Free and comprehensive?

Admissions and mixed attainment teaching in an English free school

Clara Rübner Jørgensen and Julie Allan

Abstract

The article reports on the efforts to establish a secondary school, set up within the free school legislation, to be comprehensive, serving the diverse population of the city in which it is located. This was achieved through a policy which admitted students from four 'nodes' across the city and gave priority to children with special educational needs and looked-after children, and by teaching the children in mixed-attainment classes. We report selected findings from a research project which followed the school's progress from the original application to be a free school to its establishment with a full complement of students, and which included interviews with teachers, senior school staff, professional service staff, governors, parents and students. We discuss the background and impact of the admissions policy and the practice of mixed-attainment schools, both unusual in England. We also consider some of the challenges and limitations for a school choosing to operate in this way within an education system which strongly emphasises individual performance and competition between schools.

Keywords: comprehensive schooling; inclusive intake; mixed-attainment teaching; school admissions

Introduction

The extent to which an educational system can be conceived as comprehensive depends on a range of factors, and is closely related to wider societal ideals about equality, inclusion and redistribution of opportunity (Burger, 2016). Debates about comprehensive schooling in England have a long and political history, and have tended to focus on the social injustice and inequality implications of allowing secondary schools to select students based on attainment (Martin, 2015; Benn, 2014). In this paper we discuss the response of one school to two further areas of relevance to comprehensive schooling: the impact of socially unequal catchment areas on school demographics (Hamnett and Butler, 2013) and the dominant practice of selecting children into within-school 'ability groups' (Francis et al., 2017).

The article reports on selected findings from a research project carried out at a

newly established English secondary free school in 2016-18. The school was opened in 2015, with the aspiration of being an inclusive and comprehensive school for the diverse population of the city in which it is located. This was sought, in part, by adopting a policy which admitted students from four 'nodes' across the city, and gave priority to children with special educational needs and looked-after children, and by teaching the children in mixed-attainment classes. We discuss the background and impact of these two practices, both unusual in the English context, and consider some of their challenges and limitations within an education system that strongly emphasises individual performance and competition between schools.

Background

Free schools were introduced in England in 2010 by the Conservative-Liberal Democratic government. The free school legislation enables parents, community organisations, charities and universities to set up their own schools with government funding (Hatcher, 2011). Unlike other state-sponsored schools, free schools are not controlled by local authorities. They may set their own curriculum and school day, as well as staffing and admissions arrangements. While they are not explicitly allowed to select students based on ability, critics have argued that free schools may 'bias' their catchment area (Hatcher, 2011, p494) or offer a curriculum likely to appeal to particular groups, and thereby risk increasing social segregation (Morris, 2014; 2015). However, Hatcher (2011, p501) argues that they may also 'pioneer progressive practices which the wider school system could draw on' to 'develop and popularize credible alternatives' to marketised educational solutions.

The school that formed the basis for the study described in this article is a free school, set up in 2015 in a large, diverse and multi-ethnic city. From its outset, the intentions of the school were to be inclusive and 'socially mixed', and an initial target of 40 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals was set. The purpose of the study was to explore the extent to which the school was experienced as inclusive by school staff, students and parents and, as part of this, to track the impact of the admissions policy and mixed-attainment teaching practices on inclusion. The study involved approximately twenty hours of participant observation at the school, individual semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers, four senior school staff, three professional service staff, three governors and ten parents, and group interviews with twenty-two students, using photo-elicitation methods (Torre and Murphy, 2015; Cooper, 2017).

This article draws on the data from the study, the original application to open a free school, school policies, the school's website and a subsequent interview with the school's first principal (Roden and Allan, 2020).

Admissions

The vision for the school, as stated in the original application to the Department for Education to open a free school, was primarily to create a school for the city – a comprehensive school – 'serving a diverse and geographically dispersed student body, reaching across both deprived and more affluent regions of the city' (DfE, 2012, p16). With the explicit intention to 'transform lives' (DfE, 2012, p13), the application described the school as: 'An ambitious school, meeting a need for more secondary places in [the city], accessible without examination and without reference to religious creed, seeking to bring together children from all over [the city] and beyond into a single learning community and to create an environment that raises aspirations and in which all have the opportunity to excel' (DfE, 2012, p13).

