UVIC
UNIVERSITAT DE VIC
UNIVERSITAT CENTRAL
DE CATALUNYA

The design and use of multilevel teaching activities in a mixed-ability class in Year 4 in a Birmingham Primary School

Final Dissertation

Judith Burgos Melero

Tutor: Jon Telford

Teaching Early Childhood & Primary Education, Minor in English

Year 5

FETCH (Faculty of Education, Translation, and Humanities)

University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia

Vic, May 2020

The design and use of multilevel teaching activities in a mixed-ability class in Year 4 in a Birmingham Primary School

Judith Burgos Melero

Abstract: In the schools of the United Kingdom there is a long tradition of applying homogeneous ability grouping, and to match the different ability levels of children, multilevel activities are delivered. This, however, has changed over the years, and there may be new changes coming soon. This article explores the reasons why multilevel activities have been used in the classrooms and how they have been planned by the teachers. In order to achieve this, the characteristics of different types of ability grouping and the influence of the context are analysed. This information is complemented with classroom observations and interviews with Year 4 teachers and the deputy head teacher of Ladypool School, in Birmingham.

Keywords: multilevel activities, ability grouping, academic performance, education in the UK.

Resum: A les escoles del Regne Unit hi ha una llarga tradició en l'ús d'agrupaments per habilitat homogenis, i per tal de respondre als diferents nivells d'habilitat dels infants, es lliuren activitats multinivell. Això, però, ha canviat al llarg dels anys, i possiblement també hi hagi canvis aviat. Aquest article estudia les raons per les quals s'utilitzen activitats multinivell a les aules i com les i els mestres planifiquen aquestes activitats. Per tal d'aconseguir-ho, s'han analitzat les característiques de diferents tipus d'agrupaments per habilitats així com la influència que pot tenir el context. Tota aquesta informació és complementada amb observacions a l'aula i entrevistes a les mestres de 4t curs i la subdirectora de l'escola Ladypool, a Birmingham.

Paraules clau: activitats multinivell, agrupament per habilitats, rendiment acadèmic, educació a UK.

Resumen: En los colegios del Reino Unido hay una larga tradición en el uso de agrupamientos por habilidad homogéneos, y para responder a los diferentes niveles de habilidad de los niños y niñas, se distribuyen actividades multinivel. Esto, no obstante, ha cambiado al largo de los años, y posiblemente también haya cambios pronto. Este artículo estudia las razones por las cuales se utilizan actividades multinivel en las aulas y cómo las maestras y los maestros planifican estas actividades. A fin de conseguirlo, se han analizado las características de diferentes tipos de agrupamientos por habilidad así como la influencia que el contexto puede tener. Toda esta información será complementada con observaciones en el aula y entrevistas a las maestras de 4º curso y la subdirectora del colegio Ladypool, en Birmingham.

Palabras clave: actividades multinivel, agrupamiento por habilidad, rendimiento académico, educación en UK.

1. Introduction:

This article sets out to understand why UK primary schools tend to teach their pupils in relatively homogeneous ability groups, particularly in English and Maths, as opposed to using the heterogeneous mixed-ability groupings recommended at university in Catalonia. The consequence of working in this way, the need to develop multilevel activities to cover the varying abilities of the different groups, is also examined. In order to do this, the study is focused on Ladypool school, a school in Birmingham where most of the children are learning English as an Additional Language. There, multilevel teaching is being applied currently. In the Catalan context, the view regarding homogeneous groups is different, and this is why the aims of this study are to investigate the characteristics, benefits and disadvantages of this methodology and the influence of their context from their national and local perspective on decision making. The main research questions are why do they choose to develop multilevel teaching activities and how do they plan and deliver multilevel teaching activities in Ladypool School. To do so, the literature has been reviewed and three interviews and two observations have been carried out and analysed.

2. Theoretical framework

To begin the research, the literature regarding the topic was gathered. The information is shown in a logical way, from general definitions and national context to specific characteristics and local related information.

2.1. Ability grouping: What does it mean?

It is interesting to apply grouping because when it is applied properly it enhances motivation and increases interactions between peers, as well as the benefits of learning to work in a group itself (Kutnick et al., 2005). The discussion appears when teachers have to decide how to form those groups of students. Historically, in the UK the focus has been on heterogeneous or homogeneous groupings regarding academic performance or ability (Petrello, 2000). When children are grouped by ability, the teacher needs to deliver multilevel activities in order to cover the different

needs of each group (Hallam et al., 2004). Groups of children with similar and different ability levels are found in different grouping practices that have been applied in the UK (Hallam et al., 2004). For that reason, this report is interested in how pupils are organised into classes and into groups within classes, and this is why the most common strategies are defined below.

Table 1: Types of ability grouping

Terminology	Definition of the grouping practice
Streaming	This method divides children into different classes, creating a whole group class at a similar level for the school year. Children's general performance in all the subjects is assessed (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001).
Setting	It involves grouping children, usually in different classes, according to their level of academic performance in a particular subject. It tends to be used for Maths and English. Setting can be used across a whole year group or across timetable halves, for example (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Francis et. al 2017).
Within-class grouping	Children with different ability levels share the same classroom. However, they sit in different corners or tables and they are taught separately as well, sometimes even by different teachers. The class is heterogeneous but the groups within the class are homogeneous (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Francis et. al 2017).
Mixed-ability grouping	The groups created are expected to include a range of abilities and children can work with peers with different ability levels (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Francis et. al 2017). Depending on the characteristics of the pupils of the schools (gifted, EAL, SEN, etc.) the range of variety is wider (Hallam et al., 2004).
Banding	Several classes are divided into different bands according to their level. In this case, the number of pupils in each group can vary according to the size of the year group, because it does not need to fill a whole classroom. Therefore, it is possible to create more groups with this method. (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Francis et. al 2017).

