

Exploring the concept of ability: a social constructionist approach.

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Declaration

This thesis is submitted as a requirement of the Doctoral of Applied Educational Psychology course at Newcastle University. I confirm that this work is my own and has not been published elsewhere.

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Overarching abstract

The systematic review and empirical research presented in this thesis, as part of the required work for the Doctorate in Applied Educational Psychology, explored the concept of ability and how the use of ability grouping methods influences the construction of the pupil. Additionally, the acceptance of ability as a 'true' and testable concept is also explored.

The systematic review examined research focusing on the experiences, attitudes and beliefs in relation to ability grouping from the perspective of teachers and children. A meta-ethnography was used to offer a new interpretation of such research; to explore how ability grouping influenced the construction of the pupil. Five key themes from the meta-ethnography arose as influencing the construction of the pupil; teachers assumptions and expectations; equal opportunities; self-esteem, inclusion, feeling listened too; justification of ability grouping; and perception of differences – labelling and comparing.

The empirical research reports the findings of a small-scale qualitative study that explored parental perceptions of ability and ability grouping. Constructivist grounded theory was used to analyse the transcripts of semi-structured interviews with six parents in the North of England. The emergent theory tells us that parents of children in high sets (re)produced particular discourses and attributions around ability that are similar to the discourses and attributions produced by many teachers, and in a wider sense, by the education system and Government. Conversely, low set parents challenged the current educational system as putting too much emphasis on academic ability, and raised questions around the self-efficacy of teachers in being able to meet the needs of all children. Factors that contributed to the concept and perception of ability were a sense of a hierarchy and pecking order in schools, and parental competition and pride. In exploring the concept of ability, factors that emerged as important to parents were the beliefs that there is dissonance between the education system and current society, and parents feeling isolated.

Findings from both the systematic review and the empirical research elucidate the notion that the dominant functionalist view present in education can lead to children being characterised by their perceived ability. Consequently, it highlights the potential role of educational psychologists in challenging assumptions around ability

and ability grouping, through acting as a 'critical friend', and by engaging with and advancing a socially critical account of education as opposed to the dominant functionalist one.

The pieces are linked through a bridging document questioning the nature and acceptance of truth, and an exploration of the concept of ability through changing discourse.

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Chapter One: Systematic Literature Review.

Ability grouping and the construction of the pupil: exploring teacher and children perspectives in primary and secondary schools

1.1 Abstract

Ability is a concept that has seemingly been whole-heartedly accepted by our education system; notably through the use of ability grouping. This systematic review, using a meta-ethnographic approach, aims to offer a new interpretation of research that has previously explored teacher and children's experiences, attitudes and beliefs towards ability grouping. This is with a view of providing a new question to consider how such experiences, attitudes and beliefs influence the construction of the pupil within education. Five key themes from the meta-ethnography arose as influencing the construction of the pupil; teachers assumptions and expectations; equal opportunities; self-esteem, inclusion, feeling listened too; justification of ability grouping; and perception of differences – labelling and comparing.

“Education is the process through which society transmits its accumulated values, knowledge, skills, attitudes and customs from one generation to another and influences how an individual thinks, feels and acts.” (Mortimore, 2013, p. 3)

“...inside the assessing systems of schools there are few objective standards and in their absence there remains for judgement of difficulty or success little more than the comparison of one student with another.” (Cremin & Thomas, 2005, p. 433)

“Concepts carry consequences – classifying things one way rather than another has important implications for the way we behave towards such things.” (Reznek, 1987, p. 1)

1.2 Introduction

The above quotes have stayed with me throughout this process, and highlight the broader context of this review; that of judgement, comparison and categorisation.

I have always been curious as to how societal practices influence the construction¹ of individuals. The concept of comparison and categorization of people is one that I have often struggled to understand, especially given the ease at which it occurs. Levitin (2014) argued that individuals are innately programmed to categorize – it is how we make sense of the world. Given our proposed limited memory and storage capacity (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974; Luck & Vogel, 1997) we have to categorize to enable us to function in our current society. Within Levitin's (2014) argument, parallels can be drawn with Foucault's (1988) suggestion that society needs outcasts. Whilst both authors present an argument for the need for categorisation, their justifications differ. Levitin argued from a biological developmental perspective, that our brains have not yet developed enough to cope with the vast amount of information presented to us, so, to make sense of the world, we categorize. Conversely, Foucault argued from a societal perspective; that we as a society need outcasts, evoking an "us" and "them" mentality.

Categorizing and comparing individuals is apparent within our Education System through the practice of grouping children by their perceived ability². The aim of this project is to explore how children being grouped by their perceived, or assumed, ability leads to the construction of the pupil. In the following section, a brief history of how children have historically been grouped³ by the English Education System is explored.

1.3 Ability grouping: A brief history

In England, the means by which pupils have been grouped by their perceived ability has, historically, been subject to debate. The 1950's saw a preference for streaming as a means of ability grouping (Gillard, 2008), yet by the 1960's, within-class grouping and setting became more prominent (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1999). By

¹ The term 'construction' refers to the "processes by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account" for a person (Gergen & Davis, 1985, p. 3)

² The term 'ability' is presented without quotation marks to aid readability, however, the reader should assume that the concept of 'ability' is continually being questioned.

³ Due to multiple terms being used regarding different methods of grouping children, a glossary defining terms is provided in appendix 1.

the 1980's, popularity for mixed ability teaching grew (Boaler, William, & Brown, 2000), however, such popularity was relatively short-lived with the Education Reform Act (1988) and OFSTED (1993) advocating for a return to setting. Such advocacy was supported by the Labour Government in their White Paper 'Excellence in Schools' (Department for Education and Employment, 1997), where they made the presumption that setting should be the norm in Secondary schools. The rationale behind this presumption was never quite made clear, but it could be reasoned that pressure for a focus on the academic success of the 'most-able' pupil's grew with OFSTED's recommendations (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b).

Prior to the debate in the latter half of the twentieth century, comparison and categorisation has long been present within the English Education System. In the nineteenth century, for example, categorisation was based on social class, as highlighted by three national reports (The Newcastle Report of 1861, the Clarendon Report of 1864, and the Taunton Report of 1868) focusing on an 'appropriate' education for different social classes (working, upper and middle, respectively). Categorisation was later apparent in the Norwood report (1943), which endorsed the view there were three groups of pupil; the academic, the technical and the practical (Gillard, 2008). These three groups postulated by Norwood bear resemblance to Hadow's (1931) earlier categorisation of pupils as 'As', 'Bs' or 'Cs'. Such categorisation of pupils into three distinct groups was once again advocated in the 2006 White Paper ('Higher Standards, Better Schools for All'), with the postulation that children could be divided into; *"the gifted and talented, the struggling and the just average"* (Department for Education and Skills, 2006).

Thus, despite debate and change surrounding the means, the concept of grouping children by ability has always been inherent within the English Education System.

1.4 What is ability?

For many, the concept of ability is equivalent to the concept of intelligence (Mainwaring-Betts & Bryer, 2004). The Oxford English dictionary defines ability as the "possession of the means or skill to do something" or the "talent, skill or proficiency in a particular area". Interestingly, it defines intelligence as "the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills". Consequently, does one have to acquire ability in order

to gain intelligence? Alternatively, the use of the word 'possession' within the definition of ability implies somewhat of an innate train of thought. To possess something would imply either you have it or you do not. Therefore, echoing Dweck's (2006) notions of a fixed or growth mind-set, is ability to be construed as something you innately possess or that which you strive to acquire?

Instead of answering such questions in the realms of a positivist or realist outlook, it might be useful to view ability as a concept rather than a definable term. Cremin and Thomas (2005, p. 437) referred to ability as "a vernacular construct that has been transformed into a tool used for comparison within the education system". Marks (2014) seemed to favour a similar constructionist view, stating the concept of ability is co-constructed through discourse. Conversely, Heider (1958) proposed that a concept is derived meaning through the methods used to arrive at it. If so, the concept of ability may only achieve its meaning through the use of ability tests, which, in the realm of education, are traditionally tests of 'intelligence' (Mainwaring-Betts & Bryer, 2004) in the form of intelligence quotient (IQ) tests. Critics of IQ tests, such as Gardner (1985) and Sternberg (1985), have argued that IQ tests neglect important qualities such as emotion and interpersonal skills, and lead to a narrow, fixed train of thought. Despite such critique, tests of intelligence are still inherent within our education system. Such inherence is, arguably, indicative of the English Education System (still) encompassing the postulations of Galton (1865) and Burt (1955) that intelligence is a fixed, measurable entity. The young age at which pupils are grouped by their ability would support this suggestion, with Jackson (1964) finding 74% of schools grouped children by their ability by age 7. This percentage has remained consistent, with recent research from Campbell (2013) finding 78.8% of 7 year olds were grouped by ability.

Nonetheless, there seems to be both a practical and empirical consensus that only certain subjects can be ability grouped. A review into the effects of pupil grouping found pupils are more likely to be grouped for maths and science than they are for humanities, art, physical education or music (Kutnick et al., 2005). As suggested by Becker et al. (2014), ability groups are, generally, formed on the premise that they allow instruction to be adjusted to need. However, as argued by Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, and Major (2014) in research from the Sutton Report, the suggestion from Becker et al. (2014) that ability grouping helps to meet the needs of

pupils is perhaps more valid in theory. In practice, arguably, ability grouping can lead to a loss of individual need at the expense of the perceived need of the group (Ireson, Clark, & Hallam, 2002).

1.5 Previous research

Despite being an accepted practice, research focusing on the effects of ability grouping suggests grouping makes little difference to learning outcomes (Coe et al., 2014; Hallam, 2002; Ireson, Hallam, & Hurley, 2005). Thus, grouping children by ability is accepted and advocated, despite little evidence suggesting it supports levels of achievement (Slavin, 1990). Previous research has tended to focus on the effects of grouping on attainment (Gibbons & Telhaj, 2006; Ireson, Hallam, Hack, Clark, & Plewis, 2002; Ireson et al., 2005; Slavin, 1990) and self-esteem (Ireson & Hallam, 2005; Ireson, Hallam, & Plewis, 2001; Norris & Alexio, 2003). Research has also highlighted key factors that influence the construction of the pupil, such as race (Gillborn, 1998, 2005, 2010), gender (Evans, Davies, & Penney, 1996; Wilkins, 2012) socio-economic background (Biddle, 2014; Boliver, 2011) and month of birth Campbell (2013). This project aims to synthesise both research areas of interest and explore the influence of ability grouping as a factor in the construction of the pupil. This is not with the intention that ability grouping be viewed as the only factor in the construction of the pupil, but to offer the view that it is a factor, one that can often be overlooked due to the concept of ability being so ingrained within our current education system.

Previous research has focused on experiences of ability grouping from children and teachers (Aylett, 2000; Boaler et al., 2000; Devine, 1993; Hallam, Ireson, & Davies, 2004), and their attitudes (Brassell, Petry, & Brooks, 1980; Hallam & Ireson, 2003), beliefs (Chorzempa & Graham, 2006) and preferences (Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Ireson & Hallam, 2005) in relation to ability grouping. This project offers a new question in order to explore a new interpretation of such research. The research question this project aims to explore is:

- i) How does ability grouping influence the construction of the pupil from the perspectives of teachers and children?

1.6 Meta-ethnography

Subsequently, as this project aims to offer a new interpretation, a meta-ethnography, as originally outlined by Noblit and Hare (1988), was deemed the most appropriate method over other qualitative methods, such as thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). A meta-ethnography is a qualitative method that allows for comparison and synthesis of studies into a new interpretation. The purpose of a meta-ethnography is not aggregation, but interpretation (Harden, 2010). Thus, as this review aims to offer a new interpretation of existing research, and not to report patterns within existing research, a meta-ethnography was deemed the most suitable method.

Noblit and Hare (1988) proposed seven phases of a meta-ethnography for synthesising qualitative research. However, the process of a meta-ethnography, for me, does not seem as linear as they describe. This is not an original observation; many studies have discussed the complexities of conducting a meta-ethnography due to its subjective nature (Britten et al., 2002; Campbell et al., 2003; Lee, Hart, Watson, & Rapley, 2014). Atkins et al (2008), in particular, expressed their confusion at the lack of transparency of the process of a meta-ethnography. Nonetheless, confusion arising from a process that allows, or indeed encourages, such subjectivity, as suggested by Lee et al. (2014), is perhaps to be expected. The very nature and concept of a meta-ethnography is that it allows for subjective interpretation, and by that premise, arguably, should not be bound by rigid description of phases. To offer clarity, I have outlined the process of a meta-ethnography as suggested by Noblit and Hare (1988) in brackets, but have also broadened the titles of the phases to represent my own personal experience.

1.6.1 Starting: (Phase 1: Getting started – identifying an intellectual interest that qualitative research might inform)

As previously mentioned, the concepts of comparison and categorisation have always interested me. Such interest revolves around the ease with which individuals, and society, allow such concepts to be used. Originally, when identifying an intellectual interest, I was interested in exploring the relationship between ability grouping and concepts such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and locus of control

(Rotter, 1975; Weiner, 1985). In essence, I was interested in exploring the impact of ability grouping on what pupils felt they could accomplish. This is still an interest, however, through reading papers, notably Raveaud's (2005) paper, my thinking shifted. I felt I had to take a step back and first gain an understanding of how the pupil is constructed within the realm of education, and how ability grouping influences that construction. Therefore, I began searching for papers that focused on experiences, attitudes and thoughts in relation to ability grouping, from the perspective of teachers and children.

1.6.2 Searching: (Phase 2: Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest)

Electronic databases were searched with the implementation of the inclusion criteria (presented in table 1) and key search terms ("*ability grouping**" AND "*teachers**"; "*ability grouping**" AND "*children**"; "*ability grouping**" AND "*pupil**"⁴). These search terms reflected the broad nature of the review and were inputted into five electronic databases (*British Education Index, Child and Adolescent Studies, psycinfo, scopus and Web of Knowledge*). Searches also included use of Google Scholar. This search strategy yielded 41 papers of potential relevance. Searches within references of all 41 studies were conducted, leading to a total of 43 relevant papers. The titles and abstracts of the 43 papers were read as a measure of gauging relevance. Some search engines do not allow you to select a country, therefore, whilst 43 papers were found, many were conducted in countries other than England and thus did not meet criteria for inclusion. Subsequently, 12 papers were read in detail. Of these papers, 6 were used as focal studies due to their relevance to the review question. These papers can be found in table 2. All searches were conducted between July and October 2014.