The diversity of the city within which this school was being located was seen to both make a comprehensive aspiration possible and as posing some challenges:

> If trends continue [the city] is set to become Britain's first city with a majority non-white population by 2024. It is also a city that suffers higher than average levels of deprivation, with 34 per cent of children living in poverty overall compared to 20.9 per cent nationally. This creates challenges for schools … Children growing up in poverty face documented challenges accessing education, from lack of resources for transportation to unstable home lives to poor nutrition. (DfE, *ibid.*, p20.)

Admissions policies of schools in England tend to admit children from their local catchment area, based on distance from the school. This school, in its application and its stated endeavour to create a comprehensive school for the whole city, established an admissions policy that would admit children from four, distinct, 'nodal points' across the city. These nodal points were identified, using postcodes, and with the following distribution based on the train station at the heart of three of the nodes:

1. 50 per cent (up to seventy-five pupils) from around the school site: an area with a mixture of private and council housing, and a predominantly white population but with some ethnic diversity.

2. 16.7 per cent (up to twenty-five pupils) from around rail station A, an area with a large amount of nineteenth century housing and high numbers of people from Irish, West Indian, East African, South Asian and Pakistani communities.

3. 16.7 per cent (up to twenty-five pupils) from around rail station B, a working-class, inner-city area, with a culturally diverse mix of people.

4. 16.7 per cent (up to twenty-five pupils) from around rail station C, an inner-city area that is subject to urban regeneration, with a large business area, a mixture of housing and an ethnically diverse population.

The distance between the applicants' home and the main entrance of the node (the

school in the case of node 1 or the railway station entrance of nodes 2, 3 and 4 as the crow flies) was calculated in order to apply the distance criteria.

The first principal of the school found the idea of a comprehensive school that took children from across the city compelling, and this was one of the reasons he took on the role of being its first leader: 'The new school represented an opportunity for me, personally, to make a contribution for all children in the city. This was facilitated by the proposed admissions system, one developed with the local authority to meet the needs of a growing city by admitting pupils from four different areas (thus ensuring a very diverse intake) (cited in: Roden and Allan, 2020).

In addition to the nodal system, the admissions policy of the school gives priority to pupils with an education and health care (EHC) plan – a legal document issued for children with significant special educational needs, to 'looked-after pupils' (pupils who are in the care of or who are provided with accommodation by the local municipality) and to siblings of pupils attending the school. As a consequence of this admissions policy, the school has, since its inception, had a diverse school population in terms of socio-economic background and ethnicity, and a significantly higher number of children on EHC plans than the city average. This has, in turn, had specific implications for another of the school's policies – that of teaching in mixed-attainment classes.

Mixed-attainment teaching

The practice of setting students by 'ability' is prevalent in English secondary schools. However, as noted by Francis et al. (2017, p2) the term 'ability grouping' is problematic, as it conflates attainment in tests with ability and, through this, supports the notion that educational inequalities are 'natural'. Children may, furthermore, be placed in lower sets due to circumstances other than their ability, for example behaviour (Woods, 2019, p36) or in the case of recently-arrived migrant students, their level of English (Jørgensen, 2011). In a recent edition of *FORUM,* a collection of articles critically documents the implications of the dominant discourse of 'fixed ability' and the impact of 'ability groupings' on children (Yarker, 2019; Woods, 2019; Hargreaves, 2019; Bradbury, 2019). Due to the symbolic problems and real-life impact of the terminology of 'ability' described in these articles, we follow Francis et al. (2017) and use the terms 'attainment grouping' and 'mixed attainment' instead of 'ability grouping' and 'mixed ability'.

The school that formed the basis for this study was different from most English secondary schools in that it practised mixed-attainment teaching across all subjects. This was a decision made by the applicants and the first principal of the school, and was explicitly communicated to prospective parents and students on the school website: 'We believe in helping everybody to do the best that they can. Evidence suggests that setting or streaming students does not have a positive impact on learner achievement.

We teach in mixed attainment groups and work hard to ensure that all students are stretched and challenged to meet our high expectations'.