Of course, the decision of which grouping method is applied will depend on the size of the school and the number of pupils, but also on the opinion of the staff and families (Hallam et. al, 2004), which is related to the national context, and for this reason it is analysed below.

2.2. The educational context in the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom there is a long tradition of selective education (Hallam et al., 2004). The classic theory of intelligence testing that influenced the UK argues that individuals have a fixed level of intelligence that can be objectively measured using standardised tests. This is why similar-ability grouping has been useful in this context, in order to respond to this ideology. (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998).

In 1931, the Hadow Report about primary schools suggested that if the classes were large enough, homogeneous ability grouping should be introduced in order to ease the teachers' task to teach a whole group with similar ability at a pace suitable for them (Gillard, 2015). Throughout the 1940s, streaming became rapidly common in primary schools to ensure effective selection for the different options of secondary education (Hallam et al., 2004; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Children in the top stream could take the 11+ examination which allowed them to attend grammar schools (Blatchford et al., 2008), which was for those who were more likely to study at university. The remaining students could attend secondary modern schools for practical training or secondary technical schools (Gillard, 2008).

Nevertheless, during the 1950s and 1960s, the researchers started to question if this method had a significant effect on overall attainment, and they detected negative social consequences (Hallam et al., 2004; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Besides, during the 70s, the 11+ examination was abolished, finishing with the Tripartite system in secondary schools. (Blatchford et al., 2008)

For these reasons, mixed-ability grouping was used for more than twenty years, but during the '80s, concerns were raised again because of the low standards of the UK in education compared

to other countries (Machin & Vignoles, 2006). As a result, the Government established new mechanisms in the education system such as literacy and numeracy classes on a daily basis, introducing a standardised national curriculum between the ages 7 and 16, Standardised Attainment Tests (SATs) at the end of each Key Stage (Gillard, 2008), the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) system of inspection (Scanlon, 1999), and School League Tables, which resulted in increasing pressure and comparison between schools (Goldstein & Leckie, 2008). Besides, during this decade, the Department for Education of the UK suggested setting in primary schools as a method to raise standards (Hallam et al., 2004).

Classroom Assistants (or Teaching Assistants) were introduced in the UK during the 1960s as helpers or auxiliaries (Blatchford et al., 2004), but between 1999 and 2002, the Government wanted to reduce teachers' workload by making a large investment in employing more Teaching Assistants (Blatchford et al., 2004; Guillard, 2008). Teaching Assistants give learning support to all the children (Fox, 2003), but, usually, most of them support pupils with any kind of special educational needs (Groom & Rose, 2005).

By 2003, within-class similar-ability grouping in mixed-ability classrooms was the most prevalent arrangement in Maths and English, while in other subjects, mixed-ability groups were used (Hallam et al., 2003). In 2012, the Department for Education encouraged the use of similar-ability grouping but stated that they were also seeking to reduce the gap between the different similar-ability groups (Campbell, 2013). Nowadays, because studies keep demonstrating the inequalities that can be created by homogeneous ability grouping, many teachers want a more equitable educational practice (Francis et al., 2017).

Lately, the curriculum has been slimmed down, although there are new tests such as the Maths test in Year 4 to assess their 12 times tables, and now the main areas are Maths, English, Computing, and Science. (Marriage, 2019). It has also been concluded that School League Tables are not fulfilling their aim of helping parents to choose the best school. By assessing the

achievement and comparing it with other schools, the system does not take into account pupil demographics and socioeconomic characteristics that can affect the results, benefiting those schools with educationally advantaged pupils (Leckie & Goldstein, 2017) and therefore, the comparisons are unfair (Perry, 2016).

2.3. For and against homogeneous ability grouping

The arguments supporting homogeneous ability grouping state that teaching pupils who are at similar levels makes the teachers' task easier as they are more able to meet students' needs (Hallam & Parsons, 2013). If the class group is homogeneous (using setting or streaming), it facilitates whole-class teaching (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998) and the level of differentiation required is considerably less (Hallam et al., 2004). Time is not wasted when some children have understood but the teacher has to keep teaching those children who have not, and slow students do not feel overwhelmed with instructions that they are above their level (Molnar, 2002).

It is true, however, that if within-class setting is used, organizing and developing materials for the different levels needs time, but once these materials are developed, they can be used again as many times as needed. (Berry & Williams, 1992). Children in higher sets see similar-ability grouping as a method that enables work to be matched to their needs and interests, making the activities more attractive and challenging. Some reasons to maintain homogeneous grouping are the acceptance of traditional practices that have been historically used in their context, conventions passing from one generation of teachers to the next, and teachers' decisions being motivated by their own needs rather than their students' (Shimahara, 1998). Teachers assigned to higher-level streams or sets and parents of bright students usually prefer homogeneous ability grouping for these reasons (Molnar, 2002). Nevertheless, children in lower-ability sets are not usually supportive (Hallam & Parsons, 2013).

While homogeneous grouping shows little improvement in results in high-level groups and a decline in achievement of low-level groups (Sukhandan & Lee, 1998; Hallam & Parsons, 2013),

it highlights many personal differences between pupils, thereby limiting the potential educational opportunities of children in lower sets (Hallam & Parsons, 2013). Recent research shows that when similar-ability groups are formed, teachers also take into account social relationships between pupils, gender, behaviour, class size, and other different factors. Besides, disruptive pupils are put in different groups to be able to control their behaviour (Blatchford et al., 2008) Usually, in structured ability grouping, lower socio-economic status pupils, and minority ethnic groups are situated in low or middle ability sets (Hallam & Parsons, 2013). In addition, boys and the younger children of the class are commonly over-represented in low ability sets, and this can lead to children not having peers who can be academic role models (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). As a result, children in lower ability sets tend to have low self-esteem and motivation regarding school and learning itself (Hallam, et al., 2004). Besides, there is a tendency for more misbehaviour with negative consequences for achievement in low-level sets and more discussion and open-ended questions with positive consequences in high-level sets. Then, achievement levels of students in similar-ability groups become more unequal over time (Gamoran, 2002).

