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Rethinking 'Fixed-Ability Thinking' and Grouping Practices: questions, disruptions and barriers to change in primary and early years education

ALICE BRADBURY

ABSTRACT This article uses data from a research project exploring grouping practices based on 'ability' in classrooms for children aged 3-7 years in England to consider the relationship between teachers' views of ability and their ways of organising children. The widespread use of grouping with young children and the concomitant 'fixed-ability thinking' by teachers are discussed, alongside an exploration of how and why teachers object to grouping on this basis. Examples of teachers who were able to disrupt grouping practices based on 'ability' are described, allowing for a further discussion of the barriers to change for the majority of teachers. The article concludes that the relationship between teachers' beliefs about ability and their grouping practice is complex, as there can be both grouping without fixed-ability thinking and vice versa.

Introduction

In a 2013 article in this journal, Rachel Marks powerfully argued that the absence of ability grouping did not preclude the presence of 'fixed-ability' thinking, using research data from primary classrooms to add important nuance to the discussion of how 'ability' is manifested in classroom contexts (Marks, 2013). In this article, I offer a further comment on the relationship between grouping and perspectives on 'ability' by exploring the extent of grouping, as well as teachers' doubts, and providing some examples of teachers who challenge established norms. I argue that even when there is grouping, there may not be 'fixed-ability' thinking, or not to the extent that is often presumed.[1] Thus, while Marks demonstrated that there can be fixed-ability

thinking without grouping, this article considers whether there can be grouping without fixed-ability thinking.

Using research data from a project exploring the use of grouping in early years (EY) and Key Stage 1 (KS1) conducted in England in 2017, I offer here some indication of the current grouping practices with this age group, and then examine their relation to teachers' beliefs about 'ability'. Findings suggest that while many participants accepted this term as indicating an innate and determined level of intelligence, there were some who found space to question this and, in some rare cases, to disrupt its use and dismantle the apparatus of grouping. However, for many teachers who questioned grouping by ability, there was very little time or space for alternative ways of organising their classroom, as they were limited by pressure to prepare for assessments, and school policy. Thus there were tensions between their daily practices and their views on what was best for the children in their class, indicative of a wider culture of 'doing without believing' in teaching (Braun & Maguire, 2018).

The article begins with a brief discussion of the concept of ability and the vast research literature on grouping, before an explanation of the research study and the key points that are relevant here to the discussion of fixed-ability thinking. Overall, the aim here is to focus on the positive aspects of how professionals question practices based on deterministic assumptions, however challenging that might be, and to look at where there are barriers to this questioning that might be overcome.

What is Fixed-Ability Thinking?

Fixed-ability thinking is a phrase used to describe the notion that children have a set amount of 'ability' or intelligence, which we can recognise and use to determine how they should be taught. It has also been termed the 'new IQism', whereby discredited notions of biological differences in intelligence (most dangerously associated with 'racial science' and eugenics) are re-represented through the more neutral term 'ability'; thus, 'talk of "*ability*" replaces (and encodes) previous talk of *intelligence*' (Gillborn & Youdell, 2001, p. 65, emphasis in original). As Drummond and Yarker argue, 'Fixed "ability" thinking purports to render the pupil unproblematically known, at least so far as the school is concerned' (2013, p. 5). This 'knowing' and measurability is an attractive perspective, particularly in a 'datafied' educational context dominated by ascribing numerical values to children (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017a). Thus, 'forms of determinism – or "bell curve thinking" – have been normalised in education, most notably in the fallacious view that "intelligence" is distributed in the population according to such a curve' (Drummond & Yarker, 2013, p. 6). This view of a normal distribution of intelligence or ability provides the basis for practices such as organising children into streams, sets and, most commonly in primary education, ability groups based on tables.

The idea of a fixed ability, however, has a far longer history. An academic from my own institution, Francis Galton, is credited with popularising the

notion that intelligence can be measured and ranked, though of course the ideas had far older roots (White, 2006). This history limits how and when the idea of a fixed ability can be questioned; as Marks writes, describing White's argument, 'Galtonian accounts of general intelligence have so influenced common understanding that we no longer have the capacity to see them as peculiar' (Marks, 2013, p. 32). In the discussion that follows, the ability of some teachers to see fixed-ability thinking as 'peculiar' and doubtable is explored.