⁴ Use of an asterix (*) denotes a wildcard entry. This can be used when there are various different terms that can be used to refer to the same thing, or if there could be alternate spellings.

Table 1: Inclusion criteria

| Criteria for inclusion | Reasoning |
|---|---|
| Qualitative or mixed-methods studies focusing on the views, perspectives, experiences, attitudes or beliefs of children and/or teachers in relation to ability grouping | This project is focusing on children and teacher’s experiences of ability grouping to offer a new interpretation as to how those experiences influence the construction of the pupil |
| Studies conducted in England | There is much research conducted in the United States and other countries focusing on streaming which differs from ability grouping (see glossary in Appendix 1). Specifically, the Education system can differ between England, Wales and Scotland, and for that reason this review focused on studies that took place in England, rather than the United Kingdom. |
| Studies published after 1997 | This was when New Labour advocated ability grouping as best practice. |

Table 2: Information relating to studies used in the meta-ethnography

| Paper | Researchers (date) | Sample | Place of study | Method: data collection |
|--|---|-----------------------|---|--|
| 'Modernising the comprehensive principle': selection, setting and the institutionalisation of educational failure | Araujo (2007) | Teachers and children | 1 secondary school | Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews, direct observation, collection of school documents |
| Students' Experiences of Ability Grouping – disaffection, polarisation and the construction of failure | Boaler, William and Brown (2000) | Children | 6 secondary schools | Qualitative: Classroom observation, interviews, questionnaires |
| The teaching and learning of pupils in low-attainment sets | Dunne, Humphreys, Sebba, Gallannaugh and Muijs (2011) | Teachers and children | 13 secondary schools | Mixed methods: individual and group interviews, classroom observations, documentary evidence, school reports |
| Primary pupils' experiences of different types of grouping in school | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) | Children | 6 primary schools | Qualitative: Semi-structured interview |
| Educational triage and ability grouping in primary mathematics: a case-study of the impacts on low-attaining pupils | Marks (2014) | Teachers and children | 2 primary schools | Mixed methods: Classroom observation, questionnaires, individual and group interviews, attainment tests |
| Hares, tortoises and the social construction of the pupil: differentiated learning in French and English primary schools | Raveaud (2005) | Teachers and children | 6 primary schools (3 in England, 3 in France) | Qualitative: classroom observations, interviews, school documents |

1.6.3 Familiarisation, translation and synthesising (Phase 3: reading the studies, Phase 4: determining how the studies are related, Phase 5: translating the studies into one another and Phase 6: synthesising translations)

For me, phases 3, 4, 5 and 6, as outlined by Noblit and Hare, were similar. The phases blended into one large stage that was not linear, but iterative. As argued by Lee et al. (2014, p. 6), “the movement from determining relationships to conducting a translation (and synthesis) of studies is not strictly linear”.

I began by reading each paper in detail to identify themes highlighted by the authors, as suggested by Noblit and Hare. To help with this, for each paper I followed the process of a critical synopsis as outlined by Wallace and Wray (2011). An example of this is presented in appendix 2. I then listed each theme and corresponding language, using original terms, similar to the process used by Campbell et al. (2003), and compared these original themes whilst reading each study, similar to the process detailed by Rice (2002). An example of this is presented in table 3, and fully in appendix 3.

Table 3: Example of paper's original themes and supporting narrative

| Paper and author | Theme 1 – High sets, high expectations, high pressure | Theme 2 – Low sets, low expectations and limited opportunities | Theme 3 – Restricted pedagogy and pace |
|---|--|---|--|
| <p>Students' Experiences of Ability Grouping – disaffection, polarisation and the construction of failure</p> <p>Boaler, William and Brown (2000)</p> | <p>“Come on we haven't got much time”</p> <p>“you should be able to, you're in top set”</p> <p>“you don't get time to think”</p> <p>“you're the top set, you're supposed to know it all”</p> <p>“it really depressed me, the fact that everyone in class is like really far ahead and I just don't understand”</p> <p>“you think oh my God I'm the only one in the class that doesn't understand it”</p> | <p>“we say we can do it, but he just writes them down anyway”</p> <p>“it's far too easy”</p> <p>“we do baby work off the board”</p> <p>“they just don't think they have to bother with us”</p> <p>Students in lower groups were upset and annoyed about the low level of work they were given</p> <p>Little hope of moving to higher groups</p> | <p>Setted lessons are often conducted as though students are not only similar, but identical in terms of ability, preferred learning style and pace of working</p> <p>“If you're slow she's a bit harsh really, I don't think she really understands the fact that some aren't as fast as others”</p> <p>Teachers using ability grouping adopted a prescriptive pedagogy</p> <p>“Now, every day is copying off the board and just doing the next page and it gets really boring”</p> |

Thus, I created a matrix where I evidenced each theme using data from the original studies (similar to the process outlined by Britten et al. (2002)). From here, I reviewed and interpreted the matrix to determine relationships between studies and concepts and consequently developed a line-of-argument synthesis, presented in appendix 4 (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Schumm, Skea, McKee, & N'Dow, 2010).

Although Noblit and Hare describe different levels of interpretation (first-order, second-order and third-order), for me, the distinction between these interpretations was not clear. Similarly to Atkins et al. (2008), I found it uncomfortable to view first-order interpretations⁵ as a true representation of participant voice, as the quotes used within any paper are essentially coming from the voice and interpretation of that paper's author. Echoing the difficulties experienced by Atkins et al. (2008), second-order interpretations⁶ were often repetitive and descriptive. I found it uncomfortable attempting to distinguish between participant 'voice' and author interpretation, as the participant voice being presented had already been subject to the interpretation of the author. Consequently, I merged first and second order interpretations as one, as, to me, they are both the author's interpretation; the former being the author's interpretation of what they heard a participant say, and the latter being the author's interpretation of what the participant meant. The conceptual difficulties of attempting to distinguish between voice and interpretation are, arguably, present within all types of methodology (Arruda, 2003).

1.7 My line of argument (*Phase 7: Expressing the synthesis*)

From the meta-ethnography, five themes arose as influencing the construction of the pupil as a result of ability grouping. These themes are presented in figure 1 and summarised in table 4.

⁵ Referred to by Noblit and Hare as participant views

⁶ Referred to by Noblit and Hare as the authors interpretation of what the participant said

Figure 1: Themes contributing to the construction of the pupil

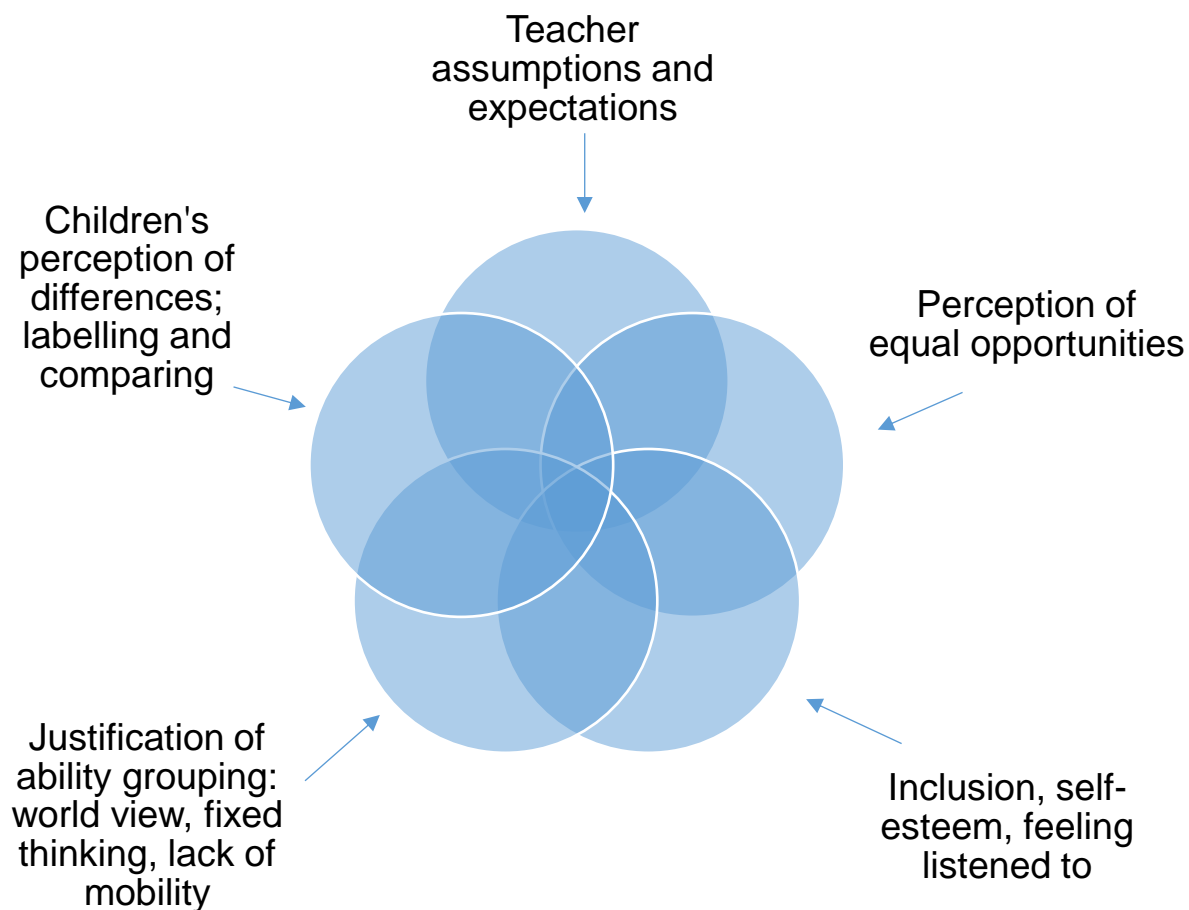


Table 3: Summary of themes

Teacher assumptions and expectations led to the construction of the pupil in many aspects, ranging from assumptions about pupil learning style and potential to expectations of pupil behaviour. Additionally, many teachers assumed ability grouping led to the creation of **equal opportunities**, although some did acknowledge ability grouping benefits those in ‘top’ sets at the expense of those in ‘bottom’ sets. Interestingly, children seemed to be much more aware of such inequality than teachers, or, perhaps, were more willing to acknowledge it. Children seemed to be aware of teacher assumptions and this seemed to influence their **self-esteem, feelings of being listened to and included**. Even when children told their teachers the work was too easy or difficult, the children were rarely acknowledged. This led to a lack of mobility between ability groups, implying a fixed notion of ability. This fixed thinking was also highlighted by teachers’ **justification of ability grouping**, that it was perceived as ‘right’ and was normalised within school discourse and ethos. Such thinking also seemed to influence **children’s dialogue and views**. Children routinely compared themselves to other children and used labels such as “clever” and “stupid” with ease.

1.8 Findings and discussion

1.8.1 Teacher assumptions and expectations

This was the most prominent theme across all six studies. Assumptions and expectations were not limited to perceived ability, but also included assumptions and expectations of pupils’ attitudes, motivations and behaviour (Araújo, 2007; Marks, 2014). Teachers interviewed in Dunne et al. (2011) and Araújo’s (2007) studies stated a high quality level of teaching was required in lower groups to counter motivational problems. However, no thought was given to the possibility that teachers were perhaps assuming there would be motivational problems in lower sets, or, that being in a lower set was the reason children lacked motivation. Many teachers in the studies held the assumption that those in lower sets lacked motivation due to their lack of ability.

Wilkinson and Penney (2014), in their literature review, found pedagogy differed vastly amongst ability groups. Whilst this was a prominent concept in this meta-ethnography, for me it highlighted more about teacher assumptions and expectations of their pupils, which, consequently, influenced their pedagogical practice. Teachers often used collaborative, social pedagogical methods when teaching high groups, in comparison to lower groups where individual work sheets were often used (Boaler et al., 2000; Dunne et al., 2011; Marks, 2014). Consistent with Hattie's (2009) findings from his meta-analysis, lessons for low set groups were often less engaging. Teachers in Boaler et al's (2000) study had assumptions and expectations about appropriate level and pace of work for their top and lower groups, and were open about informing pupils of such expectations. Similarly, teachers in Hallam et al's (2004) study were also explicit to pupils about their expectations of them. A recent OFSTED report (2013) indicated that for the 'noble' prospect of all pupils having the opportunity to achieve their potential, focus must be on the 'most-able children'. It could be argued such focus has led to increased expectations of 'top-group' pupils, and reduced expectation for those in lower groups (Araújo, 2007; Boaler, 1997b; Boaler et al., 2000; Cremin & Thomas, 2005; Dunne et al., 2011; Marks, 2014). Drawing on theories such as self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and locus of control (Rotter, 1975), teacher expectations may have profound implications for pupil's motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985), self-efficacy (Schunk, 1991) and aspirations (Gutman & Akerman, 2008).

1.8.2 Perception of equal opportunities

Previous research has found that from the perspectives of pupils, ability grouping can create inequalities (Boaler, 1997a; Hargreaves, 1967). Research by Hallam and Ireson (2003) found, generally, that teacher beliefs about the equitability of ability grouping reflected the grouping method adopted within the school where they worked. Hallam et al. (2004) found a similar finding with pupil views, with the majority of pupils in their study stating they would not make any changes to the grouping practices currently in place in their school. However, of the children interviewed, 45% stated they wished their school experience was different.