In addition, the more experienced and qualified teachers commonly spend their time with the high-level sets, using usually the better materials (Gamoran, 2002). However, in low-level sets there is a slower pace and a lower quality of instruction, lessons are based on the transmission of factual information through statements made by the teacher, with teachers with less expertise who usually have low expectations towards the pupils (Francis et al, 2017). Besides, although in theory movement between streams or sets is possible, "in practice it is frequently restricted and children perceive that it is very difficult" (Blatchford et al., 2008, p.8). In addition, The OFSTED report in 1999 indicated that schools did not know how to manage children with Special Educational Needs or English as an Additional Language when applying homogeneous ability grouping (Hallam et al., 2004).

Streaming means being grouped by ability throughout the school day. This, administratively, is easier than setting if time and resources used when changing groups are considered. Children's

individual needs are similar to their peers' and they are easier to solve. Nevertheless, it is important to consider each of the individual needs or different levels across subjects. All the positive and negative consequences of homogeneous ability grouping can appear in those conditions (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998).

Setting is also highly related to the benefits and disadvantages mentioned, but in this case, it is more flexible and it allows more effective targeting of students' levels in each subject (Gamoran, 2002). As children can have the opportunity to be at different level sets, they are less likely to feel stigmatised. However, teacher allocation keeps following the same pattern and because it is thought that children's needs are really easy to meet with this method, individual differences are usually overlooked (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998).

Within-class grouping gives freedom to teachers to organise small groups in a flexible way and to change them according to each task (Hallam & Parsons, 2013). Children share the same space, so it is less possible to feel stigmatised and it is easier to establish friendships and role models of a diversity of children. A problem that this method can face is that sometimes teachers get influenced by different factors that are not related to learning when grouping children such as the space available in the classroom and the furniture available (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998).

To finish, mixed-ability grouping, unlike those methods mentioned above, improves equality of opportunities by giving all the children equal access to the curriculum, teachers, and resources. Effective social integration can avoid the social negative consequences and foster more cooperative behaviour (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Nevertheless, it involves great demands because teachers need to make sure that each activity is appropriate for the whole range of abilities and motivates all the pupils. Teachers tend to rely on whole-class teaching, which makes all the children work at the pace of the average ability, so it can fail to meet the needs of high and low levels (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998).

However, because all the studies are based on particular schools and each one has a different context and characteristics, it makes comparisons difficult, and each grouping method may work in a context depending on the characteristics of the groups (Good & Marshall, 1984).

2.4. Ladypool School

Ladypool school is a public primary school in Sparkbrook, Birmingham, which opened in 1885 for almost 1000 pupils (*Ladypool Primary School*, n.d.). Nowadays, it has around 437 pupils from 3 to 11 years old (OFSTED, 2017). However, it is still larger than most primary schools (OFSTED, 2014). Since 2013, Mrs. Aslam has been the headteacher of the school. Before that, it seems that there were many staff and leadership and management changes (OFSTED, 2014; OFSTED, 2015). They consider themselves an inclusive school that celebrates the diversity in their community, adapting their provision to ensure that they meet the needs of all children, including those who have particular needs or disabilities. They remark that they have experience in supporting learners who are new to English. (*Ladypool Primary School*, n.d.) Indeed, the proportion of pupils in the school who have special educational needs is above the national average. Besides, as the majority of pupils are from minority ethnic backgrounds such as Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage, many children speak English as an Additional Language (OFSTED, 2017). The proportion of children eligible for pupil premium (those for whom the school receives additional funding, for example, children in local authority care) is well above the average (OFSTED, 2014). About the curriculum, they mention especially Maths and English, but they also ensure the practice of different fields such as religion and ethics, ICT, Physical Education, different topic-based lessons, and even relationship education (*Ladypool Primary School*, n.d.).

In 2014, the OFSTED report assessed Ladypool school as "requiring improvement" in all the four items that they inspected (OFSTED, 2014). The inspection highlighted different issues such as the need to use assessment information properly in order to prepare activities adapted to the level of the different groups, and they also mentioned that regarding similar-ability groups,

pupils usually had the same work to do, making the activities too easy for the more able children and too hard for the less able. (OFSTED, 2014).

In 2015, only two of the items were requiring improvement (quality of teaching and achievements of pupils) while the three remaining were good (OFSTED, 2015). The report stated that teachers did not provide enough challenging work to pupils, especially the most able pupils, to help them to reach higher standards. The teaching failed in asking the right question to promote thinking and understanding, making progress slower. Teachers needed to plan extension tasks especially for pupils who were able to exceed the standards in reading, writing, and mathematics (OFSTED, 2015).

Finally, in the latest report made in 2017, the school received all the items assessed as "good" (OFSTED, 2017). The headteacher and deputy headteacher had been successful in improving the school since 2015, overcoming previous weaknesses. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and others is closing because all the pupils were making similar progress. Pupils with English as an additional language were well supported in their learning and development of the language. The report defines a pleasant environment that is positive for learning (OFSTED, 2017). There had been a significant change since the last inspection stated that teachers knew their pupils' learning needs and they used questions effectively to check that children understood, and consequently children remained concentrated. Teachers prepared engaging lessons and pupils enjoyed the tasks that they were doing because they helped them to learn (OFSTED, 2017).

3. Methodology

The research uses an interpretive paradigm, and for that reason the study is based on the experience of the teachers that have been interviewed (Merriam, 1998). Following this line, the study used the two major types of qualitative research methodologies as its instruments, by interviewing key people through open-ended questions and carrying out observations of the daily reality to complement their reflections (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997).

For the observation, an observation list was prepared with different items to analyse related to the theoretical framework. For example, I observed the distribution of the children and the changes of group that occurred, the characteristics of children in each group, and the kind of activities and instructions that each group received from the teacher or TA. The observation was done during a whole school morning, from 8:45 to 12:20, one in each classroom (4L and 4P). All the information collected was recorded on a grid. The observations were done first, in order to have previous information before the in-depth interview.

