

Exploring Classroom Grouping Practices in Wales

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ABSTRACT

Grouping practices in classrooms are under-researched within the Welsh context. This exploratory research aimed to provide information about grouping practices for those with additional learning needs (ALN) and educators' decision-making concerning these. In addition, the study sought to gain insight into changes to grouping practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and priorities for the future. Data was gathered using an online survey of primary and secondary school ALNCos (n=102) based in Wales. Findings revealed that mixed ability was the most frequently used grouping practice for general subjects across primary and secondary schools. Similar to figures found elsewhere in the UK, the grouping of core subjects in both age phases was attainment-based. A wide range of grouping practices were selected, which offered support for academic learning, with less focus on learner choice or socially-based groups. This was the case for learners with and without ALN, and figures also show an increase in attainment grouping for younger children. ALNCos highlighted concerns over the standard of ALN provision during the pandemic and the need to move towards more child-centred, socially-focused interventions. Implications of the study and recommendations for the future are discussed.

Keywords: attainment groups, additional learning needs (ALN), additional learning needs coordinator (ALNCo)

Introduction

Despite its controversy and inequity, grouping learners by attainment continues in schools in Wales and beyond (Francis et al., 2019). Subject attainment grouping (maths and English), known as setting, is the most prevalent grouping practice, with global figures suggesting that 95 per cent of secondary school-aged children are taught maths in sets (OECD, 2013). Streaming involves separating learners by general attainment across all or a majority of subjects so that they remain in the same group for all or most of their lessons (Francis et al., 2017a), a practice becoming more popular in primary and Welsh schools (Hallam and Parsons, 2014). A third grouping practice, mixed ability, consists of either the random allocation of pupils or a balanced range of learner abilities based on prior attainment. Evidence indicates that learners prefer these classes above other groupings (Tereshchenko et al., 2019; Hallam and Ireson, 2006) since they can enhance self-confidence and attitudes to learning, especially for low-attaining learners (Higgins et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2020).

Studies that explore general subjects where mixed ability is more likely to occur are less well researched and invariably focus on maths and English in secondary schools (see Tereshchenko et al., 2019; Francome and Hewitt, 2020), where figures of mixed ability are low (less than 26 per cent for maths and 55 per cent for English, Taylor et al., 2019). Teachers who do not adopt this grouping practice cite concerns about meeting the needs of those in lower attainment groups, including those with special educational needs (Towers et al., 2020). Instead, mixed ability is more likely to be used in general subjects such as art, music, and drama, with figures suggesting as much as 80 per cent to 92 per cent (Hallam, Rogers and Ireson, 2008).

Most research exploring grouping practices in the UK focuses on maths and English, where learners are placed into sets or bands based on prior attainment. The rationale for grouping by attainment lies in the belief that it raises attainment and facilitates greater pedagogical and curricular differentiation for disadvantaged learners (Taylor et al., 2019). However, literature on the benefits of grouping by attainment reveals a complex picture (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel and

Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016; Rui, 2009). For example, some studies have outlined the positive effects of attainment grouping on learners in high-attainment groups (Hodgen et al., 2022), whereas others suggest any gains remain small for these groups and zero to minimal for low-attainment groups (Vogl and Preckel, 2014; Higgins et al., 2015). In their meta-analysis, Styles and Torgerson (2018) reported that attainment grouping was unrelated to overall academic success for learners in high, middle, or low-attainment groups. However, the studies included in the analysis had taken place over 30 years ago when statistics and methodological approaches were much less robust. Furthermore, moderating effects such as teaching quality, educational practices, teacher qualifications or differences in curriculum were not considered, making interpretations of the findings difficult.