In contrast to the findings of Hallam and Ireson (2003), many teachers in Araujo's (2007), Dunne et al's (2011) and Marks's (2014) studies openly acknowledged ability grouping did not lead to equal opportunities, but favoured those

in top groups at the expense of those in lower groups. Some teachers highlighted how they gave less experienced teachers lower groups to enable the most experienced teachers to teach top groups (Dunne et al., 2011; Marks, 2014). There was also a focus on children in middle sets having access to perceived 'best' teachers, as it was those children who were at risk of getting below a 'C' (Dunne et al., 2011). Thus, it was implied those in low groups were restricted potential learning opportunities so focus could be on those in top and middle groups. The concerns around 'least able' children being supported by the least experienced or qualified professionals have been well documented (Blatchford, Webster, & Russell, 2012; Webster, Blatchford, & Russell, 2013).

Interestingly, many pupil views of equal opportunities in English schools resembled the egalitarian views of the French pupils and teachers (Raveaud, 2005). In contrast to the 55% of pupil views reported in Hallam et al's (2004) study, findings from Raveaud (2005) and Boaler et al. (2000) reported pupils felt restricted through ability grouping, and wished for more opportunities, with one pupil encapsulating feelings of hope and optimism, stating "you never know, you could get an A".

1.8.3 Inclusion, self-esteem, feeling listened to

The concept of inclusion was culturally subjective. For French teachers interviewed in Raveaud's (2005) study, self-esteem equated to feeling included as part of the class. Conversely, for the English teachers interviewed, self-esteem was dependent on successfully completing a differentiated task. The French teachers were reluctant to set different targets for different pupils, viewing differentiation as a means of perpetuating social inequalities. In contrast, the English teachers viewed differentiating work by perceived ability as inclusive practice that could increase self-esteem. Nonetheless, French and English teachers were not willing to listen to pupils who stated their work was unchallenging, with many children voicing the opinion that teachers ignored their pleas for more challenging work (Boaler et al., 2000; Hallam et al., 2004; Marks, 2014).

Feelings of inclusion impacted children of different perceived abilities, with many children in lower groups feeling stigmatized, and those in top groups feeling teased (Hallam et al., 2004). Additionally, some pupils reported feeling embarrassed about their group placement (Boaler et al., 2000). Such embarrassment was

highlighted in a physical sense of feeling included, with Marks (2014) reporting pupils in lower groups were regularly taught in make-shift classrooms or corridors. Adopting the principles of humanistic psychology, for an individual to develop fully, to 'self-actualize', they require an environment that provides them with genuineness, acceptance and empathy (Rogers, 1951, 1957, 1969). However, a theme that arose through the meta-ethnography was that some pupils were not listened to and their concerns and worries were not accepted as real or 'true' in the face of their teacher's assumptions and expectations. Thus, it could be that teachers were so immersed in the practice of testing and grouping children, and group placement is viewed as a 'true' representation of ability, such that it cannot be challenged.

1.8.4 Justification of ability grouping: world view, fixed thinking, lack of mobility

Linking in with children's self-esteem and how they construct themselves, many children appeared to have little hope of ever moving groups (Boaler et al., 2000; Hallam et al., 2004). Teachers themselves acknowledged movement between sets was infrequent (Araújo, 2007; Marks, 2014). In some schools, moving a child up a group meant somebody else had to move down (Dunne et al., 2011). This implies the lack of mobility between groups was due to structural factors. However, this was not the message being passed to pupils, with teachers often using potential movement between groups as a reward (Dunne et al., 2011), with pupils being told they could move sets when they became "really good" (Hallam et al., 2004).

The construction and acceptance of ability as a true, testable entity was central to teacher's justification of ability grouping (Araújo, 2007; Marks, 2014). The discourse surrounding ability present within schools allowed such justification to thrive (Marks, 2014). Such discourse was highlighted in Raveaud's (2005) study, where the justification of ability grouping was a social and cultural concept. Ability grouping was not an important concept to the French teachers, yet it was ingrained in the mind set of English teachers. Similar to the New Labour Government, the majority of teachers interviewed across the studies seemed to have made the presumption that ability grouping was the best way of 'doing' education. The dangers inherent in such presumptions have been explored by Mortimore (2013) and Robinson (2011), with Robinson (2011), in particular, arguing our Education system has remained largely unchanged since the Industrial revolution, whilst our society has changed dramatically.

In addition to social and cultural differences, the justification of ability grouping was individually subjective. Dunne et al. (2011) found grouping policies could follow whole school ethos, or could be devolved to heads of department. Such devolvement and difference supports previous research highlighting how the concept of ability grouping is only applicable to some subjects (Kutnick et al., 2005). Additionally, the rationale for particular grouping methods were often informed by personal pedagogical ideologies (Dunne et al., 2011). Thus, whilst some teachers justified ability grouping through school ethos or personal preference, others stated it was the “crazy system of testing” that forced them to use ability grouping (Marks, 2014).

1.8.5 Children’s perception of differences between groups and individuals: comparison and labelling

Children routinely labelled and compared themselves with terms such as “clever” and “not clever”, “intelligent” and “stupid” (Boaler et al., 2000; Hallam et al., 2004; Marks, 2014). This language and dialogue seemed to have become ingrained in the mind set of children and enabled them to establish where they were in the pecking order (Hallam et al., 2004).

Previous research has found children model adult discourses of differentiation to label themselves and others (Davis and Watson, 2001). This was found in Hallam et al’s (2004) study, where pupils demonstrated a self-perception in accordance with their teachers’ perceptions of their abilities. This has previously been found with primary (Brock, Nishida, Chiong, Grimm, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Stipek, 1981) and secondary (Wigfield & Meece, 1988) pupils. Thus, from a young age, pupils are aware of teachers’ expectations of them. This has been highlighted through research asking children’s perspectives of their own ability (Weinstein, Marshall, Sharp, & Botkin, 1987) and through children’s use of language to describe themselves and others (Hallam et al., 2004). However, not all children had internalised their teacher’s expectations. Pupils in Boaler et al’s (2000) study conveyed the belief that individuals are different and that it is helpful to learn from each other. Consequently, differences were not perceived as a bad thing, but simply a difference. Nonetheless, in the majority of the studies, pupils had internalised teacher expectations and assumptions, evidenced through the language used to describe themselves and their peers (Dunne et al., 2011; Hallam et al., 2004; Marks, 2014).

1.9 Conclusion

This meta-ethnography has focused on research that explored teacher and children's perspectives, experiences, attitudes and thoughts towards ability grouping. This was with a view to offering a new interpretation of previous research by exploring how ability grouping influences the construction of the pupil. In a wider sense, this meta-ethnography has shown the ease at which an individual can be constructed from a socially accepted practice, and how such practices are inherent within schools.

This meta-ethnography and previous research has highlighted how susceptible children can be to adult language and discourse (Brock et al., 2008; Davis & Watson, 2001; Hallam et al., 2004). It is interesting to adopt both a Foucauldian and humanistic perspective to such susceptibility. The postulations of humanistic psychology reject the suppositions of psychoanalysis and behaviourism due to their deterministic nature (Rogers, 1951, 1957) and, conversely, argue an individual's behaviour comes down to their own perception of a situation. Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, if there is no distinction between perception and conceptualisation and both are produced simultaneously, as postulated by Foucault (1972), then it is perhaps possible that a pupil's perception is not their own. Would it be illogical to suggest pupil's perceptions of their own capabilities can be influenced by their teacher's perception of what they are capable of? Or teachers' perceptions of what pupils are capable of can be influenced by pressure from Government and OFSTED, from ability grouping, league tables and assessments?

The findings from this meta-ethnography suggest that, although ability is an abstract concept, it is a concept that is widely accepted as 'truth' within education, and is subsequently used to compare and categorise children. As considered by Hart (2004, p.5), Bourne and Moon (1995) argued that the concept of ability has come to be viewed as a natural way of comparing and categorising children. Nonetheless, as stated by Bourne and Moon, simply because the word 'ability' is regularly used does not prove its existence or tangibility.

1.10 Limitations

The process of meta-ethnography involves interpretation, and with such interpretation subjectivity is to be expected (Lee et al., 2014; Noblit & Hare, 1988). As

argued by Arruda (2003), any methodology, regardless of rigorousness, does not establish neutrality. In every situation, we, as researchers and individuals, bring our own objectives and beliefs, and the process of meta-ethnography is unconcealed in its acknowledgement of this. I have endeavoured to be transparent in the decisions I have made in regards to the process I took in terms of completing the meta-ethnography. I took the experiences from previous meta-ethnographies, and the difficulties and observations reported from such studies (Atkins et al., 2008; Britten et al., 2002; Campbell et al., 2003; Lee et al., 2014) and incorporated them into my own experience of the process.

Nonetheless, being conducted by a single researcher, this review lacks the verification process that multiple reviewers could offer. It is recognised that the themes from this meta-ethnography could not possibly capture the variety and complexity of children and teachers' views and experiences. However, it can be seen as a reflective tool for thinking about the influence of ability grouping on individual's perceptions and constructions of the pupil. Additionally, it highlights the importance of encouraging individual's to not just accept something simply because it has always been done, but to question and consider what their own views are and where such views have come from (Argyris, 1976).

1.11 Future research

It is interesting to consider the changing discourse around the concept of ability, and how it came to be so readily accepted and embedded within our education system. It would be of interest for research to explore whether such acceptance is present in the mind set of others. This meta-ethnography has shown that the notion of ability is deeply embedded within educational establishments in the mind sets of teachers as something that can be tested and categorised. A further line of enquiry could explore whether the acceptance of ability is also present in the mind sets of others. Whilst there is some research focusing on parental views of ability (Mazzoli Smith, 2014a; 2014b), research in this area is sparse. Thus, further research exploring parental perspectives could prove enlightening and thought provoking. Parents are arguably well placed as research participants in further exploring how the conceptualisation and acceptance of ability can influence the perception and construction of individuals.

Word count: 5014

Chapter Two: Bridging document

“We do not quickly or easily reach any conclusion or resolution about our own view of the nature of truth and reality. We are all influenced by our history and cultural context, which, in turn, shape our view of the world, the forces of creation, and the meaning of truth. Often these underlying assumptions about the world are unconscious and taken for granted.” Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006, p. 26)

2.1 Introduction

The aims of this bridging document are to show how my thinking progressed from the systematic review to the empirical research, and to convey how my view of the world, incorporating my epistemological and ontological positions, have helped shape my chosen methodology for the empirical research in chapter three. In addition, this document aims to elaborate upon my own viewpoint and reflections regarding the research process by reflecting on my journey as a researcher. To question a well-ingrained and accepted societal concept, such as ability, indicates my view of the world. In this bridging document, I hope to provide the reader with an understanding of me as a researcher-practitioner and a perspective on my views.

2.2 Researcher’s background

Prior to training as an Educational Psychologist (EP), I worked with a child who had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. In the realm of education, the label of ‘autism’ came to define this child, and influenced teacher assumptions and expectations of what he was capable of achieving. In my view, the education system did not work for this child. He was capable of many great things, yet as he viewed the world a different way to that deemed ‘typical’, he was perceived by some teachers as lacking ability and was not given the opportunity to thrive.

The dominant discourses and practices that are apparent in schools can generally be traced back to Government policy (e.g. the Academies Act 2010, the Education Act 2011). Previous Government’s manifestos (e.g. the Conservative Manifesto 2010) indicate that raising educational standards for all pupils is high on the political agenda. However, the view that educational standards for all children

should be the same is perhaps a naïve one (Chitty, 2014). The belief that all children can (and should) be taught the same things in the same way and then be tested to prove how much they know, to me, is nonsensical. The Government's focus on 'raising standards' generally revolves around testing and grouping children, which is only set to increase with the Government's recently announced plans to test more and at a younger age. This feeds into the discourse of children being defined by their perceived ability.

2.3 Developing a research focus

The literature review investigating the influence of ability grouping on the construction of the pupil in chapter one revealed five key themes and highlighted that many teachers accepted the concept of ability as a true and testable entity. This developed my curiosity and interest in exploring whether such acceptance is apparent in the mind sets of others. My journey through the literature thus far has not highlighted research explicitly exploring parental perspectives of ability and ability grouping. In my view, parents' perspectives are well placed as a research area of interest; they are somewhat part of the educational realm but are also separate from it. In addition, with the current Government agenda highlighting the importance of increasing parental voice and involvement within education, this, arguably, places parents as important research participants.

Thus, I was curious to explore whether the norms of educational establishments, primarily revolving around the use of ability grouping and the acceptance of ability as a 'true' and testable concept, that were evident in the literature review, are also apparent and accepted in the mind set of parents. More so, I was motivated to explore how an EP may facilitate the relationship between parents and schools, and encourage wider thinking. Consequently, I hope to disseminate my findings through publication and discussion to provide practical implications for EP practice.

2.4 Philosophical perspective: questioning 'truth'

The purpose here is to introduce the philosophical perspective guiding the research. My philosophical and theoretical perspective is post-modernist in nature as I hold the view that there is plurality of truth, not just one singular truth to be found. Post-modernist perspectives replace certainty with questions (Aranda, 2006).

Adopting a Foucauldian approach, I have found it interesting to explore the history of 'truth' within the realm of education. Foucault (1988) explored the evolution of madness; of how society moved from a period where 'fools' were loaded onto ships and extradited, to a period where such individuals came to be cared for and looked after, to a later period where such individuals came to be viewed as capable of rehabilitation. Foucault linked such development to discourse, and the changing discourse from one of segregation to one of obligation. I see many parallels in the development of discourse in regards to 'madness' to the discourse surrounding education and ability. We have moved from a society that deemed some individuals as 'uneducable' (Gillard, 2008) to a society that deemed Every Child to Matter (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003) to a society with the view of Helping Every Child Achieve More (Coalition Government, Post 2010).

2.5 Ability and discourse

"All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth." (Nietzsche, 1954)

Arguably, some discourses are viewed as truth as they align with the interests of a particular social group, as postulated by Burr (2003) in her discussion of discourse, power and knowledge. Thus, some discourses, for example, discourses around ability, are rarely questioned by some social groups, for example educators, as it is of interest to that group that a certain concept is viewed as 'right' and 'true'. My position as both a researcher and a trainee EP allows me to question such discourse; I am not immersed within the boundaries or 'truths' of education, and thus am free to question and challenge. As such, EPs are arguably well placed to adopt the role of a 'critical friend' and question and challenge practices and dominant discourses that are inherent within schools.