The participants for the interviews were two teachers of Year 4 (4L and 4P) and the deputy headteacher of Ladypool School. In this way, the sample is homogeneous because it is based on teachers of the same year group in the same school, but the research is enriched with the perspective of the leadership team. It is interesting to interview both teachers because even if the method that they use is quite similar, the characteristics of their pupils vary, and in this way the sample studied would include more diversity, making it more realistic. Moreover, the teachers have different backgrounds and expertise (the teacher from 4L is a Phase Leader and the teacher in 4P is new in the school). The interview with the deputy head teacher had different questions than the interviews with the teachers because the information that they could give to the study is different. On the one hand, the teachers answered 9 questions about their opinions regarding the different ability grouping methods according to their experience, how they assess to which group a child should be placed, and what the role of the TA is concerning multilevel teaching, among other questions. On the other hand, the deputy head teacher answered 6 questions about, for example, the past and future objectives of Ladypool regarding the topic, the guidelines they give to the teachers for grouping or the impact that using different methods has on the school's results, for example regarding the OFSTED reports.

4. Analysis of the data & results

From my observation, I detected within-class similar-ability grouping (usually for Maths & English) and mixed-ability for other subjects (topic, P.E.,...). In some cases, the lower group was

separated from the rest of the class and sat on the carpet to work. When reading books, children in the two lines of the school year were divided into different bands (up to 10) according to the difficulty of the book. Mostly, during the school day, children work individually or in groups of 4 to 6 pupils. In some specific tasks they work in pairs (eg. see Activity 1 in Appendix 2). When they work in pairs, they are usually in similar ability level groups. Some activities are also designed to develop cooperation among all the children in a group.

The distribution can change depending on the subject, but also within subjects of Maths or English I observed a variety of grouping practices depending on the activity (homogeneous and heterogeneous groups). When homogeneous groups were formed, teachers taught through multilevel activities to respond to the different needs and levels.

In order to form the groups, the teachers stated that children that have similar characteristics in terms of their work and progress are grouped together. The teachers use observation and, taking into account how children answer the questions posed during the lessons or how they complete their learning activities in their notebooks, teachers know if children understand the content and group them in different levels according to these pieces of evidence. Of course, the results of the tests also help to confirm that. But, mostly, teachers observe the work that children do in class to decide if they need a change of group in order to understand the content during that specific lesson.

Even if they said that it depends on every teacher, both of the interviewees stated that they change the composition of the groups every lesson if needed, because groupings are flexible and if a child is not understanding or is finding it too easy they may need a change of group. However, they recognise that although children do move from one group to another, some groups will often stay the same, especially the bottom group and SEN.

In this school there are many children from ethnic minority groups and who have SEN. It is mixed regarding gender. Even if a few of them are quite able, in general the children are academically behind where they should be in year 4. When I was observing the children it was difficult to detect differences in social class because children were wearing school uniform.

In 4L class, there are a total of 30 children, 16 boys and 14 girls. Most of them are of Pakistani, Arab, Afghan, Bangladeshi, Moroccan, or Gypsy/Irish traveler ethnicities. Three children are new to the country this school year. Two of those three children are the ones who show the lowest motivation and sometimes disturb the lessons. I could not detect any children with important SENs.

Usually, they are grouped in similar-ability groups, although one child is not in his level group because of behaviour management issues. The groups are heterogeneous regarding gender. When they do English or Maths, some children are redistributed, changing their ability group depending on their skills on each subject. Some children who are usually in the lower group may be in the higher group for a specific subject and vice versa. I also observed mixed-ability groups when doing a project related to science and drama (see Appendix 1.1).

4P is a group of 29 children, with 14 girls and 15 boys. Almost all of them are from different minority ethnic groups such as Pakistani, Arab, African, Caribbean, or Indian. It is an energetic group in general. There is one student new to the country and 3 students with important Special Educational Needs, one of them needs to be with the TA all the time.

Usually, they are distributed in mixed-ability groups, although the SEN child and the TA usually work at two tables apart from the rest of the group. Children often use the carpet to sit, sometimes the whole class but sometimes just the lower group to work together while the rest of the class keeps working in mixed-ability or similar-ability groups (see Appendix 1.2.).

Both teachers agree that they like to make homogeneous ability groups so they can make sure that the work they give to children is right for them, "pushing the ones that can carry on and supporting the ones that need extra help". They also state that even during Topic lessons, when they are planning to do mixed-ability groups, sometimes the need to group by ability appears because of language problems (EAL) or because some children are just not understanding, so teachers need to plan for those children separately. Otherwise, it would be "a waste of time". It takes a little bit longer to plan multilevel activities, sometimes teachers need to plan six or seven ways trying to take into account those children who are in the middle of the levels, but "you couldn't teach it otherwise, you have to do it. It is something that has to be done" according to the teacher in 4L.

According to the teachers, the high-level children are motivated, the behaviour is much better, they progress more quickly and they are really into education. The aspirations are higher regarding what they want to achieve. If the lower attainers don't understand something, their behaviour goes lower. The teachers try to motivate the lower-ability groups and for them to also become independent learners, because if they do not have the same aspirations as the others they start to have a "different destiny from those in high ability sets which just gets harder when they leave school." While the high-ability group looks more motivated when they are sitting together, the low-ability gets demotivated when sitting together because they know that they are doing the easier work and the expectations towards them are low.

Teachers feel that similar-ability groups make it easier to talk to children because they do not need to go one by one, as the children in each group have the same kinds of needs, teachers can solve the doubts quickly and move on to the next group. It also enables children to work independently with work that fits their needs and interests. The teacher usually starts the lessons working with the lower level group. For example, for English (See Activity 1 in Appendix 2), I saw how she sat with them and provided an explanation using an extra whiteboard to add some visuals. Together, they created a model of the text that they were going to arrange afterwards.