Controversies surrounding attainment grouping are related to inadequate experiences for those in low-attainment groups. Here, learners often display lower subject knowledge due to lower-quality repetitive teaching from a limited curriculum taught by those with less subject-specific expertise or experience (Francis et al., 2019; McGillicuddy and Devine, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2021). Concern also surrounds the disproportionate representation of certain disadvantaged groups, such as learners from low economic status backgrounds, minority ethnic groups and those with special educational needs (Strand and Lindoff, 2018; Dunne et al., 2011). As a result, these learners suffer a 'double disadvantage' (Francis et al., 2017b) because their background places them at a disadvantage as they enter school before facing educational practices that constrain rather than encourage progression. Practices such as misallocating groups based on behaviour and motivation rather than prior achievement (Davies, Hallam and Ireson, 2003; Dunne et al., 2011) and using the label 'low-ability' carry negative connotations that can affect learner identity. The consequences of such practices lead to poor self-perception, a self-fulfilling prophecy (where an individual/group engages in behaviours which perpetuate [mis]understandings that their 'ability' reflects the designated label), and subsequent disengagement from schooling (Francis et al., 2020; Archer et al., 2018).

The prevalence of grouping practices in the UK

Globally, the PISA survey (2015) revealed that 38 per cent of learners in OECD countries attend schools that use attainment grouping for all subjects, and

grouping for specific subjects increased by 4 per cent between 2006 and 2015 (OECD, 2016). Evidence indicates a similar rise in attainment grouping in England (Hallam and Parsons, 2014; McCleod et al., 2015), with figures suggesting 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). Furthermore, as might be expected, the increase in attainment grouping does not appear to be exclusively related to secondary school learners. Figures from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) of more than 19,000 children born around 2001 suggest that many primary school children, as young as seven, are segregated by attainment. Figures revealed that 16 per cent were grouped by attainment in all subjects and 26 per cent for literacy and maths. Of the 16 per cent, 64 per cent were grouped for literacy and 70 per cent for maths. (Hallam, 2012; Hallam and Parsons, 2014).

More recent figures from PISA (2018 cycle) support a high prevalence of grouping practices in UK schools (OECD, 2020). However, details of the types of groups used and differences across geographical areas or subjects are unavailable, which makes interpretations of large data sets challenging. Furthermore, practical differences in the rate at which decisions about grouping are made also add to the complexity of interpreting the figures. For example, grouping decisions in primary schools are based on many factors, such as prior attainment, cohort size, behaviour, friendships, timetabling and space resources, all of which will have some bearing on group choices and outcomes (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Blatchford et al., 2008).

Special educational needs and attainment grouping

There is very little literature on the effects of attainment grouping on learners who require additional learning support, with the exception of work carried out by Blatchford, Russell and Webster (2012) and Webster and Blatchford (2013). These studies show that learners with special educational needs (SEN) tend to be in groups with low-attaining learners when taught in attainment groups. Therefore, the adverse effects of attainment grouping for low-attaining groups outlined above will likely apply to those with SEN. For learners with SEN, it is often the case that they remain in their designated groups, irrespective of their progress or attainment (Francis et al.,

2017a). This was the case in Stobart's (2014) study, where 88 per cent of four-year-olds in low-attaining groups were still there by the end of their schooling.

A lack of mobility between groups and a belief that their ability is somewhat 'fixed' may affect learners' views and identity (Lee, 2014). Francis et al. (2017b) reported that first-year secondary school learners showed a negative association between attainment grouping and self-confidence in general and the core subjects of maths and English. Learners in this study were asked which group they believed they had been assigned for maths and reading. Learners in the high-attainment groups were aware of their academic status and what this meant. In contrast, learners in the low-attainment group rejected their academic status by assigning their positioning in the class as 'low', 'dumb', or 'not smart'. These learners also expressed a desire to be moved to a high-attainment group because of the shame of not being good enough.

While there is a tendency to assume that low-attainment groups are detrimental to learners with SEN, there is some evidence that these groups offer less intimidating learning environments that support learners' confidence and competence (Hallam and Ireson, 2006). It also seems to be the case that the smaller class sizes posed by many low-attainment groups are supportive of strong teacher-learner relationships that encourage progress (Mazenod et al., 2019). However, Mazenod et al. also highlight that teachers characterise learners in high-attainment groups as 'independent learners' and those in the low-attainment groups as 'dependent learners'. This tendency to have lower expectations of learners in low-attainment groups raises concerns about the extent to which teachers' expectations may prevent the development of independent thinking and learning and subsequent group mobility and future success.