2.6 Interpretivist paradigm: ontology, epistemology and methodology

"...realities are social constructions of the mind, and there exist as many such constructions as there are individuals (although clearly many constructions will be shared)" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 43)

This section aims to briefly outline the interpretivist paradigm, and make clear my ontological, epistemological and methodological stance.

As argued by Mills et al. (2006), to ensure a strong research design, researchers must choose a research paradigm that is both suitable for the field of inquiry and congruent with their beliefs about the nature of reality. As outlined by Denscombe (2014), there have traditionally been two paradigms of social research: positivist and interpretivist. My view of the world aligns itself with the interpretivist paradigm, as I assume a relativist ontological stance, my epistemological position is social constructionist, and I am applying an interpretive approach to methodology through constructivist grounded theory (explored further below). The interpretivist paradigm challenges the notion that social researchers hold an objective view (Denscombe, 2014). Instead, social reality is constructed intersubjectively through thoughts, actions and discourse. Within this, there is an acknowledgment that data collected in research and any theory or concepts that emerge from that data is the researcher's interpretation; influenced by the researcher's own experiences and beliefs. This is explored further below when discussing my research journey.

2.6.1 Ontology

My ontological stance is relativist, as I hold the view that concepts such as truth, reality and norms must be understood "as relative to a specific...society, or culture" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 8). It is my view that the world consists of multiple individual realities influenced by context (Mills et al., 2006). Consequently, 'reality' is constructed intersubjectively through socially shared meanings, experiences and understandings.

2.6.2 Epistemology

My epistemological stance is social constructionist in orientation. Social constructionism, as outlined by Burr (2003, p. 2), insists that we take a critical stance towards taken for granted ways of understanding the world. Thus, such a stance is congruent with my view of the world as I am taking a critical stance on a well-ingrained understanding in education; the concept of ability and ability grouping. As explored previously, I am interested in how shared discourses lead to the creation of 'truth' and 'reality'. Social constructionism emphasizes the subjective interrelationship

between the researcher and participant, and focus is on the subsequent co-construction of meaning within that relationship (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997).

A criticism of the constructionist approach, as expressed by Leadbetter (2002, p. 24) is the extent to which “subjective knowledge, perceptions and intentions owned by individuals can be brought together in any meaningful way” in order to provide a source of knowledge that can be used and generalised. Whilst a valid criticism within a positivist framework, such criticism, arguably, may lack warrant within a social constructionist approach. The purpose of this research is to explore the perceptions of the individuals involved in order to inform theory development. Therefore, throughout this process, no claim is made that the results of the research will generalise to other settings. Conversely, cautious claims are offered for theoretical generalisation surrounding the perception and impact of the concept of ability within a particular social group.

2.6.3 Methodology

I am applying an interpretive approach to my methodology. As argued by Walsham (2006), interpretive methods of research adopt the position that reality is a social construction. Subsequently, theories concerning reality are ways of making sense of the world, and shared meanings are a form of intersubjectivity rather than objectivity (Walsham, 2006, p. 321). As argued by Biesta (2007), in relation to education, there is arguably a need for research that explores multiple realities and perceptions, rather than research that seeks to find a definitive answer to technical questions.

In seeking a research methodology that would provide an ontological and epistemological fit with my interpretivist position, I was led to explore constructivist grounded theory.

2.7 Constructivist grounded theory (CGT)

There are many reasons for choosing CGT as the guiding methodology for the empirical research. Firstly, the chosen research area, exploring parental perspectives of ability, is, to my knowledge, an area that has not previously been explicitly studied. Robson (2011), when discussing real world research, presented CGT as particularly useful for examining areas that have not previously been studied as the research can help to build theory and develop concepts for further exploration. Secondly, the research is a small-scale study and CGT is acknowledged as being a suitable

approach for small-scale, qualitative research designs (Denscombe, 2007). Although other methods such as Thematic Analysis and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) also lend themselves to small-scale qualitative research, my decision was further guided by the research question that I was going to ask. My research aims to explore parental views of ability grouping, and in a wider sense, how parents construct the concept of ability. Willig (2008, p. 21) argued that research questions about “process, experiences, structures and even cognitions” are well suited to grounded theory methods, therefore providing justification for CGT as an approach suitable for the question being explored.

2.7.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used as a method of gathering data in the study. This method of data collection is recognised as being suitable for grounded theory methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Robson, 2011; Willig, 2008). All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed by myself. During the interviews, I used a tentative interview guide, as encouraged by Charmaz (2014), which allowed me to begin the interviews in similar ways, and dig deeper into my data collection to ensure that I covered all areas of enquiry. Nonetheless, in keeping with the iterative process of CGT, the participants in this research are part of the construction of reality, thus the questions to be asked during the interviews could not be fully determined prior to undertaking the process. Consequently, throughout the interview process, I used open questions to provide participants with greater opportunity to describe their views, thoughts and beliefs in their own words. This also provided opportunities for new lines of enquiry and required me to be continually reflexive about the nature of my questions and how they were being received by participants.

2.7.2 Stages of coding

2.7.2.1 Initial codes

The interview transcripts were analysed using CGT methods as outlined by Charmaz (2014). Each transcript was initially coded before the next interview was conducted. Due to the iterative cycle of analysis, initial codes are provisional as they continually remain open to other analytic possibilities (Charmaz, 2014). As such, this stage of initial coding is often referred to as open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In keeping with the interpretivist stance and encouraging theoretical plausibility (Charmaz, 2014), initial codes aim to capture possibilities suggested by the data; rather than

seeking to ensure accuracy of the data. Initial coding allows for a critical and analytical view of the participants narrative, rather than an acceptance of their assumptions that could bear resemblance to my own assumptions I bring as a researcher. Thus, initial coding reduced my own perceptions and assumptions, and allowed me to be critical and analytical of the participant's narrative. As such, the process of initial coding allowed for concepts and lines of enquiry to emerge that were pursued in further interviews. Many of the initial codes were derived from the actual words used by participants; a process termed in-vivo coding by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Coding in the language used by participants helped me as a researcher to gain an understanding of the participants' assumptions, understandings and perspectives, and helped me to be consistently mindful of my own interpretations. An example of the process of initial coding is provided in appendix 6.

2.7.2.2 Focused codes

Focused coding is the next step after initial coding. Focused coding advances the theoretical direction of the data by synthesising and analysing initial codes to capture what the researcher finds to be the most important concepts emerging from the data (Charmaz, 2014). As such, focused coding helps direct analysis early in the research process, without eliminating other lines of potential interest. Focused codes appear most frequently within the initial codes and hold more significance in comparison to other codes. Additionally, focused codes are often more conceptual than initial codes which are often conveying the participants own language (in-vivo codes) (Charmaz, 2014). When undertaking focused coding, I moved across interviews and made comparisons among the parent's experiences and narrative. The process of how focused codes were formed is provided in appendix 7.

2.7.2.3 Conceptual categories

Conceptual categories present the emerging theory. A category may subsume common themes and patterns presented in many codes. Thus, I merged various focused codes into conceptual categories. Conceptual categories may consist of in vivo codes (born from participant's narrative) or they may represent the theoretical direction of the data (Charmaz, 2014). To build conceptual categories, participant's narrative, initial codes and focused codes are compared and analysed. This process is supplemented through memo writing. This process is evidenced in appendix 8.

2.7.3 Memo writing

Memo writing is a crucial part of CGT, as it prompts the researcher to analyse data at an early stage by identifying and recording key thoughts and ideas that are of interest, and continually compare and reflect on such thoughts throughout the research process. In terms of my experience as a researcher, I found memo writing to be hugely helpful in helping me to understand my data, and fully immerse myself within the iterative process of data collection and analysis. Charmaz (2006) encouraged researchers to openly acknowledge the influence of prior work or experience on their perspectives. I found the process of memo writing helped make me as a researcher aware of my own potential assumptions and interpretations of the data.

2.8 My research journey; reflexivity

This section aims to provide the reader with an insight into my research journey and concepts that became important to me throughout that journey, namely, the concept of reflexivity.

Robson (2002, p. 22) defined reflexivity as “an awareness of the ways in which the researcher as an individual with a particular social identity and background has an impact on the research process”. Charmaz (2014) discussed the concept of ‘reflexive progression’ in relation to conducting interviews within CGT. In Charmaz’ concept of reflexive progression, she refers to participants views arising throughout interviews, rather than such views preceding the interviews. I feel this is pertinent to the topic of this research, as the concept of ability is one that participants may not have deeply considered previously. I also feel this resembles my own research experience. Of course, I started this process with an awareness of my own tentative thoughts, experiences and beliefs, but mostly what I had was questions around how others perceived ability. This began with a question of how those in education perceived the concept of ability, namely teachers and children (explored in chapter one), and then progressed into how those just outside of the educational realm perceived ability, namely parents. Within that, I had questions around how such perceptions of ability then influenced perceptions and constructions of individuals. I am not a teacher, child nor parent, and thus I was interested in exploring those perceptions. Subsequently, I recognised that it was not possible to completely share parental perceptions and understandings. In keeping with the principles of CGT, data

and analysis were created from my shared experiences and relationships with participants (Charmaz, 2006). The study examined how, and why, parents constructed meanings and actions in relation to the concept of ability and ability grouping. This was achieved through maintaining a sense of reciprocity between myself as a researcher and parents in the co-construction of meaning, and the recognition of potential power differences and ways of modifying these (Mills et al., 2006). Echoing the discomfort I expressed within chapter one in relation to distinguishing between participant voice and author interpretation within the meta-ethnography, the process of CGT allowed me to both acknowledge and explore this distinction .

My experiences as a trainee educational psychologist have forced me to question a concept such as ability. I recognise that as a researcher, in my 'humanness', I am a part of the research process rather than an objective spectator, and I acknowledge this as an inevitable part of the research (Appleton, 1997; De Laine, 1997). As acknowledged by Charmaz (2014) and Hallberg (2010), maintaining theoretical sensitivity and continuous memo writing can help the researcher to stay mindful of their own perceptions and interpretations, and help to bring the participant's words to the forefront of the research.

Word count: 3273

Chapter Three: Empirical Research

Exploring parental perceptions of ability and ability grouping

3.1 Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a small-scale qualitative study that explored the concept of ability from the perspective of parents. Constructivist grounded theory was used to analyse the transcripts of semi-structured interviews with six parents in the North East of England. The emergent theory showed that parents of children in high sets (re)produced particular discourses and attributions around ability that are similar to the discourses and attributions produced by many teachers, and in a wider sense, by the education system and Government. Conversely, low set parents challenged and questioned the current educational system as putting too much emphasis on academic ability, and raised questions around the self-efficacy of teachers in being able to meet the needs of all children. Factors that contributed to the concept and perception of ability were a sense of a hierarchy and pecking order in schools, and parental competition and pride. In exploring the concept of ability, factors that emerged as important to parents was the belief there is dissonance between the focus of the education system and current society, and parents feeling isolated.

“What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms...which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are...We still do not know where the urge for truth comes from; for as yet we have heard only of the obligation imposed by society that it should exist.” (Nietzsche, 1954)

3.2 Introduction

In seeking to develop the findings of the systematic review presented in chapter one, this research explores the concept of ability and ability grouping methods from the perspectives of parents. Within this, the narrative of typical

development, expectations that come from such narrative, and the nature of seeking a singular 'truth', are explored.

I was drawn to the conceptual nature of the research, which essentially searches for meaning and understanding. Although ability is an abstract concept, it is a word frequently used within education to compare and categorise children. I was curious to find out what ability means to other people, fuelling a deeper exploration of the concept and how others might perceive it.

Within this introduction, I present why it is important to explore parental perspectives of ability and ability grouping methods. I also present relevant policy and research highlighting the importance of parental engagement in education, and policy and research advocating for an increase in parental voice.

3.3 Parent 'voice' and engagement: policy and research

From the Government's perspective, parental engagement is considered as engagement in learning, as opposed to parental involvement in schooling (Harris & Goodall, 2007). This distinction was made to ensure that policymakers and practitioners were not confusing the objective of getting parents involved in school life (e.g. attending a parents evening) which is viewed as being reactive, and the objective of engaging parents with their children's learning, which is viewed as proactive (Campbell, 2011). However, to engage parents in their children's learning, arguably, there should be some engagement in *how* their children are learning, which implies how children are being taught, which would, in many instances, be through a method of ability grouping. Nonetheless, in my journey through the literature thus far, whilst there is some research exploring parental views of high ability (Mazzoli Smith, 2014a; 2014b), there appears a lack of research exploring parental understandings of, or involvement in, ability grouping practices. As such, this implies parental engagement and understanding of how their children are being taught is perhaps minimal.

Key findings from the Department of Children, Schools and Families (2008) showed parental engagement in their children's education from an early age has significant effects on educational achievement (Sylva et al., 2004). The aspirations and attitudes of parents have been shown to predict later educational achievement,

with research suggesting parents with high aspirations for their children are more involved with their children's education (Gutman & Akerman, 2008).

Nonetheless, recent research from See and Gorard (2015), who reviewed the literature to explore whether enhancing parental engagement improved children's attainment, concluded that research in the area of parental involvement in education has to improve for any discernible conclusions to be made. Whilst I agree with See and Gorard's claims, I also hold the view that research in the area of parental engagement must also focus on parental understanding and perception of issues and concepts within education. Such understanding and perception, arguably, will bear some influence on level of engagement. In keeping with this, parental understandings of 'typical' child development is of importance, as this influences perception of the child as a typically developing pupil.

3.4 The narrative of typical development

Popularity and interest in developmental psychology has, arguably, led to a fascination with the typical development of a child (Burman, 2008; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011). In keeping with popular theories of child development, notably Piaget, child development can be viewed as a staged process. Such a staged process implies development as something that is predictable and measurable. Consequently, such assumed predictability and measurement has led to discourses around terms such as 'normal' and 'typical', 'behind' and 'exceeding' becoming inherent within our education system (Burman 2008; Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011). As argued by Cremin and Thomas (2005), terms such as 'normal' and 'typical' develop into central constructs by which children are judged and compared. Consequently, these central constructs become objectified and accepted by the procedures and discourses of education, and thus appear reliable and objective, rather than constructed and subjective. Viewed through this lens, the importance of a child being labelled or grouped as 'high ability' or 'low ability' then becomes an indication of their development against discourses around terms such as 'normal' and 'typical'; with high ability exceeding such expectations and low ability falling behind.

