Grouping practices for learning support

Research to investigate the use of groups in schools with a focus on inclusive education and additional learning needs

Research

Grouping practices for learning support

Audience   This document is aimed at policy makers, researchers and professionals with an interest in the education system in Wales, particularly as it relates to inclusive education and learners with additional learning needs.

Overview   This report presents findings from research into grouping practices used in schools for the purpose of learning support, with a particular focus on inclusive education and learners with additional learning needs. The research sought to explore decision making of educators in relation to grouping practices and how these were experienced by learners in lower attaining groups prior to and during the pandemic.

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Action required   Report has been shared with Welsh Government policymakers

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Additional copies   This document can be accessed from the Welsh Government's website at
https://hwb.gov.wales/professional-development/the-national-strategy-for-educational-research-and-enquiry-nsere/collaborative-evidence-network/

Related documents   Research to establish a baseline of the Special Educational Needs system in Wales
https://gov.wales/research-establish-baseline-special-educational-needs-system-wales

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

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Glossary

Acronym/Key word	Definition
ALN	Additional learning needs
ALNCo	Additional learning needs coordinator
CEN	Collaborative Evidence Network
EAS	Education Achievement Service
HEI	Higher Education Institution
IDP	Individual Development Plan
NSERE	National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry
SEN	Special educational needs
UWTSD	University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Executive summary

Purpose of the research

Grouping learners, for example based on attainment, is commonplace within education systems, though is under-researched within the Welsh context. The aim of this exploratory research was to provide information about patterns of grouping practices for learners who are taught in lower attaining groups, particularly those with additional learning needs (ALN), as well as information about the decision making of educators in relation to these. In addition, the research sought to gain insight into learner experiences of support within lower set groups, including around the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as learner and teacher priorities for the future.

Methods

The project took place in two educational regions of Wales, the Education Achievement Service (EAS) in the south-east region and three local authorities in the south-west region. Data was gathered using an online survey of primary and secondary school ALNCos (n=102) based in these two regions, as well as focus groups and interviews with learners, teachers and teaching assistants in a representative range of secondary schools. Overall, 14 focus groups were carried out with 70 learners in Years 8 and 9 to target the intended population who were being taught in lower attaining groups and 'intervention' groups were invited to take part in the research along with the teachers and teaching assistants (n=10) who were leading these groups

Findings

Key findings in relation to the research are as follows:

- The most frequently used group across primary and secondary phases for all learners was mixed ability, but for core subjects in both age phases the grouping was ability-based. The reported figure for secondary age learners taught in ability groups for core subjects is similar to figures found elsewhere in the UK.

- A wide range of grouping practices was described with the primary purpose given as support for academic learning. This was the case for all learners as well as learners in lower attaining groups and those with additional learning needs, with grouping described as an effective way of raising attainment and ensuring progress for all learners.

- Teachers expressed a strong belief in grouping by attainment to provide appropriate support and challenge and, in addition for learners with ALN, of building confidence and self-esteem.

- Learners expressed strong appreciation of the favourable teacher-pupil relationships and positive attitudes they experienced in lower attaining groups and intervention groups and said that knowing support was readily available was essential for their learning and sense of well-being in school.

- There was a lack of movement between groups for many learners participating in the study, with some learners taught full-time in the same group over a number of years.

- Negative learning identities were described by some learners and teachers attested to the stigmatising nature of lower attaining groups in some settings.

- The experience of learning during the pandemic was challenging because of difficulties in providing learning support online, the increase in learners requiring support during this time and learner dis-engagement.

Key recommendations

1. There is strong evidence that grouping by attainment disadvantages learners in lower attaining groups. It is recommended that renewed emphasis is put on inclusion as a goal for education during the Covid-19 recovery period.
2. The evidence base in relation to the use of attainment grouping in schools should be more widely disseminated as a way of encouraging teacher reflection and the development of more effective practices.
3. More emphasis is needed on the importance of flexibility in the use of groups, with learners fully consulted in relation to judgements about their ability and placement in groups for learning support.
4. Further research is needed in relation to the following: the make-up of groups in terms of diversity, the fluidity of group practices, ie. frequency of learner movement between groups, and finally, the differential nature of curriculum and pedagogy in different types of groups.

1. Introduction

1.1   In September 2021, the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE) Collaborative Evidence Network invited expressions of interest for research into the impact of Covid-19 on the Welsh education system. In particular, research was invited that identified evidence gaps and promoted collaborative evidence gathering to address these.

1.2   Under this call, University of South Wales in collaboration with Swansea University, Wrexham Glyndwr University and University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) were funded to carry out research into the area of grouping practices used in schools for the purpose of learning support, with a particular focus on the experience of learners who are taught in lower attaining groups including those with additional learning needs (ALN). The research sought to explore decision making of educators in relation to grouping practices and how these were experienced by learners prior to and during the pandemic.

1.3   This final report outlines the study method and presents the findings from the research. It includes a discussion of implications for practice, including suggestions for how to use grouping practices to mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic on learners who require extra support for their learning, including those with ALN, as we enter the phase of Covid-19 recovery in Wales.

Background to the study

1.4   Wales is in the process of major educational reform, including the development of a new curriculum and changes to teacher education and professional standards. The aim of reform is to raise standards and reduce the impact of disadvantage on the attainment of learners through increased emphasis on universal access to the curriculum, higher aspirations for all learners, and flexibility in educational decision-making by schools and teachers (Welsh Government 2020a).

1.5   In addition to these reforms, the system for learners who require additional support for their learning is being transformed. The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 introduced a unified legislative framework for children and young people across the broader age range of 0-25 years, along with a single category of 'additional learning needs' (ALN) to replace the statutory definition of special educational needs (SEN). ALN reform has the aim of

establishing more transparent, efficient, and collaborative systems for assessing, planning and monitoring provision for learners with additional learning needs and for resolving conflict and appeals (Welsh Government 2021a). Individual Development Plans (IDPs) are provided for learners who experience significantly greater difficulty in learning than others of the same age.

1.6   During the Covid-19 pandemic, the reform programmes have been ongoing and, for the purposes of the research reported here, it is important to note that schools are currently in the process of moving over to the new ALN system. This means that, though the ALN system began on 1 September 2021 for learners newly identified as having ALN, those who are designated as having SEN are gradually being moved across to the new system during a three-year transitional period. This research, therefore, is reporting on the experience of grouping practices for learners who are currently designated as SEN and ALN. In project documentation, the term 'ALN' was used since it was believed that schools have now adopted this terminology. However, it is noted that learners who participated in the research include learners identified as SEN at School Action, School Action Plus and Statement stages of the SEN Code of Practice for Wales (2004), some of whom may not eventually be identified as ALN under new arrangements. In carrying out the research, we were informed by schools that only learners who require provision not generally available in a setting will be identified as having additional learning needs. It should be noted then that the focus of the research is on grouping practices for learners who require extra support for their learning, with a particular but not exclusive focus on additional learning needs.

2. Literature review

2.1   Grouping learners, for example based on attainment, is commonplace within education systems and is widely seen as a way of stretching higher attaining learners, but also of providing focused support for those who are lower attaining (Taylor et al. 2017). Grouping can take many forms with the most prevalent including banding for subjects, streaming across subjects, and setting for smaller groups and aspects of subjects (Francis et al. 2017a). Grouping is used in schools across the age range with evidence of grouping based on attainment even within early childhood education (John 2022), but with widespread use in later age phases. Figures suggest that 95 per cent of learners in secondary schools are grouped by attainment for maths (OECD 2013) and slightly lower levels for science and English (Francis et al. 2017a).

2.2   It is notable that the widespread use of grouping based on attainment – what is often described as 'ability grouping' – is despite the absence of a strong evidence base for overall benefit in terms of learner outcomes (Cullen et al. 2020). Findings are consistent on this point with meta-analyses showing that ability grouping does not raise achievement (Higgins et al. 2015; Kutnick et al. 2005). Some positive benefit has been found for learners in higher attaining groups (Ireson and Hallam 2001), but for learners in lower attaining groups, there is evidence that progress is delayed by one to two months each year (Higgins et al. 2015). In the UK, research into grouping practices for lower attaining learners has found evidence of less effective pedagogy for these learners (Blatchford et al. 2011; Webster and Blatchford 2013) and more experiences of exclusion (Gill et al. 2017; Webster and Blatchford 2015). Importantly, lower attaining groups have been shown to represent disproportionately disadvantaged groups, for example, in terms of socio-economic status, race and gender (Francis et al. 2017a).

2.3   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 rather than enhance learning autonomy (Sharples et al. 2015). It appears to be the case that the label of 'low attaining' has an enduring effect with learners deemed this early on their school career continuing to have this label in the long-term (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018).

2.4   Belief in learners having fixed ability in terms of learning has been associated with the use of non-mixed attainment grouping practices in schools. This has been seen as particularly problematic for inclusive education since positive teacher beliefs about learners and open-ended expectations about what they can do have been found to be important factors in the achievement of inclusive learning environments (Florian and Beaton 2018). Teachers tend to have lower expectations of learners in lower attaining groups (Hallam and Ireson 2005; Taylor et al. 2019), whilst a 'fixed ability mind-set' has been found to be damaging particularly for those who are designated as having additional needs (Florian and Linklater 2010).

2.5   Current thinking around inclusive education emphasises the critical importance of classroom teachers developing rich contexts for learning that support the participation of all learners (Black-Hawkins 2017). Good teacher judgement, teacher capacity to respond equitably to the different ways in which learners engage, carefully considered resourcing, and personalized instruction tailored to the needs and interests of learners have been found to be key practices that support educational inclusion (Florian and Graham 2014; Väyrynen and Paksuniemi 2020).