When discussing mixed-attainment teaching with teachers, they were generally positive about the practice, as they saw it as facilitating social interaction between students, supporting the inclusive school ethos, and avoiding negative self-perceptions among the students. As expressed by one teacher: 'I think the benefits are that I don't see children labelling themselves as "stupid" or "unable" … we don't have the sink-group mentality'. Another teacher similarly noted that the children were not limited by their 'ability level':

> I find the fact that the students don't know very much about their achievement background in the sense that they don't know what levels everyone got at Key Stage 2 or whatever, that's not important. They work really well together because they don't feel limited by an ability label, so quite often you can pair people up successfully, whether that's a similar level ability pairing to support each other in a task or for certain tasks to allow someone who is working at a slightly higher level to work with someone who is struggling a little bit, to help support them in moving forwards. So, I do think it works well. I do find the students here are very supportive of each other.

Teachers diversified their lessons to suit the needs and skills of different students in many different ways, for example by providing several options for given tasks and worksheets. The need for differentiated teaching was mentioned by a teacher, who also acknowledged that this had significant implications for planning and time. 'The school has the broadest range of children I've ever taught … it demands a lot of prep before class. Preparation is very time-consuming, but the thinking has been interesting … Sometimes you feel you have to plan six to seven different support systems to help them do the same thing'.

Consequently, some of the staff also admitted to finding it challenging to teach mixed-attainment groups, not least because it was different from the way they had previously taught in other schools.

> Teacher: I came from a place [where] more classes are set, so I never had any experience from mixed-ability teaching. I had to change how I taught here. So, a lot of that was me working through that.
>
> Interviewer: How did you find that?
>
> Teacher: It was really hard. Really hard. Now I am more comfortable with it and I do see the benefits. Last year I mainly saw the negatives, this year the benefits.

The majority of parents interviewed for the study were parents of children with special educational needs. For them, the mixed-attainment classes were sometimes mentioned in relation to inclusion, and they generally seemed to value that children of all levels were taught together. One pair of parents said:

I think the principle of inclusion is fairly inspirational in that it requires all students to interact on a day-to-day basis. So, it expands students' ability to meet and work with people who have different needs and requirements and I think that is important in life when you go forwards. If handled correctly, it can be very positive. But for it to work successfully, all teachers need to have the necessary training to work with the students.

However, following on from this, they also described the mixed-attainment classes as difficult for their son, when he felt he couldn't keep up with his peers: 'He is fully aware that he is not cracking it relative to his peers and the effect it has on him in terms of his confidence, that I am ok, his self-belief, his emotional wellbeing, he does sometimes come home very sad and anxious'.

As this illustrates, teachers' previous experiences, beliefs and training, as well as general perceptions and discourses in society about competition and individual performance, all play a role in the implementation of mixed-attainment teaching, even in schools that are explicitly committed to making it work. A similar point is made by Woods (2019):

I work in a school where we teach mixed-attainment groups for my subject. This way of grouping is a step in the right direction: it removes certain group cultures. But can we permanently remove the labels that are still hanging precariously around the necks of students? The invisible signs that might scream out: 'I got under 100 in my SATs so I've failed at 11!' or 'I can only complete the easy sheet!' or 'I've never been good at English!'. Can we remove these barriers completely? Is it possible in the day-to-day when our systems measure, calculate and categorise students?(p37).

Discussion

Working towards a truly comprehensive school involves an explicit rejection of 'determinism, whether by notions of intelligence, social class or curriculum' (Martin, 2015, p375). In the case of the school described in this article, determinism was rejected by adopting an admissions policy that crossed catchment areas and gave priority to children with an EHC plan, looked-after children and siblings. Hereby, it challenged some of the demographic difficulties of creating comprehensive schools within socially and economically stratified cities. At the same time, the school worked to avoid the determinism of the free-school system which, while not explicitly allowing for ability-based admissions, can potentially privilege and favour some students over others (or at least be more attractive to them).

