

How can we improve the level of attainment of selected pupils through the use of mixing abilities within groups?

	Targed/Target	Yr hyn yr wyf wedi'i wneud yn yr aseiniad hwn. What I have done in this assignment.
Targed/Target 1	Revise guidelines for referencing correctly using the Harvard system.	I have referred to https://library.leeds.ac.uk/referencing-examples/9/leeds-harvard To help me with my referencing.
Targed/Target 2	Revise correct application of apostrophes to indicate possession.	Consulted with lecturers and study support. Minimal quotations have been used in this essay.
Targed/Target 3	Develop further your critical engagement with the research that you refer to. What are the limitations of their claims and what might their significance be in your context?	As this is a research project, I have used critical engagement in regards to my own research, this can be found in the recommendations part of my essay.

Aim, focus and purpose of the research

The issue that interested our research group, was looking at a class of mixed ability students, and exploring how we could raise and improve their performance and attainment in the subject of Drama and Art. We wanted to see the impact of placing students in mixed ability groups and if this has any effect on raising the overall standard of results of each member of the group. In my school, Drama is studied at key stage three, four and five but is not set in terms of ability or has any grade requirements for enrolment onto the GCSE course. As the students have the opportunity to study the subject at key stage three it would be interesting to see if we could raise everyone's attainment so that all students are prepared for the transition from key stage three to key stage four.

Research Context

Our chosen focus age group was year seven; this year group in my school are all mixed ability classes, with one Welsh medium class per year group. I discussed this with my research partners, one of whom was from the same school and worked within the same context, where as another was based in a partnership school where this particular year group is set according to ability, and her chosen class was a low ability set. Our research questions is:

“How can we improve the level of attainment of selected pupils through the use of mixing abilities within groups?”

For my class this meant that I had to decide from the data supplied which students were higher, lower and middle band ability and arrange them into groups based on this information.

Overview of literature

Whilst conducting this research, it became apparent that certain themes needed to be explored further. Firstly the aspect of putting pupils in groups outside of their typical settings would need to be addressed, as there are many factors that can influence this decision and its impact on the pupils. This relates to an investigation into the context of the class and school, and how this could affect the pupils development. We also discovered that for Expressive Arts subjects, the data we used to select pupils for groups by ability may not be an accurate representations of abilities of all pupils within these subjects. Therefore, how we measure attainment in a creative subject needs to be further explored. In regards directly to our research question, we must explore the process of mixing abilities.

With regard to the setting of groups there are many factors to consider. The students taking part in this research projects were placed into groups according to the data obtained in their NRT (National reading test) and NNPT (National numeracy procedural) tests. From observations our research team discovered that one of the key issues that became apparent was the social psychology aspect of group settings. Kassin et al (2011) explains that social psychology is a representation of how people feel, think and behave. In social groups Brewer (2003) states that we become representations of ourselves when we become part of a group, this gives us social motivations, which could enhance status, self-esteem and personal achievement. As part of our experiment, I and my fellow researchers placed students into groups

outside of their regular chosen settings, and this had an impact on what occurred. If we look at the identities of groups and the relationship it has on social psychology, Brewer (2003) explains that humans forming groups is part of human evolution, and that based on survival instincts humans form groups instinctively and subconsciously. However Freud (1921,1960) as stated in Brewer (2003) theorises that groups are formed around the identification of a group leader, and that the projection of the leader onto the followers is what identifies the group. Freud (1921) as stated in Jaques (1983) also explains psychodynamic theory, whereby people form groups based on emotional ties with other members; this can be seen when a leader exudes qualities of a followers preferred qualities from a previous emotional connection, and then the leader projects these qualities onto each group member causing a following. A classic theory by Festinger (1954) as noted in Brewer (2003) is that groups are formed because the participants all have similar values, attitudes and behaviours; this view is supported by Turner (1991) in that individuals seek out others who are similar to themselves to satisfy their needs for social affiliation and self-identity. Kassin et al (2011: 294) suggests that another view of how groups are originally formed can be through three distinct characteristics; firstly, 'direct interactions with each other', secondly, a joint membership to a social category (such as race, sex etc.) or thirdly a shared goal or identity. These particular theories are relevant to our research question, as we were able to see that our method of separating already socially confirmed groupings would have an impact on the learners and their interactions with each other.