2.6   Much of the research into grouping practices in the UK has focused on England (Blatchford and Webster 2018), though a small number of studies focused on Wales suggest the existence here too of grouping practices based on attainment. One pre-Covid-19 study in Wales, that focused on the system for special educational needs, indicates widespread use of a range of non-mixed attainment grouping practices across the nation, including ability grouping, segregated classes and withdrawal for the delivery of a wide range of academic and non-academic teaching programmes (Thomas et al. 2019). There is also evidence that the use of exclusionary practices may be widespread though hidden for some learners, including those with additional learning needs (Power and Taylor 2020). Research into attitudes and beliefs relevant to this area, moreover, points to a lack of commitment towards inclusive education on the part of some teachers and leaders in Wales, and indeed policy leads working in additional learning needs (Conn and Hutt 2020; Knight and Crick 2021; Knight et al. 2022). Together these studies find that some teachers and leaders working within the education system in Wales believe that the inclusion of all learners in mainstream classrooms is an unrealisable vision for many learners who present differences in learning.

2.7   Though learner voice is thought to be central to the achievement of inclusive
        environments (Ainscow and Messiou 2018) and is a key feature of current
        educational reform in Wales (CCW 2017; Welsh Government 2020b, 2021a), there
        has been little research to date into learner perspectives on grouping practices and
        learning support. When consulted, learners in segregated and lower attaining
        groups tend to express negative views about non-mixed attainment grouping,
        emphasising the importance of collaboration, cooperation and fairness for their peer
        group (Tereshchenko et al. 2019). Research suggests that the experience of being
        in segregated groups has a negative impact on learner confidence and supports the
        development of negative learner identities, particularly for those identified as lower
        attaining (Hallam and Ireson 2006, 2007; Francis et al. 2017b).

2.8   In a recent study of learner experience of non-mixed attainment grouping it was
        found that this can be highly individual in nature. Learners were found to focus on
        different aspects of learning environments – that is, physical, social or pedagogic
        features – and that this led to different experiences of grouping practices, with some
        learners in lower attaining groups expressing satisfaction with these and some
        frustration and feelings of exclusion (Gripton 2020).

2.9   There is some evidence of lower attaining groups providing less intimidating
        learning environments and supporting learners in feeling more competent and not
        'left behind' (Hallam and Ireson 2006). 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). However, it should be noted that all learners benefit from
        smaller and well-structured learning environments that allow for strong, positive
        teacher-learner relationships (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020).

Aims and objectives of the study

2.10   Grouping practices that are used in schools are key influences on whether and how
        learners feel themselves to be included. Gaining learner perspectives is seen as an
        important way of supporting the agenda of inclusion since these go beyond
        traditional views about effective practice and provide distinctive and unique insights
        (Ainscow and Messiou 2018). It is a focus that fits well with Welsh Government
        Covid-19 recovery plans which emphasise improving pupil well-being and

stakeholder confidence and closing the attainment gap between different groups of learners (Welsh Government 2021b).

2.11 The aim of this exploratory research was to provide information about patterns of grouping practices that exist within the education system in Wales for learners who are taught in lower attaining groups, particularly those with additional learning needs, as well as information about the decision making of educators in relation to these. In addition, the research sought to gain insight into learners' experiences of support within groups, including around the time of the pandemic, as well as their priorities in this area for the future. In order to realise these aims, the specific objectives set out below were addressed.

1. To find out what grouping practices exist for learners with ALN in Wales.
2. To understand how these have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. To find out what factors influence educators' decisions about the formation of groups for learning support.
4. To explore learners' experiences of support within lower attaining groups pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, along with their future priorities post-pandemic.

Structure of the report

2.12 The report presents the findings from the research and is structured in the following way:

- Section 3 of this report outlines the method.
- Section 4 presents the findings from information gathered from the survey of ALNCos.
- Section 5 presents the findings about learners' experiences of groups and teachers' views.
- Section 6 provides a discussion of findings and recommendations arising from the study.

3. Methodology

3.1   The study sought to investigate the decision making of educators in relation to grouping practices used with learners who are taught in lower attaining groups, particularly those with additional learning needs. In addition, information about learners' experiences of support within groups was sought. A mixed methods approach to data gathering was taken, which involved an online survey designed for completion by ALNCos in primary and secondary schools in the two regions of the research, as well as in-depth qualitative focus groups and interviews with learners and teachers in secondary schools. This section describes the methods used to gather information for the study, including development of the sample, the survey, and the fieldwork in schools.

Development of the sample

3.2   The project took place in two educational regions of Wales: the Education Achievement Service (EAS) in the south-east region which is an educational consortium covering five local authorities (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport, Torfaen), and three authorities in the south-west region (Swansea, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthen). These two regions were selected on the basis of the range of perspectives that could be brought to the study, but also because of the existence of links with schools by participating HEIs. These links were used to develop the design of the study as well as build the sample, with preliminary meetings and communications taking place with ALN leads and consortium officers in the two regions. Discussions focused on developing a strategy for disseminating the survey to all ALNCos within each region, as well as on identifying suitable schools for the fieldwork element of the research. Specifically, we sought advice on schools that employ a range of grouping practices to provide a stratified sample for the focus groups and interviews.

3.3   The online survey was aimed at ALNCos in all primary and secondary schools and was distributed via contacts provided by ALN leads in each of the two regions as well as directly to individual schools by email. The survey was opened on 7 February 2022 and ALNCos were invited to take part on a voluntary basis. The survey was open for five weeks and, in total, 102 responses that were received were deemed to be eligible for survey analysis. These included 69 responses from

ALNCos in primary schools and 33 responses from ALNCos in secondary schools. This constitutes a 20 per cent response rate for all primary and secondary schools in the two regions.

3.4   Fieldwork took place in seven secondary schools in the two regions, four schools in the EAS region and three schools in the south-west region. Schools were selected based on a range of characteristics in terms of percentage of pupils with ALN, percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals, urban or rural location, deprivation and size[1]. We ensured that there was a representation of schools that are higher and lower than, as well as similar to, the national average for each of these characteristics. Schools were also sought to provide a range of grouping practices used with learners who are lower attaining and learners with additional learning needs and this was identified with ALN leads in the two regions.

3.5   Overall, 14 focus groups were carried out with 70 learners in the seven participating schools, two focus groups taking place in each setting. Of these, there were 36 girls and 34 were boys included aged 12-14 years old. 31 follow up interviews were undertaken with learners who elected to be interviewed individually. All focus groups and interviews took place as face-to-face meetings in schools with appropriate Covid-19 risk assessment protocol and procedures adhered to. Teachers who were leading groups attended by the participating learners were also invited to be interviewed individually and 10 teachers in five schools agreed to this. These interviews took place on Microsoft Teams and were arranged at a time that was convenient for the teacher participant.

Ethics approval

3.6   The study was approved by a sub-committee of the University of South Wales' Faculty of Life Sciences and Education Ethics Committee (number: EEYSW01/2021.2022). Following this, documentation in relation to the approval

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[1] Sources:
Data on learners with ALN (SEN) and eFSM from School Census Results April 2021: Schools Census 2021
Data on deprivation from Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019: Welsh Index Multiple Deprivation 2019
Population data by LA from PLASC: PLASC 2021_22

was logged by members of the research team with the relevant ethics committees in their HEI.

Online survey for ALNCos

3.7   An online survey using Qualtrics survey software was developed by the research team which sought information about patterns of grouping practices, educational benefits of groups, prevalence of the use of grouping and frequency of groups. This made specific reference to learners with additional learning needs, though with information sought in addition about grouping practices used with all learners as a way of gaining an overall comparative picture (see Appendix 1). Information was also sought on what academic and non-academic (eg. for social and emotional support) programmes were in use in schools. Following pre-testing and piloting, the final survey questions asked ALNCos demographic and closed questions on grouping practices at their school. In addition, several open-ended questions were included to gain a more in-depth understanding of ALNCos beliefs about the educational benefits of grouping and how grouping had changed during the pandemic, as well as their priorities in this area for the future.

Focus groups and interviews in schools

3.8   Research into learner experiences of attainment grouping has found that focus groups combined with individual interviews is an effective method for working with young people (Tereshchenko et al. 2019). Focus groups and interviews were therefore used to gather information about learner experiences of support within groups pre-pandemic and during the period of the pandemic, as well as priorities in relation to grouping and support post-pandemic (see Appendix 2 for the structure used for focus groups). Focus groups were carried out in all seven schools across the two target regions with learners in Years 8 and/or 9. Learners who are members of one lower set and one learning support or 'intervention' group in each participating school were invited to take part in the research.

3.9   In addition, follow up interviews were carried out with learners from the focus groups who elected to be interviewed individually. The objective of these interviews was to provide individuals with a more private space to share their views, particularly those

they did not feel comfortable describing in the focus group (Renold et al. 2017) (see Appendix 3 for topic guide for pupil interviews).

3.10   Teachers (n=7) and teaching assistants (n=3) leading the two groups in each participating school were invited to be interviewed individually online. A topic guide was developed for these interviews which focused on the educational benefits of the group, the nature of learning support and specific arrangements around the time of the pandemic (see Appendix 4).

Analysis of data and presentation of findings

3.11   The survey was analysed using SPSS 26.0 to derive statistics on a range of key measures of interest, for example, types of grouping used in participating schools, frequency of grouping, use of the core curriculum, use of specialised curricula. ALNCos were asked to choose from a list of 21 grouping types which included an 'other' option. The groups were derived from the literature and discussions with teachers and ALNCos. Originally, there were 26 grouping types which were then reduced to the final 21 following a thorough discussion by the research team. Of interest for the research was patterns of grouping practices in the two regions. Qualitative information was also derived from the survey, for example, in relation to beliefs about the educational benefits of different types of grouping practices.

3.12   Survey responses were returned anonymously and this means that it is not possible to state with confidence the degree to which findings are generalisable to the population. Therefore, it should be noted that the results of the survey cannot be considered representative of all ALNCos working in the two regions and should be interpreted as a convenience sample of respondents.

3.13   Information gathered from the focus groups and interviews were analysed in the following way:

- Interview audio recordings were fully transcribed and were reviewed by the relevant researcher.

- The significance of transcribed information and audio recordings of focus groups were determined by the data, that is, patterns of information identified, as well as by the questions for the project set out above.

- Researchers individually coded the information to develop a set of findings which were then reviewed and discussed by the research team. Discussion is seen as a way of allowing relationships within the data to be explored and ensure that the research process is rigorous and valid.