The Welsh context

Wales is amid major educational reform, which includes the development of a new curriculum and changes to teacher education and professional standards. The reform aims to provide a broad and balanced curriculum that raises standards to reduce attainment gaps and provide support for disadvantaged learners with a focus on universal access to the curriculum, higher aspirations for all learners, and flexibility in educational decision-making by schools, teachers and key stakeholders

(Welsh Government, 2020). Alongside these reforms, the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 replaces the statutory definition of special educational needs (SEN) with a single category of 'additional learning needs' (ALN). The Act aims to establish more transparent, efficient, and collaborative systems for assessing, planning and monitoring provision for learners with additional learning needs (Welsh Government, 2021). At its core, the Act seeks to ensure that learners with ALN are supported to participate fully in mainstream education and that those responsible for their learning understand the individual's strengths and potential so that learners can successfully progress. Therefore, decisions on grouping learners with ALN should consider the Act's objectives to ensure that all learners reach their potential and are afforded equity and inclusion.

Studies on grouping in the UK have primarily been conducted in England, with little focus on Wales. Although not explicit in the curriculum (new or old) or ALN Act, Thomas et al. (2019) indicated widespread use of attainment grouping in their research exploring special education in Wales. In their study of teacher beliefs about inclusive education, Knight et al. (2022) reported that many strongly believed in attainment grouping since mixed ability grouping was considered challenging and often detrimental to learners.

Unsurprisingly, the extent and nature of attainment grouping are unknown for learners in Wales since the ALN Act does not provide practitioners with a 'code of practice' to follow. Instead, it is a 'technical' guide for identification, provision and review. Although it outlines the importance of inclusive practice, learner rights and differentiated teaching, how these are to be achieved is not made explicit, putting the onus on the practitioner to interpret and implement them into their practice. Equally, subsequent reform documents add to the confusion by offering inappropriate measures and controversial interventions with no evidence base or support for differences across learners, differentiated activities or universal provision (Conn and Davis, 2023).

For many schools, the decision to group by attainment to raise standards and attainment for disadvantaged learners fits well with Welsh Government plans that emphasise the need to close the attainment gap and ensure equity and inclusion for all (Welsh Government, 2021). However, evidence from related academic studies suggests that the opportunities afforded across groups are unequal. Learners in low-attainment groups have an impoverished curriculum and pedagogy relative to

their high-attaining counterparts, which may not reduce attainment gaps and disadvantages for learners but widen the gap further (Hallam and Ireson, 2005; Webster and Blatchford, 2013; Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015). Conversely, for those with ALN, segregation into low-attainment groups, where upward mobility is rarely achieved, may act as a barrier to higher aspirations, expectations and successful future outcomes.

Much of the literature exploring grouping practices has focused on the perceptions of Headteachers, Senior management leads (SML) and class teachers. Heads and SMLs have reported varied and fluid groupings based on subject, cohort and resources, and class teachers cite group flexibility and between and within-class mobility (Towers et al., 2020). However, although Heads and SMLs have an overview of teaching practices in their schools, they may differ in their knowledge of the extent of grouping and, therefore, underestimate its use. Moreover, the lack of observational research on grouping practices may lead teachers to overestimate flexibility and group mobility (McGillicuddy and Devine, 2018).

In order to provide a more accurate account of grouping practices in learners with ALN, the research team recruited ALN Coordinators (ALNCoS). The ALN Act requires mainstream schools to have a designated ALNCo that works at a strategic level to ensure that the needs of all learners with ALN within the education setting are met. Tasks of an ALNCo include identifying a learner's needs, coordinating provision, monitoring the effectiveness of the provision made, and promoting inclusion. Since the role of ALNCo is to work with senior management, teachers and learners, we expect them to provide a more representative picture of grouping practices in Wales.