The teacher guided a discussion to talk about what they should include or improve in the model. When reading instructions, the teacher spoke slowly, read with intonation and asked questions to ensure understanding. Meanwhile, the high-level group did not need the help of the teacher and started working independently, they only asked the teacher to check their answers. In general, when the teacher spoke to the whole-class, she used a normal rhythm and sometimes included advanced vocabulary, just as she did with the high-level group.

The TA is, according to the teachers, a great help and their partner teacher. I saw both TAs doing parallel tasks: marking and preparing homework, changing home readers, and taking the register. Sometimes, the teacher in 4L also gave instructions to children and checked that the group was working. She was working with the low-ability group to check their answers in the latest test and help them to understand what they were supposed to answer. She also spent time with the high-level group and did 1:1 with every child (reading, for example). The teacher in 4L stated that they split the groups so each teacher and the TA can be working with a different group. It helps to develop similar-ability groups, it would be much difficult with only one teacher. Then, after the lessons, both teacher and TA need to meet and talk about the process of the children so the teacher can detect the needs of the group that the TA was working with.

In the case of 4P, the TA spends more time with the lower group while the teacher helps the rest of the class, so the lower group can follow the rhythm of the others with the extra help of the TA. However, most of the time, the teacher is “alone” because the TA needs to be 1:1 with a child with SEN; she has a schedule for her in order to adapt the curriculum to her skills as much as possible, and then she also works with the lower group observing their process.

The multilevel teaching activities are delivered mostly for English and Maths when children are organised into similar-ability groups within-class. The activities are very similar in most cases, and when they are different, it is because the level of visuals to help is higher or the vocabulary used in the statements and activities is clearer for the easier levels. The content and what children are learning is the same. The level seems adequate for the children because none of them were

struggling too much or completing the task perfectly, and therefore it was challenging for them (see Appendix 2).

The interviewees also spoke in favour of mixed-ability groups because in that situation children can help each other. Some children might see things differently from the others but then they can come to agreements and learn from their peers. The teacher in 4P stated that children can hear what the pupils that would be in the top group if similar-ability was used is doing and what kind of work they should be aiming towards having those pupils as a model, and it also helps those who are new to the country to pick up the spoken language. However, with mixed ability, those who are in the top group are not that motivated as when they are in similar-ability groups.

The interview with the deputy head teacher helped to discover the past and the future of of Ladypool School regarding grouping. She stated that because of the disadvantages discovered in studies of similar-ability grouping, they try to have mixed-ability groups, and for those who cannot keep up so easily they have interventions in the afternoon in order to help them catch up with what is happening in the class.

Prior to having mixed-ability groups they had streamed groups, but they found out that those children in the bottom groups would stay in the bottom groups so they "were putting a ceiling on their learning", for both high attainers (making them believe they make no mistakes, which does not allow them to have a growth mindset) and low attainers (by repeating in different ways the message that they make many mistakes). Therefore, now they are in the process of change, still applying multilevel teaching activities but inside a mixed-ability class.

When I asked the deputy head teacher if they felt pressure from any educational agent (families, school governors, the city Education Authority, OFSTED, or others), she answered "Absolutely". Because of the SATs, schools narrow the curriculum and do less topic work because they are focused on the subjects that are assessed. Now, they are trying to create a wider curriculum, shifting the focus from Maths and English, into a more integrated one. They are not there yet; at the moment, the curriculum is still narrow.

One of the teachers also said that other schools do not like using homogeneous ability grouping, but they still do it in year 6 because of the pressure of the SATs exams. However, teachers in Ladypool still do similar-ability groupings because they think it is the best option to make the teaching understandable for children and they stated that they liked working with both homogeneous and heterogeneous groupings.

Although teachers have positive attitudes towards similar-ability grouping and they still have a tendency to use it, they think that changing to mixed-ability groups has helped them to improve their results in OFSTED inspections from "needs requirements" to "good", but they just introduced it five years ago and they still have plenty of room for improvement.

5. Conclusion and discussion

- Why do they choose to use multilevel teaching activities in Ladypool school?

To start, it is key to analyse the relation of the characteristics of the families of the school with the grouping practices. Children come from very low-income backgrounds, most of them come from different minority ethnic backgrounds and therefore their mother tongue is not English, and there are more children with SEN than the average for the country. However, there are also some brilliant students. In order to cover this wide range of ability levels, teachers feel comfortable planning different multilevel activities for them, expanding the knowledge of the ablest ones and giving extra help to those who need it.

Teachers have positive attitudes towards multilevel teaching and similar ability groups and argue that it is a good tool to save time during the class. Because the work is adapted to the children's level, there is no need for explanations that children will not understand or that the teacher will need to repeat. It is positive in order to avoid students feeling overwhelmed or bored (Molnar, 2002). Furthermore, the teacher does not need to solve children's doubts one by one, but in group, because their needs will be similar to those of their peers. Children can work independently and usually faster.

In 2015, the school was not providing work that was challenging enough for pupils and those who were more able were not motivated and the school was not helping them to reach higher standards (OFSTED, 2015). At that time, according to the information provided by the deputy head teacher, they were using streaming, but it looks like changing to mixed-ability group classes has overcome this problem according to the good results of the last OFSTED inspection (OFSTED, 2017). Probably, because having a whole class with a similar ability makes the teacher forget about the individual differences (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998).

However, in Ladypool school they are in a process of change from streaming to mixed-ability grouping. They also want to expand the curriculum by expanding the focus from Maths and English. At this moment, they find themselves in this situation of combining mixed-ability classes and within-class similar-ability grouping, and why they and other schools who do not support similar-ability grouping are still maintaining this practice is due to the pressure felt from SATs tests, school league tables, OFSTED reports and other factors that push the school to achieve the best possible results (Hallam et al., 2004). It is interesting to observe that changes are not easy or a fast process, and although teachers know what the research says, they still tend to apply homogeneous ability groupings. They have been working with this method for years, it has eased their work and they do think that activities should match children's ability level, and it is difficult to abandon habits and conventions that have passed from one generation of teachers to others (Shimihara, 1998).