3.13   Information gathered for the research provides data about grouping practices used with learners with ALN, but also learners who were taught within a lower attaining group but who were not identified as having additional learning needs. Reporting of findings therefore describe practices for additional learning needs, but also learning support more generally. Given the extensive use of groups in schools, terminology use in this area is complex. In this report we distinguish between academic support and non-academic support, for example, support for emotional well-being. We also distinguish between subject classes, learning support groups and 'special classes'. With the latter, though we are conversant with problems associated with the term 'special', a number of segregated classes are included in this study and we are using nomenclature for these to reflect terminology use in schools.

4. Findings from survey of ALNCos

4.1   There were five main sections to the survey: (1) background characteristics of the ALNCos such as gender, school-type (primary and secondary), and the local authority/region in which their school is situated (2) questions relating to the different types of groups that are used and the reasons behind their use (3) questions relating to the different types of specialised programmes that are used in their school (4) questions that focussed specifically on groups used to support learners with ALN which included the frequency of grouping learners (5) open questions relating to the benefits of groups used in their schools and changes to grouping during the pandemic.

4.2   The data presented here represent the five main sections outlined above. The summed data and percentages are presented in tables corresponding to each section. The n number differs for some of the responses due to the inclusion of multiple responses, optional questions and non-responses. Several chi-square tests for independence were calculated to determine differences across several responses. The chi-square test of independence is used to determine if there is a significant relationship between two categorical variables (i.e., primary and secondary). ALNCos were asked to provide information on five open-ended questions to allow for information regarding the educational benefits of groups used for All learners and those with ALN, changes to how learners with ALN have been grouped during the pandemic, the future priorities on how groups are used post-pandemic for learning support for learners with ALN and what ALNCos had learned about grouping from the pandemic. Open comments were analysed using content analysis (Krippendoorf, 2018). Content analysis is a systematic coding and categorising approach used for exploring textual information (Mayring, 2004). The exact responses and codes are not included in the tables but summarised under the relevant section.

Background characteristics of ALNCos

4.3   One hundred and two ALNCos completed the online survey, with 81% of respondents being female, which is a representative sample since the majority of ALNCos are female. More primary school ALNCos completed the survey than secondary school ALNCos (68% and 32%, respectively). Sixty-one percent from the

south-east Wales region (EAS) and 39 per cent from the south-west region (Partneriaeth).

Types of groups used in schools and reasons behind use

4.4　Table 1 presents the different types of groups used in schools. For primary and secondary school ALNCos, the most frequently reported group for All learners (across all general subjects) was mixed ability (94% and 91%, respectively). While some percentages were similar for primary and secondary schools (ie. ability/achievement, numeracy and literacy), many differed. For example, groups such as student choice, social skills and social cooperation were chosen more by primary than secondary ALNCos. In contrast, tutor groups, streaming and settings were chosen more by secondary than primary school ALNCos. A chi-square test for independence supports these differences by revealing a significant association between groups and school type, x^2 (22) 46.90, p = .002. Table 1 shows the most frequently reported group for both core subjects in primary and secondary schools was ability/achievement. Analysis of differences between primary and secondary schools and maths/numeracy groupings revealed no association, x^2 (12) 12.26, p = .425. Similarly, there was no association between primary and secondary schools and English/literacy groupings, x^2 (12) = 11.71, p = .469. The lack of associations suggests that the selection of groups in both core subjects do not differ significantly across primary and secondary schools.

4.5　Table 2 presents the responses relating to the reasons for using different types of groups with All learners and learners with ALN. The most frequent reasons behind the choices for All learners across primary and secondary schools were learners with ALN are better supported, to raise attainment, improve academic progress and develop pupil skills (Primary: 77%, 69%, 68% and 68%, respectively; Secondary: 67%, 64%, 67% and 67%, respectively). The most frequent reasons for ALN learners in primary school were learners with ALN are better supported and develop pupil skills (92% and 82%, respectively). Similarly, the most frequent reasons for ALN learners in secondary school were learners with ALN are better supported to raise attainment and develop pupil skills (81%, 69% and 69%, respectively). Among the least frequently selected reasons for all learners and those with ALN were staff, space, and resource restrictions.

Table 1 Types of groups used in primary and secondary schools

		Primary N (%)	Secondary N (%)
Types of groups used for all	Mixed ability	64 (94%)	30 (91%)
	Ability/achievement	48 (71%)	27 (71%)
	Similar interests	13 (19%)	7 (20%)
	Task dependent	44 (65%)	15 (46%)
	Table-top grouping	15 (22%)	7 (21%)
	Behavioural grouping	18 (27%)	9 (27%)
	Student choice	35 (52%)	14 (42%)
	Friendship grouping	31 (46%)	15 (46%)
	Social (cooperative)	24 (35%)	8 (24%)
	Social skills	37 (54%)	13 (39%)
	Peer support group	23 (34%)	8 (25%)
	Numeracy group	51 (75%)	26 (79%)
	Literacy group	53 (78%)	26 (79%)
	Reading group	49 (72%)	19 (58%)
	Language/communication	18 (27%)	11 (33%)
	Nurture groups	33 (49%)	17 (52%)
	Specialist resource base	14 (21%)	9 (27%)
	Tutor groups	4 (6%)	12 (36%)
	Streaming	2 (3%)	7 (21%)
	Setting	6 (9%)	9 (27%)
	Special class	3 (4%)	4 (12%)
	Other	2 (3%)	2 (6%)
Groupings used in Numeracy/Maths	Mixed ability	44 (66%)	19 (58%)
	Ability/achievement	52 (78%)	27 (82%)
	Task dependent	41 (61%)	14 (42%)
	Table-top grouping	6 (9%)	3 (9%)
	Behavioural grouping	6 (9%)	0 (0%)
	Student choice	10 (13%)	4 (12%)
	Friendship grouping	8 (12%)	1 (3%)
	Social (cooperative)	6 (9%)	2 (6%)
	Peer support group	19 (28%)	6 (18%)
	Specialist resource base	9 (13%)	3 (9%)
	Special class	3 (5%)	3 (9%)
	Other	3 (5%)	2 (6%)
Groupings used in Literacy/English	Mixed ability	50 (74%)	20 (61%)
	Ability/achievement	55 (81%)	27 (82%)
	Task dependent	39 (57%)	15 (46%)
	Table-top grouping	9 (13%)	3 (9%)
	Behavioural grouping	6 (9%)	0 (0%)
	Student choice	13 (19%)	3 (9%)
	Friendship grouping	10 (15%)	4 (12%)
	Social (cooperative)	12 (18%)	3 (9%)
	Peer support group	21 (31%)	7 (21%)
	Specialist resource base	10 (15%)	4 (12%)
	Special class	3 (4%)	3 (9%)
	Other	3 (4%)	1 (3%)

Table 2 Reasons for grouping practices in schools

		Primary N (%)	Secondary N (%)
All Learners	Large class size	19 (28%)	9 (27%)
	Ease of teaching in smaller groups	37 (54%)	12 (36%)
	Staffing issues	11 (16%)	7 (21%)
	Space restrictions	8 (12%)	5 (15%)
	Resource restrictions	7 (10%)	4 (12%)
	Reduce behavioural issues	18 (27%)	8 (24%)
	Learners with ALN are better supported	52 (77%)	22 (67%)
	Delivery of specialised programmes	26 (38%)	10 (30%)
	Task dependent	30 (44%)	11 (33%)
	Improve academic progress	46 (68%)	22 (67%)
	Encourage better understanding	41 (60%)	19 (58%)
	Raise attainment	47 (69%)	21 (64%)
	Develop pupil skills	46 (68%)	22 (67%)
	Encourage cooperation	44 (65%)	14 (42%)
	Improve student-teacher relationships	10 (15%)	5 (15%)
	Improve group dynamics	17 (25%)	6 (18%)
	Improve peer relationships	27 (40%)	9 (27%)
	Improve class behaviour	19 (28%)	5 (15%)
	Other	3 (4%)	2 (6%)
Learners with ALN	Large class size	4 (7%)	1 (4%)
	Ease of teaching in smaller groups	30 (50%)	9 (35%)
	Staffing issues	7 (12%)	3 (12%)
	Space restrictions	8 (13%)	1 (9%)
	Resource restrictions	9 (15%)	1 (9%)
	Reduce behavioural issues	12 (20%)	4 (15%)
	Learners with ALN are better supported	55 (92%)	21 (81%)
	Delivery of specialised programmes	35 (58%)	17 (65%)
	Task dependent	13 (22%)	5 (19%)
	Improve academic progress	36 (60%)	15 (58%)
	Encourage better understanding	35 (58%)	17 (65%)
	Raise attainment	33 (55%)	18 (69%)
	Develop pupil skills	49 (82%)	18 (69%)
	Encourage cooperation	24 (40%)	12 (46%)
	Improve student-teacher relationships	4 (7%)	0 (0%)
	Improve group dynamics	8 (13%)	6 (23%)
	Improve peer relationships	17 (28%)	9 (35%)
	Improve class behaviour	10 (17%)	9 (35%)
	Other	2 (3%)	1 (4%)

4.6   ALNCos were also asked to rank the reasons behind their grouping choices in order of importance. The most important reason selected for All children was 'children with ALN are better supported' (ranked first by 29 ALNCos), followed by 'raise attainment' (ranked second by 13 ALNCos). Twenty-one ALNCos also chose 'children with ALN are better supported' as the third most important reason behind their grouping choices. As with the selection for All children, the most important reason for grouping decisions for ALN children was 'children with ALN are better supported' (ranked first by 49 ALNCos). The second most important reason chosen was 'develop pupil skills' (ranked second by 17 ALNCos). Eleven ALNCos chose 'encourage better understanding' as the third most important reason behind their grouping choices.