When looking at our specific subjects that we used in our research project, Drama and Art, we had to decide how to measure the student's ability in these subjects. We decided to place students in groups based on their performance in their NRT and NNPT tests, which is the data our school provided us with. However, we questioned the criteri: both subjects are part of the Expressive Arts area of learning in the new curriculum, and we would need to consider a measurement for creativity within these subjects, and how this would affect their ability or attainment Donaldson (2015). Fisher, Williams (2009) explains that Creativity is essential for skills such as problem solving, emotional development and self-expression. Furthermore Sternberg (1999) as stated in Fisher, Williams (2009) explains that when pupils are assessed in particular ways that recognise their creative ability, their performance academically improves. Griffiths (2010) supports this view by explaining that for a child's development, their creativity can form a relationship with imagination to form an environment that supports their self-expression and learning. Ross et al (1993)

suggests that assessing a student's ability in expressive arts can be determined from the teacher's own professional judgements, perceptions and statements of the learner. Addison and Burgess (2000) supports this view as they state that when assessing the subject of Art, it is mostly a formative assessment by the teacher or educator before a diagnostic summative assessment is completed. Therefore assessing a student's ability in the subject of expressive Arts would have to consist of a formative assessment and summative results.

These particular theories supports our research question, however further investigation will need to be explored to see if this may have had an impact on our results, findings and recommendations. For the Drama lesson study I assigned pupils into groups of mixed ability based on scores from their tests as previously mentioned. However, after teaching the class, I strategically placed some students who had a middle band score and who I thought were particularly strong in their creative ability or skills in this subject into groups in with a lower and higher scored student.

Lesson study design

The methodology used in this project is lesson study research, which is a form of reaction research, this is beneficial to learn more about our research question but also to progress our own professional practice in teaching and learning. The methods used for the data collection for the research are: observation (non-participant), reflection, focus group and interview (see appendices). This was to create qualitative data to help us improve our teaching practice and gain meaning and awareness of our research question.

To create focus groups we chose all chose classes in year seven, as we wanted to make our research more focused and coherent with each other. Then from a chosen class within this year we examined student's results from national reading tests and numeracy procedural tests that they had completed when they were in year 6 (primary school). From this data I arranged all 25 pupils in this class in order of highest to lowest score in each test. To create a focus group I then cross-referenced the two lists to show which pupils consistently had scores in either a higher or lower band of results. From this data I could see five pupils who had both consistently high scores on both tests and five other students who had consistently low scores on both tests. I then created groups of three and placed one high ability, one low ability and one middle band in each group. As previously mentioned, I also had to consider

those pupils who I had observed from previous lessons either showing a talent for this particular subject or those who had been highlighted for their behaviour in my lessons. I felt that distributing these pupils in this way would help select focus groups and would give us differentiated results. As Tereshchenko et al (2018) states, the Arts subjects are typically of mixed ability classes and are not set, and that by mixing abilities in these classes has a positive outcome.

The observation was non-participant, this allowed the researchers to record the data, a method supported by Montgomery (2002) who explains that participant observation can cause complications and difficulty in recording findings coherently and consistently. The observing researchers collected the observation data, and each pupil in the focus group was monitored at the beginning middle and end of the lesson, with a score between 1 and 5 from a resource based on the 'Leuven Scale model of Active Engagement in Learning' (SCILT, 2019) (see appendix C). We altered the scale slightly to suit the research project, and then used this data to assess their participation in the lesson and as part of their group. During the observation as researchers we had to be aware of the Hawthorn effect Wragg (1994), whereby students may have acted differently being if they became aware that they were being observed.

After the observation, we then conducted an interview with the children in the focus group; we wanted to do this straight away so that we could capture the children's thoughts as soon as possible to the lesson (see appendix B). We designed our interview questions based around a group interview and our initial pre-conceptions of our research project. Watts and Ebbut (1987) in Cohen and Manion (1994) states the benefits of group interviews is that they give the opportunity to start discussions and have different answers, however the disadvantages of this is that the answers given are not specific enough for the individual participants within the focus groups, and could potentially stop any personal matters or thoughts from arising.

After the group interviews we designed a reflective model, the structure was based on Gibbs (1988) (see appendix D). One was to be completed straight after the interviews and another a few days later for further reflection. The model allowed the research to have structure, firstly describing the events, then our feelings and emotional responses to the events that occurred and if they were positive or negative; and further to make conclusions or add theories on the reflections of the events with recommendations for anything we could have changed in the future. This

model allowed us to structure our research findings from the lesson observation and the interviews to give us qualitative data. Having a second reflection model as part of our lesson study also allowed us to reflect on our own teaching practice, this also allowed the teacher of the lesson to add in input, thoughts and feelings.