Grouping by 'Ability'

The research project in focus here was intended as an exploration of the current state of grouping practices with young children aged 3-7 (in Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms) (see Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017b). The term 'grouping practices' was used deliberately vaguely in order to gather the full range of practices of classroom organisation present in primary schools. The study was motivated by the need to consider how recent policy developments such as the Phonics Screening Check, changes to KS1 tests and the revised Early Years Foundation Stage Profile had played out in terms of classroom practice. It was also informed by the findings from the Millennium Cohort Study of children born in 2000/01, which have indicated that 37% of children are streamed for literacy or maths in Year 2 (age 6-7) (Hallam & Parsons, 2013).

The literature on grouping is vast, but the key points relevant here are that it has been shown to have little benefit in terms of improving academic attainment overall (Taylor et al, 2017), though there may be some benefit to higher attainers (Parsons & Hallam, 2014). Meanwhile, there is a range of evidence that grouping affects 'pupils' self-esteem, academic self-concept and their emotional responses to school' (Ireson & Hallam, 2001, p. 61). It is important to note that grouping practices are hugely varied and the terms used to describe particular systems of organising children vary from school to school. The most common form in secondary schools is 'setting', which is organising children into class-sized groups on a long-term basis based on 'ability', usually for one subject (Taylor et al, 2017). This is also used in primary schools (Hallam & Parsons, 2013), particularly in later years. Less common is 'streaming', which is placing children into particular classes for all subjects based on their ability, though we did find one example of this in a primary school during this study. Each of these forms of grouping may of course be used with varying degrees of fluidity, as children are moved up or down the 'sets'. The main concern here, however, is the use of in-class grouping, where a 'mixed-ability' class is divided physically into a number of small groups to sit at ability-based tables, often given names of animals or characters to obfuscate their hierarchical organisation. This form of grouping is 'often believed by teachers to be free of the iniquitous impacts of between-class ability grouping practices such as setting and streaming' (Marks, 2013, p. 35).

The Research Study

This research project used a mixed-methods approach to explore a range of teachers' and school leaders' views of grouping practices in KS1 and EY. Data collection involved four focus groups with teachers, a nationwide survey of teachers of these age phases (n = 1373), and individual interviews with teachers in KS1 and EY and in other relevant senior roles at four case-study schools: one in the north of England (Moore Primary), one in the Midlands (pseudonym: Whiteread Primary), and two in London (Hepworth and Kapoor Primaries). The schools varied in terms of size, local population, Ofsted rating and attainment levels. In total, 12 teachers and school leaders were interviewed using a semi-structured schedule focused on the details of practices and teachers' views. The participants are referred to only by year group or as 'senior leader' to increase anonymity. The research adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association and was approved by the UCL Institute of Education ethics research committee. All names used are pseudonyms and all attempts have been made to maximise anonymity of respondents. The project was funded by the National Education Union (NEU), the main teachers' trade union in the UK, but conducted independently. It was conducted by the author with my colleague Guy Roberts-Holmes.

Findings: how is fixed-ability thinking manifested in early years and primary education?

The main finding from this project was that grouping practices were widespread among teachers of children aged 3-7, but varied by subject. As shown in Table I, many respondents to the survey indicated that they used grouping for the 'core' subjects.

	Nursery %	Reception %	Year 1 %	Year 2 %
Phonics	58	81	78	72
Literacy	21	46	68	60
Maths	35	61	72	66
Reading	9	52	72	71

Table I. Yes responses to the question 'In your year group, do you regularly group children by ability for the following?' by year group.

Similarly, the majority of the focus-group (FG) participants and interviewees used ability grouping in some form, often in taken-for-granted ways. For instance, in this typical exchange during the interviews, a teacher explains the basis of her grouping practice:

> I: I can see four groups on your sheet for maths and English. What are the differences between the groups?
> T: The main difference is: we group them with similar ability levels. So, we've got the highest down to the lowest.
> I: Blue, green, yellow, red.
> T: Yes. So, I've got two sets that are the most able and then two groups that are less able.
> (Year 2 Teacher, Hepworth Primary)

For this teacher, and many other participants, the idea that children are more or less able was a neutral, normalised premise on which to base grouping decisions. It is important to emphasise how widespread this discourse was, and how unquestionable it appeared to many of the teachers we spoke to. This confirms the previous arguments that fixed-ability thinking is orthodoxy for many in schools, and that the ability to see it as 'peculiar' is absent (White, 2006; Marks, 2016). However, as indicated already, I wish to focus on those who had doubts and questions, and on how they were able to translate these into practical change.