Teaching programmes used in schools

4.7   ALNCos were asked to list any specific programmes they use with groups. They listed 59 programmes for All learners and 91 for learners with ALN. The programmes were mentioned multiple times across ALNCos, and the figures are presented in Table 3. The programmes appear to make up two main categories, individualised programmes and those used for academic purposes. Table 3 shows that schools use academic programmes significantly more than individualised programmes for learners with and without ALN, x^2 (3) 98.08, $p < .001$, but interestingly, the percentage for each programme category is similar for All learners and those with ALN (around a third of the programmes used are individualised and around two-thirds are academic).

Table 3 Teaching programmes used in schools

Specialised programmes	Examples	All Learners	ALN Learners
		N (%)	N (%)
Individualised programmes (e.g. social and emotional support, communication)	Thrive, ELSA, SEAL, Intensive Interaction, Draw & Talk	29 (29%)	65 (30%)
Academic (Literacy/Numeracy)	Read, Write Inc, Lexia, Precision teaching, POPAT, Numicon, Mathletics	70 (71%)	149 (70%)

The frequency of grouping learners with ALN

4.8   Table 4 presents the grouping frequency during an average day or week and how often groups are reassessed for learners with ALN. Thirty percent of primary school ALNCos said that learners with ALN are placed in groups for, on average, two hours per day. Similarly, more secondary school ALNCos stated that children were placed in groups for two hours and all day (20%). A chi-square test for independence revealed an association between frequency of grouping and school-type, x^2 (7) 41.789, $p < .001$, suggesting that the frequency of grouping per day differed between primary and secondary school. In contrast, the frequency of grouping per week was similar across primary and secondary schools and thus did not reach significance, x^2 (1) .091, $p = .763$. For primary schools, the most frequent reassessment of groups was per half-term (35%), and for secondary schools per term (48%). A chi-square reached significance for frequency of reassessment and school-type, x^2 (8) 134.15, $p < .001$, suggesting that the frequency of reassessment differed between primary and secondary schools.

Table 4 Frequency of grouping practices in schools

	Primary	Secondary
Frequency of grouping	N (%)	N (%)
1 hour per day	10 (16%)	1 (4%)
2 hours per day	18 (30%)	5 (20%)
3 hours per day	12 (19%)	2 (8%)
4 hours per day	4 (7%)	1 (4%)
5 hours per day	0 (0%)	3 (12%)
All-day	10 (16%)	5 (20%)
Once per week (if not daily)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Twice per week	1 (20%)	2 (33%)
Three times per week	1 (20%)	2 (33%)
Four times per week	1 (20%)	1 (17%)
Five or more times per week	2 (20%)	1 (17%)
Groups are reassessed when needed	7 (12%)	0 (0%)
Groups are reassessed daily	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
Groups are reassessed weekly	15 (26%)	1 (4%)
Groups are reassessed monthly	6 (11%)	0 (0%)
Groups are reassessed per half term	20 (35%)	10 (44%)
Groups are reassessed per term	8 (14%)	11 (48%)
Groups are reassessed yearly	0 (0%)	1 (4%)

Educational benefits of groups and changes to grouping practices during the pandemic

4.9   ALNCos were asked about the educational benefits of groups used in their school for All learners. Fifty-one responded to this question and the main benefits related to targeting specific work (cited by 15 ALNCos) and support for learners (cited by six). This targeting of work and support was also supported by a further seven ALNCos who explicitly mentioned the benefits of differentiation (lessons tailored to target individual needs). For example, *'differentiated tasks ensure each pupil is working at an appropriate level'* and *'work is geared to the needs and abilities of the child'*. Another benefit cited by a number of ALNCos (12) was how groups improve attainment and maximise progression. For some ALNCos grouping achieved progression through challenging students, for example, *'ability groups challenge all learners at their ability level – promoting success and achievement'* (cited by five ALNCos). Eight ALNCos also mentioned the benefits of smaller classes that provide *'quieter environments and better concentration than larger groups'* and *'allow for quicker identification of misconceptions during the lesson'*. Thirteen ALNCos cited peer support as a benefit of grouping and why this was important, *'interaction with peers either of similar ability or interests provide a supportive learning environment'*. A further eight suggested that peer support has the added benefit of encouraging teamwork and modelling. The final educational benefit cited by ALNCos was the development of social skills (cited by 9). For example, *'encourages social interaction'* and *'better developed social skills'*.

4.10   Fifty-eight ALNCos responded to the question asking for the educational benefits of groups for ALN learners. Similar to those cited for All learners, the benefits for ALN learners centred around being able to target specific work/skills (cited by 18 ALNCos) and support for learners (cited by 13). Here they state that groups are *'specific to them and at an appropriate level where they can access learning with appropriate support'* and *'allows staff to focus on specific needs'.* As with the benefits cited for All learners, three ALNCos mentioned differentiated learning and how this *'improved engagement and progression'* (two further benefits also noted by eight ALNCos). Twelve ALNCos noted the benefit of smaller classes linked to comments of quieter environments improving concentration and reducing distractions (cited by a further seven ALNCos). These benefits were reflected in statements such as: *'smaller class sizes means there is increased support and attention'* and *'less children, less busy environment, less distractions'.* A benefit of

grouping that was noted only a few times for All learners was *'building confidence and self-esteem'*. ALNCos cited this 15 times as a benefit for ALN learners. For a further eight ALNCOs, improved confidence lead to improvements in attainment and progression, *'improved self-esteem and wellbeing improves skills and attainment = better understanding and achievement'.* The final benefit cited by ALNCos specific to ALN learners was the better support received in groups. This was cited ten times and was also related to comments about individualised programmes delivered by experienced and specialist staff (cited six times) which make monitoring of learners more effective (noted four times). Comments included, *'pupils are better supported, targets are appropriately set for their needs, monitoring and reviewing are quicker and smarter'* and *'reassurance and support for learners, delivered by experienced staff tuned into individual need'.*

4.11   ALNCos were also asked about changes to how learners with ALN have been grouped during the pandemic. Over half of ALNCos (55%) responded to this question, and the comments fell into three categories: no change, positive changes, and negative changes. Ten ALNCos stated there were no changes to grouping during the pandemic since many schools used learning hubs. Positive changes included increased and improved support for learners with ALN (cited by eight) reflected in comments such as *'the programmes used have been more focussed on increasing wellbeing, self-esteem, reducing anxiety etc. as well as academic attainment. We have also been able to increase the number of groups/ pupils receiving intervention due to increased funding following the pandemic'.* For some ALNCos (nine), the pandemic had allowed them to create new ways of using groups with learners. For example, *'more social groups and pupil-led activities than previously used. Using pupil interest to engage and support tasks'.* Negative changes included an increase in ALN and support needed, and due to the introduction of 'bubbles', there was a noticeable decrease in cross-class grouping and trained specialists. Six ALNCos cited the increase in the need for specialised support, *'more children needing support; therefore there are more of them [learners with ALN]'.* The comments from a further eight ALNCos concerned with a decrease in cross-class grouping and trained specialists were affecting their usual standard of provision *'with the introduction of class 'bubbles' support staff could only deliver interventions within their own class. This meant that specialised programmes such as ELSA and ComIT were only available in one year group as the school has one*

staff member trained for these interventions. Prior to the pandemic, this member of staff was able to offer the intervention across the whole school'.

4.12   Fifty-two ALNCos responded to the question 'what are your future priorities in relation to how you use groups post-pandemic for learning support for learners with ALN?'. For ten ALNCos, their priorities centred on the learner's needs *'ensuring that all ALN learners have their individual needs catered for in a way that allows them to learn and progress'.* To help ALNCos achieve this, four ALNCos spoke about needing *'more specific targeted activities'* and *'targeted interventions and support'.* For ten ALNCos, their priorities were to *'continue with successful activities'* or those that existed before the pandemic, *'getting back to cross-bubble intervention groups'.* For a further six ALNCos, the pandemic has encouraged them to develop new interventions as part of their future priorities. Some spoke of *'trialling different inclusion methods such as inclusive differentiation and mixed-ability'*, while others had ambitions of developing new *'nurture approaches to learning'.*

4.13   The final open-ended question asked ALNCos if they had learned anything about grouping from the pandemic. Forty responded, and one central theme was noted by seven ALNCos: the importance of peer support and social interaction. In particular, ALNCos stated that *'pupils need to be grouped carefully so that they can support each other'.* For some, this was linked to a child's well-being, *'children need peer interaction to develop their social skills, meet their well-being needs'.* A further three ALNCos mentioned that they had learned how '*crucial well-being and self-confidence was to improvement'* and that more help was needed in this area since the pandemic. Four ALNCos also suggested that *'groups are not the best strategy'* and '*children need more practical activities'* than those afforded to them by online or blended learning.

5. Learners' experiences of groups and teachers' views

5.1   This section reports on the findings from the focus groups and interviews with secondary school pupils and on the interviews with teachers. Here we describe learners' experiences of being in lower attaining groups and intervention-type groups as well as teachers' accounts of the educational purpose of different grouping practices and how groups are organised for learning support. In this section, we also report on the experience of the pandemic and on learner and teacher priorities post-pandemic.

Learner experiences of grouping practices

5.2   Learners were asked about what they liked about the lower set group and/or intervention group of which they were part, as well as what they did not like and what they would like to see in the future in relation to how groups are used post-pandemic. They were also asked about what happened to their group during the Covid-19 pandemic and what their experience of learning was at that time.

