named, say, you're 11B3, and they know that there are three sets', Participant 6) or from the other pupils in the group ('they can see who's in the room with them and how big the group is and how many LSAs there are in the room', Participant 1).

4.26 However, teachers did not describe advertising group level to pupils and some expressed concern about the impact of being aware of being in a lower group and its impact on pupil self-confidence: 'they feel like, "Oh, I'm in the class..." They say, "I'm in the stupid class."' (Participant 6).

4.27 For the most part teachers reported communicating group membership very clearly to parents, with two teachers saying that set membership was stated on school reports to parents. Parent perceptions of grouping were a concern in some schools with one teacher observing that they felt a recent decision to introduce a top set in English had been due to perceived pressure from parents. Teachers were particularly cautious about telling parents that their child was in a lower group and were concerned about parent responses to their children being moved down a group.

4.28 The following section reports on teachers' reflections on why they adopted particular practices.

Primary schools: Teachers' reflections on their in class grouping practices

4.29 In primary schools, where grouping was used, teachers gave a variety of reasons for their practices. These included facilitating targeted teaching, making it easier to plan and meeting the needs of different learners particularly where there was a wide range of prior attainment in their classes. These are reflected in the following comments:

Each child is different and they develop at different rates too. So, by doing grouping, you can target (Participant 14).

So, I think it's easier for teachers to plan for, personally I think historically if we know, for example, within my maths group if I know that I've got group one, two, three and four it's kind of easier for me to plan an activity for those groups down to my lower groups (Participant 3).

In Year 6, for example, there might be... and this has been my experience, where there might be a pupil... they're all the same age, but there might be a pupil within that setting that is working at a nursery level, for example, in their mathematical development, and then there might be pupils within that same class, same age, who are working at maybe two or three years above their chronological age (Participant 4).

4.30 Grouping was also seen as creating smaller groups where pupils could be given more individual attention:

So I'll have 10 in with me, or 9 in with me at the same time, would we be the same... of the same ability level. [...] if I only have 10 at a time, I can give those pupils more dedicated time to improve what [we're] targeting during the activity (Participant 15).

And one teacher mentioned that grouping allowed teachers to push higher attainers further: 'The idea is that we group them to the best that they're capable of doing' (Participant 14).

4.31 Teachers described wanting to set up inclusive classroom environments where children would have 'good role models to look up to' (Participant 10) or where the environment would be stimulating for all pupils to learn:

You have to give them exciting, fun challenges, activities that will inspire them but equally you as the teacher are always keeping an eye that you've got that scaffolding in place to support that child who isn't perhaps achieving as much as the others but grouping them into a group where they're all not able to perhaps stimulate each other as much as if it was a mixed group (Participant 11).

Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of mixed attainment grouping in primary schools

4.32 Teachers principally identified the benefits of mixed attainment grouping in terms of social effects and academic outcomes. One teacher felt that working with friends could be motivating for pupils (Participant 10). She particularly highlighted the positive social impact of collaborative learning:

We're finding now that our children are getting to know each more now; they're knowing each other's strengths; they're influencing each other's decisions and certainly that peer mentoring approach that we're taking has had a real impact in that (Participant 10).

The same teacher identified increased attainment and confidence of pupils:

In these mixed ability groups not only are we now challenging all of our pupils, we're also giving them opportunities to master skills and then go on to teach someone else those skills as well, which is cementing their knowledge and their skills in many aspects across the curriculum (Participant 10).

Increased confidence was a theme in the responses of teachers reporting mixed attainment grouping. Another teacher described the benefits of mixed attainment and cross-age grouping in her school:

It's teaching collaboration, it's the cooperation. It's peer assessment, peer learning. [...] So where we have that cross-age, again it is solely for the purpose to improve the self-confidence and to improve the learning outcomes for that

child, so that every child can see themselves as a winner, they can all succeed (Participant 12).

Secondary schools and their grouping practices

4.33 In the survey, secondary school teachers reported on any changes to grouping since COVID. Some schools had changed towards more mixed attainment grouping around the time of the pandemic and school closures:

Went to mixed ability [in English]

Changed from mixed ability to sets/ streamed due to covid and not returned to mixed ability [English, Welsh and mathematics]

Moved away from strict setting [English]

Moved from sets to broad bands. Now exploring mixed [mathematics]

Mixed in y7+8 [mathematics].

Secondary schools and teachers' grouping practices

4.34 In the interviews a variety of contextual factors were reported. These included differences between subjects and different grouping practices, learners' self-perceptions and the resources available in different schools.