Ethical considerations

Before conducting our research project we had to highlight ethical considerations and complete an ethics form that would need to be approved in line with the University's regulations for research. Through group discussions we were able to identify risks to the participants and researchers. Following the BERA (2008) guidelines we needed to ensure that these particular ethical considerations were in place for our participants: participant understandings of the project and right to withdraw at any time, all students were issued with a consent form and brief document outlining research. We also had to consider the safeguarding of the participants and the research firstly by ensuring anonymity and security of data collected, and secondly by ensuring the emotional well-being of the students involved. We created a consent letter for the research and a cover letter for parents/guardians (see appendix E), so that participants knew they could withdraw from the project if they wanted to do so. Finally, we also had to consider ethical responsibilities of the researchers to ensure that the research project was conducted in a professional manner and free from bias.

Lesson study 1 results and analysis (see appendix F-J)

The first lesson in our research project was an Art lesson. The lesson objective for this lesson was for the students to develop drawing skills and learn new techniques such as roller printing (see appendix F). The students in a previous lesson had been placed into mixed ability groups based on provided data and the teacher's judgement. We then collected observations on one of the focus groups. The children's identity was kept anonymous to comply with ethical study procedures BERA (2008). Child 1 was identified as a low ability student, Child 2 was of high ability and Child 3 was a middle band student.

The lesson began with a quick starter activity, as we wanted to see initially how the groups responded, the student's had to complete a short literacy task as a group. Using the Leuven Scale (SCILT, 2019) (see appendix G) we were able to score each child's engagement and involvement. It was interesting to see from the off-set that Child 1 scored a level 2 which is low involvement, we observed that he seemed more

interested in other children from an already established social group; this view is again supported by Festinger (1954) and Turner (1991) in that Child 1 could have been seeking out others who give them social affiliation and satisfy their needs. Child 2 took charge of the starter activity and completed the task by accessing prior knowledge. This could be seen as the child establishing their role as the leader of the group confirming Freud's theory (1921). It was interesting to observe that Child 3 (the middle band child) did imitate and follow in Child 2's behaviour for the entire lesson and their interview responses. Festinger (1954) as stated in Kassin et al (2011) discusses social comparison theory, whereby a person in a state of uncertainty compares his or her own abilities to another person who is more able. Calhoun (2002) suggests that because of this theory, a person may emulate the behaviour of the person they are comparing themselves to. Bem (1967) as stated in Kassin et al (2011) agrees that if Child 3 was struggling with the task, they could create self-perception and examine their own feelings or internal states and this could create a change in their social behaviour with other participants. These theories could explain why Child 3 was copying or emulating Child 2's behaviour in the lesson study. Upon analysis of the results of the observations Leuven scale, Child 3 made a steady progress of involvement starting at a level 3 working towards the highest possible level of 5 by the end of the lesson.

Another theory that could be relevant in this lesson study are the roles of the students in the focus group and how this contributed or had an affect on our research question. Several times during the observation, it was noted that Child 2 took on a leadership role and helped the other students, particularly Child 1 who was of a lower ability. Fielder (1967) as cited in Wetherell (1996) explains that leadership takes place when certain qualities exist in a situation such as the complexity of a task, the leader to member relationship, and what form of leadership is taking place. In this case, Child 2 helped Child 1 complete their tasks; this could be seen as Child 2 taking steps toward altruism Kassin et al (2011). Altruism could have many different motivations for Child 2, for instance it could be egotistic in a desire to improve one's own or another's welfare. Another view on this could be that Child 2 could have been motivated by empathy-based altruism Batson (2009) whereby Child 2 could have seen Child 1 in need and experienced oriented feelings and emotions to help them. These theories were confirmed as possible actions for Child 2 as when questioned in the interview they responded that they would help someone in need.

Overall, from the observation, all of the children in our focus group completed the lesson goal/objective and were mostly engaged in all of the tasks. Our focus group happened to finish the task first and then Child 2 and Child 3 then helped other groups in the class. Child 1 did not help other students but did return to their original social group and interact with them. From this observation we can see that the higher ability student took on a leadership role in the group and helped out the other students; therefore, referring back to our research question, having mixed ability groups does affect the overall attainment of the weaker students in the group. Ireson and Hallam (2001) questioned does ability grouping in classes raise the student's attainment? Ireson and Hallam (2001) states that the impact can be varied or influenced by a number of factors, however by streaming mixed ability classes in schools can sometimes disadvantage lower ability pupils. This opened up a discussion amongst our research team that the data we were using to determine the ability of our students in these particular subjects may not be accurate or appropriate in determining their ability in Art was high or low. Another recommendation so that the lesson may improve in the future, was that when the task has been completed the teacher could instruct Child 1 to help other students as without instruction he returned to his friendship group and disengaged in the remainder of the task time.