Satisfaction with the support provided in groups

5.3   Many learners expressed satisfaction with the support they were provided with in their lower set group or intervention-type group. Satisfaction was described in relation to the pedagogical relationships they experienced in these groups as well as social features of groups and the physical environment. In particular, teachers of lower attaining groups and intervention groups were described as supportive, with words used to describe teachers including patient, friendly, kind, encouraging and easy to talk to. One Year 8 pupil described her teacher as 'amazing', another Year 9 pupil described his teacher as 'the best', and a further pupil said that teachers in her learning support groups were 'not like normal teachers'. When asked why learning support was effective in his special class, one Year 9 pupil said:

> *Because the teachers show respect to me, and I show respect back to them.*
> (Individual interview, Year 9 pupil, special class)

5.4   What many learners emphasised was the effectiveness of the support they received from their teachers, particularly in the way they offered instructions that were understandable, as evidenced in the two comments set out below:

If we don't get the work, then [the teacher] *will come over and give us a little more detail and then we'll get it.* (Focus group, Year 8 pupil, English lower set)

The main teachers, with my dyslexia and all that, if they explain it long and they're going through and through, I'll go off and it blurs out in my mind. But with [teacher], *I ask her and she just cuts it up in short pieces, doesn't cut it up in long pieces, because I remember it and I understand it a bit more and I can do it. But when the teachers do it, I just fade off.* (Individual interview, Year 9 pupil, maths lower set)

5.5   Of particular importance for many of the learners was the knowledge that they could ask for support when they needed it and that support was readily available. One Year 9 pupil, for example, said she appreciated being able to ask for extra instruction in her smaller support group without 'wasting people's time', which was her experience of the larger group. Lower sets and intervention groups were distinguishable for many learners in terms of their favourable staffing ratio, with one learner commenting that he needed that reassurance 'when I'm really struggling', and another saying:

I feel more confident in there because I have teachers around. (Individual interview, Year 9 pupil, special class)

5.6   The fact that groups were often smaller was seen as a benefit since this increased the availability of support. One Year 9 pupil expressed this idea in the following way:

[The class] *is quite small as well so if we need help then the teacher can come over and talk to us individually.* (Focus group, Year 9 pupil, special class)

5.7   Satisfaction was expressed by learners in relation to the nature of learning activities in their lower set or intervention groups. Learning tasks were regularly described as 'easier', at a slower pace, achievable, but also well organised, engaging and 'fun'. Specific learning programmes, such as the literacy software programme IDL, were described as enjoyable and rewarding in the way they allowed the user to see their progress. One Year 9 pupil in an IDL intervention group, commented that he had been doing this programme every year since he was in Year 2 in primary school, but that he still found it enjoyable. Learners expressed an appreciation of the rewards they received for completing learning tasks, such as receiving a sweet or earning a Minecraft session or day trip out of school.

5.8   A positive feature of groups was the relationships learners experienced with their peers. Several of the groups had learners who had been in the same group for two or more years and this meant that learners sometimes knew each other well. Groups were described as safe places where people felt less awkward about asking for and receiving support. Some learners described their peers as 'really good friends' with whom they could 'have a good laugh' and who they looked forward to seeing each day. Academic support, but also social support from peers were further positive features described by many learners:

> *I like it because I sit by my friend. She helps me a lot.* (Individual interview, Year 9 pupil, maths lower set)

> *We can help each other because there are only six of us.* (Focus group, Year 9 pupil, special class)

> *We're mega-friendly and funny – almost like a family.* (Focus group, Year 9 pupil, special class)

5.9   The environment where groups took place was described by many learners as supportive. Noise in larger classes was mentioned frequently as a problem for learning and many learners experienced their support group as a quieter, calmer and more comfortable space for learning. Some pupils described needing a quiet space to be able to regulate themselves emotionally and recover from the pressures of being in a busy, larger classroom. For example, learners in a well-being group, which was made up of six pupils, described it as a quiet and calm space where they could be more spread out, but also as a place where communication was clearer, expectations were different and there was less of a feeling of pressure.

5.10   One Year 8 pupil described his smaller literacy support group as a quiet place where the pressure of learning was reduced. For him, learning in the larger group could be 'stress work' which he defined as:

> *Work that you might not know and then they force you to do it and when you say you don't know what to do then they'll have a go at you 'cause they'll say, why didn't you listen and all that.*

For this pupil his smaller group was described more positively in this way:

> *It can help you and they don't put you under any pressure. It will calm you down and they don't yell at you if you don't do something, and you can always ask questions.* (Focus group, Year 8 pupil, literacy support group)

Dissatisfaction with the group experience

5.11   Dissatisfaction with the experience of groups was expressed by some learners in relation to the level of challenge within pedagogy and the flexibility of groups. Some learners felt that the slower pace of their group was a barrier to making progress and meant they were not stretched in terms of their learning. One pupil in a English lower set expressed this in the following way:

> *You can't get better because it's a slower pace. It's annoying.* (Focus group, Year 8 pupil, English lower set)

5.12   Some learners expressed mixed feelings in this regard, acknowledging the usefulness of the support they received, whilst expressing frustration at the inflexibility of grouping practices in their setting. A Year 9 pupil, who had been taught in the same special class for three years, had mixed feelings about grouping practices in his setting. He said:

> *I don't really like being in set three because I feel like I'm not the same as everybody else, but I know I'm getting my work done and I know it's easier for me. But I feel like, I don't know, I could achieve more. I reckon I could get more work done if I was in a higher set 'cause I'd be more determined to stay in there* (Individual interview, Year 9 pupil, special class)

5.13   This learner stated a belief that learners should be set by subject and should be in higher or lower sets depending on ability in relation to the specific area of learning. Other learners similarly expressed frustration with the lack of movement between groups. One Year 8 pupil in an English lower set commented that moving up a set was only possible if 'you are good at assessments', but that some learners were not. In the same focus group, another pupil commented:

> *There's no opportunity to change a class. So, say if you're succeeding in the classroom, you can't get up into a higher set. You're stuck in this set for the whole year.* (Focus group, Year 8 pupil, English lower set)

5.14   Some pupils expressed dissatisfaction with missing subject lessons they liked. For some of those taught within a special class, this meant a reduced curriculum and missing subjects such as history, geography, and RE. Some learners noted that there had been no consultation about this and that they were simply expected to be in the special class full-time, though for learners attending intervention groups,

some noted they could miss a support session if they wished to stay in a lesson. A number of learners described feeling that expectations about what they were capable of was low amongst teachers and that this was a problem. One Year 8 pupil commented:

What I don't like about being in [class name] is the way they treat you like you are still in Year Two. They still treat us like we are still little. Sometimes it can help, sometimes it can't. If they treat us like we are little, we end up expecting that is what is going to happen throughout the whole year and it's not… We should all get treated the same, not some people getting treated like little kids and other people getting treated like they are already adults (Individual interview, Year 8 pupil, literacy support group)

5.15   Conditions within support groups were seen by some learners as a barrier to learning. Some learners commented that the group could be noisy, that poor pupil behaviour could be a problem and that it was possible to feel intimidated by peers within the group, for example, by name calling or bullying. One Year 9 special class complained of a group of boys in the class who intimidated and mocked other learners, saying that this had been the case since Year 7 when they had commenced being taught full-time in the class. When asked about what teachers needed to consider when organising groups, most learners mentioned the importance of ensuring that people 'got along' with each other, worked well together and did not feel intimidated.

5.16   Stigmatisation because of being in a lower set was seen as an issue that existed outside of a group. Though not all learners when asked thought this was a problem within their school, some did, for example, this Year 9 pupil who said:

We're such a low set, we get called names because of it. It's not very nice. I don't like it. But you do get it don't you, just because you're in a lower set. They think they're one up on you. (Focus group, Year 9 pupil, special class)

5.17   A small number of pupils described grouping practices in their setting in terms of wider ethical issues, for example, in relation to fairness, tolerance and respect for diversity. Several pupils said they should be thought of as equal to all other learners in their school. One Year 8 pupil noted that the use of setting on the basis of ability was an unfair practice that publicly and unfairly marked out people as unequal. This pupil felt that all teachers needed to be competent in teaching learners who required additional support for their learning. She commented:

I don't like the teachers showing who is intelligent and people who are not intelligent. It's like comparing who is intelligent and who is not…Some teachers don't give more details on the subject or something like that. (Focus group, Year 8 pupil, English lower set)

5.18   Learners described different identities in relation to difference. One Year 9 pupil in a maths lower set group did not identify as disabled and described disabled learners as needing to be taught in segregated groups. By contrast, another Year 9 pupil identified with disabled learners, saying the following:

I wish people would understand why we're in that group, such as this is for confidence not just for learning. There's also [another pupil] *in a wheelchair, he can't do everything and sometimes people blame him for not doing something he can't himself…We're not dull, we're not dumb, we're people who just need a little bit of support and help with our GCSEs.* (Individual interview, Year 9 pupil, special support class)

5.19   Negative identities were described by some learners using words such as 'dull', 'dumb', 'weirdos' and 'not the most clever of classes'. Sometimes learners described having a range of feelings about the groups they were taught in, including mixed feelings about being a member but also different feelings about their own capabilities. For example, a Year 8 pupil in a support group described how she had different views of her capability at different times, making the following comment:

Sometimes I feel normal, sometimes I feel like I am a little kid again, sometimes I feel like I am ready for anything. (Individual interview, Year 8 pupil, literacy support group)

Learners' experiences of support during the Covid-19 pandemic

5.20   The experience of learning during the pandemic was described by learners in almost wholly negative ways. Many learners said that they found learning more difficult online with the main reason given for this being the lack of immediate and effective support. A typical comment was this from a Year 9 pupil:

I didn't do it online, when we were in lockdown, I didn't do it. I found it hard, I didn't know what to do. (Individual interview, Year 9 pupil, maths lower set)

5.21   Many of the groups we spoke to ceased to exist during the pandemic with learners returning to their form or subject classes for the purpose of teaching, with less or no

one-to-one support available. Some learners mentioned that their families tried to help them with their work, but that this was 'not the full help' that they were used to in school. One Year 8 pupil, for example, said that he found working online hard and that he found the face to face support he was used to in school much more helpful. A few learners mentioned that they had been supported by their support teachers over the phone, but that this meant teachers were less able to gauge when they really understood something and what they needed to explain further.

5.22   Some learners mentioned that they initially enjoyed the freedom and lack of pressure of learning at home, but that they quickly become bored. Several learners said that they did very little learning during the pandemic and spent the time sleeping, going out on their bike or playing video games. A number of learners said that they found it a relief to come back to school, mentioning seeing their friends again as an important part of this experience.