4.35 In terms of the implications of different subjects on grouping practices, teachers debated whether mixed attainment grouping was more appropriate in English than mathematics because of the nature of the subjects. Another described how mixed attainment grouping in mathematics was challenging for staff at the school as 'we didn't have all staff being confident enough to differentiate effectively' (Participant 2). The teacher stated that setting enabled them:

...to ensure that we are giving every learner the opportunity to make the maximum progress but also flourish in a set they feel comfortable in. In addition, what it has allowed is as a learning manager or assistant learning manager, staffing wise I can really play to the strengths of the teaching experience we have within our [department] (Participant 2).

4.36 However, another teacher (Participant 16) felt mixed attainment grouping was feasible within her smaller secondary school and in English as a subject because this form of grouping enabled flexibility and a pupil-centred approach.

4.37 The importance of learners' self-perceptions also shaped a teacher's support for mixed attainment grouping. One teacher said it avoided forming a 'sink group in which pupils see themselves as being in a lower set and the expectation drops to that level.' (Participant 1). Expectations were central to this teacher's view, both in terms of the pupils' expectations of themselves and their peers, and their expectations of pupils:

I think it's very much about pupils not seeing themselves as having been labelled as being of lower ability, that the expectation will be that we teach to the top and differentiate down, so the expectation in a mixed ability setting I think on the whole tends to be higher for the lower ability pupil (Participant 1).

The teacher also echoed the view held by primary teachers, that 'everybody has exposure to what the brightest in the room have to say.' Similarly in secondary schools, teachers identified advantages of motivating pupils and building confidence, as well as raising attainment for those on the C/D borderline, for example:

We find for instance boys around the CD borderline can potentially drop to Ds rather than Cs, I think for them to be taught in a mixed ability environment raises the level of expectation generally across the board. So, I think they fare better from a mixed ability environment where they're more exposed to other pupils of a higher ability and the teacher is having to raise the bar a little bit there (Participant 1).

4.38 Finally, in relation to resources the same teacher noted that class sizes and budgetary constraints were an influence on grouping and ensuring that resources were targeted effectively, matching 'the best teachers that we have for that ability pupil.' However, this teacher also noted challenges of teacher workload ('the more pressure of work if there was a wider range of ability in the classroom') and teacher confidence to challenge pupils more in sets.

4.39 These findings have implications for different forms of professional learning.

Different forms of professional learning to support the confidence and skills of teachers in implementation of mixed attainment grouping

Teachers identified the value of peer learning and the implications of different forms of CPD and guidance for their practice.

4.40 For example, teachers in primary schools reported that they felt it would be helpful to know more about grouping practices in other schools:

It wasn't until we went to the other schools, spoke to other practitioners who were teaching the same year groups as us; who were teaching in an area of high deprivation like us and then they were taking a very different approach and had seen different outcomes. So, for us, that was the most powerful thing (Participant 10).

4.41 Similarly, teachers in secondary schools also felt an increased awareness of practices in different schools had value, whilst also believing schools to be quite different from one another. Whilst 'what works' in one school may not work everywhere, networking, and sharing methods and good practice were felt to be helpful approaches- as part of a process of professional learning.

4.42 Primary teachers reflected on why other forms of continuing professional development were important and the roles of research – to inform their different practices. For example, one teacher reported that training on metacognition (awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes) had helped them with thinking about how to support learners in their groups. They suggested that grouping should be addressed in initial teacher education:

I do think that maybe universities and teacher training colleges need to really talk about groupings and the impact of groupings based on research, what impact it does have on particular learners because, for example, now within this school I'm not sure how many teachers really would have done their research into the pluses and the negatives with regards to mixed ability versus abilities (Participant 4).

They also emphasised the importance of research in informing practice:

I think it's really, really important that we keep revisiting our practices and asking ourselves questions about why we do the things that we do, and who's it for, who's it for is it for the teacher or is it for the children or the child? And do we ever ask the children about how they feel about being in these groups? No, I don't think we do, we don't ask them how it feels to be a learner in a lowest ability set every single day of their teaching and school days. I think there's a lot more that needs to be shared really from examples of research like this to inform us as professionals really about the choices that we are making for the learners (Participant 4).

4.43 The teacher also reflected on the need for training around staffing of attainment groups:

Another conversation we've had recently is looking at the most vulnerable learners that we have, so those children with the greatest gaps in their knowledge, really those children need to be supported by the most highly qualified teachers, and often, and I have seen it in other primary schools, and I've seen it here, not always the case, but they tend to be working with the least qualified people. So, it might be the LSAs who are supporting the bottom group, for example, in maths and the bottom group in maths is the group that needs the most teaching and the most qualified person to do that job (Participant 4).