Lesson study 2 results and analysis (see appendix K-O)

Our second lesson study took place in a partnership school during an Art lesson. This class was a nurture group with all pupils in this class having an ALN Status or lower ability compared to other classes in that year group in this particular school. The lesson objective was for students to understand composition of an image using the theme of leaves, which they had been studying in previous lessons. The teacher changed the seating plan slightly to groups students whom she had noted had a higher or lower ability in Art. Smith and Laslett (1993) state that the use of seating plans in the classroom is integral to good classroom management practice, as this enables students to establish structure and sense of place. Fernandes et al (1999) agrees that seating plans in classroom management can have a part to play on the student's motivation, involvement and engagement in the lesson. Observing the lesson the students were overall calm and focused on the tasks at hand.

The focus group we observed in detail had a mixed set of results from our Leuven Scale (SCILT, 2019), which provided interesting analysis. Child 1's results remained fairly consistent throughout the lesson with a moderate level of engagement with very

little distraction. Child 2 had a steady decline through the lesson and become engaged more with Child 3 once they had finished their work. Child 3's engagement at the start of the lesson was low and then grew during the task, but when Child 2 and Child 3 finished before Child 1 they became distracted with each other. Their conversation suggested that they were both from the same social group as they discussed topics they had in common. This is similar to the first lesson study as we could see a pattern of when the participants had finished working in their group they returned to a more familiar social grouping.

As researchers we discussed how the lesson could be improved and agreed that the students in the lesson could have been working on a group task rather than individual painting tasks. This would have enabled us to see if the participants interacted more as groups and if this enabled the student's attainment to rise. However, the lesson did show that the use of seating plans had a calming impact on the participants, more so than usual which could contribute to increased motivation and focus on the lesson, which in turn could improve their performance.

Lesson study 3 results and analysis (see appendix P-T)

For the final Lesson study, we observed a lesson taught by myself in the subject of Drama. Teaching the lesson gave me a different perspective as I was participating in the study by being in the role of the teacher. The lesson objective was for the students to be introduced to scripts on a chosen AoLE subject and perform a section of the script using vocal skills only. The focus group chosen was formed of one higher (Child 1), one lower (Child 3) and one middle band ability student (Child 2). Putting the students into new groups outside of their friendship circles caused a lot of conflict and disturbance at the start of the lesson. During the starter activity, the majority of the students adapted well and resiliently to this, working well with their groups, whereas other groups disengaged and even began to bully other students. Complying with our ethical guidelines BERA (2018) I was concerned for Child 2's wellbeing so swapped her with Child 1, and this improved their overall mood and engagement improved, which we recorded in our Leuven Scale (SCILT, 2019). For the main task of the lesson the students worked in their groups reading through the scripts and I then chose the observed students to read the extract aloud to the class. All students were highly engaged and it appeared Child 3, (the lower ability student) actually adapted their voice and performance to their chosen character better than Child 1 and 2. In the interview we could analyse the connection for this as Child 3's

answers showed that they felt more comfortable working in a group and with a friend from their social group, which happened to be Child 1 (the higher ability student).

The lesson could have been improved by seeing if the challenge of physically acting out their scenes then had an impact on the participant's involvement with each other. Perhaps in a previous lesson I could have asked the students to form their own groups to see if this could have avoided any conflict or any emotional distress to the participants in the lesson study. Similarly, to Lesson study 1 and 2, we saw that social factors influenced their performance when working with other people outside of their normal social constraints.

Discussion of research findings

From our lesson studies we were able to find out that there is a social change in behaviour when putting people into groups outside of their normal comfort zones, and if this had an impact on our research question:

“How can we improve the level of attainment of selected pupils through the use of mixing abilities within groups?”

Previously it has been noted that human beings form different groups in their lives and that there are many factors that make that person a part of a group. From our lesson studies we were able to see a change in the students behaviour. As researchers we discussed the possible problematic instances that could occur from putting students in groups, and that we had to be mindful of students wellbeing. We understood that our participants had already formed solid friendships and relationships with their classmates. Summer (1906) explains the theory of ethnocentrism in social psychology, whereby people form in-group relationships based on emotional significance, loyalty and preference. Darwin (1872) and Fridlund (1994) as stated in Brewer (2003) explain that the expression of emotions serve as a function for communication on how the individual person has interpreted the present situation and how they will respond. We could see a huge shift in behaviour in my Drama lesson as, in the starter activity, 2 out of the 3 groups members bullied the other member of the group. When questioned why they were doing that it became apparent it was because they were not friends nor from the same social group. This view is supported by Brewer (2003) as they say that behaviour in working in groups can go two ways: anti-social behaviour or prosocial behaviour. These can have a

positive or negative effect on the group and the relationships within the groups. Allport (1954) as stated in Brewer (2003) explains that the lack of familiarity can cause conflict and hostility between groups. Brewer explains that when there is a present social structure that's met with a change, this can then create a psychological response and motive, which then created responses in a person.