Teachers' Doubts about Ability

Teacher respondents in this project voiced many concerns about grouping practices and their impact on children's well-being in a number of ways (see Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017b). They argued that children were aware of their ranking in groups and that this had an impact on their feelings about school and learning; as one teacher commented, 'We might call them foxes and rabbits but they know.' However, the participants who voiced concerns about the idea of 'ability' were fewer in number. For many, the problem of grouping was one of *making the differences between children visible to them*, rather than one of ordering children by ability per se. Thus, we cannot assume that those who had doubts about grouping also had doubts about the concept of ability; after all, it is quite possible to believe in innate fixed abilities but to fear that making these apparent to children is damaging.

The small number of respondents who did question fixed-ability thinking did so on the basis of fluidity and variability: they commented that children could change over time and that their talents could vary dependent on the task, and this was particularly the case for younger children. For example:

> It needs to be used on occasions but not constantly.… Children learn and mature at different times. It's wrong to label children into daily ability groups at this age.… We all learn in different ways, at different times and have different talents. (Written survey response)

In rare cases, some survey respondents went further in questioning fixed-ability thinking:

> [Grouping] is a form of educational apartheid that sustains negative attitudes amongst teachers about certain pupils and their families. Children do have different skill sets but grouping by ability takes those skill sets and establishes them as something much more definitive. (Written survey response)

> [Grouping] is an old fashioned and unimaginative way of working that harks back to times when people believed that intelligence was an innate fixed entity. (Written survey response)

Again, this questioning of the underlying premise of grouping was far less common than concern about the impact of grouping. These more critical stances were survey responses, so unfortunately it was not possible to establish how they were translated into practices in the classroom. There were, however, two examples of interviewees who had disrupted the norm, to whom I now turn.

Questioning the Orthodoxy

Two teachers involved in the study had very critical stances on grouping practices and the ideas that underpin them. One was a school leader who was long established in his career (pseudonym: Simon), and one was a second-year teacher in a different school (Leah). For very different reasons, they had both found the space and professional capital to question the standard grouping practices in their schools.

Simon, who took part in one of the focus groups, explained that his school had shifted away from grouping practices in both KS1 and KS2, in response to the both the data from SATs tests and interviews with the children. He explained:

> The only grouping we have in key stage one is for their daily phonics session, they're grouped but everything else is taught in whole class teaching. We've recently moved, as a school, away from teachers trying to do differentiated groups within the classroom and towards a whole class teaching approach.… So we looked at the data and what had happened since we'd had the maths groups in two years and the overall averages ... was that our averages for maths hadn't changed but the spread of results had become much wider. So we had a lot more children getting level fives and a lot more children not getting level four and much down the middle. But when we interviewed the kids, it was the most fascinating bit, I've got all the quotes recorded at home but the most powerful one I had was one girl who said, she'd been in the top set for maths and she'd moved, after an internal assessment, down to the middle set. Her mum was a doctor and she said, 'I used to want to be a doctor like my mum but since I moved to the middle set I've realised that that's not something I can do because I'm not good enough so I'm

> thinking about what else I might do in the future.' That was in the report we gave to governors and that quote was one of the main reasons that we reorganised. (Simon, FG2)

Here we see how a dedicated exploration of the impact of grouping (in this case involving setting in KS2 as well as in-class groups) on children led to a change in school policy. In particular, it seems to have been the limiting effect on aspirations, exemplified in the example of a pupil who no longer aspired to become a doctor after she was 'demoted' to a middle set, which prompted the shift in policy. Alongside this, the diversification of results shown in assessment data replicated the wider research findings that while children labelled as higher attaining benefit from setting, the children labelled as lower attaining are negatively affected, producing a wider spread (Parsons & Hallam, 2014). Clearly, this project of gathering data and interviewing children involved significant amounts of teacher time and a willingness from the governing body to listen and to question the established policy. Simon's relatively senior position within the school also provided him with the professional capital to challenge the orthodoxy and engage in this small-scale research on the impact of grouping. It is notable, however, that the basis on which grouping was challenged here was not that ability as an idea was problematic, but rather that it had negative effects.