With this in mind, an online survey was created to find out what grouping practices exist for ALN learners and, as a way of comparison, how they differ for those without ALN, and significantly, what factors influence decisions about grouping practices in Wales. Since data was collected during a phased return following the second lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be remiss not to explore how grouping practices for learners with ALN were affected by school closures and online learning. During this time, learners had limited time with teachers, resulting in a 'loss of learning' and challenges with cognitive and physical development and mental health and well-being (Education Endowment Fund (EEF), 2020; Welsh Government, 2020). Literature at the time suggested that

these challenges were more pronounced in learners deemed 'vulnerable and/or disadvantaged' because of issues with managing 'bubbles' (small selected groups), accessing technology and reduced peer interaction (Waters-Davies et al., 2022). Limited specialist support, routines and spaces may also have exacerbated inequalities that already exist in classrooms (EEF, 2020; Welsh Government, 2020). Despite the Welsh Government's 'check-in, catch-up and prepare' and guidance documents for supporting vulnerable and/or disadvantaged learners during the pandemic (Welsh Government, 2020), online learning and limited access to support may have changed the decisions and set-up of groups, which could result in long-term adverse effects that contribute to the widening attainment gap for those with ALN (Doucet, 2020).

In light of the literature discussed the online survey was created to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent and which grouping practices exist for primary and secondary school learners with and without ALN in Wales, and how do these differ for core and non-core subjects?
2. What factors influence educators' decisions about grouping learners?
3. How have grouping practices for learners with ALN been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and what are the future priorities for grouping learners with ALN post-pandemic?

Method

Sample of respondents

The project took place in south-east Wales and the south-west Wales region and were selected based on the range of perspectives that could be brought to the study. Discussions took place with ALN leads and consortium officers in the two regions to develop a strategy for disseminating the survey to all primary and secondary school ALNCoS within each region.

Data were collected in February and March 2022, and ALNCoS were invited to participate voluntarily. The survey was open for five weeks, and, in total, 102 responses were deemed to be eligible for survey analysis. These included 69

responses from ALNCoS in primary schools and 33 from ALNCoS in secondary schools.

Materials and procedure

The research team developed an online survey using Qualtrics survey software, which sought information about patterns of grouping practices and the educational benefits of groups. This made specific reference to learners with ALN, though with information sought about grouping practices used with all learners to gain an overall comparative picture.

Following pre-testing and piloting, the final survey questions asked ALNCoS four demographic questions, such as school type and local authority. Twelve closed questions were asked, including the reasons behind grouping choices, the frequency of grouping ALN learners per day/week and what kind of intervention programmes (e.g. for academic or social/emotional support) were being used in schools. It was thought that examining the length of time learners spend in groups during the day (or week) and the different intervention programmes utilised would help us understand the extent and nature of provision in Welsh schools. ALNCoS were asked to choose from a list of 21 grouping types, including an 'other' option. The groups were derived from the literature and discussions with teachers and ALNCoS to reflect the terminology used in schools. Originally, there were 26 grouping types, which were then reduced to the final 21 following a thorough discussion by the research team. Grouping types included mixed ability, a term widely used in schools (rather than mixed-attainment), attainment/achievement, table-top, student choice, peer support and friendship grouping. ALNCoS were also asked about grouping types for core subjects (maths and English). In addition, five open-ended questions were included to gain a more in-depth understanding of the perceived educational benefits of grouping. ALNCoS were also asked to comment on changes to how learners with ALN had been grouped during the pandemic, the future priorities post-pandemic for learning support for learners with ALN and what, if anything, they had learned about grouping from the pandemic. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Ethical approval was gained from the relevant University Ethics Committee. ALNCoS were required to give their informed consent before completing the survey.

Analysis of responses

The data presented in the results section represent the five main sections of the survey: (1) background characteristics of the ALNCos, such as 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 intervention 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-ended questions relating to the benefits of groups used in their schools and changes to grouping during the pandemic.

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. The statistics package SPSS v26.0 was used to calculate several chi-square tests for independence to determine differences across several answers. In addition, open comments were analysed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis is a systematic coding and categorising approach for exploring textual information (Mayring, 2004).

Findings

Background characteristics of the ALNCos

One hundred and two ALNCos completed the online survey. The majority of respondents were female (81 per cent). More primary school ALNCos completed the survey than secondary school ALNCos (68 per cent and 32 per cent, respectively). Sixty-one per cent from the south-east region and 39 per cent from the south-west region.