Considering this, we can then examine if our research question has been answered, could we raise attainment of certain pupils by mixing abilities in groups? In each lesson study there was evidence of this, where the higher ability students would either help the weaker students or the middle band students would emulate the higher abilities behaviour. However, because of external factors and already formed social groupings, it was interesting to see how each group worked together, if at all and if this had an impact on their learning.

Mohammed et al (2007) explains that structured mixed ability groups can promote engagement and involvement, particularly in middle band students; furthermore they explain that in groups students can take on roles, such as the higher ability student taking on the role of the teacher and helping out the lower ability students. Hallam, S and Ireson, J (2001) agrees that mixed ability groupings can benefit lower abilities in certain contexts, but it doesn't have much of an effect on an overall average attainment rise. Frances et al (2020) states that mixing abilities could be varied from subject to subject, for example, the participants I had analysed as having a higher ability in my Drama class, some of them did not participate or perform as well as other students who had been defined as low ability from the data that we used. However Dudley and Osvath (2016) states that mixing abilities into groups can have many benefits, such as the weaker students being involved more in the learning and raising their self esteem, there are also more opportunities for personalised learning.

Conclusion

Examining our own research lessons, we discussed as a group and with our subject mentors about the ways we created our ability groups. The data I was given by my school was the results from student's national numeracy and reading tests and then I grouped students based upon this. The strength from this method was that we had solid evidence to confirm our decisions on their ability. Brookheart (2010) states that assessing creativity can often lead to us assessing that person's creative or critical thinking when confronted with a task to create a new idea. As previously discussed,

the way we grouped students using the provided data revealed a weakness when applied to our subjects, where creativity is a key skill and perhaps we could have included our own judgements to decide which of the students were of a higher ability in these specific subjects.

For our research project we used a lesson study and observation method, for the lesson observation we created an adaptation of the Leuven scale SCILT (2012) to assess student participation in the task. Then we used a Gibbs (1988) reflection model, one completed immediately after the lesson and one a few days later (see appendix C, D). We found that the Leuven scale was easy to use, however to improve it we could have perhaps used a more advanced observation sheet where we could add any additional comments to support our choice of scores. We were able to generalise our findings in our reflection model, being able to complete this twice with space in-between allowing us to process and think of any possible events we may have missed. The limitations of our method was that when we took on the role of teacher, we might have missed some events happening as we had a duty of care to all of the students and not just the ones in the focus groups. Our research group was lucky to have 3 members, this allowed us to have an extra pair of eyes when observing. After the observations we conducted interviews with our chosen focus groups. The interview allowed us to ask any personal questions about the lesson study and get another perspective from the students point of view. We conducted the interviews in groups, however, upon reflection we agreed that we may have had more honest answers if the students had been questioned individually, as we believed that at times their answers were influenced by other students. The interview however gave us an insight into how the pupils thought the lesson could have been improved or made more challenging. For example, in my Drama lesson the students said they could have been more challenged if they were allowed to physically act out the scene. This could have been an opportunity to explore the physical aspects of how the new groupings worked together and if this would have had a part to play in our study.

This research project has helped me move forward with my teaching practice, as I now know more about group work, social dynamics and external factors that would help me creating group work activities. In the future, I would consider allowing the students to pick their own groups and then make a professional judgement if this would work to raise their attainment and performance in my lessons.

Recommendations

In light of our research there are a few recommendations suggested for future practice and to inform further research. Firstly, how do we assess the students in Drama and Art and can this be applied to other subjects. Didau (2015) suggests that schools can often stifle creativity, and that the skills to be able to articulate creative ideas within boundaries should be regarded in a decision to assess a student's ability.

Secondly, understanding the already formed social groups and external factors when deciding on selecting groups could play an important role in the student's participation and learning. Gaertner and Dovidio (2000, pp46: 47) suggest a 'common in-group identity model' could be used to have a positive impact on merging different social groups. This method is designed so that individuals can find a common factor with their new group, so much so that they then begin to make more positive personal prosocial behaviours with other group members and become more co-operative. Kassin et al (2011) also agrees that a strategy for improvement to promote better dynamics within a group is through the sharing of information, goals and training. Kassin et al also suggests that having a rewards system in place should reinforce positive behaviours for working in groups.

Overall, the experience of this research project will benefit me in my future teaching practice. It has given me a clearer knowledge of social psychology and the behaviours of students, and will influence my choices when planning future group activities in the classroom.

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