Learners' messages to teachers about grouping practices

5.23   When asked about what messages they wanted to convey to teachers about grouping practices in their setting, many learners stated that they wanted their support groups to continue in the current form. In some focus groups, this was a unanimous response with all learners saying that the support they received was essential to their learning and sense of well-being in school. Some learners commented that the idea of being taught in a larger class was worrisome, with one Year 9 pupil in a special class, for example, commenting that 'going back to class would be hard'. Many learners, however, felt that teachers needed to prioritise friendships in organising groups. Some learners said that it was important someone should have at least one friend in a group and should not feel isolated. Being able to get along, not feeling intimidated and feeling a sense of belonging in a group were further important considerations for teachers, who were recommended by some learners to consult them more about the formation of groups.

5.24   One Year 8 pupil in an English lower set thought setting should be done on the basis of learner confidence rather than intelligence, that is, people who felt themselves less able to do the work needing to be prioritised. Some learners said they wanted to be more challenged in terms of learning tasks so that they did not have 'easy work' all the time. Some learners thought that groups needed to be organised more flexibly, that is, learners should not be taught in the same class on

a full-time basis or that there should be more movement between higher and lower sets. A Year 9 pupil who had been in the same special support class for three years felt strongly about this and said:

> *I think we should be in different sets for different things. We have a classmate and he's brilliant at maths, but he's not so good at English. But it's different for other people. I think we should be in higher sets for different things and then lower sets for different things.* (Focus group, Year 9 pupil, special class)

5.25 Though many learners agreed that they should be grouped according to ability, one Year 8 pupil in a literacy support group said that there should be more mixed ability teaching within her school. She based her arguments on the opportunities for peer support that such groups provide, saying:

> *If you know somebody understands the topic or has different things to bring to the group, so if somebody is good at writing, somebody is good at reading, somebody is good at researching, somebody is good at knowing how to set it out, you should mix up those skills. They can help each other then. What's the point of having everyone in a group who doesn't understand.* (Focus group, Year 8 pupil, literacy support group)

5.26 Some learners suggested that subject teachers needed to reflect on and change their practices. This was expressed by a Year 9 pupil in a special class who suggested that teachers needed to consider how they communicate when they support learners. Similarly, one Year 8 pupil suggested that the onus was on teachers to provide 'more details' when setting tasks. Finally, Year 8 and 9 learners within a behaviour support group felt that strictness, which they defined as teachers being 'hard on you and shouting at you', was not helpful and resulted in lack of motivation. One Year 9 pupil in this group made the following comment:

> *In English, if I literally say one word, it could even be about the work, I get shouted at. But in maths, if I'm talking, I don't get shouted out and I do more work in maths than I do in English.* (Focus group, Year 9 pupil, behaviour support group)

Teachers' views of grouping practices

5.27   Teachers and teaching assistants who were leading the groups and classes that were described in the learner focus groups were interviewed on an individual basis. They were asked about the educational purpose of different grouping practices and how groups are organised for learning support, as well as the challenges of working with their groups and their experience of the pandemic.

Educational benefits of lower attaining and intervention-type groups

5.28   Many teachers and teaching assistants explained the purpose of their group in terms of its academic benefits to learners. Groups were invariably described as small in size and with higher staffing ratios and therefore conducive to providing learners with more frequent and intensive support than could be offered in larger subject classes. The nature of support was described in terms of learning 'at a more appropriate rate', applying more 'scaffolding' for learning, providing more individualised support, and giving learners strategies for completing tasks. Other forms of support included providing highly structured tasks which allowed immediate feedback, providing a higher proportion of listening activities than would usually be the case in subject classes, 'discussing rather than writing' and carrying out group writing, and using alternative recording methods, specifically laptop computers. Software programmes were frequently being used in groups, especially for literacy and numeracy support, to make assessments of individual needs, provide learning resources and monitor the progress of learners.

5.29   Some teachers expressed a strong belief that grouping learners based on attainment was necessary given the wide discrepancy in the level of difficulty of academic tasks for learners of the same age. This was most clearly expressed by a teacher of a Year 8 maths lower set:

> *The actual maths that they've got to do, the gap widens very, very quickly and if they were in the same class as say, for example, Set 1, the very high ability ones, the actual work they're doing is so vastly different, it would be very difficult to offer the support that they need. I think that the higher ability ones would also suffer because it would be very difficult to challenge them in the way that they need. It's just because the level of difficulty of the maths is so vastly different, even from such a young age. It's mainly to do with recall with the lower ability ones. It's not necessarily they couldn't do it at the time, it's*

more to do with struggling with being able to recall it in the next lesson or two weeks' time, whatever. So they need a lot more, we need to go over it a lot more, a lot more consolidation, a lot more repetitive work, whereas the higher ability ones need the challenge, they need to be pushed further on. If they were mixed I don't think anyone would get the support they need basically and I think everyone would lose out.

5.30   Many teachers and teaching assistants described their group as having purpose in terms of the social and emotional support it provided to learners, some groups having this as a dual aim along with academic benefit and some as a sole aim, for example, well-being groups. Support groups were frequently described as more comfortable learning environments than subject classes where learners felt learning was more manageable and enjoyable, where 'little wins' could be celebrated more easily, and where learners felt safer and better understood. Building the confidence of learners – expressed by one learning co-ordinator as changing 'I can't' mind-sets into 'I can' – was seen by many as a vital aspect of their role. When asked about the main purpose of her support group, one Year 8 literacy support teacher said:

It's building their confidence really and believing in themselves because I think they are, a lot of the time, getting some negative feedback. The way they feel about their ability perhaps and comparing themselves to other people, I think that's a challenge.

5.31   Teachers said that some of their learners had had poor prior experiences of learning, felt anxious about being in larger subject classes and found it difficult to come to school. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was described by many as creating greater numbers of such learners. For this group of learners, the small size of classes and higher staffing ratios was thought to be supportive since this allowed greater flexibility to respond to learners' immediate needs. Teachers' personal qualities were felt to be important however, specifically teachers needing to be empathetic, patient, encouraging, and 'progressive minded'. Building strong, supportive relationships, being a consistent presence in learners' lives, and creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere within classrooms were seen as essential practices. The importance of establishing feelings of togetherness and belonging was described by one teacher, who noted that this was not always easily done:

I do try and build this team ethic in the class, that we are a team and it's all "we" and "us" it's not "you" and "me". I try and build it up and it is nice that

particular group, I know they love being there. Some don't, some just don't like being there but they don't like being in school full stop – but we're building up. (Teacher of Year 9 special class)

5.32   Some well-being groups were described as having the purpose of supporting learners who were experiencing difficulty with particular subject teachers. Staff saw their role as engaging in 'restorative conversations' with teachers, whilst giving learners 'time out' in a setting that was less pressurised. One teaching assistant, who was leading this kind of well-being support group, commented:

> *I feel they benefit by having someone that doesn't judge them, doesn't scold them if you like for misbehaving and someone who they feel is on their side.* (Teaching assistant working with Year 8 well-being support group)

5.33   A range of other purposes were given for the existence of groups including providing support at break-times, providing support for homework, allowing individualised timetables to be followed, delivering specialised programmes, and providing intensive support for skills development, for example, in reading, spelling and the vocabulary needed for curricular subjects.

5.34   Five out of the fourteen focus groups we spoke to existed as a discrete class where mostly learners with additional learning needs were taught for all their lessons. Some of these classes had had the same membership for a number of years in succession and some schools said they had such a class in each year group. In their interviews, several teachers expressed a strong belief in the effectiveness of this arrangement:

> *I think it works, the grouping practice of having an ALN class. It does work with us because instead of having them sort of dotted around in other classes, where they might be flying under the radar and really struggling, the TAs that work with this class are really vigilant and they know them really well because they're with them all the time and I think their needs are met before they escalate into something a bit dire.* (Teacher of Year 8 special class)

5.35   By contrast, some teachers and teaching assistants felt that they were providing support that could be provided in the larger class, but that this depended on the disposition of individual teachers. One teaching assistant who ran literacy support groups expressed the hope that that new ALN Code would bring about change in this respect:

I think with the new ALN Code hopefully those teachers that are not quite as supportive of those students and of ALN and the flexibility that's needed in teaching, I think it should hopefully make a bit of difference…That's going to help us as well because, a lot of the time, the onus is put on us to sort out issues in the classroom that really can be tackled with just a little bit of tweaking.

Challenges associated with lower attaining and intervention-type groups

5.36   Several challenges associated with working with lower attaining and intervention-type groups were described by teachers and teaching assistants. Amongst these was learner awareness of the low attaining nature of their group, which was described as causing problems in terms of confidence, motivation and behaviour. The teacher of a Year 9 special class thought that the use of attainment grouping early on in education gave rise to an enduring belief for the individual in their lack of ability. She commented:

They were put in the bottom table in primary school for maths and I think that's more harmful than anything else. They come to high school thinking, because they've been put in that group for maths and they stay on that table then for all the other subjects, they automatically think that maths means, because they struggled in maths, it means that they are stupid and that maths is the indicator of their intelligence.

5.37   Some teachers said that steps had been taken in their settings to be discrete about the nature of learning groups, so that learners were not easily identified as in need of additional support. In one setting, for example, a new head teacher had asked for the removal of alphabetic letters used to designate the rank order of groups in the school and that this strategy was helping to protect learners from stigma. Stigma attached to attending learning support groups was described by some teachers as a problem, however, as evidenced by the following two comments:

They don't like it [being in the lowest set]. *Yes, that is an issue. There is a stigma definitely. They know that it's the bottom set and they do say oh, we're in the thick group or things like that. So yes, that is a disadvantage. It doesn't help with self-esteem and doesn't help with morale. It does switch some of*

them off, they think oh well we're thick anyway, we can't do maths 'cause we're in Set 4, which yes is an issue. (Teacher of Year 8 maths lower set)

To be honest I think most of the children in our school are very tolerant and most of them don't stigmatise people, but I think there are always going to be some people who might go, oh you're in [lower set name] *or you're in the nurture group and you don't go to normal lessons, that type of thing.* (Teacher of Year 8 literacy support group)

5.38   Some teachers commented that attitudes to receiving learning support changed over the course of time for learners, with learners in Years 10 and 11 becoming increasingly dissatisfied with attending intervention-type groups. Several teachers mentioned that learners did not always like missing subject lessons and that Year 7 learners sometimes did not like being taken out of class for an intervention group to begin with, though eventually got used to the idea and often grew to like it. One teacher of a literacy intervention group said:

[When they are first taken out] *they hate it, to be honest. They think why am I out? I don't want to be out. It's almost like a stigma to it. As the years go on, they realise that it is a benefit to them and lots of pupils want to attend which they're not supposed to. They see it as a positive rather than a negative now.* (Teacher of Year 9 literacy support group)

5.39   Though support groups were often described as 'safe havens' for learners, some groups were described as including members who could be intimidating and whose behaviour had a negative impact on others within the group. Some teachers felt that membership of the group was itself a cause for low confidence in learners. A Year 8 teacher of a maths lower set made the following comment:

I think the only challenge for them really is the fact that they're in Set 4 and it's getting their head round that and understanding that doesn't mean you can't do maths, it just means that you need to be taught to your ability so that you can do maths. Getting their head around that it doesn't necessarily mean you can't do it because you're in a low set, it just means that you need to be taught in a different way.