Types of groups used in schools and the reasons behind their use

Table one 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 per cent and 91 per cent, respectively). While some percentages were similar for primary and secondary schools (i.e. attainment/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, $\chi^2(22) 46.90$, $p = .002$. Table one shows that the most frequently reported group for both core subjects in primary and secondary schools was attainment, followed by mixed ability. Analysis of differences between primary and secondary schools and maths/numeracy groupings revealed no association, $\chi^2(12) 12.26$, $p = .425$. Similarly, there

Table 1. Types of groups used in primary and secondary schools for all learners across general and core subjects

Type of groups used for ALL children/young people	Primary		Secondary	
	N	%	N	%
Mixed ability	64	94	30	91
Attainment	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	Primary		Secondary	
	N	%	N	%
Mixed ability	44	66	19	58
Attainment	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	Primary		Secondary	
	N	%	N	%
Mixed ability	50	74	20	61
Attainment	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

was no association between primary and secondary schools and English/literacy groupings, $\chi^2 (12) = 11.71, p = .469$. However, despite no overall significance in the English/literacy groups, percentages for mixed ability, task-dependent, student choice, and social and peer support were significantly higher for primary schools in this sample ($\chi^2 (5) = 2.79, p = .001$).

Table two presents the responses relating to the reasons for using the above groups with all learners and learners with ALN. The most frequent reasons behind the choices for all learners across primary and secondary schools were that learners with ALN are better supported followed by to raise attainment, improve academic progress and develop pupil skills (Primary: 77 per cent, 69 per cent, 68 per cent and 68 per cent, respectively; Secondary: 67 per cent, 64 per cent, 67 per

Table 2. Reasons behind the grouping practices used in schools

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

cent and 67 per cent, respectively). The most frequent reasons for ALN learners in primary school were that learners with ALN are better supported and develop pupil skills (92 per cent and 82 per cent, respectively). Similarly, the most frequent reasons for ALN learners in secondary school were that learners with ALN are better supported followed by to raise attainment and develop pupil skills (81 per cent, 69 per cent and 69 per cent, respectively). The percentage for 'learners with ALN are better supported' was higher in primary compared to secondary school, and both age phases were higher for learners with ALN compared to all learners. Staff, space, and resource restrictions were among the least frequently selected reasons for all learners and those with ALN, with similar figures for primary and secondary schools.

Further percentage differences across primary and secondary schools existed between all learners and those with ALN. For example, ease of teaching in smaller groups and task-dependent grouping were higher in primary schools compared to secondary schools (all learners: 54 per cent and 36 per cent; 44 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively. ALN learners: 5 per cent and 35 per cent; 22 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively). Significant differences were also found between primary and secondary school learners with ALN ($\chi^2(4) = 7.66, p < .001$). Here, secondary school percentages were higher for raising attainment (69 per cent and 55 per cent, respectively), whereas developing pupil skills was significantly higher for primary compared to secondary schools (82 per cent and 69 per cent, respectively). Table two also shows that the percentage of 'delivery of specialised programmes' was similar between primary and secondary schools. However, the reason to group learners based on delivering specialised programmes was significantly higher for learners with ALN ($\chi^2(4) = 9.04, p = .002$).

Intervention programmes

ALNCos were asked to list any intervention programmes they used. 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 three.

The programmes appeared to comprise two main categories: individualised intervention programmes to support social and emotional needs and those used for

Table 3. Intervention programmes used in the schools

Programmes	Examples	All learners		ALN learners	
		N	%	N	%
Intervention programmes (e.g., social and emotional support, communication)	Thrive, ELSA, SEAL, Intensive Interaction, Draw and Talk.	29	29	65	30
Academic (Literacy, numeracy)	Read Write Inc, Precision teaching, TT Rockstars, White rose maths, POPAT, Numicon, Mathletics	70	71	149	70

academic purposes. Table three shows that schools use academic programmes significantly more than social/emotional programmes for learners with and without ALN, $\chi^2(3) 98.08, p < .001$, and the percentage for each programme category is similar for all learners and those with ALN (around a third are social/emotional programmes and around two-thirds are academic).

