Setting the scene

EDUCATION

4-year-old pupils grouped by ability

A SCHOOL has been criticised for putting children as young as 4 into classes based on their ability.

King's Hedges Primary School, which has three classes at reception level, separates bright pupils in reception from those deemed less academically able.

The Cambridgeshire branch of the National Union of Teachers says "labelling" children as low ability puts a ceiling on ambition that can stay with them for the rest of their education.

But the school says the structure helps maximise the support it can give to those pupils who need it most.

Jon Duveen, secretary of the county's NUT, said ability grouping, which is rare for pupils in the early part of their primary education, assumes that ability is an "unchanging talent".

He added: "lt has the inevitable effect of labelling students, especially those deemed to have low ability. This label of 'failure' often stays with the child throughout their education. They cannot do maths, or chemistry, or PE or whatever and this constant labelling has the effect of telling the child that they cannot succeed and not to aim too high in their ambitions."

GARETH **MCPHERSON**
@GarethMcP_CN

A spokesman for the school in Northfield Avenue said its pupils are offered a "personalised curriculum based on their individual needs". A "significant number" of pupils arrive at King's Hedges school with "many complex needs", he said.

The spokesman added: "The school needs to meet those needs as quickly and as cost effectively as possible. In grouping children in this way those who need most support have the greatest access to it.

"If the very high needs children were separated throughout three classes then their access to support would be significantly diluted, less effective and their progress less marked.

"This model has produced some excellent results and our achievement gaps are amongst the smallest in the county.

"Children who arrived at the school having had access to a wide range of experiences were able to continue to flourish, but those who did not have the skills struggled to make the same amount of progress."

The school said it invites parents and children in to discuss the pupil's needs before grouping, adding that no child has been taken out of reception for that reason.

Kevin Bullock, Fordham Primary's retired headteacher, said he did not introduce streaming or setting, although children needing extra help were often put in groups.

He said: "My take on streaming is if it's well thought out, if it suits the context of the school, it can be effective. But what is more important is teaching and leadership. It's the quality and dedication of the teaching staff that matters, whether there is streaming, setting or whole class teaching. A study of 2,500 children aged 6 and 7 in England by the Institute of Education in London found streaming pupils by ability appeared to entrench educational disadvantage.

Prime Minister David Cameron said earlier this year he would like to see all pupils put in sets for core subjects.

Figure 1.1 Four-year-old pupils grouped by ability
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This article appeared recently in *Cambridge News* (Mcpherson, 2015). Before reading further in this book, consider the following.

Reflection

- What is your immediate reaction to this article?
- What beliefs underlie your reaction?
- Where do these beliefs stem from?

Core aims of this book

This book is written to support teachers, headteachers and teacher educators in the primary sector to think critically about ability-grouping. The book explores the beliefs and principles widely held in the English education system by engaging with key questions.

- To what extent is this common practice in primary schools?
- Can we reliably identify *bright* children and *less academically able* children? What do these terms mean?
- What are the implications of such practices for teaching and learning?
- How do children feel about such practices?

Ability and ability-grouping in primary education

The use of ability-grouping in primary schools is increasing (Hallam and Parsons, 2013). Policy plays a role in this resurgence, placing teachers in the difficult position of balancing policy directives with the needs of their class. Many approaches taken by teachers to manage an often wide attainment range take the form of some type of ability-grouping.

Grouping by ability requires teachers to hold some notion of what ability is. While it is unlikely that all teachers would give the same definition – this in itself reveals something of the difficulty and complexity of ability-grouping – it is likely their lists would contain a number of similar characteristics of the *bright* or *less able* child. This is not due to teachers seeking to elevate or demonise particular children but to the extraordinary ideology of ability deeply embedded in the English education system perpetuating a belief that individuals come *hard-wired* with a certain level of ability that can – indeed should – be measured and accorded appropriate educational provision.

This ideology of ability is reproduced on a daily basis through the media and popular culture with the language of talent, ability and intelligence commonplace in everyday talk. Immersed in such language and working in educational structures built on notions of

selection, ideas of ability become normalised. It is not uncommon, often without shame, to hear an individual assert that they *can't do mathematics*. This raises questions about when and where children begin to engage with such beliefs, resulting in them growing into adults who hold a can/cannot do belief. This book explores what may be happening in primary schools to perpetuate ability language and beliefs.