Learning support during the pandemic

5.40   Almost all learning support groups ceased during the lockdown phase of the pandemic. Teachers explained that most programmes used with groups involved high levels of experiential learning and were therefore difficult to deliver online. Support was provided in other ways however, for example, by developing learning activities that could be used online, by supplying learners with equipment and WiFi access, by phoning learners at home to provide reassurance and a regular point of contact, and by bringing some learners into the school to provide them with 'hub-type' provision.

5.41   Emotional support for anxiety, feelings of isolation and feelings of dis-engagement from learning was described by many teachers and teaching assistants as the focus of their work during this time. Many learners were not engaged with online learning, one teaching assistant of a literacy intervention group, for example, noting that only 25 out of 80 learners she supported were present online. Though one ALNCo felt that some learners appreciated online learning because it provided a quieter learning environment and one-to-one engagement with teachers, other teachers described learners as developing a 'lazy streak' and becoming disengaged.

5.42   The impact of the pandemic was described in mixed ways. One teacher of a literacy support group noted that there had been no fall in attainment scores for learners carrying out the IDL programme she delivered. However, a teaching assistant who was also working with a literacy support group found that 60 per cent of Year 8 learners post-pandemic were requiring the Accelerated Reader programme, whilst another teaching assistant noted that the reading ages of the current Year 7 intake were below the usual level. The attendance of learners, which was described as generally lower than average pre-pandemic, was highlighted by a number of teachers as a growing problem. Learners were described as more anxious post-pandemic, with an increased number of learners feeling uncomfortable about going into subject classes. Finally, it was noted by some teachers that the attainment gap between higher and lower attaining learners in their school had widened.

6. Discussion and recommendations

6.1   The aim of this exploratory research was to gather information about patterns of grouping practices that exist within the education system in Wales as they relate to learners who are taught in lower attaining groups, particularly those with additional learning needs. Information was sought about learners' experiences of grouping practices and teachers' decision making in relation to these both pre- and during the Covid-19 pandemic, along with future priorities post-pandemic.

6.2   Findings from the survey of ALNCos suggest that the most frequently used group across primary and secondary phases for all learners was mixed ability, but for core subjects in both phases the grouping was ability based. The reported figure of 82 per cent of secondary age learners taught in ability groups for maths and English is similar to figures found elsewhere in the UK (Gripton 2020; Taylor et al. 2019; OECD 2013).

6.3   A wide range of different grouping practices were described by schools with the primary purpose of these given as support for academic learning. Grouping learners was viewed as an effective way of raising attainment and ensuring progress for all learners. Though a number of ALNCos in primary schools reported social support as an important factor in decision making, across age phases the academic opportunities offered by groups were given as the main purpose of different grouping practices for all learners, but particularly for those with additional learning needs.

6.4   A wide range of teaching programmes were reported as being used by schools. This was the case for all learners, though for those with additional learning needs the range of programmes was doubled. At two-thirds, the majority of these had an academic focus, though a number of programmes for personal and social-emotional support were also being used.

6.5   Findings suggest a strong belief by ALNCos in the use of attainment grouping for effective practice and raising standards. The educational benefits of groups were described in terms of providing appropriate levels of support and challenge as well as more conducive learning environments for all learners and, again, this reflects findings elsewhere (Francis et al. 2017a). For learners with ALN, grouping by attainment was seen as a way of building confidence and self-esteem and of providing effective learning environments that ensure greater progress, though for

high attaining learners grouping was also described as important. Primary aged learners with ALN most often spent two hours per day in groups, whilst secondary aged learners with ALN most often spent two hours per day or all day in a group for learning support.

6.6 A strong investment in grouping practices for learning support was expressed by learners and teachers alike. Learners expressed appreciation of the favourable teacher-pupil relationships and positive attitudes they experienced in lower attaining groups and intervention groups, describing these groups as providing engaging activities, effective instruction and readily available support. The views of learners and teachers were aligned in terms of seeing such groups as offering a less pressured learning environment. Research findings in relation to positive aspects of lower attaining groups, such as, development of supportive pedagogical relationships aided by smaller class sizes (Mazenod et al. 2019), provision of less intimidating learning environments where learners do not left behind (Hallam and Ireson 2006), and enhanced opportunities for meeting individual needs (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018), are of relevance here. Important considerations for teachers who participated in this study included establishing a good pace for learning along with a culture of competency and community.

6.7 In many instances learners described favourable peer relations in lower attaining and intervention groups. This was often mentioned in relation to the amount of time learners spent with each other and highlights the lack of movement between groups that was the experience of many participants in the study. Some learners had been in the same group for the duration of their time in secondary school and expressed frustration about this. Lack of movement and low teacher expectations are amongst key problems associated with ability grouping (Dunne 2011; Taylor et al. 2018) and it appears from this study that, though teachers believed in learner progress, they also invested in 'fixed ability thinking' (Hart and Drummond 2013). This is the belief that learning is the result of fixed amounts of ability, with the internal resources of the learner as the dominant factor in learning. Many teachers talked in terms of 'high' and 'low' ability, though it should be noted that some pinpointed factors external to learners, such as unhelpful practices in subject classrooms, as the reason for segregated groups.

6.8 There was some evidence in the study of negative learner identities which is a further problem associated with ability grouping (Francis et al. 2017b). As with the

findings from the study carried out by Gripton (2020), learners appeared to have individualised responses to being placed in lower attaining and intervention groups, some expressing satisfaction and some dissatisfaction. Teachers attested to the stigmatising nature of these groups in some settings, though often described learners as becoming gradually accepting of their placement. A possible interpretation of this is the internalisation by learners over time of the low expectations of their teachers (Nieto and Bode 2012).

6.9   The experience of learning during the period of the pandemic was described in wholly negative ways by learners who felt that the lack of face-to-face support made learning more difficult. Many learners described their disengagement from learning during this period. ALNCos and teachers provided a more mixed picture with some positive experiences described, such as increased resource being available which made enhanced provision of social-emotional support possible. Challenges were also reported by these participants, however, including difficulties in relation to providing support online and ongoing learner disengagement. Long-term impact of the pandemic was also described in terms of a realisation of the importance of peer support and social interaction for learners as well as the increase in numbers of learners continuing to require both academic and social-emotional support.

6.10   Research into attainment grouping used in schools highlights the fact that a nuanced picture is important, with both positive and negative features of groups fully captured and understood (Hallam and Ireson 2006; Tereshchenko et al. 2019). This seems to be of relevance to this study which indicates features of grouping practices that are important to both learners and teachers, as well as problems arising from such practices.

Limitations

6.11   Data collection for the research was carried out in January-March 2022 which was at the height of the Omicron variant outbreak during the Covid-19 pandemic. This caused high staff and learner absences in schools and had an impact on the recruitment of schools for this research. The target sample for the fieldwork element of the study was ten schools (five in each region), but this was not achieved in either region. Two schools that did not in the end participate in the research expressed an interest but subsequently reported that they were unable to be involved because of staff absences. We do not have specific information about the

uptake of the survey for ALNCos, but it is likely that participation in this was also affected by developments in the pandemic at the time of its distribution.

6.12   In relation to the survey, we note a further limitation of the research is that ALNCo respondents cannot be considered representative. Survey responses were returned anonymously and this means that it is not possible to state with confidence the degree to which findings are generalisable to the population.

Recommendations from the study

6.13   The following are recommendations from the research and are taken directly from research participants' suggestions about future priorities as well as from issues that emerged from analysis of the data. Recommendations are as follows:

6.14   A strong message from learners was that support is essential to their learning and sense of well-being in school and needs to be readily available. Positive teacher-pupil relationships and less pressured learning environments are crucially important in this. Emerging evidence suggests that the experience of the pandemic has resulted in widening of the attainment gap between higher and lower attaining learners, making learning support even more critical. It is not clear from the research, however, that what is offered to learners with additional learning needs and learners in lower attaining groups is markedly different to what is offered to learners more generally. It is recommended therefore that renewed emphasis is put on inclusive education as a goal for education during the recovery period, with a focus on inclusive values and the nature of inclusive practices in mainstream classrooms.

6.15   Though regular monitoring of groups was reported in the survey of ALNCos, data gathered from interviews and focus groups strongly suggest a lack of fluidity in groups in schools. A recommendation is therefore that more emphasis is put on the importance of flexibility in the use of groups, for example, increasing the use of setting by individual subject and reducing the incidence of 'special classes' attended on a full-time basis. It is also recommended that learners are fully consulted in relation to judgements about their ability and placement.

6.16   The research suggests that ability grouping is widespread across age phases supported by a strong belief by practitioners in the effectiveness of this. Given that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the experience of disadvantage for some, the potentially negative impact on progress of those in lower attaining groups

threatens to impede Welsh Government recovery plans. It is recommended therefore that the evidence base in relation to the use of ability grouping in schools is more widely disseminated as a way of encouraging teacher reflection and the development of more effective practices.