3.5 Assumptions and expectations from ability grouping

A consequence of the narrative around typical development and the subsequent grouping of children, is the creation of expectations and assumptions.

Research exploring teacher expectations of children gained attention in the late 1960's with Rosenthal and Jacobsen's (1968) study, which found when teachers had high expectations of students, these students tended to confirm those expectations, a phenomenon known as 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton, 1948). Such findings have since been replicated many times in the literature (for examples see; Jussim 1986; Rubie-Davies, 2010; Rubie-Davies, Hattie, Townsend, & Hamilton, 2007; Sorhagen, 2013). Furthermore, research has also shown children are aware of teacher's expectations of them (Rubie-Davies, 2006). Such findings highlight concern over potential self-fulfilling prophecies (Merton, 1968), locus of control (Rotter, 1975) and feelings of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972).

Research exploring teacher assumptions and expectations has also found that teachers tend to have lower expectations for minority students and students from less affluent families (Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, Klapproth & Böhmer, 2013; Speybroeck et al., 2012). Such findings highlight concerns regarding teachers' assumptions of children and young people's ability and whether such ability is viewed as innate and fixed.

In summary, research findings indicate that children and young people grouped in higher sets have higher teacher expectations and higher aspirations for themselves, whereas those in lower sets have lower teacher expectations and lower aspirations. Merton (1968) and Rigney (2010) refer to this as 'The Matthew Effect', relating to the phrase "the rich get richer whilst the poor get poorer". In the context of education, such an effect indicates the presumption that the "academically good" get "better", whereas the "academically bad" get "worse". As stipulated by Heath (1981, p. 26), "school...sorts, labels and grades children...in its total the whole school system...is a very complicated sieve, which sifts 'the good' from 'the bad', 'the able' from 'the dull', 'those fitted for high positions' from those 'unfitted'". This view of school as a sieve, whilst admittedly pessimistic, is not easy to forget once considered. Heath (1981) made such a comment over thirty years ago. It is my view that schools have only become more consumed with testing and subsequently labelling and categorizing children. Arguably, a consequence of such testing and categorizing has led to the normalization of talking about children in relation to their perceived ability, and making assumptions and expectations of such children. I am

curious to explore whether such assumptions and expectations are also present in the mind set of parents.

3.6 Method

3.6.1 Participants

An opportunistic sample of six parents took part in the study. I was curious to explore whether there was a difference in the understanding or perception of ability between parents of children in high sets, and parents of children in low sets. Therefore, headteachers and SENCo's from two secondary schools sent out information sheets and consent forms to parents of children in year 7 who were in high sets and low sets⁷. Four parents of children in high sets took part, along with two parents of children in low sets. All participants were female.

3.6.2 Ethics

All participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form that detailed the aims of the research (see appendix 5). To address an issue of potential power imbalance between myself as the researcher and parents, I stated I was not looking for any 'right' or 'wrong' answers, and I was genuinely curious to hear their views. I gave an opportunity for parents to ask questions or withdraw before we began the interview. No names were used when discussing previous schools or previous/current teachers.

I adopted a situational relativist approach to ethical considerations by considering potential ethical implications in actuality, not just theoretically (Wiles, Charles, Crow & Heath, 2006). By adopting a situational relativist approach, I was able to consider ethical decisions in the specific context of the research and reflect on how certain environments or questions may evoke feelings of shame or embarrassment, and ways of rectifying these.

3.6.3 Procedure

All participants took part in a semi-structured interview with the researcher in a private room at their child's school. A tentative interview guide was used to help foreground the concept of ability grouping within the interviews, however, in keeping

⁷ The terms 'high set parents' and 'low set parents' are used for clarity as their meaning is represented through the dominant functionalist paradigm apparent in education. However, it should be noted that the dominant functionalist paradigm, and consequently phrases such as 'high set' and 'low set', are consistently challenged and questioned throughout this paper.

with the postulations of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2014), discussion and subsequent data was co-constructed with participants. Interviews took place between July 2015 and December 2015. The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Voice recordings were stored on a password-protected computer that only the researcher had access to. All transcriptions were anonymised and, once transcribed, all voice recordings were deleted. The transcribed interviews were analysed using Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT). This is described in detail in chapter two. For ease of the reader, an outline of CGT is also provided in the following section.

3.6.4 Constructivist grounded theory

Constructivist grounded theory, developed by Charmaz (2006; 2014), is a qualitative research methodology that seeks, through an iterative cycle of analysis, to highlight issues of importance for specific groups of people and to create meaning about those issues through presenting an emerging theory (Mills et al., 2006). Whilst other qualitative methodologies such as discourse analysis or narrative analysis may have worked well due to their emphasis on human language and the power of stories and experiences, I was ultimately drawn to CGT as it considers that any data and any constructions of 'reality' are co-constructed between the person experiencing the situation and the person theorising.

CGT was used to analyse the transcripts, which entailed initial codes (through a process of line-by-line coding) being assigned to the participant's narrative. From these initial codes, focused codes were developed which allowed for conceptual categories to be formed. These conceptual categories formed the basis of the emerging grounded theory (these processes are presented in appendices 6 and 7). The analytic process is presented below in table 5.

Table 5: Process of analysis

| Step | Action |
|------|--|
| 1 | After each interview, data was transcribed. Consistent use of memo-writing at this stage is important to help identify and record key thoughts and ideas that are of interest, and continually compare and reflect on such thoughts throughout the research process. |
| 2 | Generation of initial codes through line-by-line coding. Initial codes aim to capture possibilities suggested by the data and allows for a critical and analytical view of the participants' narrative, Each transcript was initially coded before the next interview was conducted. |
| 3 | Generation of focused codes by synthesising and analysing all initial codes to capture what the researcher finds to be the most important/reoccurring concepts emerging from the data. |
| 4 | Generation of conceptual categories to present the emerging theory through merging various focused codes into categories. To build conceptual categories, participant's narrative, initial codes and focused codes are compared and analysed, and ideas are supplemented through memo writing. |

Charmaz (2006, p .11) advocates the use of grounded theory methods “as a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages” and emphasizes “flexible guidelines, not methodological rules, recipes and requirements”. The use of a flexible, qualitative approach in this study allowed me to explore the meanings parents ascribed to the concept of ability and ability grouping, from their perspective. I felt a grounded theory approach could most effectively be used to tease out participants understanding of a concept they may never have considered before.

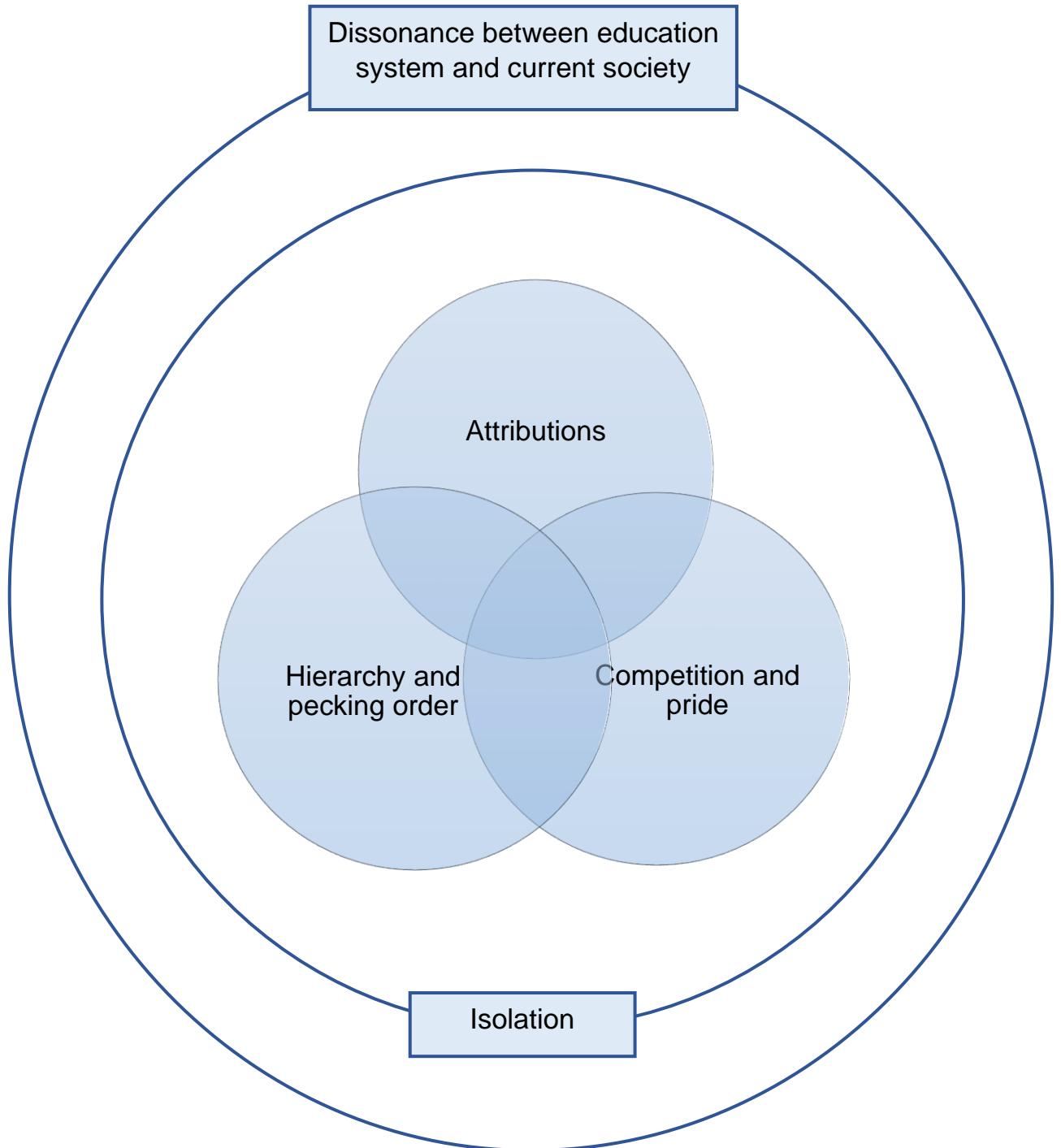
3.7 Findings and discussion

The debate as to when to conduct a literature review, and the incorporation of previous research into findings within grounded theory, has long been a contested issue (Dunne, 2011; Giles, King, & de Lacey, 2013). In traditional grounded theory, the literature review and previous research is initially avoided in order to prevent contamination of the researcher’s analysis of codes emerging from the data. However, as argued by Dunne (2011), the idea that any researcher undertakes a study without some level of prior knowledge or beliefs is perhaps a naïve one. As encapsulated by Cutcliffe (2000, p. 1480), “no potential researcher is an empty vessel, a person with no history or background”. With this view, a literature review

prior to conducting research can stimulate thinking about concepts that can be used to examine the data (Charmaz, 2006). In the following sections, relevant literature has been interwoven into the findings. The literature was used to help clarify ideas; make comparisons; further theoretical discussion and show how and where this work fits or extends relevant literatures (Charmaz, 2006, p. 167). As such, this research follows the view advocated by Dey (1999), and approached the research with “an open mind, not an empty head”.

The research aimed to explore parental understandings and perspectives of ability and ability grouping. Analysis of the data using CGT methods revealed five conceptual categories that formed the basis of the emerging theory. The following sections describe the findings with reference to existing research and theory from the wider literature where relevant. The process detailing how conceptual categories were formed are provided for each category (and can be found in appendices 7 and 8). The five conceptual categories that form the emerging theory are presented in figure 2.

Figure 2: A model of the conceptual categories that form the emerging theory exploring parental perceptions of ability



3.7.1 Attributions

| Conceptual category → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Attributions | <p>Either you can or you can't</p> <p>Assigning blame / attributions: internal vs external</p> | <p>Either able or not</p> <p>Fixed view</p> <p>You can or you can't</p> <p>Natural ability</p> <p>Knowing who is able</p> <p>Literal thinking</p> <p>Can or can't</p> <p>Teacher not feeling able to differentiate</p> <p>Teacher self-efficacy</p> <p>Notion of what makes a good teacher</p> <p>Training needs of teachers</p> <p>Teacher ability</p> <p>Middle of the road children</p> <p>Teacher's threatened by extremity of need</p> <p>Emphasis on teacher</p> <p>Diffusion of responsibility to experts</p> <p>Complexity confuses/scares teachers</p> <p>Good vs bad teacher</p> <p>Teacher should adapt to child</p> <p>Natural ability</p> |

| Examples of HS parents narrative | Examples of LS parents narrative |
|---|--|
| <p><i>"My son can tell you who's able in year 1 and 2" (HS1)</i></p> <p><i>"From reception, they know who can write and you can't write, who can read and who can't read." (HS1)</i></p> <p><i>"They do know from a very young age who can and who can't" (HS2)</i></p> <p><i>"There are those children who just always seem to naturally do well and have that natural ability...that was always my child" (HS3)</i></p> | <p><i>"A good teacher would be able to differentiate her lessons for him to gain access" (LS1)</i></p> <p><i>"Teacher's don't always seem to know what to do...they know how to teach the middle but they're not given the tools to support those who don't fall in the middle, so then they want to get an expert in to come look at them" (LS1)</i></p> <p><i>"If you get a good teacher, they can adapt their teaching and everyone can learn. If you get a bad teacher, then you're stuck really." (LS1)</i></p> <p><i>"I think sometimes if they had just treated him like another 10 year old child they might have found that, okay he might not be able to remember his two times tables or whatever, but they might have found he could do something else." (LS1)</i></p> <p><i>"It's a real shame if this achievement and ability takes over, the child matters a lot more." (LS2)</i></p> |

The conceptual category of attributions related to how parents attributed their child's ability group placement. Attribution theory, or the study of perceived causation (Kelley, 1967; Kelley & Michela, 1980), refers to the perception or inference of cause. The current research coincides with previous research findings; high set parents attributed their children's success in school to their natural, innate high ability. High set parents in this study attributed children being placed in low ability groups to their innate low (or lack of) ability, as well as attributing low set placement to external factors such as family background (*"I think generally speaking, the children who are in top sets are more able because they come from more able, more supportive backgrounds."* (HS1)). These findings are congruent with previous attributional research findings that have highlighted the self-serving bias, where success is attributed more to the person, i.e. to ability, and failure is attributed to external factors (for examples see, Campbell & Sedikides, 1999; Zuckerman, 1979).