It is worth noting that ability-grouping, more so in the secondary than primary sector, carries an extensive research base. It is a topic that raises strong and emotive debate and research evidence can be found to support many opinions. It will be clear that I hold a particular position and I do not attempt to disguise that in this book. I do however present the research, both from the published literature and my own study, in a robust and critical manner which I hope will contribute significantly to the on-going debate and open up channels for critical engagement.

You may ask why this topic is important to you. If many other teachers are engaged in ability-grouping practices in primary schools, does it matter? My hope is that the stories in this book – told through the children's voices – will answer that directly. Beyond this we are reaching a saturation point; with the evidence available, it should be possible to move forward, rather than having to repeat the warnings of history. You may wish to reflect on the following from the 1950s and 1960s. The language we use today may be more socially acceptable, but the issues appear alarmingly persistent. The question must be, if doubts were raised – strongly backed by research evidence – at these times, why are we still debating, let alone commonly using, these practices today?

Before 1955 or thereabouts, public confidence in the fairness and accuracy of the [11+] examination rested on the belief that intelligence tests could detect and measure inborn ability. In the middle fifties this belief was strongly challenged by such university teachers as Philip Vernon, Brian Simon, and John Daniels, who demonstrated conclusively that this was not so. None of the tests conceived and tried over the course of sixty years can satisfactorily distinguish natural talent from what has been learned. Heredity and environment are too closely entangled to be closely identified. This means that children from literate homes, with interested and helpful parents, have an enormous advantage over children from culturally poor homes where books are unknown and conversation is either limited or unprintable.

(Pedley, 1963, pp 16–17)

[I]n the homogeneous class of the streamed school the stimulus to learning is reduced … the slower children appear slower still, accepting the fact that they are too often called 'only B stream', and making less effort than they might … In the streamed school there is paradoxically another danger, in that, since the children appear to be more on a level, the teacher is tempted to underestimate the diversity of quality and pace of learning which in fact still remain and which must still be catered for.

(DES, 1959, p 69)

Key terminology

This book uses some key terms. For clarity these terms are defined below. Throughout this book the term *ability* is presented without quotation marks to aid readability but it is always under question.

- Ability-grouping: any form of re-grouping on the basis of some idea of ability.
- Setting: children are placed into ability groups between classes for particular subjects; a child could be in different sets for different subjects.
- Streaming: children are placed in the same ability classes for all subjects based on general ability.
- Within-class grouping: children are allocated to table groups within the class for all or some subjects based on general ability or subject-specific ability.
- Mixed-ability: classes are not grouped by ability and in a multi-form entry school each class in a year-group should contain the same range of attainment.

These structures may exist independently or in combination. Children may find themselves further differentiated to table groups (within-class grouping) in sets and streams.

The research study

The evidence presented in this book comes from my longitudinal study across three schools into the use of ability language and practices in primary mathematics classrooms. These schools – Riverside Primary, Parkview Primary and Avenue Primary (all names in this book are pseudonyms) – and their different approaches to ability-grouping are outlined in Chapter 3. The study focused particularly strongly on Parkview Primary and Avenue Primary, which on the surface took very different approaches.

I spent a year observing Year 4 (ages 8–9) and Year 6 (ages 10–11) children in and beyond mathematics lessons. Becoming a constant face in the schools, the children, and to an extent the teachers, took little notice of my presence, allowing me to observe closely how children seemed to experience their lessons and to hear the conversations they engaged in about their learning in the corridors and on the playground. In order to build up a fuller picture of the children's experiences, I focused on three children within each mixed-ability class, top, or bottom set within each year-group at each school – 24 children in total – representing the attainment range in each class or group. Each child, in addition to being observed within and between lessons, was interviewed individually and in groups with conversations about their learning very much dictated by the children. It is these children's voices that appear throughout this book. Data were also obtained from attainment tests and attitudinal questionnaires with all 284 children in the study, although with a purposeful focus on the children's voices, much of this analysis lies outside the scope of this book.