4.44 Secondary teachers argued they would benefit from a combination of clear guidance from Welsh Government and Estyn, and meta summaries of research to help them understand this area. However, they also felt there were conflicting messages coming from the academic community-

There's so much research out there and it's so difficult to know which way to go. There's all sorts of research that will tell us that actually mixed ability grouping is the way to go but our maths teachers would probably disagree with that in their context. So, I think that the help comes from somebody who has done all of that research for us on a kind of meta data level of looking at all the different examples from around the world (Participant 1).

4.45 Another participant recognised the potential value, but also complexity, of comparative research

...what would be useful is looking at actual physical, I guess, in-school tried and tested review of models that they've tried and the impact that they've been able to measure, which is a very hard thing to do. If they had that from a number of schools across Wales and England and the UK it might help other schools consider different models (Participant 2).

Participant 1 also felt that enquiry-based approaches within schools could be helpful. Differentiation and meeting the needs of all learners within a group were identified as particular issues for the enquires.

Teachers' perceptions of the impact of attainment and mixed attainment grouping on learners from lower-income households (based on those eligible for free school meals).

4.46 Problematic assumptions were reported by some primary school teachers, indicating that there were cases where disadvantage was viewed as synonymous with or closely correlated to low attainment. However, other teachers reported that they avoided labelling.

One teacher described how previously, when they used sets, the majority of children receiving free school meals were in lower sets and so had limited exposure to higher-attaining pupils. They described how this had now changed:

What they're having now are these really good role models of reading, of maths or whatever it might be. Oracy, for example, that's been a really big... we've seen a really big impact on the level of our children's oracy since we've moved to mixed ability groupings, especially our children who are eligible for free school meals because they're being exposed to a lot more advanced language and they're actually raising their own attainment because of that (Participant 10).

4.47 However, other teachers were keen to stress that they avoided labelling pupils as disadvantaged:

I'm not seeing them as low-income, I just see them as maybe they're just the pupils in our school (Participant 4).

Another primary teacher was clear why they saw mixed attainment as a preferable approach for disadvantaged learners:

I think by seeing other children that may come from more advantaged backgrounds they have the prospects and they have a goal to work towards which is nice; they, sort of, feel a bit more inspired and they want to be like that but they still have that – if they need it, obviously – the impact of having the teacher to have a little bit more time with them to work on them and to really figure out what they need to support them. So I'd say mixed ability groupings would support them a lot more than ability grouping would (Participant 7).

4.48 By contrast, very few of the secondary school teachers explicitly articulated anything about the impact of grouping practices on disadvantaged learners. It was commonly felt that it was important for teachers to know and understand their pupils' strengths and weaknesses and to target learning activities accordingly, but meeting practical and emotional needs were given higher priority in teachers' responses.

4.49 The one exception was a participant who emphasised that 'positive setting', where groups were engineered to ensure that pupils weren't disadvantaged through grouping, had achieved a positive result for pupils:

There was only a differential of four percent between literature last year between boys and girls which is unheard of, and it was only twelve percent with language. But we've closed the gap in both boys and free school meals students with this positive setting (Participant 8).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions relate to each of the research questions and combine findings and, where appropriate, recommendations for future practice derived from the scoping study.

5.1 Generally, it appears that mixed attainment groups are most common within class groups in primary schools in Wales in the research sample, whilst, in secondary schools, learners are completely mixed in earlier years before transitioning to sets for older years. The size of the school (mixed year group classes), school developments with their approach to Curriculum for Wales (individualised progression), and perceived benefits in social development when mixing children were all identified as reasons for adopting these

approaches. It is noteworthy that the intention to motivate learners was a reason given for teaching mixed groups of learners in both primary and secondary schools.

5.2 Some of the grouping practices explored involve setting children based on 'ability' levels, particularly as learners move into years 10-11. Contributing factors to this include different exam papers being set for different groups of learners, for example, in maths at GCSE. Similarly, learners' Welsh language standards, including a 'first language group' were discussed.

5.3 The use of language to describe the different grouping practices varied. Whilst some teachers acknowledged the terms that they used would indicate the ability of children, for example, 'confident', with other members of staff; this language was not shared with learners or parents and carers. Examples of learners enquiring which groups they were in, relative to their ability, were also shared by teachers who participated in the study. It is notable that some teachers spoke of the shift from using language that would typically be associated with attainment to that of progress; 'children are grouped entirely on their progress within that specific topic or over the year'.