Consistent with the postulations of attribution theory, low set parents attributed their child's set placement to external factors, namely, the capabilities and self-efficacy of the teacher to adapt their teaching to meet the needs of all children. However, whilst initially this may present as an external attribution, it is interesting to consider Eberly, Holley, Johnson and Mitchell's (2011) notion of relational attribution. Eberly et al. (2011) argued research undertaken within a social context makes it difficult to ascertain an attribution as solely internal or external, and thus proposed a third locus of attributions; relational. Such relational attributions locate the attribution not solely with the individual or with an external factor, but with the relationship the individual has with another person. Given what previous research has found around teachers' assumptions and expectations of children in low sets (Rubie-Davies et al., 2007), and how such assumptions and expectations influence their teaching and relationship with that child, such an attribution may prove valid in relation to low set parents. In addition, low set parents did not convey the view they believed their child should not be in low sets, in fact they acknowledged their child may not be the most academically able, but they did not accept this as a reason for their child to not achieve. As encapsulated by a low set parent; *"I think sometimes if they had just treated him like another 10 year old child they might have found that, okay he might not be able to remember his two times tables or whatever, but they might have found*

he could do something else.” (LS1). Therefore, the attribution lies with how the teacher treated and taught her child (their relationship), as a result of that teacher’s assumptions and expectations of a child in a low set.

Thus, high set parents seemed to hold a fixed view of ability, a mentality encapsulated by the view that *“from a very young age you know who can and who can’t, who’s able and not able”* (HS2). Such a fixed view echoes both the majority of teacher views from the systematic review in chapter one, and Dweck’s (2006) theory of fixed and growth mind set. In accordance with Dweck’s concept of a growth mind set, low set parents had a holistic view of their child. Low set parents conveyed a sense of excitement at how their children would develop and grow (*“I admire the person she has already become and I can’t wait to see who she will be in 2 years time or 5 years time”* (LS2)). It is interesting to consider what impact this may have on children’s own attributions. As highlighted in the systematic review in chapter one, previous research has found children model adult discourses of differentiation to label themselves and others (Davis and Watson, 2001). As stated by Dweck (2006), certain mind sets can be imparted, often inadvertently, to children and students from their parents and teachers.

3.7.2 Hierarchy and pecking order

| Conceptual category → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Hierarchy and pecking order | Hierarchy and pecking order Stretching high ability and supporting low ability Labelling, accepting and justifying Knowing the child | Ranking by ability Pecking order Hierarchy Children knowing where they stood Children knowing who is able Child awareness of grouping Being stretched and held back Concerned Stretching and supporting Possibilities for most able vs assumptions for least able Child not being pushed Stretched Stretched, pushed and challenged Knowledge and acceptance Justifying ability grouping Labelling Relationship between birthdate and ability Relationship between gender and ability |

| Conceptual category → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| | | Relationship between behaviour and ability Home life and ability Certain classes of certain abilities No problem in top sets Going beyond the label Relationship between behaviour and frustration/confusion Labelling leading to support and restriction People getting hung up on labels and not seeing the child Ability grouping and labelling Challenging/questioning the system No rhyme or reason Questioning testing Acceptance; have to work with the system |

| Examples of HS parents narrative | Examples of LS parents narrative |
|---|---|
| <p><i>"My daughter could tell me...exactly where everyone in the class stood ability wise from year 6 down to year 3." (HS1)</i></p> <p><i>"They knew who, within the whole class, was able to do what, almost a pecking order I guess" (HS2)</i></p> <p><i>"They knew which place they were in, they would always know where they stood." (HS2)</i></p> <p><i>"You need to get everyone working so you're stretching the more able ones and supporting the less able ones" (HS1)</i></p> <p><i>"It's easier to focus on the most able and getting them to the highest level, and then with the least able it's more about how to get them to a certain standard, possibly level 4" (HS1)</i></p> | <p><i>"I think children are aware of where they are at in the class. Even if you say 'oh that's the red group, the children know." (LS1)</i></p> <p><i>"I don't feel they ever really said right let's see what he can do" (LS1)</i></p> <p><i>"People get hung up on one or two little words or phrases instead of really seeing what children can do" (LS1)</i></p> |

The conceptual category of hierarchy and pecking order related to parents' perceptions of children being ranked by ability to create a pecking order; with those at the top of the pecking order being stretched without limits, and those at the bottom of the pecking order being supported to reach a certain, pre-determined level. In keeping with previous research findings (Hallam et al., 2004), parents (both high and low set) conveyed the view that children were aware of the pecking order and hierarchical

system in schools and “*know where they stood*” (HS2). As argued by Hart (2004, p. 3), children “very quickly learn their standing in comparison to their peers...young people soon learn the category they belong to.” Such an internalisation of ‘their place’ in class raises concerns over concepts such as children’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), feelings of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972) and locus of control (Rotter, 1975).

High set parents conveyed the view that children in high sets should be stretched and those in low sets should be supported. This view was also apparent in the mind sets of teachers within the systematic review in chapter one (Boaler et al., 2000; Marks, 2014). The idea that low set pupils should be supported (not stretched or challenged) strikes me as an interesting one, and is perhaps indicative of pre-determined aspirations for children in low sets. This is supported by the view of a high set parent, who shared that the least able children should all reach a certain standard, “*possibly level 4*” (HS1). Conversely, and perhaps unsurprisingly, low set parents conveyed the view that their children were hindered by the label of being in a low set as they were never stretched, and instead were supported to reach a level deemed appropriate by their teachers.

Sternberg (1985), in his writings of intelligence, argued the prominent factor in whether people develop their ability to the point of reaching expertise is “not some fixed prior ability, but purposeful engagement.” However, what if children in low ability groups (those at the bottom of the hierarchy) are not given the opportunity to fully engage with their learning? As shown by this research (“*I don’t feel like they ever really said ‘right let’s see what he can do’... My son was never pushed, I think the teachers thought he was alright there you know tickety boo*” (LS1)), and previous research (Boaler et al. 2000; Hallam et al, 2004), teachers can have rigid and fixed assumptions and expectations of the capabilities of children in low sets. Subsequently, children in low sets can be deprived of learning opportunities that fall outside of teacher’s fixed assumptions and expectations.

In her discussion of discourse and power, Burr (2003 p. 76) argued that certain discourses around education (e.g. viewing education as a meritocracy), serve to justify beliefs about education being unbiased and egalitarian. Such discourses, according to Burr, are more likely to be viewed as ‘truth’ to some people (e.g. educators) over discourses that represent education as systems of social control and

exploitation. This view is consistent with high set parents viewing ability as innate; as those who can do well do so on their own merit (their own innate ability), and thus children are at the top of the pecking order because of such innate ability. Whereas, low set parents challenged the education system as being geared up to benefit children in high sets by primarily focusing on academic ability. Such findings are indicative of (a lack of) social mobility and inequality on a larger scale (see research from the Sutton Trust Report, 2013).

3.7.3 Competition and pride

| Conceptual category → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| Competition and pride | Competition and pride among parents | Competition among parents Parental ego Stigma Competitive parents Different priorities Competition Extra tuition Proud of son Bragging Admiration Excitement at who her daughter will be in 2 years |

| Examples of HS parents narrative | Examples of LS parents narrative |
|--|---|
| <i>"Parents of children in top sets want to know their children are in the most able group. There's a stigma." (HS1)</i> | <i>"I want to see her smile. I want her to come home and be buzzing with what happened in the day, and I don't mind if that's a social thing that happened or an academic achievement you know that's all great because it will form her as a person" (LS2)</i> |
| <i>"There's a certain amount of competition" (HS3)</i> | <i>"I admire the person she has already become and I can't wait to see who she will be in 2 year's time or 5 year's time" (LS2)</i> |
| <i>"I questioned whether my son [when in year 3] was being stretched and challenged enough" (HS1)</i> | <i>"I can't even remember what place my child comes in you know because it doesn't matter to me as long as she is happy" (LS2)</i> |
| <i>"If my child doesn't want to do work at home then we have to talk about the consequences" (HS3)</i> | <i>"...school on Saturdays or in the holidays, why? That's their time to get away from school and be a child" (LS1)</i> |

The conceptual category of competition and pride related to high set parents engaging in an ethos of academic competition, and low set parents feeling pride at all the different ways their children are developing. This is not to say high set parents were not proud of their children, but they perceived a stigma of being in a top set that

their child had to live up to, which led to a sense of competition between high set parents. Additionally, high set parents shared similar views of a low set child's family background and the 'type' of child that was generally in low sets (*"you're always going to get certain classes, of certain abilities, who are going to be quite disruptive. I don't know whether behaviour goes with ability but my son is in top set for maths and there is no problem in that class whatsoever"* (HS2)). Conversely, low set parents did not engage in any competition, but conveyed a sense of pride at who their children were becoming. Within this, low set parents acknowledged their child's skills in all areas e.g. swimming, sociable.

Consistent with the previously explored narrative around typical development, and drawing from the postulations of attachment theory, it is interesting to consider the view from Goodley & Runswick Cole (2011, p. 79), that "the (in)ability of children to reach such milestones constructs both the mother's image of her child and the image of herself as an (un)successful mother". Such a view seemed true for the high set parents; however, low set parents did not judge their children, or themselves, on their child's ability to reach milestones. Instead, they longed for their children to develop in many ways, and expressed their pride at all the different skills their children had. Such polarising views from high and low set parents forces us to question the purpose of education. Uprichard (2008) discussed the distinction between the child as a 'being' (child is viewed as living their own 'childhood') and the child as 'becoming' (child is viewed as an 'adult in the making'). Seemingly, high set parents in this study were focused on who the child was becoming, whereas low set parents were focused on the child as a being. As argued by Uprichard (2008), the discourse surrounding the child as becoming is problematic in the sense that it is explicitly future orientated. Consequently, focus is placed on who the child will become; the child is primarily viewed as 'a future adult' rather than a child who should be enjoying all that childhood has to offer. High set parents seemed focused on who their child will become (and what they need to achieve to get there), rather than who their child currently was. Conversely, low set parents seemed more focused on who their child currently was and was excited for who they may become, but seemed to hold no preconceptions or assumptions as to who that person may be.

3.7.4 Isolation

| Conceptual category → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Isolation | Parental isolation at secondary school | Loss of communication with staff Child as a go between Parent isolation Don't see other parents Loss of support network and being able to talk Never knowing what's going on at secondary Relying on child to tell you Not knowing what is happening Feeling left out Indirect experience Big change for parents Not knowing Losing control Letting go Loss of parental involvement Difference between primary and secondary No networking support Hands-off Sense of detachment |

| Examples of HS parents narrative | Examples of LS parents narrative |
|---|--|
| <p><i>"When your child goes to secondary you feel very detached from what is going on and it's very easy to feel like you've just put them on a bus and they've just gone" (HS4)</i></p> <p><i>"You lose that network of being able to talk to other parents about what is happening" (HS2)</i></p> <p><i>"At secondary you don't meet other parents so don't have a chance to talk, you're never at the gate so you don't see other parents" (HS2)</i></p> | <p><i>"It's all out of my control, it's the first proper letting go" (LS2)</i></p> <p><i>"I hear about it if she tells me but if she doesn't tell me I have no idea what's happening" (LS2)</i></p> <p><i>"That's been a really big change because of course in primary school you see the teacher every single day when you drop her off and pick her up. I haven't met any of her secondary teachers and that's a big change in my life. I can't put a face to a name" (LS2)</i></p> |

The conceptual category of isolation related to parental perceptions of their own isolation from other parents, from teachers and from schools. Parental isolation was mentioned across all participants as something they felt when their child started secondary school. Parents spoke of losing a support network, of not meeting any other parents and not knowing who their children's teachers are, which was a stark contrast to their experiences when their child was in primary school. Applying Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecosystemic theory, parental isolation can be perceived as

a mesosystem⁸, relating to (a lack of) interactions between parents in general, but specifically between high set and low set parents. Such a lack of interaction can lead to assumptions being formed and not challenged.

Government publications, such as the SEND Code of Practice (2015), have highlighted the need for a clearer focus on the participation of parents in decision making at individual and strategic levels in schools. In an effort to do so, the Office for Standard's In Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) has launched Parent View, an online questionnaire that allows parents to give their views on their child's school. Congruent with Ofsted's intentions, and reflecting societal changes, research is also exploring how use of technology may help to increase parental voice and engagement (Olmstead, 2013). A lack of communication with teachers was raised as a concern across parents, but notably more so from low set parents. High set parents were more focused on the lack of communication with other parents. It could be that high set parents feel more able to communicate with teachers whereas low set parents may feel there is a stigma or power imbalance (Crozier, 1999).

Feelings of isolation amongst parents seemingly became a prominent concept when their children started secondary school. Parents' concerns around transitioning from primary to secondary school have previously been explored by Zeedyk et al. (2003). The authors acknowledged there was a lack of research focusing on parental concerns during transition, and concluded more research in this area would be beneficial. Findings from Zeedyk et al indicated that 24% of primary children parents stated they had no concerns about their child going to secondary school. Yet, it is worth noting that this research was conducted over 10 years ago, and in those 10 years the potential consequences of bullying at secondary school have been increasingly highlighted (Dale, Russell, & Wolke, 2014), there are rising concerns around the mental health of teenagers (Bor, Dean, Najman, & Hayatbakhsh, 2014) and secondary schools have been (and are currently) criticised for not meeting mental health needs (Armstrong, Price, & Crowley, 2015). Consequently, parental concerns, as shown by the parents in this empirical study, may have increased. From their findings, Zeedyk et al suggested strategies that might help pupils prepare for

⁸ "A mesosystem comprises the interrelations / interactions among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life. Thus, for an American 12-year-old, the mesosystem typically encompasses interactions among family, school, and peer group." (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515).

transition to secondary school. Whilst this is undeniably an important focus, it may also be important to consider what support parents may need during this time. As discussed further on, EPs may be well placed to provide such support.