The frequency of grouping learners with ALN

Table four presents the grouping frequency during an average day or week and how often the groups are reassessed for learners with ALN.

Thirty per cent 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

Table 4. Frequency of grouping learners with ALN

Frequency of grouping	Primary		Secondary	
Per day	N	%	N	%
1 hour	10	16	1	4
2 hours	18	30	5	20
3 hours	12	19	2	8
4 hours	4	7	1	4
5 hours	0	0	3	12
All day	10	16	5	20
Per Week	N	%	N	%
Once	0	0	0	0
Twice	1	20	2	33
Three times	1	20	2	33
Four times	1	20	1	17
Five or more	2	20	1	17
How often are groups reassessed?				
When needed	7	12	0	0
Daily	1	2	0	0
Weekly	15	26	1	4
Monthly	6	11	0	0
Per half-term	20	35	10	44
Per term	8	14	11	48
Annually	0	0	1	4

day (20 per cent). A chi-square test for independence revealed a significant association between the frequency of grouping and school type, $\chi^2 (7) 41.78$, $p < .001$, indicating that secondary school learners spent more time in groups during the day than primary school learners. In contrast, the grouping frequency per week was similar across primary and secondary schools and thus did not reach significance, $\chi^2 (1) .091$, $p = .763$. For primary schools, the most frequent reassessment of groups was per half-term (35 per cent), and for secondary schools, per term (48 per cent). A chi-square reached significance for frequency of reassessment and school type, $\chi^2 (8) 134.15$, $p < .001$, suggesting that those in primary school were reassessed more frequently.

ALNCos beliefs about the educational benefits of groups and changes to grouping during the pandemic

ALNCos were asked about the educational benefits of groups used in their school for all learners. Fifty-one responded to this question, with the main benefits relating 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 seven more 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 several ALNCos (12) was how groups improve attainment and maximise progression. For some, ALNCos grouping achieved progression by challenging students: 'attainment 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 social development (cited by 9). For example, 'encourages social interaction' and 'better developed social skills'.

Fifty-eight ALNCos responded to the question about the educational benefits of groups for ALN learners. Similar to those cited for all learners, the benefits centred around being able to target specific work/skills (cited by 18 ALNCos) and support for learners (cited by 13). 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 emphasised 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 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 had led to improvements in attainment and progression, 'improved self-esteem and well-being 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 related to comments about individualised programmes delivered by experienced and specialist staff (cited six times), making 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'.

ALNCos were also asked about changes to how learners with ALN had been grouped during the pandemic. Over half of ALNCos (55 per cent) 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 well-being, 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 increased need for specialised support, 'more children needing support; therefore there are more of them [learners with ALN]'. The comments from a further eight ALNCos were concerned with the availability of specialist support, which affected 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.

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 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 had encouraged them to develop new interventions as part of their future priorities. For example, 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'.

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.

Discussion

This study aimed to gather information about grouping practices for learners with and without ALN within Wales's education system. Information was also sought about changes to grouping practices during the COVID-19 pandemic and future priorities post-pandemic.

The extent of grouping by mixed ability for general subjects in Welsh schools aligns with those reported in England (Hallam et al., 2008). Interestingly, the concern surrounding a lack of mixed ability for core subjects was not apparent in the present study; mixed ability grouping was higher than anticipated, especially in the primary-age phase, and in contrast to previous findings from English studies (Taylor et al., 2019; Tereshchenko et al., 2019; Francome and Hewitt, 2020). The extent to which this type of grouping is used in Welsh classrooms is encouraging as it can provide class diversity, opportunities for a range of activities, collaborations and teaching expertise (Wilkinson et al., 2021). However, since the present study did not measure the outcomes for the different grouping types, their benefits are unclear. The management of and how mixed ability grouping affects high, middle and low-attainment learners needs further examination before schools decide to move to mixed ability for all learners and subjects.

Notwithstanding the positive figures for mixed ability grouping in this study, attainment grouping featured highly in almost three-quarters of all schools surveyed for general subjects. These figures exceed global estimates of 38 per cent for general subjects reported in the 2015 PISA survey and suggest that a high proportion of schools are streaming across all subjects where learners may have different levels of attainment. If learners are placed in groups based on one subject's level of attainment, such practice could hinder opportunities for success in other subjects where achievement may be higher.