Why were these practices adopted?

5.4 The reasons for the implementation of grouping practices can be broadly separated into primary and secondary phases. For example, primary school teachers spoke of the perceived need to target learners and therefore, grouping allowed for this targeted approach to occur more easily. Similarly, it was stated that grouping allowed for smaller groups of learners, and that they could therefore be supported by adults appropriately.

5.5 By contrast, the grouping in secondary schools were primarily due to the perceived difference in nature of the subjects. For example, teachers spoke of the desire to have mixed attainment groups in English for learners to be motivated and informed by comments of their peers. Similarly, the differing formats of examination papers in different subjects was also given as a contributing factor:

Recommendation 1:

Welsh Government should review the feasibility of extending existing opportunities for collaborative professional development and/or designing new opportunities for teachers, middle and senior leaders to meet and reflect on forms of mixed attainment practice.

Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of attainment and mixed attainment grouping for learners (e.g., attainment gap, behaviour, attendance).

5.6 Teachers from both primary and secondary settings spoke of their belief that mixed attainment grouping had a positive impact on the social development of learners. Increased collaboration and the way in which learners influence one another's work were cited as positive outcomes, in particular.

5.7 Secondary teachers felt that the increased motivation of learners as a consequence of mixed attainment grouping was particularly impactful on boys on the C-D GCSE grades boundary. The 'higher' expectations that were evident in such mixed groups were believed to have impacted on the learners positively in this regard.

5.8 However, in interviews, primary and secondary teachers were not able to draw direct links between the impact of grouping practices on behaviour and attendance.

Recommendation 2:

Welsh Government should investigate the feasibility of designing and conducting further research, with teachers, on the impact and relationships between grouping practices, behaviour and attendance.

Professional learning required for practitioners to be more confident and skilled in implementing mixed attainment grouping.

5.9 There were instances, reported in the interviews, where teachers felt a lack of confidence when teaching a range of learners. In addition, teachers identified a need for further knowledge of, and reflection on, metacognition and their classroom practices.

5.10 In supporting schools to think about developing practice in relation to the grouping of learners, we would like to recommend clear guidance to schools provided through the wider dissemination of relevant research. We think that raising awareness of research will help schools consider issues related to the use of mixed attainment, and also non-mixed attainment groups, with potential for improving overall efficacy and equity of the system. We are aware of several initiatives currently taking place in schools, for example, the Embedding Research and Enquiry in Schools (EREiS) project, that are focused on school engagement with research. We suggest that existing projects such as this are used for the dissemination of key research findings in this area.

5.11 The role of ITE Providers and research was also discussed, with one of those interviewed expressing a desire for greater input on the impact of grouping learners in teacher education programmes. This was due to the perception that not all teachers have the time to engage with research in this field once qualified.

Recommendation 3:

Welsh Government should review the form and content of additional training and professional development for teachers and middle and senior school leaders on mixed attainment teaching practices, integrated into Curriculum for Wales.

5.12 There were examples uncovered in interviews with teachers in Welsh medium primary schools of attainment grouping practices successfully integrated with the Curriculum for Wales ambition to have an individualised approach to learning and learner progress. In this regard, we recommend further synergies between these research findings and Camau i'r Dyfodol (<https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/camau-ir-dyfodol/>) work on understanding progression and assessment in Curriculum for Wales.

5.13 A guide to equitable practices for teachers, similar to Dos and Don'ts of Attainment Grouping (Francis et al., 2018) adapted and developed for the Welsh context would provide an easily accessible source of information to schools and impact positively on practice in this area.

Teachers' perceptions of the impact of attainment and mixed attainment grouping on learners from lower-income households (those eligible for free school meals)

5.14 There appears to be a good understanding by some participants about the impact of attainment grouping on learner identities and teacher expectations, particularly for those in lower groups. There is also some evidence of caution around labelling or ‘othering’ learners in groups and the potential for stigmas to be attached to groups.

5.15 However, there does not appear to be a consensus, within the scope of the study, of what the impact on learners from lower-income attainment is. Indeed, there was no standardised approach to grouping these learners in the schools in the study. There was reluctance to give what they considered to be ‘special treatment’ to such learners as they felt this stigmatising. Primary school teachers spoke more favourably about personalising their approach to learners from lower-income households, rather than banding or grouping them together.