- How do they plan and deliver multilevel teaching activities in Ladypool school?

They apply within-class grouping usually in Maths and English, where the pressure from the SAT tests is higher. To reduce the negative consequences that this decision can carry, they also apply mixed-ability grouping in other subjects. In this way, because children are sharing the same space and changing the group peers often, it is less likely that children feel labelled or stigmatised (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Besides, the homogeneous groups are also flexible, so if in a specific activity the teacher detects through observations and questions during the lesson that

the child needs a change of group, it is possible to apply it. For those reasons, the gap between different levels is prevented from becoming more and more unequal over time (Gamoran, 2002).

The number of children in similar-ability groups are flexible, from working in pairs to larger groups of 8-10. This is because of the distribution of the tables, which can be moved if needed, and the use of the carpet, which allows children to work in groups easily. There are factors like behaviour management issues that can create the need for changes of group, but in general, the grouping is fair and children from different groups that authors highlighted as usually stigmatised (boys, low-income families, or minority ethnic groups) are equally distributed among the different sets avoiding the patterns that authors highlighted (Hallam & Parsons, 2013), or at least it is difficult to detect because they are wearing the same uniform and most of them come from similar social and economic backgrounds. The dynamics of the activities vary from working cooperatively to doing individual work. However, sitting in groups means that the teacher can provide each group with specific material to manipulate or clear instructions that will help them to work better.

Children do receive differentiated instruction with different rhythms and vocabulary, suited to their level, but it does not mean that the low-ability group receives a lower quality of instruction as the authors reported (Francis et al., 2017). Besides, when the instruction is not differentiated, the level is high so the low-ability group is also exposed to advanced vocabulary and high cognitive challenges. In addition, because they are sitting together, it is easier for the teacher to give scaffolding to the lower group, for example, if they are having a debate, without disturbing the rest of the class working independently.

The Teaching Assistant is a key to facilitating this practice because although multilevel activities imply an increase of the amount of work that has to be prepared before the session, TAs can help to plan it, prepare it, mark it and even to work with a small group as authors suggested (Guillard, 2008). Because there are two teachers in the class teaching different groups of children, they need to have daily meetings to talk about how children are doing. In this way, swapping groups

and having meetings, they avoid situating the more experienced and qualified teacher with only one specific group (Gamoran, 2002), providing a good quality of teaching for every child.

Finally, it is also a great help to include special needs in ordinary schools (Groom & Rose, 2005), because in case those children need the constant attention of an adult, the Teaching Assistant can be with them inside the classroom. Nonetheless, many children with SEN are also included in the similar ability groups, and therefore it looks as if they are learning to deal with SEN children within this grouping method, overcoming the problems emphasized by the OFSTED report in 1999 (Hallam et al., 2004).

To sum up, in Ladypool school, it is possible to develop multilevel activities by doing flexible within-class ability grouping thereby obtaining all the benefits and reducing the disadvantages to a minimum, which allows them to improve according to the OFSTED reports and covers the pressure towards the academic outputs of children given by the UK educational context. However, they are moving towards a mixed-ability practice with the focus on integral learning, prioritizing the process instead of the results, following the current trend in the UK.

6. Limitations and further research

This research was limited to the study of a single school and therefore the sample was not a wide one, and it only represents the thoughts of those who were interviewed, not representing all the schools in Birmingham let alone the United Kingdom. However, it was logical to focus only on one school to make the study in depth.

As further research, it would be interesting to study the opinions of different teachers in other schools, to observe different ways of using multilevel activities or of responding to the educational context of the UK. Probably, the situation will be different in a few years and it would also be interesting to observe how schools adapt to those changes in education regarding ability grouping. Besides, it would be interesting to check the future OFSTED reports of

Ladypool school to observe their evolution regarding the new changes that are being applied that foster mixed-ability grouping

7. Bibliography

Berry, E. & Williams, M. (1992). *Teaching Strategies for Multilevel ESL classes. Facilitator's Guide.* Oregon: Clackamas Community College. Retrieved on May 7th from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED367198.pdf

Blatchford, P., Russell, A., Bassett, P., Brown, P., & Martin, C. (2004). *The role and effects of teaching assistants in English primary schools (Years 4 to 6) 2000–2003: Results from the Class Size and Pupil Adult Ratios (CSPAR) KS2 project (Research Report RR605)*. Nottingham, UK: Department for Education and skills.

Blatchford, P., Hallam, S., Ireson, J., Kutnick, P. & Creech, A. (2008). *Classes, groups and transitions: Structures for teaching and learning. Primary Review Research Survey.* Cambridge: University of Cambridge.

Campbell, T. (2013). *In-school ability grouping and the month of birth effect: Preliminary evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study.* London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Pepper, D., Taylor, B. & Travers, M. (2017). Exploring the relative lack of impact of research on 'ability grouping' in England: a discourse analytic account. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 47:1, 1-17, DOI: 10.1080/030576X.2015.1093095

Fox, G. (2003). *A Handbook for Learning Support Assistants: Teachers and Assistants Working Together.* London: David Fulton Publishers.

Gamoran, A. (2002). Standards, inequality, and ability grouping in schools. Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Inequality. Retrieved on May 7th from: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/163446.pdf

Gillard, D. (2008). *Us and Them: a history of pupil grouping policies in England's schools.* Retrieved on April 23rd from: www.educationengland.org.uk/articles/27grouping.html

Gillard, D. (2015). *Hadow Report 1926.* Retrieved on April 23rd from: http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/hadow1926/hadow1926.html

Good, T., & Marshall, S. (1984). Do students learn more in heterogeneous or homogeneous groups? in Peterson, P. & Hallinan, M. (Eds.), *The social context of Group organization and group processes* (pp. 15-38). New York: Academic Press.