The second example came from a different school, from a teacher at an early stage of her career. Leah was the main contact for Hepworth Primary and organised the interviews with her fellow teachers. She was keen to explain how her practice in Year 1 differed from many other classrooms in the school and how she hoped to challenge established norms, but faced real resistance from colleagues:

> Apart from guided reading, I don't have groups anymore. I'm in my second year of teaching and when I did my PGCE we, obviously, do lots of reading and talking about ability grouping. So we all left with the idea like, yeah, no ability grouping. It's bad. And then I came here and I was with my year partner who had been my mentor when I was a student. I think she's been teaching for thirteen years, really experienced. And when I was like, 'Oh, how shall we, are we going to not have groups?' And she was like, 'No, it's just easier to do this the way we've always done it.' And so I was like, 'Oh, I don't want to rock the boat', like, keen NQT. So I went with it. And then when I, like, brought it up with the headteacher, I was, like, 'So, maybe we should speak about this.' ... So then we were kind of talking about our classroom organisation and so I was like, 'Oh yeah, here we could get rid of the groups, the ability groups.' And the head was just like, I think what he said to me was, 'They might do that at X but it's just not practical and not realistic.'… I did it last year and I really like, because I was like, I love my old class partner, totally respect her. And she's like, 'Come on, just have all your

> groups laid out, you can be really organised.' And so I even had, like, little charts, like, green group, blue group, even though I'd been taught, like, not to do that the year before. So I've always felt, I was always aware of the fact that there was a real, like, disparity between what I believed and what I was doing.
> (Leah, Year 1 teacher, Hepworth Primary)

Here we see how Leah came to her school with questions about grouping but was limited in her ability to put these into practice in her first year as a teacher, when she relied on the experience of her mentor and the head saw a change as unrealistic. As a result, she ended up using groups, even though this contradicted her beliefs. This is indicative of what Braun and Maguire call 'doing without believing' (2018), where teachers engage in practices that they have little faith in.

For Leah, however, change came when studying for a master's degree provided her with a reason for a change in practice:

> T: Because I'm doing my master's and I have to do a project, I wanted to do my project on teaching in mixed attainment groups. So that's what's given me, like, a reason to be like, 'Right—'
> I: 'I'm going to do something different.'
> T: '—I'm going to do something different.'
> I: And so the head has approved it because, for that reason?
> T: Yeah. And I've had the confidence, I think it's given me the confidence I didn't have, like, to kind of go against what my experienced partners do.

Leah goes on to explain that she no longer uses any grouping in her classroom other than for guided reading, and enthuses about the positive effect on her classroom. For different reasons from Simon, Leah had the professional capital provided by her master's to challenge the established practice and 'break ranks' from her colleagues. Following the interview, she explained how she intended to explore the use of setting in KS2 in her school and hoped to end that practice too. She was clearly passionate about this particular issue and an advocate for mixed teaching practices.

In both these examples, there were unusual reasons why the teachers were able to disrupt grouping practices. What is less clear, of course, is whether this came with a concomitant disruption of fixed-ability thinking; as Marks (2013) has shown us, there can be fixed-ability thinking without groups. Conversely, as Leah's example shows, there can be no fixed-ability thinking where there are still groups present, as teachers may feel pressured into organising their classrooms in particular ways even when they do not agree, particularly at the start of their careers.

Barriers to Change

I end this findings section with a discussion of what stands in the way of teachers questioning fixed-ability thinking, including returning to the two cases above. It goes without saying that the main barrier is the pervasiveness of fixed-ability thinking and its long-established nature (White, 2006). Furthermore, many teachers described the taken-for-granted notion of ability as a basis for the practical organisation of teaching; to believe children are different and need different things simply makes teaching easier, as discussed in previous research (Hallam & Ireson, 2007; Francis et al, 2017).[2] The pressure to show that your teaching caters to the full range of children means clear differences in tasks need to be demonstrated; differentiation is the 'enforcer-cum-seducer' of ability (Drummond & Yarker, 2013, p. 4), both its inspiration and its protector. There is also the problem of changing long-established practice, of breaking away from 'doing what we've always done', as Simon explains:

> We introduced the whole school approach based on problem-solving investigation which we thought was much more dynamic. It's been a real success but yes, there was a fear moment. There was that bit when they were looking at [it]and we put loads of support in. I did mentoring with a number of different teachers. (Simon, FG2)