5.16 Specific evidence was reported, by one primary school teacher, about the impact of mixed attainment groups on oracy amongst those from lower-income households.

Recommendation 4:

- To review how to design future research, with teachers, on the impact of grouping practices on learners and how to define ‘disadvantage’.
- To design a study that investigates how attainment grouping may impact learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM).

Aspects of attainment grouping which need to be explored further in Wales

Teachers did not raise specific areas for further research. However, the project team has identified a number of issues that it recommends are worthy of further investigation.

Recommendation 5:

For Estyn and Welsh Government to provide guidance and signal specific, research-informed, examples of good practice that schools can look to embed in their contexts. For example, to invite schools to provide case studies to share via Estyn’s website when good practice is identified during inspections.

Recommendation 6:

To increase engagement with initial teacher education (ITE) providers by continuing to carry out and share research on attainment grouping and to include this in ITE programmes.

Recommendation 7:

We recognise the need to develop understanding of the complexities and risks involved in attainment grouping for student teachers and those at the outset of their careers. For example, misallocating learners to groups based on incorrect interpretations of attainment levels and predicting their consequent progress as well as the challenges of not experiencing mixed-attainment grouping during ITE practicum.

Recommendation 8:

To review the potential for further research on how attainment groupings may interact with language medium, both within the school and at home, and the social and educational factors that may influence these processes.

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Annex A. Primary School Survey Questionnaire: Pupil Grouping in Primary Schools

Information about the survey

What is the purpose of the study?

UWTSD is leading a Welsh-Government funded study about Pupil Grouping in Secondary Schools, working with University College London (UCL) and the University of South Wales (USW). We hope to draw up a picture of grouping practices in Welsh secondary schools.

The response will help to inform the discussion of education policies and practices in Wales.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part.

You should read this information page and if you have any questions you should contact the named lead, whose contact details are given below.

You should not complete the questionnaire until you have had all your questions answered satisfactorily.

What will happen if I answer the questionnaire?

The questionnaire asks a few questions about how children are grouped for teaching and learning in your school. The questionnaire should take you only 5 minutes to complete.

What will happen with the data I provide?

All data is strictly confidential and will be anonymised so that it will not be possible to identify you or your school in any analyses or reporting. The information you provide will be handled in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act 1998, which means we will store it securely and we will not give your personal details to anyone else.

Our data protection reference is: Z6441030. You do not have to respond to the questionnaire if you do not want to.

What will happen to the results of the study?

We will report our survey findings to Welsh Government to inform policy. We plan to make our research findings publicly available through events such as seminars, conferences and meetings, and through publications such as reports, articles and books.

Who should I contact for further information?

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact Anna Brychan at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) by email at a.brychan@uwtsd.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information page and for considering taking part in this research. Please click to continue or withdraw:

I confirm that I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop at any time and without giving any reason.

I confirm that I understand that all information will be confidential and my name or other personal details will not be included in reports or publications.

I agree to my data being collected, processed and stored according to the Data Protection Act of 1998.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Primary School Survey

School information

Please provide details of your school. This allows us to combine responses if more than one person from your school completes the survey.

School name:

School postcode:

Local authority:

Medium: English, Bilingual, Dual, Primary/Secondary/Middle/through schools, % Efsm

Numbers: on roll /cohort size/year group

Curriculum for Wales: (Secondary schools in Wales had the flexibility to begin the mandatory introduction of CfW for Year 7 learners in 2002 **or** 2023.),

Did/will your school do this in 2022 or 2003

Respondent information

Please tell us about you. This will help us understand the responses we receive.

What is your role?

Subject leader of English (including Key Stage 3 lead)

Subject leader of Welsh (including Key Stage 3 lead)

Teacher of Welsh

Teacher of English

Mathematics subject leader (including Key Stage 3 lead)

Mathematics teacher

Teacher of another subject

Senior Leadership Team member

Administrative/office staff

Other

Grouping practices in English (as a subject):

Please read the following descriptions of different grouping practices:

Completely mixed attainment classes. All English teaching groups include learners from the full attainment range for the year group.

Mixed attainment classes with a top set. The highest attaining students are taught in a separate group for English. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Mixed attainment classes with a bottom set or nurture group. The lowest attaining students are taught in a separate group for English. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Mixed attainment classes with a top and bottom set. The highest and lowest attaining students are taught in separate groups for English. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Sets. Students are grouped by attainment in English.

Streams. Students are grouped for most or all subjects, including English, by a general measure of ability.

Please select the best description of CURRENT grouping practices in English in each year group in your school.