As expected, the most frequent grouping choice for core subjects for primary and secondary schools was attainment-based. The reported 82 per cent of

secondary-age learners taught in attainment groups for maths is similar to figures found elsewhere in the UK (Taylor et al., 2017; OECD, 2013). However, the same percentage for English in the present sample was much higher than in previous examples reported by the above authors. This trend was also apparent in primary-aged children, with attainment grouping slightly higher for English than maths. One reason for this could be the push for Welsh schools to improve reading scores since the latest PISA (2018) results revealed that reading scores in Wales remained the lowest in the UK and are further behind the OECD average. The high percentage of attainment grouping in primary schools in the current sample supports Hallam and Parson's (2014) finding that this type of grouping is becoming more prevalent in younger learners. These findings have implications for development and future progress when entering secondary school. As demonstrated by Stobart (2014), once a learner is placed in a lower-attaining group at a young age, it may be difficult to progress, and learners are likely to lose motivation and disengage (Ireson, Halam and Hurley, 2005). Furthermore, if, as suggested by Mazenod et al. (2018), children in low-attaining groups are more dependent on teachers, they may not develop the independent skills required for secondary school or be subject to low teacher expectations, which can affect group placement and future mobility (Francis et al., 2020).

The first research question also sought to discover grouping practices other than those previously studied and how these differed across general and core subjects. It appears that, for general subjects, ALNCos relied more on a variety of child-centred and socially oriented groups. In contrast, group choices tended to be less varied and achievement-focused for core subjects. Limited variability in group choices has implications for the new curriculum's focus on a rich, broad curriculum for all learners. For example, learners in lower-attainment core subject groups will likely miss out on the expert teaching and wide range of activities offered in high-attainment groups needed for success and progression (Francis et al., 2018). Additionally, the differences between age phases, with primary school learners experiencing more socially oriented groups than their secondary-age counterparts, could place older children at a disadvantage. Using more social and self-selecting groups is beneficial to developing essential social, collaborative learning skills, where learners are likely to feel a greater sense of autonomy and belonging and should, therefore, be encouraged more at the secondary level.

The attainment focus was also apparent in the predominant use of intervention programmes to improve academic performance for all learners and those with ALN. What is encouraging here is that the academic and social/emotional programmes provided for learners with and without ALN were similar in percentage use and programme type. These programmes support the Welsh Government's focus on universal provision by providing evidence-based techniques and inclusive learning opportunities for all learners.

ALNCos were asked about their decisions for grouping in order to answer our second research question. In line with pre-pandemic literature (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017), the ALNCos' primary decision to group learners was to support academic learning. However, while these decisions appear to support the curriculum for Wales' aim to raise standards, they may not reduce the attainment gap or raise aspirations in younger learners and those with ALN since attainment grouping contributes to educational inequalities (Higgins et al., 2015). Furthermore, the academic focus is at odds with the Welsh government's well-being agenda that recognises the importance of well-being for educational attainment and future success. Additionally, although encouraging, decisions to group learners for social purposes comprised less than a third of all decisions and were more apparent in primary schools overall. However, the notable differences in social grouping between primary and secondary school learners with ALN may have negative consequences for the development of social skills for younger learners with ALN, who often require more effort to gain these skills and take longer in their transition to larger settings.

The evidence on grouping suggests that learners must be regularly tested to incentivise and motivate them to move between groups (Francis et al., 2018). It was encouraging to see that in line with Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes's (2017) research, over half of ALNCos reported that primary-aged learners with ALN were reassessed weekly or per half-term, and most secondary-aged learners (over 90 per cent) per half-term or full-term. What is less encouraging is that secondary-aged learners with ALN spent long periods through the day in their designated groups, which is at odds with the varied and fluid groupings reported by Towers et al. (2020). Extended periods in one group may result in fewer opportunities for interaction with other learners or even instil a culture of 'us and them'. Also, limited interaction with peers is often compounded by the amount of time learners with ALN spend with teaching assistants or specialist staff, which can act as barriers to successful relationships and positive classroom experiences

(Gwernan-Jones, 2016). However, caution is needed since the extended periods in one group and longer reassessment times may be unique to grouping during the pandemic. Furthermore, the outcomes of reassessment were not measured in the present study, so assumptions on the effects of this practice are impossible to make. Future researchers may wish to explore these factors further, with a focus on how they might affect mobility, outcomes and the experiences of the learner.