In Simon's case, the barriers were reluctance to change based on fear and the need to provide a lot of support and mentoring to allow teachers to take a different approach. Again, the focus of support here is on the practical ways of doing things differently, rather than on attempting to challenge teachers' underlying beliefs. Leah, who faced similar challenges from the headteacher and colleagues, similarly commented on the volume of work it had taken to stop using groups, though she was also enthusiastic about the results:

> I think it works, like, I have to think about a lot more and it's taken a lot of work to get here. Because I've had to redesign how I teach and, like, the activities that we do. But I feel like I'm able to support kids more. ... Because this was my project, I've spent ages, like, talking and thinking with them about group work and let them come up with their own class rules, and like, your group rules.
>
> [On differentiating] I think it's taken time to get my head around how to do that, but now I feel like I can pull that stuff out more. I'm getting quicker at it, like, it's coming a bit more naturally. It does still take time. (Leah, Hepworth Primary)

Leah describes the effort and time taken by both herself and the children to make a mixed-group system work and, implicitly, the necessary shift in thinking about children that this has involved. Her experience is very positive, and she is motivated by her master's project. This is an unusual case, but also one which shows how even those teachers at the beginning of their career can on occasion find spaces to disrupt established practice and ideas.

Many teachers in this study argued that they felt under pressure from convention, from their training and from their senior leadership team (SLT); for example, 'I'd rather not group by ability but SLT expect us to' (written comment on survey). The vast majority of teachers, it should be noted, do not have the time or professional capital to begin to challenge grouping practices or the fixed-ability thinking that underpins them. As Marks (2013) argued, there is little capacity in teachers' day-to-day lives for deeper thinking about educational principles and alternative ways of being. As we noted in our report on this project, the pressure of tests and fitting in the full curriculum means that grouping is often seen as a 'necessary evil', potentially damaging but required in order to manage the risk of producing 'bad data' (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017b). Notably, grouping in phonics was particularly widespread among respondents, due to the pressure of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (see Bradbury, 2018 for a fuller discussion).

Conclusion

Decisions on how to group children are made by individual schools and teachers; in this study, 60% of teachers responded that they were individually responsible for choosing their practices, 41% responded that it was a decision made by the SLT and 35% said that it was a decision made by the phase leader. This did not have any impact on the extent of grouping used, which might be seen as indicating that this is not a case of orthodoxy imposed from above, but a problem of widespread fixed-ability thinking among teachers. What I have aimed to do here is complicate further our assumptions about the relationship between grouping practices and teachers' views on ability. First, I noted the widespread use of grouping practices based on ability in EY and KS1, and their variability by subject. Second, I explored teachers' doubts about grouping and its effects, which suggest that many engage in practices they fear are damaging to the children in their classrooms (with a resultant impact on their feelings of professionalism, though I do not have space to discuss this in detail here). However, these doubts were largely premised on the impact of grouping and the visibility and solidification of difference, rather than on an underlying question about innate ability. Third, I considered two cases of very different teachers who disrupted grouping practices, and where and how they were afforded the space to do so. Exploring these cases illuminates how unusual it is for teachers to have the space to question practice and the need for some exceptional circumstance to provide a justification for this disruption of the norm. Leah's case also provided a complimentary argument to Marks' (2013) argument that there can be fixed-ability thinking without grouping, in providing a case of how there can be grouping even when the teacher does not believe in fixed abilities. One key conclusion to emphasise overall is that we cannot assume that practices are indicative of beliefs, particularly given the immense pressure on teachers in performative cultures.

While these findings do not offer a great deal of hope for those who seek to systematically challenge fixed-ability thinking, they do provide some insights into the possibilities for change. If teachers are given the space and time to think about and research the impact of grouping, they can become advocates for change in practice, and in turn begin to challenge the orthodoxy of fixed-ability thinking.

Notes

[1] Clearly both 'ability' and 'fixed ability' are contested problematic terms; for ease of reading, I refrain from using quote marks for these terms from here onwards.

[2] Note here that this is not a criticism: in my own experience as a primary teacher I adhered to the standard practice of using groups to show differentiation and to help with behaviour. Teaching is a difficult enough task, and any method of easing the burden is naturally attractive.

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ALICE BRADBURY is an associate professor in the Centre for Sociology of Education and Equity at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London. Her work focuses on the relationship between education policy, classroom practices and inequalities, mainly in the field of primary and early years education. *Correspondence*: a.bradbury@ucl.ac.uk