Grouping	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
----------	--------	--------	--------	---------	---------

Completely mixed					
Mixed + top set					
Mixed + Bottom set					
Mixed + top + bottom sets					
Sets					
Streams					
Other					
Don't know					
Not applicable					

If you would like to provide additional information about **current** grouping practices in English, you can do so here:

This question asks about FUTURE plans for grouping in English.

Do you know of any plans to change your current grouping arrangements in English in the future?

No

Yes

If you selected Yes, please specify:

This question asks about PAST grouping practices in English. Have you changed your practices in grouping since 2020?

No

Yes

If yes, can you explain how and why? For example, were these changes linked to Curriculum for Wales.

If you would like to provide additional information about **past** grouping practices in English, you can do so here:

Grouping practices in Welsh (as a subject):

Please read the following descriptions of different grouping practices:

Completely mixed attainment classes. All Welsh teaching groups include children from the full attainment range for the year group.

Mixed attainment classes with a top set. The highest attaining students are taught in a separate group for Welsh. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Mixed attainment classes with a bottom set or nurture group. The lowest attaining students are taught in a separate group for Welsh. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Mixed attainment classes with a top and bottom set. The highest and lowest attaining students are taught in separate groups for Welsh. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Sets. Students are grouped by attainment in Welsh.

Streams. Students are grouped for most or all subjects, including Welsh by a general measure of ability.

Please select the best description of CURRENT grouping practices in Welsh in each year group in your school.

Grouping	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Completely mixed					
Mixed + top set					
Mixed + Bottom set					
Mixed + top + bottom sets					
Sets					
Streams					
Other					
Don't know					
Not applicable					

If you would like to provide additional information about **current** grouping practices in Welsh, you can do so here:

This question asks about **FUTURE** plans for grouping in Welsh.

Do you know of any plans to change your current grouping arrangements in Welsh in the future?

No

Yes

If you selected Yes, please specify:

This question asks about PAST grouping practices in Welsh. Have you changed your practices in grouping since 2020?

No

Yes

If yes, can you explain how and why? For example, were these changes linked to Curriculum for Wales?

If you would like to provide additional information about **past** grouping practices in Welsh you can do so here:

Grouping practices in mathematics:

Please read the following descriptions of different grouping practices:

Completely mixed attainment classes. All mathematics teaching groups include children from the full attainment range for the year group.

Mixed attainment classes with a top set. The highest attaining students are taught in a separate group for mathematics. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Mixed attainment classes with a bottom set or nurture group. The lowest attaining students are taught in a separate group for mathematics. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Mixed attainment classes with a top and bottom set. The highest and lowest attaining students are taught in separate groups for mathematics. All other groups include children from the remaining full attainment range.

Sets. Students are grouped by attainment in mathematics.

Streams. Students are grouped for most or all subjects, including mathematics, by a general measure of ability.

Please select the best description of CURRENT grouping practices in mathematics in each year group in your school.

Grouping	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Completely mixed					
Mixed + top set					
Mixed + Bottom set					
Mixed + top + bottom sets					
Sets					
Streams					
Other					
Don't know					
Not applicable					

If you would like to provide additional information about current grouping practices in mathematics, you can do so here:

This question asks about FUTURE plans for grouping in mathematics.

Do you know of any plans to change your current grouping arrangements in mathematics in the future?

No

Yes

If you selected Yes, please specify:

This question asks about PAST grouping practices in Welsh. Have you changed your practices in grouping since 2020?

No

Yes

If yes, can you explain how and why? For example, were these changes linked to Curriculum for Wales?

If you would like to provide additional information about past grouping practices in mathematics, you can do so here:

Grouping practices in subjects other than English, Welsh and mathematics:

How are students grouped for subjects other than English, Welsh and mathematics in your school?

Grouping	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
All subjects are grouped by attainment (sets/streams)					
Some subjects are grouped by attainment and others are mixed					
All subjects are taught in mixed attainment groups					
Don't know					
Not applicable					

If you would like to provide further information about grouping practices at your school, please do so here:

Annex B: Secondary School Survey Questionnaire: Pupil Grouping in Secondary Schools

Information about the survey

What is the purpose of the study?

UWTSD is leading a Welsh-Government funded study about Pupil Grouping in Primary Schools, working with University College London (UCL) and the University of South Wales (USW). We hope to draw up a picture of grouping practices in Welsh primary schools.

The response will help to inform the discussion of education policies and practices in Wales.

Do I have to take part?

No, you do not have to take part.