The school also explicitly rejected determinism through its mixed-attainment teaching, and by eschewing setting and streaming. In this way, the school interrupted

an element of what Zhao, (2020, p198) has termed the 'grammar of schooling':

> The grammar of schooling, such as standardized organizational practices in dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms, and splintering knowledge into 'subjects,' is so powerful that it has persisted despite many repeated challenges by very courageous, intelligent, and powerful innovators. It has persisted despite mounting evidence and widespread acknowledgement that it is obsolete and does not serve our children well.

Successive studies have shown that attainment groupings have little or no impact on overall school attainment (Hogden, 2001; Francis et al., 2017) and that they have a particularly negative impact on students in lower sets and streams (Hallam and Ireson, 2007). Attainment grouping increases inequality between higher and lower attainment groups (Johnston and Wildy, 2016), and as students of lower-income and minority-ethnic backgrounds tend to be overrepresented in lower sets, this has important implications for educational equality and intergenerational mobility (Hallam, 2012). However, as discussed by Framcome and Hewitt (2018), mixed-attainment teaching is often conceived of as 'difficult' by schools and, due to the lack of good-practice examples, teachers may consider it 'unworkable' in their classrooms. By presenting data on the experiences of teachers and views of parents on mixed-attainment teaching, this article begins to document some of the benefits of mixed-attainment teaching in relation to comprehensive schooling and inclusion. However, our data also illustrate that mixed-attainment teaching is not practised in a vacuum.

Conclusion

Caroline Benn (1982, p84), almost forty years ago, argued that 'a comprehensive system is the only way we can openly ensure attention to all equally and at the same time protect and reveal the full range of human gifts'. However, as R.H. Tawney (1964, p150) pointed out over seventy years ago, equality of opportunity is 'a sham' whilst our highly stratified society, whereby certain groups have easier access to highly paid jobs than others, remains, like 'the impertinent courtesy of an invitation to unwelcome guests, in the certainty that circumstances would prevent them from accepting' (Tawney, 1964, p110). In this article, we have shown the significant advances that one school has been able to make to promote the comprehensive ideal, and to reject determinism on the basis of social disadvantage and ethnicity. The school's adoption of an admissions policy that actively sought to 'engineer' a diverse school intake, together with its refusal of setting and streaming, has worked to ensure a supportive learning environment for all and avoid the creation of a 'quintessentially … ableist' (Goodley, 2014, p100) school environment. The steadfast upholding of democratic principles is remarkable, given the context of the free-school legislative reform in which the school was set up. This reform,

as Ravitch (2013, p19) reminds us, observing similar moves in the US, is characterised by 'a fundamental distrust of public education and hostility to the public sector in general'.

Clyde Chitty, dubbed the 'patron saint of comprehensive schooling', suggested that admissions was the one area that he and colleagues had never got right: 'Because I still don't know what a comprehensive school should be in the city. Whether you do have a community school or whether you have banding or social mixing ... I think admissions is the one thing we never got right' (Benn and Martin, 2018, p26).

The school in this study does not claim to have created the perfect admissions system. However, combined with the practice of mixed-attainment teaching, the admissions system has succeeded in building an environment that may increase the chances of breaking through the 'so-called "ceiling" of a child's possible achievement' (Chitty, 1979, p162).

References

Benn, Caroline (1982) The Myth of Giftedness (Part II), *FORUM*, 24(3), 83-84.

Benn, Melissa (2014) Why the Government Needs a Little History Lesson, *FORUM*, 56(3), 425-430. http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2014.56.3.425.

Benn, Melissa & Martin, Jane (2018) The 'patron saint' of comprehensive education: an interview with Clyde Chitty. Part Two. *FORUM*, 60(1), 11-30. http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2018.60.1.11.

Bradbury, Alice (2019) Rethinking 'Fixed-Ability Thinking' and Grouping Practices: questions, disruptions and barriers to change in primary and early years education, *FORUM*, 61(1), 41-52.

Burger, Kaspar (2016) Intergenerational transmission of education in Europe: Do more comprehensive education systems reduce social gradients in student achievement? *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 44, 54–67.

Chitty, Clyde (1979) Inside the secondary school: Problems and perspectives, in David Rubinstein (ed.) *Education and Equality*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 150-163.