6.17   Finally, it is recommended that further research is carried out in this area. Grouping practices are pervasive in schools and structure curriculum and pedagogy in many cases. This research was an exploratory study that raises questions about a number of issues including, the make-up of groups in relation to diversity, for example, in terms of gender, race and socio-economic status, the fluidity of grouping practices in terms of learner membership, and the differential nature of curriculum and pedagogy used with different types of groups. These issues are critically important to practice but are under-researched at the moment within the Welsh context. The widespread use of published teaching programmes was a finding of this study and research into the evidence base for these would also be important.

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Appendix 1 – Online survey for ALNCos

ALNCo Survey

Research study: Experiences of groups for learning support pre-, during and post-pandemic

Q1. Gender

◯ Male

◯ Female

◯ Non-binary / third gender

◯ Prefer not to say

◯ Prefer to self-describe (add choice)

_____

Q2. School type

◯ Mainstream

◯ Special School

◯ Other

Q3. Age range of the students at your school.

◯ 3-4 (Nursery)

◯ 5-10 (Primary)

◯ 3-10 (Nursery and Primary)

◯ 11-16 (Secondary)

◯ 5-16 (Primary and Secondary)

◯ 3-16 (Nursery, Primary and Secondary)

◯ 16-18 (Sixth Form)

◯ 11-18 (Secondary and Sixth Form)

◯ 5-18 (Primary, Secondary and Sixth Form)

○ 3-18 (Nursery, Primary, Secondary and Sixth Form)

Q4. The Local Authority/Region in which your school is situated

○ South East Wales (EAS: Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport and Torfaen)

○ South West Wales (Partneriaeth: Swansea, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire)

○ Other

Questions 5-10 will focus on the different types of groups that are used in your school.
Q5. What type of groups are used in your school for **ALL** children/young people? Please select all that apply.

☐ Mixed-ability

☐ Ability/achievement

☐ Similar interests

☐ Task dependent

☐ Table-top grouping

☐ Behavioural grouping

☐ Student choice

☐ Friendship grouping

☐ Social (cooperative)

☐ Social skills

☐ Peer support group

☐ Numeracy group

☐ Literacy group

☐ Reading group

☐ Language/communication

☐ Nurture groups

☐ Specialist resource base

☐ Tutor groups (e.g., for pastoral support)

☐ Streaming (ability groups operate for most lessons)

☐ Setting (ability groups operate for individual subjects)

☐ Special class

☐ Other – please state other groups you use.

_____

Q6. Thinking of the groupings you selected, which are used when teaching **Numeracy/Maths**? Please select all that apply.

☐ Mixed-ability

☐ Ability/achievement

☐ Task dependent

☐ Table-top grouping

☐ Behavioural grouping

☐ Student choice

☐ Friendship grouping

☐ Social (cooperative)

☐ Peer support group

☐ Specialist resource base

☐ Special class

☐ Other – please state other groups used for Maths/Numeracy

_____

Q7. Thinking of the groupings you selected, which are used when teaching **Literacy/English**? Please select all that apply.

☐ Mixed-ability

☐ Ability/achievement

☐ Task dependent

☐ Table-top grouping

☐ Behavioural grouping

☐ Student choice

☐ Friendship grouping

☐ Social (cooperative)

☐ Peer support group

☐ Specialist resource base

☐ Special class

☐ Other – please state other groups used for Literacy/English

_____

Q8. What are the reasons for using the above groups in your school with **ALL** children/young people? Please select all that apply.

☐ Large class size

☐ Ease of teaching in smaller groups

☐ Staffing issues

☐ Space restrictions

☐ Resource restrictions

☐ Reduce behavioural issues

☐ Learners with ALN are better supported

☐ Delivery of 53pecialized programmes

☐ Task-dependent

☐ Improve academic progress

☐ Encourage better understanding

☐ Raise attainment

☐ Develop pupil skills

☐ Encourage cooperation

☐ Improve student-teacher relationships

☐ Improve group dynamics

☐ Improve peer relationships

☐ Improve class behaviour

☐ Other – please state other reasons behind your grouping choices.
_____

Carry Forward Selected Choices from "Q8. What are the reasons for using the above groups in your school with ALL children/young people? Please select all that apply."

Q9. Below are your chosen reasons for grouping **ALL** students. Please rank in order of importance - where 1 is most important (drag and drop in rank order).
_____ Large class size
_____ Ease of teaching in smaller groups
_____ Staffing issues
_____ Space restrictions
_____ Resource restrictions

_____ Reduce behavioural issues
_____ Learners with ALN are better supported
_____ Delivery of specialised programmes
_____ Task-dependent
_____ Improve academic progress
_____ Encourage better understanding
_____ Raise attainment
_____ Develop pupil skills
_____ Encourage cooperation
_____ Improve student-teacher relationships
_____ Improve group dynamics
_____ Improve peer relationships
_____ Improve class behaviour
_____ Other – please state other reasons behind your grouping choices.

Q10. Please list any specialised programmes you use with **ALL** students.
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Questions 11-17 will focus specifically on groups used to support learners with additional learning needs (ALN).

Q11. Thinking about learners with **ALN**, what are the reasons for using your chosen groups? Please select all that apply.

☐ Large class size

☐ Ease of teaching in smaller groups

☐ Staffing issues

☐ Space restrictions

☐ Resource restrictions

☐ Reduce behavioural issues

☐ Learners with ALN are better supported

☐ Delivery of specialised programmes

☐ Task-dependent

☐ Improve academic progress

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☐ Encourage better understanding

☐ Raise attainment

☐ Develop pupil skills

☐ Encourage cooperation

☐ Improve student-teacher relationships

☐ Improve group dynamics

☐ Improve peer relationships

☐ Improve class behaviour

☐ Other – please state other reasons behind your grouping choices.
_____

Carry Forward Selected Choices from "Questions 11-17 will focus specifically on groups used to support learners with additional learning needs (ALN).   Q11. Thinking about learners with ALN, what are the reasons for using your chosen groups? Please select all that apply."

Q12. Below are your chosen reasons for grouping learners with ALN. Please rank in order of importance - where 1 is most important (drag and drop in rank order).
_____ Large class size
_____ Ease of teaching in smaller groups
_____ Staffing issues
_____ Space restrictions
_____ Resource restrictions
_____ Reduce behavioural issues
_____ Learners with ALN are better supported
_____ Delivery of specialised programmes
_____ Task-dependent
_____ Improve academic progress
_____ Encourage better understanding
_____ Raise attainment
_____ Develop pupil skills
_____ Encourage cooperation
_____ Improve student-teacher relationships
_____ Improve group dynamics
_____ Improve peer relationships
_____ Improve class behaviour
_____ Other – please state other reasons behind your grouping choices.

Q13. Please list any specialised programmes you use with learners with **ALN.**

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Q14. Thinking about the frequency of grouping learners with **ALN** at your school, on average, how many times per day are children/young people placed in groups?

○ Students are not grouped daily

○ 1 hour

○ 2 hours

○ 3 hours

○ 4 hours

○ 5 hours

○ All day

Display This Question:
If Q14. Thinking about the frequency of grouping learners with ALN at your school, on average, how m... = Students are not grouped daily

Q15. If groups are not part of the daily routine, on average, how many times a week are learners with **ALN** placed in groups?

○ Once

○ Twice

○ Three times

○ Four times

○ Five or more

16. How often are the groups reassessed for learners with **ALN**?

○ Weekly

○ Monthly

○ Per half term

○ Per term

○ Yearly

○ Other - please state any other time
_____

Q17. What do you think are the main educational benefits of groups used in your school for learners with **ALN**?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Q18. What do you think are the main educational benefits of groups used in your school for **ALL** children/young people?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Q19. Have changes been made to the way in which learners with **ALN** have been grouped during the pandemic? If so, how have they changed?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Q20. What are your future priorities in relation to how you use groups post-pandemic for learning support for learners with **ALN**?
_____

Q21. What, if anything, have you learned about grouping from the pandemic?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Q22. How many children/young people do you have on the SEN register at your school? (if usure of the exact figure, please use an approximate figure).
_____

Q23. How many children/young people do you expect to have on the new ALN register at your school? (if usure of the exact figure, please use an approximate figure).

_____

Appendix 2 – Focus group structure

Warm up	Do a round:
	1. How long have you been coming?
	2. What would you say you typically do in this group?
Empty chair technique	Indicate the empty chair. If someone was joining this group – do a round for each question:
	1. What would you tell them is good about the group – what do you like about coming to the group?
	2. What would you tell them that was not so good about the group – what do you not like about coming to the group?
	3. What do they need to know about the group, what would you say?
Pandemic/post-pandemic	1. During the pandemic, how did your experience of being taught in this group change?
	2. What happened in terms of learning support? How did this compare with how you were supported before the pandemic?
	3. What do you think are the important things that teachers need to think about when they put learners into groups?
	4. What would you like to see in terms of groups and grouping in school in the future?

Appendix 3 – Topic guide for pupil interviews

1. What's the name of your group? Are you in any other groups?

2. What are other groups called? What's the difference between the groups?

3. What's your favourite thing about [the group]? And second favourite?

4. What don't you like about being in [the group]? What else don't you like?

5. Which group is your favourite? Why? Which don't you like? Why?

6. During the pandemic, how did the group(s) change?

7. What did this feel like?

8. What do you think teachers need to think about when they put learners into groups? Why?

9. [Thinking about one of the groups you belong to] How do you feel when you join your group?

10. What would you like to see in the future for groups?

Appendix 4 – Topic guide for teacher interviews

1. What different types of groups do you teach during a typical school week?

2. Can you describe the way in which grouping is used generally in your setting to support learners with ALN.

3. Can you describe the purpose of the group we are focusing on for this research.

4. What are the particular needs of learners within the group?

5. What is the nature of learning support provided within the group? What do you see as the educational benefits of the group?

6. How do learners respond to being in the group? How do they feel usually about coming to the group?

7. Does the group present any challenges for you and/or learners?

8. How did the pandemic affect arrangements for learning support in terms of this group? Can you say something about the impact of the pandemic on grouping for learning support in general.

9. What are your priorities post-pandemic for using groups for learning support?