You should read this information page and if you have any questions you should contact the named lead, whose contact details are given below. You should not complete the questionnaire until you have had all your questions answered satisfactorily.

What will happen if I answer the questionnaire?

The questionnaire asks a few questions about how children are grouped for teaching and learning in your school. The questionnaire should take you only 5 minutes to complete.

What will happen with the data I provide?

All data is strictly confidential and will be anonymised so that it will not be possible to identify you or your school in any analyses or reporting. The information you provide will be handled in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act 1998, which means we will store it securely and we will not give your personal details to anyone else.

Our data protection reference is: Z6441030 -. You do not have to respond to the questionnaire if you do not want to.

What will happen to the results of the study?

We will report our survey findings to Welsh Government to inform policy. We plan to make our research findings publicly available through events such as seminars, conferences and meetings, and through publications such as reports, articles and books.

Who should I contact for further information?

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact Anna Brychan at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David by email at a.brychan@uwtsd.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information page and for considering taking part in this research. Please click to continue or withdraw:

I confirm that I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop at any time and without giving any reason.

I confirm that I understand that all information will be confidential and my name or other personal details will not be included in reports or publications.

I agree to my data being collected, processed and stored according to the Data Protection Act of 1998.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Primary school survey

School information

Please provide details of your school. This allows us to combine responses if more than one person from your school completes the survey.

Please provide details of your school. This allows us to combine responses if more than one person from your school completes the survey.

School name:

School postcode:

Local authority:

Medium: Welsh, English, Dual,

School: Primary/3-16/19, % E fsm

Numbers: on roll /cohort size/year group

Grouping practices in your school in reading, writing and maths:

Terminology used in this survey:

Fully mixed attainment: mixed attainment groups within a mixed attainment class.

Within-class attainment **groups:** ability groups (these could be arranged in table groups) within a mixed attainment class.

Sets: attainment 'sets' between classes in the same year group (e.g. children in all year 4 classes are placed into high, middle and low 'sets' in maths based on their attainment in maths).

Streams: children are assigned to a class according to their overall attainment where they remain consistently for all subjects.

Other (including mixed year groups): Another type of grouping e.g where children from different year groups are taught together.

If you want to tell us anything else about grouping practices, please comment here. E.g. have you changed any grouping practices since 2020 or are you planning any changes?

GROUPING PRACTICES IN READING IN YOUR SCHOOL

Thinking about the teaching of READING, please tick the statements which best describe grouping practices in your school.

	Fully mixed ability	Within-class ability groups	Sets	Streams	Other (including mixed year groups)	N/A
Reception						
Year 1						
Year 2						
Year 3						
Year 4						
Year 5						
Year 6						

GROUPING PRACTICES IN WRITING IN YOUR SCHOOL.

Thinking about the teaching of WRITING, please tick the statements which best describe grouping practices in your school.

	Fully mixed ability	Within-class ability groups	Ability sets	Streams	N/A
Reception					
Year 1					

Year 2					
Year 3					
Year 4					
Year 5					
Year 6					

GROUPING PRACTICES IN MATHS IN YOUR SCHOOL;

Thinking about the teaching of MATHS, please tick the statements which best describes grouping practices in your school.

	Fully mixed ability	Within-class ability groups	Ability sets	Streams	N/A
Reception					
Year 1					
Year 2					
Year 3					
Year 4					
Year 5					
Year 6					

Please add any further information about grouping in English, Welsh and maths in your school:

Annex C: Semi-structured, in-depth interview questions

Explanatory reminder for interviewees:

The Welsh Government has commissioned the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, in collaboration with the University of South Wales and University College London, to undertake research to explore practices for grouping learners, including mixed attainment teaching, that are used in schools in Wales.

This is a scoping study that explores grouping practices in schools in Wales (how schools use them, the language they use and attitudes towards them).

For the purposes of this study, we are looking at the extent to which, how, and for what purpose, schools and practitioners 'group' pupils for teaching/learning purposes, to gain a better understanding of these practices and how they could inform education policy in Wales.

Q1. How is the grouping of students organised in your school?

Q2. How do you describe the teaching groups? What terms are used in your school to describe them?

Q3. Are the same terms used to describe the groups to practitioners, parents and pupils?

Q4. What do you see as the purpose of grouping learners in this way?

Q5. Do you use different forms of grouping to support different groups of pupils? (Prompts: What factors/characteristics of the learners influence your grouping? Are decisions based on prior attainment? Other considerations?)

Q6. Are these decisions regularly reviewed?