ALNCos were asked to expand on their grouping decisions in the open-ended questions. ALNCos strongly believed in using grouping for effective practice and raising standards, a belief reflected elsewhere (Hallam and Ireson, 2006; Francis et al., 2017a). The educational benefits were described in terms of providing appropriate levels of support and challenge through intervention programmes delivered by experienced and specialist staff tuned into individual needs. Grouping decisions in their free-text answers appeared less about academic choices than when they had to choose reasons from a pre-set list earlier in the survey. Instead, ALNCos concentrated on the value of grouping to support social development and opportunities for building confidence and self-esteem.

The final research question of how grouping practices and future priorities for learners with ALN were affected by the pandemic allowed ALNCos to reflect on changes to groupings and their rationale for grouping learners during the pandemic. It was reassuring to hear that in some schools, learners with ALN had received improved, more child-centred support during the pandemic, especially with regard to well-being. Although ALNCos stressed that grouping choices need further consideration in post-pandemic classrooms, well-being should be prioritised for all learners moving forward. It will be interesting for future studies to examine the impact of such support and whether well-being remains a priority for schools now that all learners have returned to the classroom.

Despite the positive reflections noted above, for many, the pandemic had meant that learners with ALN had not received the usual standard of provision, which ALNCos believed would impact learners in the future. Consistent with the findings presented by Waters-Davies et al. (2022), ALNCos were cognisant of the adverse effects of 'bubbles', which, for many, had led to a decrease in mixed ability grouping and access to trained specialists. This meant many saw the main priority for grouping in the future to be more child-centred by targeting activities to the individual learners' needs while ensuring peer support and social interaction were at the heart of any new interventions.

Limitations

Data was collected in February-March 2022, at the height of the Omicron variant outbreak during the COVID-19 pandemic. This caused high school staff absences and may have impacted the response rate. Furthermore, the responses on the extent and type of grouping used during the pandemic may be unique to this period, making previous and future comparisons difficult. Also, survey responses were returned anonymously, making it difficult to state with confidence the degree to which findings are representative of all ALNCos working in the two regions and, therefore, should be interpreted as a convenience sample of respondents.

Recommendations from the findings

The findings suggest that attainment grouping in primary and secondary schools features highly across general and core subjects. However, ALNCos questioned their initial support for the effectiveness of attainment grouping and academically-focused programmes following time to reflect during the pandemic. Through these reflections, they recognised the need to adapt and explore new interventions. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the experience of disadvantage for some, the potentially negative impact on the progress of those in low-attainment groups threatens to impede learners' progress and the Welsh Government's well-being agenda and post-Covid recovery plans. Therefore, it is recommended that the evidence base concerning the use of attainment grouping in schools is more widely disseminated to encourage teacher reflection and develop more effective practices that have, at their heart, the learners' social and emotional needs.

In conclusion, attainment grouping is pervasive in Welsh schools and, although not often explicit in the curriculum and pedagogy, could threaten to widen the attainment gap, not reduce it. The reported findings raise questions about issues that would benefit further examination, including the representation, diversity and mobility between groups and how these are monitored. Additionally, a thorough examination of how universal provision and differentiation are applied to groups and how their selection and management ensure all learners have access to a varied curriculum and expertise pedagogy. Since the present study focussed on ALNCos under a unique set of circumstances, expanding the sample to all those involved in a

learner's experience (teachers, senior management, subject leads, teaching assistants) should provide a more holistic view of grouping practices and how decisions and priorities have changed in light of the reflections noted here. Finally, with the concerns surrounding the use of 'bubbles' and limited access to specialist support during lock-down periods, educators and policy-makers must ensure that learners with ALN do not suffer a 'triple disadvantage' as a legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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