Goldstein, H. & Leckie, G. (2008). School league tables: what can they really tell us? *Significance*, 5, 67-69.

Groom, B. & Rose, R. (2005). Supporting the inclusion of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the primary school: the role of teaching assistants. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs,* 5(1), 20-30.

Hallam, S., Ireson, J., Lister, V., Andon Chaudhury, I. & Davies, J. (2003). Ability grouping in the primary school: a survey, *Educational Studies,* 29(1): 69-83.

Hallam, S., Ireson, J. & Davies, J. (2004). Grouping practices in primary school: what influences change? *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(1), 117–141.

Hallam, S. & Parsons, S. (2013). The incidence and make up of ability grouped sets in the UK primary school, *Research Papers in Education*, 28(4), 393–420.

Ireson, J. & Hallam, S. (2001). *Ability grouping in education.* London: SAGE Publications

Kutnick, P., Blatchford, P., & Baines, E.(2005). *The effects of pupil grouping: Literature review.* London: Department for Education and Skills.

Ladypool Primary School: Together everyone achieves. School prospectus. (n.d.). Birmingham: Ladypool Primary School.

Leckie, G., & Goldstein, H. (2017). The evolution of school league tables in England 1992-2016: 'contextual value-added', 'expected progress' and 'progress 8'. *British Educational Research Journal*. Retrieved on May 7th from: http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/berj.3264

Machin, S. & Vignoles, A. (2006). *Education policy in the UK.* London: Centre for the Economics of Education

Marriage, R. (2019). Education reform in England. *Relocate Global Journal.* Retrieved on May 7th from: https://www.relocatemagazine.com/articles/education-reform-in-england-rebecca-marriage

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education.* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Molnar, A. (2002). *School reform proposals: The research evidence.* Connecticut: Information Age Publishing.

OFSTED (2014). *School Report: Ladypool Primary School*. Retrieved on May 7th from: https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/2321355

OFSTED (2015). *School Report: Ladypool Primary School*. Retrieved on May 7th from: https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/2470024

OFSTED (2017). *School Report: Ladypool Primary School*. Retrieved on May 7th from: https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/2691593

Perry, T. (2016). English Value-Added Measures: Examining the Limitations of School Performance Measurement. *British Educational Research Journal*. Retrieved on May 7th from: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/berj.3247/full.

Petrello, N. (2000). *Can ability grouping help educators meet higher standards?* Retrieved on May 7th from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED442743.pdf

Scanlon, M. (1999). *The impact of OFSTED inspections.* London: GI Assessment.

Shimahara, E. (1998). *Homogeneous-ability grouping: Fourth-grade teachers' rationale and students' perceptions.* Master's thesis, University of Virginia.

Sukhnandan, L. & Lee, B. (1998). *Streaming, Setting and Grouping by Ability: A review of the literature.* Slough: NFER.

8. Appendices

Appendix 1. Group distribution observations

1.1. Distribution in 4L

Figure 1: Usual distribution in 4L

This picture shows how children are grouped usually, when the day begins and during different activities throughout the day. They are grouped by general ability in all the subjects. In table 1 (red), high attainers are situated. Table 2 (orange) and 3 (yellow) would correspond to middle levels, although in general children in table 2 show higher marks and better behaviour than table 3. Finally, in table 4, there are sitting those children with low ability. There is a child who is moved from where it "should" belong, because the child (new to the country) who speaks less English is situated in table 3, because of behaviour management. The blue line indicates the area where the digital board is and where the teacher usually makes her explanations to the whole class. However, she is constantly moving around the tables, as well as the TA. The within-class groups are half and half regarding gender.

Figure 2: 4L distribution in English

When doing writing in English, children are redistributed. The tasks are different as well (see Activity 1). In this case, in tables 3 and 4 there are more boys than girls, and in table 2 there are more girls than boys.

Figure 3: 4L distribution in a project

After that, they had a project related to science and drama. For that, the teacher decided to do mixed-ability groups. In this case the gender was distributed equally again.

Figure 4: 4L distribution in Maths

Finally, for Maths, the teacher gave them Activity 2. After that, they did Activity 3 in the same groups. Again, the distribution is flexible and some children who were sitting in low-attainers groups before now are sitting in the higher level set. However, the work here is individual and in silence.

1.2. Distribution in 4P

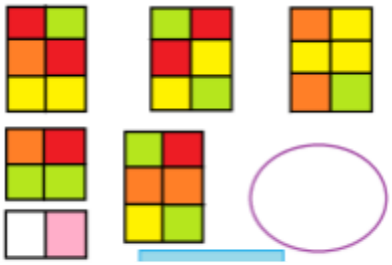


Figure 5: usual distribution in 4P

This is the usual distribution of the classroom in 4L, with children sitting in mixed-ability groups. They also sit on the carpet often, all the class for an explanation of the teacher or the lower group alone to work together. In the pink square, the child with SEN and the TA are usually sitting to work on activities specially prepared for her.