Q7. Is there movement between the groups?

Q8. How do learners respond to being in the group? (Prompts: can you comment on the impact on learners' motivation and/or attitude to learning in response to grouping?; how does the grouping impact learners' motivation and/or attitude to learning and/or attainment?)

Q9. What approaches to grouping do you think are most helpful to support the learning of learners from low-income households? Why?

Q10. What do you see as the educational benefits of grouping learners in this way?

Q11. Do you measure the impact of grouping practices, and if so, how?

Q12. Has Curriculum for Wales changed how you approach the grouping of learners?

Q13. for secondary schools only: please tell us when your school introduced Curriculum for Wales: 2022 or will you do so in 2023.

Q14. (and for school leader/SLT interviewees only: Do you currently have plans to re-examine your school's grouping practices in the context of Curriculum for Wales?)

Q15. In mixed-ability groups, how do teachers support and challenge all learners?

Q16. Can you describe the role of LSAs working with grouped learners?

Q17. Which staff work with which students?

Q18. What information is shared with parents around grouping practices? (Further prompts: is information shared with parents explaining grouping practices? Are their views sought?)

Q19. What kind of support, such as professional learning opportunities/access to research or guidance, would you find helpful to inform how you group students in your class/school?

Annex D: Invitation to participate in scoping study

Email invitation to school sample, selected and invited to participate in the scoping study on mixed attainment teaching practice in schools in Wales: in-depth interviews.

Invitation to participate in research.

Dear [participant]

We are delighted to announce that the Welsh Government has commissioned University of Wales Trinity Saint David, in collaboration with University of South Wales and University College London, to undertake research to explore practices for grouping learners, including mixed attainment teaching, that are used in schools in Wales. This is an exciting project, and we are very keen to work with you to this end. We have attached additional information for you, below:

Research aims:

Researchers from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David would like to invite two colleagues from your school, a senior leader and a class teacher, to participate in this scoping study that explores grouping practices in schools in Wales (how schools use them, the language they use and attitudes towards them).

This will be by means of an interview to seek your views on grouping practices in Welsh schools: specifically to what extent, how, and to what purpose schools and practitioners 'group' pupils for teaching/learning purposes, according to the pupils' academic attainment to gain a better understanding of these practices and how they could possibly inform educational policy in Wales.

Why have I been chosen?

We consider your school best placed to answer the research questions because you have a strategic overview of programmes, projects, plans and evaluations related to or affecting groupings.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part is voluntary. If your school does not want to take part in the research, you need not do anything. You have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and any information collected will not be used and instead destroyed. Please keep this information for reference.

If you consent to take part in the research, please email Natalie Way n.way@uwtsd.ac.uk with the names of the interviewees, contact number and a date and time that would be convenient for you. Interviews can take place in person or virtually over Teams or Zoom with a member of the research team. You may also choose the medium of your interview (Welsh or English) which should not last more than 1 hour for each individual attending.

UWSTD will be able to provide you with a small payment in recognition of your time, expertise and contribution in the form of £200.

What will I be asked to do?

Taking part in the research means that you will give an anonymous response to questions in an interview on issues relating to grouping practices within your school setting and local authority.

We do not perceive any disadvantages or risks from taking part in this research and while we cannot promise the study will help you, the information we get might help us know more about grouping practices and attainment in education in Wales.

Will my answers be confidential?

Anonymity, confidentiality and safeguarding will be assured at all times. If you share information suggestive of malpractice or that anyone is at serious risk of harm, the researcher will be required to share the information with relevant statutory bodies.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any concerns about this research, you may contact Anna Brychan in the first instance, E-mail address: a.brychan@uwtsd.ac.uk

What will happen to the information provided?

The information you provide will be kept on a secure password protected at the University of Wales Trinity St. David computers, will be analysed by the research team and a report will be presented. The information collected during the project will be included in a report published on the Welsh Government website and possibly in other publications by the University of Wales Trinity St. David, in collaboration with the University of South Wales and University College London.

The findings will be published in academic journals and presented at conferences and in teaching sessions in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR). Neither your name nor that of your institution will be identifiable in any report or publication. Further details can be found in the Privacy Notice ([LINK](#))

Who has approved the study?

Approval for this research has been given by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David Research Ethics Committee.

We are very much looking forward to meeting with you and would like to thank you in advance for your participation.

UWTSD research team.

Gwilym Siôn ap Gruffudd

Anna Brychan

Laurence Thomas

Siobhàn Eleri

Natalie Way