Cooper, Victoria (2017) Lost in Translation. Exploring Childhood Identity Using Photo-elicition. *Children's Geographies,* 15(6), 625-637.

Department for Education (DfE) (2012): Free schools in 2013. Application form. Mainstream and 16-19 Free Schools. London: DfE.

Francis, Becky, Archer, Louise, Hodgen, Jeremy, Pepper, David, Taylor, Becky & Travers, Mary-Claire (2017) Exploring the relative lack of impact of research on 'ability grouping' in England. A discourse analytic account. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 47(1), 1-17.

Francome, Tom & Hewitt, Dave (2020) 'My math lessons are all about learning from your mistakes': How mixed-attainment mathematics grouping affects the way students experience mathematics, *Educational Review*, 72(4), 475-494.

Goodley, Daniel (2014) Disability studies. *Theorizing disablism and ableism*. London: Routledge.

Hallam, Susan (2012) Streaming and Setting in UK Primary Schools. Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study. *FORUM*, 54(1), 57-64.

Hallam, Susan & Ireson, Judith (2003) Secondary school teachers' attitudes towards and beliefs about ability grouping, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 73(3), 343–356.

Hamnett, Chris & Butler, Tim (2013) Distance, education and inequality, *Comparative Education*, 49(3), 317-330.

Hargreaves, Eleanore (2019) Feeling Less Than Other People: attainment scores as symbols of children's worth, *FORUM,*61(1), 53-65.

Hatcher, Richard (2011): The Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition Government's 'free schools' in England. *Educational Review,* 63(4), 485-503.

Hogden, Jeremy (2001) Setting, streaming and mixed-ability teaching. In: Dillon, Justin, Maguire, Meg (eds) *Becoming a teacher: Issues in secondary teaching*. Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 201-212

Johnston, Olivia & Wildy, Helen (2016) The effects of streaming in the secondary school on learning outcomes for Australian students – A review of the international literature, *Australian Journal of Education,* Vol. 60(1), 42–59.

Jørgensen, Clara (2011) Schooling and Life Projects – Experiences and Perspectives of Migrant and Minority Ethnic Youth in England and Spain. PhD Thesis. University of Warwick.

Martin, Jane (2015) Building comprehensive education: Caroline Benn and Holland Park School. *FORUM,* 57(3), 363-386.

Morris, Rebecca (2014) The admissions criteria of secondary Free Schools. *Oxford Review of Education* 40, 389–409. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2014.921614.

Morris, Rebecca (2015) Free Schools and disadvantaged intakes. *British Educational Research Journal* 41(4), 535–552. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3168.

Ravitch, Diane (2013) *Reign of Error: the hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Roden, Michael & Allan, Julie (2020) Governing inclusion: A school principal and a governor in conversation. In: Julie Allan, Valerie Harwood & Clara RübnerJørgensen (eds) *Schooling, governance and inequalities*. London: Routledge, 130-139

Tawney, Richard Henry (1964) *Equality*. London: Unwin.

Torre, Daniel & Murphy, Joseph (2015): A Different Lens. Changing Perspectives Using Photo-elicitation Interviews. In: *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 23(1), 111.

Woods, Katie (2019) 'Nothing New and Shiny.' My Experience with Learning without Limits: a teacher's journey, *FORUM,* 61(1), 35-40

Yarker, Patrick(2019) Calling Time on 'Fixed-Ability' Thinking and Practice, Editorial, *FORUM,* 61(1), 3-9.

Zhao, Y. (2020) Tofu Is Not Cheese: rethinking education amid the COVID-19 pandemic, *ECNU Review of Education*, 3(2), 189-203.

Clara Rübner Jørgensen is a social anthropologist with specialism in contemporary childhood and comparative and inclusive education. Her work has explored the schooling experiences of children of different backgrounds in England, Spain and Central America, and looked at policies and policy gaps around migration and special educational needs and disabilities in education.

C.Joergensen@bham.ac.uk

Julie Allan is Professor of Equity and Inclusion in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham. Her research focuses on inequalities in education, particularly in relation to children with special educational needs and disabilities, and inclusion. She is also interested in children's rights and children's mobilities, and is a governor at the school depicted in this article.

J.Allan.1@bham.ac.uk