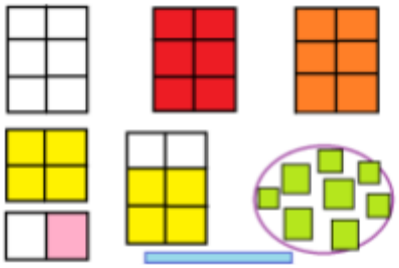
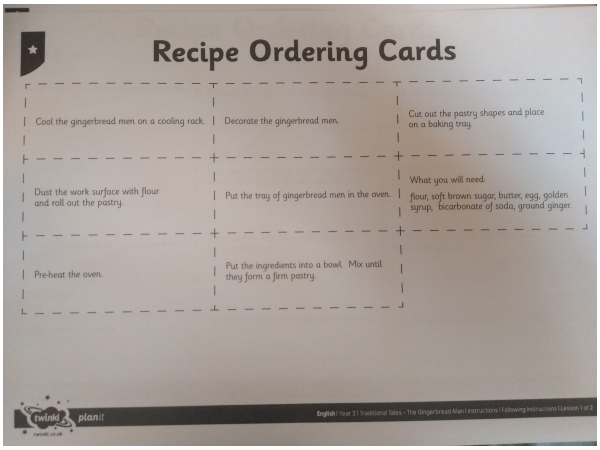


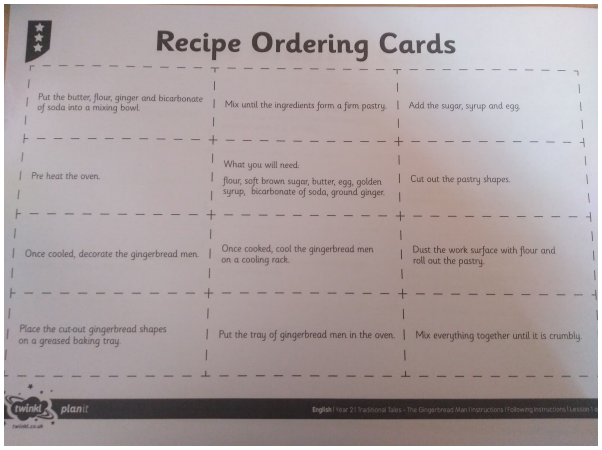
Figure 6: 4P distribution in Maths

They kept working in mixed-ability groups most of the morning, but for Maths, they changed into those ability sets. The distribution of different genders was more or less equal. They did Activity 2 and 3.

Appendix 2. Multilevel activities observed

Activity 1: Recipe ordering cards





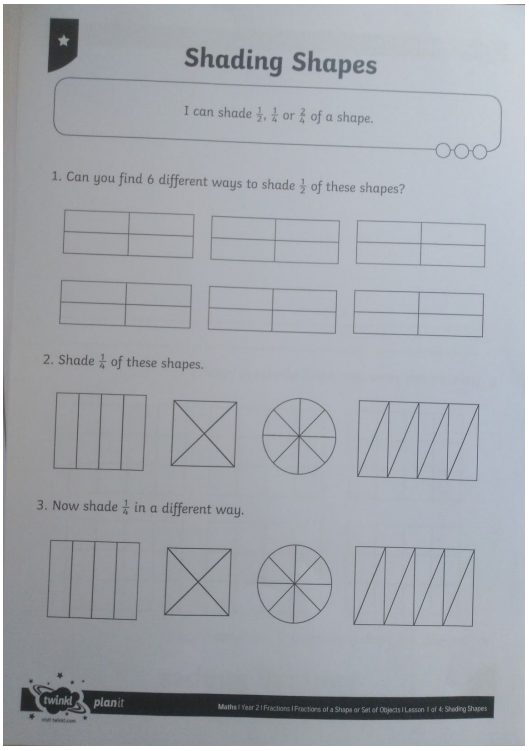
In this case, they were doing writing in English. The lower group (*) (Table 4) had to order the sentences and after that copy them on a whiteboard. The higher group (***) (Tables 1, 2, and 3) had to order the sentences and then improve them by adding adverbs. The activity is similar but the cognitive challenge and the vocabulary are harder for the higher group. The higher group did it in small groups while the lower group did it individually. However, some children in the lower group seemed to struggle, therefore it was not really easy for them.

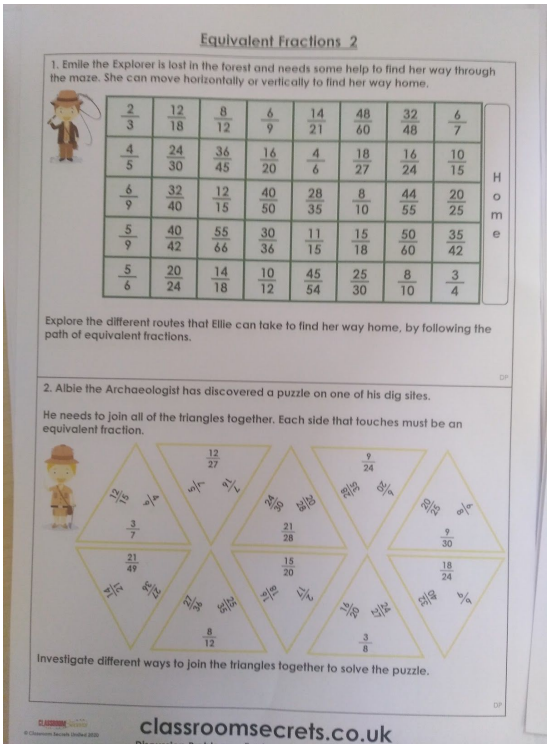
Activity 2: Mental Starter:

*	**	***
46-6	21-18	222-93
52-8	68-42	860-47
74-8	44-42	451-91
27-9	25-11	157-20
77-2	98-42	874-80

This is an activity that children did to start the Maths lesson. The activity was projected on the whiteboard and the teacher said the column at which each table should start (* for Table 4, ** for Tables 2 and 3, *** for Table 4). The only difference between columns is that the level increases a little bit making the numbers bigger, but the operations are the same. Moreover, children have the opportunity to go through the levels if they can, they are not limited to do only the easier one.

Activity 3: Fractions





After the mental starter, children practiced equivalent fractions. The lower level group was doing the worksheet on the left(*) and the higher level group was doing the worksheet on the right. Although they are working on the same topic, the worksheet on the left is much easier, with visual help and the simpler number fractions in order to understand them. The instructions are short and use clear language. Besides, children in the lower group could use manipulatives and a whiteboard to check their answers. However, the one on the right assumes that children already have that knowledge and proposes to solve some challenges with many different fractions. Those activities were challenging for them but most children were able to do them correctly.