3.7.5 Dissonance between the education system and current society

| Conceptual category → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|---|---|--|
| Dissonance between the education system and current society | Restrictive education system and the loss of childhood Different types/aspects of ability Pressure from targets | Education of child lost within pressure of targets No time to be a child Something gone wrong somewhere Joy of learning lost It should be fun Teachers ticking boxes Education system not matching world of today Restrictive and prescriptive curriculum Tick box system Different types of ability Different aspects to ability Some people are good at some things and other people are good at others Idea of 'other ones' Practical people Different abilities Skills in other areas Lose so much of the child As long as she is happy Different priorities Forming as a person Not seeing what a child is capable of 'Right let's see what he can do' People getting hung up on labels Not seeing the child Consequences Pressure from government Target driven society Pressure to meet targets Obsessed with grades Grades and targets Pressure, pressure, pressure Pressure Pressure causing physiological symptoms |

Examples of HS parents narrative

"The whole education of the child gets lost within pressure to meet certain targets" (HS1)

Examples of LS parents narrative

"It's all about grades and targets...there's something gone wrong somewhere" (LS1)

| Examples of HS parents narrative | Examples of LS parents narrative |
|--|---|
| <i>"The joy of learning seems to have been lost" (HS3)</i> | <i>"It's all about grades and targets. It's all pressure, pressure, pressure." (LS1)</i> |
| <i>"It must be really hard for children who are practical to go through all the schooling" (HS3)</i> | <i>It's a real shame if this achievement and ability takes over, the child matters a lot more." (LS2)</i> |
| <i>"You just have to work with the system we've got" (HS4)</i> | <i>"Teachers love reading schemes and say 'you can't read above a certain level' – well of course you can! There's no rhyme or reason to a lot of things" (LS1)</i> |

The conceptual category of dissonance between the education system and current society related to parental perceptions of how, and whether, the current education system prepares children for current societal demands and expectations. Applying a Bronfenbrennerian approach, perceived dissonance between the education system and current society can be viewed as a macrosystem⁹.

Previous conceptual categories have shown a clear distinction, often a polarisation, between the views of high set parents and low set parents. However, all parents shared similar views on the dissonance between the education system and society, that being, the education system is rigid and represents a 'tick box system', whereas current society emphasises imagination and creativity. Nonetheless, such views were not entirely without difference; high set parents worked with the current educational system as, although it may not be completely aligned with society, the system is working for their children. Conversely, low set parents challenged, questioned and at times ridiculed the education system, stating *"there's something gone wrong somewhere"* (LS1).

The view that the education system does not align with current society has largely been propagated by Robinson (2011) and Mortimore (2013). In Robinson's view, there needs to be a transformation of "education systems into something better suited to the needs of the 21st century" (p. 13). Despite research advocating for the importance of encouraging creativity and imagination within the English education system (Fasko, 2001; Mortimore 2013; Robinson 2011; Shaheen, 2010), traditional

⁹ "A macrosystem refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture...Macrosystems are conceived and examined not only in structural terms but as carriers of information and ideology that, both explicitly and implicitly, endow meaning and motivation to particular agencies, social networks, roles, activities, and their interrelations." (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515).

focus on the 3 R's seems set to increase with the Government's recently announced plans to test more and at a younger age.

All parents conveyed the view that the joy of learning and fun of childhood has been lost within the pressure of targets and obsession with testing. As such, the curriculum does not allow for, nor encourage, creativity and imagination and instead is a *“restrictive and prescriptive...tick box of achievements”* (HS4). Ryan and Deci (2000) and Crain (2003) endeavoured to remind us of what it really means to be a child: how imaginative, artistic and creative many children naturally are. However, as argued by Robinson (2011, p. 7), “few people discover what [their natural talents] are and even fewer develop them properly. Ironically one of the main reasons for this massive waste of talent is the very process that is meant to develop it: education”.

3. 8 Conclusion

The proposed grounded theory (presented in figure 2), suggests that the conceptual categories of attributions, hierarchy and pecking order, and competition and pride were influenced by the mesosystem of parents feeling isolated, and the macrosystem of perceived dissonance between the education system and current society. Aspects of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model was used to present the emerging theory to highlight how parental experiences and perspectives were influenced by (a lack of) interaction and discussion, and societal and cultural practices. All parents shared the view that there was dissonance between the education system and current society (the macrosystem), however, due to parental isolation (the mesosystem) such views were rarely shared with others. Consequently, the dominant functionalist view of education pertaining to discussing children in terms of their perceived ability was allowed to thrive (notably for high set parents). From this, parental perspectives around assumptions, assumed hierarchies and competition were formed and rarely challenged.

Despite sharing similar views on the rigidity and tradition of the education system, there was dissonance between how high set and low set parents attributed perceived success and failure. High set parents attributed success and failure to internal factors (innate ability or lack of) and low set parents attributed success and failure to relational factors (relationship between child and teacher). As such, high set parents (re)produced particular discourses and attributions around ability that are

similar to the discourses and attributions produced by many teachers, and by the education system and Government. Conversely, low set parents challenged and questioned the current educational system as putting too much emphasis on academic ability, and raised questions around the self-efficacy of teachers in being able to meet the needs of all children. Additionally, high set parents engaged in an ethos of academic competition, whereas low set parents were excited to see their children develop in various ways. This study emphasises a greater need to consider the discourses surrounding the concept of ability, and the discourses that are encouraged by the propagation of the 'typical development' of a child. Such discourses are only heightened by the continuous testing, comparing and grouping of children.

3.9 Limitations

Overall, the sample size used in this research was small and covered a particular geographical area. Parents volunteered their participation and were perhaps likely to have been more involved in school generally or had strong views on the topic of ability grouping. However, a grounded theory approach was used as it could effectively be used to tease out participants understanding of a concept they may never have considered before. Therefore, parents may not have been aware of their strong views on ability prior to being asked to consider it.

Although steps were taken to address some of the issues associated with reliability (namely, consistent use of memo-writing to help me as researcher stay mindful of my own perceptions and interpretations), I was the sole interpreter. The research findings may have achieved greater reliability if conducted by a team of data analysts. Nonetheless, the purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of the individuals involved in order to inform theory development. Throughout this process, no claim has been made that the results of this research will generalise to other settings.

3.10 Implications for schools and Educational Psychologists

Whilst this research does not claim that the perspectives of these parents are generalisable to a wider population, the findings have value in highlighting issues to be considered in relation to ability grouping.

Dweck's (2006) suggestion that mind sets can be inadvertently imparted on to children is important to consider. Not perceiving one's self as capable, and believing 'ability' is fixed, may lead to feelings of helplessness that may also lead to disengagement (Bandura, 1999). Feeling a sense of control and optimism over the future can be crucial for psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The theory proposed from this research is intended as a discussion and reflection tool to encourage wider thinking and questioning of concepts. Arguably, a prominent role for EPs is to utilise their skills in consultation and training to encourage wider thinking; to help move away from dispositional, fixed thinking towards a more holistic view of the individual (Cameron, 2006).

Consistent with encouraging wider thinking and questioning ingrained assumptions, it is often assumed that parents know how to parent simply because they are one. As shown by the Baby Room Project (Northamptonshire EPS), EPs providing training or offering 'drop in' consultations to parents in the community can prove both enlightening and reassuring in helping to move discourse and pressure away from the child developing at a 'typical' rate. Opportunities for parents to engage in professional dialogue, reflection and critique are rare (Crozier, 1999). When offered, these may increase parents' awareness of certain discourses that are somewhat inherent within education, and, in doing so, may offer a space in which certain discourses are questioned and challenged.

Similarly, EPs are well placed to help encourage home-school communication (Christenson, 2004), especially in times of anxiety for both parents and children; namely the transition from primary to secondary school. An increase in home-school communication could also provide increased opportunities for parents and teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue. This research has shown that parents can have strong views on concepts within education. It may be they are not aware of their views prior to being questioned on it, but it is important their views are heard. EPs can play a valuable role in igniting debate and query around ingrained assumptions and beliefs of truth (for example, the concept of ability). Consistent with the postulations of double loop learning (Argyris, 1976), the importance of encouraging individual's to consider, question and reflect on their beliefs and where those beliefs have come from should not be overlooked.

Thus, this research can help to highlight the practical role of EPs in acting as a 'critical friend', and challenging ingrained assumptions by engaging with and advancing a socially critical account of education as opposed to the dominant functionalist one.

3.11 Ideas for future research

During my journey through the literature, I came across labelling theory. Labelling theory was popular in the 1960s and 1970s and was largely used by sociologists to challenge the functionalist view of crime and deviance (Plummer, 1996). Piliavin (1964) applied labelling theory to police arrests and found many arrests were based on stereotypical assumptions about ethnicity and social class. Additionally, Young (1975) highlighted how labelling caused behaviour to amplify. However, the more I read about labelling theory, the more I realised it lacked empirical validation. Nonetheless, Scimecca (1977) synthesised labelling theory with personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) through use of repertory grids. I am curious as to whether such synthesis could prove interesting in further exploring how use of labelling in relation to perceived ability leads to the creation of particular perceptions and assumptions. A prominent concept that came from this research was the impact of labelling and grouping children on attributions for perceived success or failure. Synthesising labelling theory and attribution theory could be of great interest in terms of future research in this area.

Word count: 5493

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Appendix 1: Glossary

| Term | Definition |
|------------------------|---|
| Ability grouping | <p>A practice that places students into classrooms or small groups based on an initial assessment of their levels of readiness or ability (Kulik, 1992)</p> <p>“Allows for the possibility that students will be placed in a high-ranking group for one subject and a low-ranking group for another” (Slavin, 1990)</p> |
| Streaming | <p>The method of assigning pupils to classes on the basis of an overall assessment of their general ability. Pupils remain in their streamed classes for the majority of their subjects. (GB. DES. HMI, 1979)</p> |
| Tracking | <p>“Students are often assigned to academic, general, and vocational tracks; middle / junior high school students are often assigned to advanced, basic, and remedial tracks...This type of grouping plan is generally called tracking in the U.S. or streaming in Europe.” (Slavin, 1990)</p> |
| Within-class grouping | <p>Dividing a class into small groups and instructing each group separately. (Sorenson & Hallinan, 1979)</p> |
| Mixed-ability teaching | <p>Teaching groups of widely ranging ability. (GB. DES. HMI, 1979).</p> |
| Self-concept | <p>"One's collective self-perceptions that are formed through experiences with, and interpretations of, the environment, and that are heavily influenced by reinforcements and evaluations by significant other persons." Schunk (1996)</p> |
| Self-efficacy | <p>"People's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives." (Bandura, 1994)</p> |

Appendix 2: Example of critical synopsis

Critical synopsis:

Students' Experiences of Ability Grouping – disaffection, polarisation and the construction of failure. Boaler, William and Brown (2000)

1) Why am I reading this?

It directly answers my central question of exploring the effects of ability grouping, and explores whether ability grouping creates teacher expectations of the whole group, as opposed to meeting the individual needs to the children and young people within that group. It argues that ability grouping creates a set of expectations of children's capabilities, based on which set they are placed in. It reports interim data from a 4-yearlong study monitoring the mathematical learning of students in 6 UK secondary schools, all in Greater London. However, the focus of the study became about the effects of ability grouping on children's experience of school, due to the results from questionnaires, interviews and lesson observations.

2) What are the authors trying to do?

The paper is an intellectual project that challenges that which is accepted in the world and that which is advocated by current Government policy. It challenges the somewhat presumed notion that ability grouping meets children's needs in the best way. The authors argue that ability grouping leads to disaffection, polarisation and the construction of failure for children and young people placed in top and bottom sets. They argue that these children's individual needs are not met by ability grouping, but are instead created by the concept of top and bottom sets. Thus, that teachers teach to the needs of children in 'top' and 'bottom' sets, rather than to the individual needs of the children within those sets.

3) What is relevant to what I want to find out?

- "the problem...from teachers' perceptions about the level of work appropriate for low-set students, but also from an idea...that students in setted groups have the same...capabilities and learning styles" (p639)

- “placing of students into ability groups creates a set of expectations for teachers that overrides their awareness of individual capabilities” (p641)
- “students are constructed as successes or failures by the set in which they are placed” (p643)

When students moved from mixed ability to setted ability groups, 40 of the 48 children interviewed wanted to return to mixed ability or change groups. The move from mixed ability to setted group caused 3 major issues (claims) to arise:

- High sets, High expectations, High Pressure

The authors interviewed and observed students in set 1 to see if they would find similar results to what Boaler found in 1997 – (research agenda?). They interviewed 8 girls- all of which said they wanted to move down into set 2 or lower, and 8 boys- 6 of which were extremely unhappy but did not want to move (which the authors suggest is due to being more confident than the girls and enjoying the status of being in top set). From lesson observations, the authors argued that teachers in set 1 rushed through the lesson without providing accurate explanations, often saying comments such as “you should be able to, you’re in top set”. In each of the 6 schools, the children’s perceptions of top sets were similar. The authors suggest that; children in the top sets do not require detailed help or time to think and are not given space to make mistakes.

- Low sets, Low expectations and Limited Opportunities

Children in low sets reported a wide range of negative experiences which were substantiated by lesson observations. Children were concerned around how often they had a new teacher, the low level of their work and teachers ignoring their pleas for more challenging work, and the little hope they had of changing sets. The authors suggest these negative experiences come from teachers’ perceptions about the level of work appropriate for low-set students, that they have the same capabilities and learning styles.

- Restricted Pedagogy and Pace

“in setted classes, students are brought together because they are believed to be of similar ‘ability’. Yet, setted lessons are often conducted as though students are not only similar, but identical- in terms of ability, preferred learning style and pace of working” (p640).

“it seems the placing of students into ability groups creates a set of expectations for teachers that overrides their awareness of individual capabilities” (p641).

The authors claim that these 3 issues arise from ability grouping...however, in their discussion they mention that 77% of children they interviewed in setted groups said that the work they were set was “usually about right” for them.

4) How convincing are the authors?

They are convincing – but wary that many of their ideas and hypothesis’ come from earlier research by Boaler (1997), and that the findings from this research seems to have generated the need for more research...perhaps already know what they are hoping to find?

They acquire a lot of data – 120 hours of observation, questionnaires to 943 students, interviews with 72 students. However, their ideas about teacher expectations, whilst I agree with their views, do not seem to be warranted on anything other than subjective ideas about what could be happening. What they report fits in with my experiences of my time at school as a student, and with my time in school as a TEP.

5) What use can I make of this?

I can link this to Raveaud’s (2005) paper – as both suggest ability grouping leads to the construction of the pupil, either as a success or a failure. The authors’ claims are convincing and do resonate with my experience of ability grouping and the effect it can have on children’s experiences and teacher expectations, both as a student and a TEP. The authors only conduct their research from a student perspective – would have been interesting to gather teacher views on ability grouping – do they know their pedagogy changes when teaching setted groups? Are they aware of this?

Appendix 3: Example of matrix of original themes (first order and second order) in studies used in meta-ethnography

| Paper and author | Theme 1 – Differentiation: classroom practice | Theme 2 – Teachers view of differentiation | Theme 3 – Self-esteem, failure and the construction of a pupil identity | Theme 4 – Differentiation and social justice | Theme 5 – Culture, context and comparability |
|---|--|--|--|---|--|
| <p>Hares, tortoises and the social construction of the pupil: differentiated learning in French and English primary schools</p> <p>Raveaud (2005)</p> | <p>Comparison of French and English classroom practice; English teachers differentiated task according to ability, French teachers showed no differentiation of task</p> <p>English children in Year 1 could name other groups in class but unaware of reasons for such groups. By Year 2 one girl wished she was in a different group as “work would be easy”</p> <p>French children considered it normal that they all did the same work</p> | <p>English teachers viewed differentiation as adjusting task according to ‘ability’; French teachers viewed differentiation as providing different levels of support</p> <p>The systematic creation of same-ability groups in England reflects a widely held assumptions that it is absurd to expect children to tackle the same degree of difficulty – “unrealistic and unfair”</p> <p>(French teacher) “I sit down beside them and we go over it until they’ve understood”</p> | <p>English teachers reluctant to provide work which would provoke feeling of inadequacy and failure “it’s all about self-esteem really”</p> <p>French teachers opposite – “you need to stretch them [children] to their limit”</p> <p>Greater tendency among French teachers to attribute the outcome of children’s work to effort rather than to ability</p> <p>French teachers did not construct failure in the same way as their English colleagues. In their eyes, failure was the opposite of equal opportunities</p> | <p>French teachers reluctant to set different targets for different pupils, viewing differentiation...as a means of perpetuating social inequalities</p> <p>French debates surrounding differentiation tend to focus on issues of social equality, rather than its effects on academic achievements</p> <p>If the school expects more of the former than the latter, the gap in their attainment can only increase or at best remain stationary</p> | <p>In France, pupil was viewed as a social being, a member of a class who should be entitled to the same learning and experiences as their peers. In England, pupils were considered individual children entitled to the recognition of their aptitudes, difficulties and needs</p> <p>Through the social construction of the pupil, schools participate in a wider process of meaning making, shaping children’s views of their society and their place in it</p> |

Appendix 4: My line of argument (themes)

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, Wiliam and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|--|--|--|---|--|---|--|
| <p>Teacher assumptions and expectations</p> | <p>English teachers reluctant to provide work which would provoke feeling of inadequacy and failure (Raveaud interpreted this as concern around self-esteem, I interpret it as a teacher assumption of ability)</p> <p>French teachers attribute outcomes of children's work to effort rather than ability, in comparison to English teachers who do the opposite (Teachers having differing assumptions – subjective, cultural)</p> <p>If the school expects more of the former than the latter, the gap in their attainment can only increase or at best remain stationary</p> | <p>Students given identical work and have all been required to complete it at the same speed</p> <p><i>In top-sets:</i></p> <p>Teachers raced through examples on the board</p> <p>Teachers giving quick demonstrations of method without explanation</p> <p>“you should be able to, you're in top set”</p> <p><i>In low sets:</i></p> <p>Children aware of teacher assumptions – “he thinks we're really low” “really stupid or something”</p> <p>“You can't have finished, you're set 5”</p> | <p>Setting criteria...views of pupils' behaviour, motivation and attitudes, which are highly dependent on teachers' interpretations</p> <p>Trying to build a culture of high expectations...in practice contrasted sharply with low expectations that teachers seemed to have of pupils in lower groups</p> <p>Top set...'ideal' pupils</p> | <p>Pedagogy limited through assumptions about ability and learning approaches</p> <p>Perceived as 'right' within the teacher discourse community</p> <p>Teachers were not placed in position of having to challenge assumptions</p> <p>Dis-applied from tests</p> <p>Shared assumptions about set 4 behaviour</p> <p>Set 4 unable to engage in discussion in mature manner</p> <p>Did not possess collaborative working skills</p> <p>Assumptions...based on beliefs about</p> | <p>“you've got to ensure a high quality of teaching in the lower ability...otherwise you've no chance of tackling the motivational problems” (assuming that there are motivational problems, not because students deserve the best teachers)</p> <p>Set placement were monitored using NC test results...and teacher judgements</p> <p>There were evident efforts to customise curriculum provision and experiences to the <i>perceived</i> learning needs of low attainers</p> <p>Many schools opted for curriculum programmes with strong coursework components</p> | <p>Top stream seemed to know they were expected to work at a faster pace and higher level</p> <p>Work was set at an inappropriate level</p> <p>Abilities in different subjects not being catered for</p> |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, William and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|-----------------|----------------|---|---------------|---|---|----------------------------------|
| | <p>“lazy”</p> | <p>Teachers’ perceptions about the level of work appropriate for low-set students...that students in setted groups have the same mathematical capabilities and learning styles and may be taught accordingly</p> <p>Some teachers seemed to hold ideas about the pace at which a class should work</p> <p>The placing of students into ‘ability’ groups creates a set of expectations for teachers that overrides their awareness of individual capabilities</p> <p>Students in high sets came to be regarded as mini mathematicians...w hereas students in low sets came to be</p> | | <p>ability, may be leading to missed opportunities</p> <p>Decisions grounded in shared meaning making</p> <p>The limited attainment of set 4 could be accounted for through shared beliefs about potential and assumptions that these pupils were working at the peak of their capability</p> <p>Consequences of a common and expected classroom practice</p> <p>Top sets had regular access to teaching paraphernalia e.g. interactive whiteboards and number lines</p> <p>Low sets limited to what teacher could physically carry</p> | <p>(doesn’t this contradict an earlier assumption that children in lower sets lack motivation? Why would they be motivated to do coursework?)</p> <p>“in GCSE they would get an E...we’ve got a course which, well, it’s vocational”</p> <p>Offered pupils who struggled with writing the opportunity to be assessed orally (difference here – children given the choice, not made for them – but only one English department did this)</p> <p>If their reading levels improved sufficiently, they were reintegrated into the class (what is sufficient?)</p> | |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, William and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|-----------------|----------------|---|---------------|--|---|----------------------------------|
| | | <p>regarded as failures who could only cope with low level work</p> <p>Students are constructed as successes or failures by the set in which they are placed</p> <p>Teachers that used ability grouping...adopted a prescriptive pedagogy...chalk-board teaching and textbook work</p> <p>"now, every day is copying off the board and just doing the next page, then the next page and it gets really boring"</p> <p>The adoption of ability grouping appears to have signalled to teachers it is appropriate to use different pedagogical strategies (and</p> | | <p>Pedagogy limited through assumptions about ability and learning approaches</p> <p>Set 4...low repetitive worksheets completed on an individual basis</p> <p>Lack of preparation for tests</p> <p>Engaged in individual activities</p> | <p>Some pupils were not being sufficiently challenged</p> <p>Micro-level decisions</p> <p>We do a bit of engineering (social engineering)</p> <p>Many teachers emphasised activity based learning</p> <p>Relaxed disciplinary environment in lower sets</p> | |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, Wiliam and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|---|--|--|----------------------------------|
| | | teacher assumptions) | | | | |
| Perception of equal opportunities | <p>French teachers did not construct failure in the same way as their English colleagues. In their eyes, failure was the opposite of equal opportunities</p> <p>In France, pupil was viewed as a social being, a member of a class who should be entitled to the same learning and experiences as their peers. In England, pupils were considered individual children entitled to the recognition of their aptitudes, difficulties and needs (really though? Or is the individual child 'lost' within their 'ability' group?)</p> | <p>Child - "classes should have a mixture of everyone and then everyone could learn from everyone, because it's not like the dumb ones don't know anything, they do know it"</p> <p>Child - "I think they should give you the work and what you get is what you get. They shouldn't try and aim you for something, because, you never know, you could get an A"</p> <p>They knew their opportunities for learning were being minimised</p> | <p>"...students...in lower groups have not had the same quality of teaching, or the same access, or the same materials...whenever anybody says setting, it reminds me..."</p> <p>"if it's holding the brightest ones back all the time, then it's not fair, is it?" (what about the ones who aren't 'the brightest'?)</p> | <p>Teacher concern that lowest sets allocated to weakest or newest teachers and TA's</p> <p>"They don't care about us being happy, we don't have nothing"</p> <p>Rationale for low level work included allowing pupils to experience success</p> | <p>Learning materials and technology were equally accessible</p> <p>class size of low-attainment groups were small...make more teacher time available...maximising learning opportunities</p> <p>Teachers in low attainment...as experienced and well qualified</p> <p>"we have to give our weaker teachers the lower sets"</p> <p>"because of pressure of getting the middle kids up to C's, you have to put your most experienced teachers with them"</p> <p>Test-level entry decisions for KS4 were delayed in some schools</p> | |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, William and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|--|--|--|---------------|--|---|---|
| | | | | | <p>There were evident efforts to customise curriculum provision and experiences to the perceived learning needs of low attainers</p> <p>Many schools opted for curriculum programmes with strong coursework components (doesn't this contradict an earlier assumption that children in lower sets lack motivation? Why would they be motivated to do coursework?)</p> | |
| <p>Inclusion and self-esteem; being listened to</p> | <p>French culturally situated...ideal of inclusion rather than successful task completion (to the French, self-esteem equated to feeling included, to the English, self-esteem was successfully completing a task)</p> | <p>"in sets you all have to stay at one stage" (doesn't sound like this makes them feel included, rather, sounds an annoyance)</p> <p>"it really depressed me, the fact that everyone in class is like really far ahead"</p> | | <p>Low sets not timetabled to a regular learning space...made use of infant classrooms and...corridors – for me self-esteem – how does this affect the children? Is this inclusive practice?</p> | | <p>"they want to see who's clever"</p> <p>"I wouldn't want to be in the middle set because I think I couldn't do it"</p> <p>"they're talking about what they do and the rest of us are sitting there and we haven't even heard of the sums"</p> |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, Wiliam and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|-----------------|--|---|---------------|--|--------------------|--|
| | <p>French teachers reluctant to set different targets for different pupils, viewing differentiation...as a means of perpetuating social inequalities</p> | <p>and I just don't understand"</p> <p>"you think oh my God I'm the only one in the class that doesn't understand it"</p> <p>"we say we can do it, but he just writes them down anyway"</p> <p>"once or twice someone has said something and he's shouted at us"</p> <p>Students reported that teachers continued with their own ideas, even when students asked for more difficult work</p> <p>Students...talked at length about teachers ignoring their pleas for more difficult work</p> | | <p>"you're a bit constrained and a bit public"</p> <p>Physically located away from their peers</p> | | <p>Not being in same stream as friends</p> <p>Work too easy</p> <p>Higher status</p> <p>Pressure</p> <p>Low status</p> <p>Teasing</p> <p>"I'd like to be a higher science set"</p> <p>"I'd like some harder work"</p> <p>"I want to get more brainy and go higher"</p> <p>"it gets a bit too hard"</p> <p>"all my friends are in a different set and I feel left out" (social engineering)</p> <p>Not a lot of movement unless</p> |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, Wiliam and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|---|---|---|--|--------------|---|--|
| | | | | | | <p>parents say something</p> <p>“weren’t so clever we were in lower groups and that made you feel uncomfortable”</p> <p>“called the professor because I’m one of the clever ones. It bothers me”</p> <p>“can sometimes be horrible”</p> <p>“you’re crap”</p> <p>“you’re thick”</p> |
| <p>Lack of mobility: fixed ability</p> | <p>The lack of mobility between groups was remarkable</p> | <p>Students in low groups believed there to be little hope of moving to higher groups</p> <p>Curriculum polarisation results in a situation in which upward movement...is unlikely to be successful</p> | <p>Movement between sets “as small as possible”</p> <p>Unless pupils were identified as being in the ‘wrong’ set within the first 2 or 3 weeks, they would only be moved at the end of each term</p> <p>“not a fantastic amount of movement”</p> | | <p>Possibility for pupil’s to move up served as an effective carrot</p> <p>An expressed reluctance to move pupils</p> <p>Moving someone up usually necessitated moving someone else down</p> <p>Pupil movement between sets was often limited</p> | <p>“they wait until you get really good before you go to a higher group”</p> <p>Not a lot of movement unless parents say something</p> |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, William and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|---|--|---|---------------|--|--|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Children's perception of differences between groups and individuals: comparison and labelling</p> | <p>Through the social construction of the pupil, schools participate in a wider process of meaning making, shaping children's views of their society and their place in it</p> | <p>"I don't want to be put in the top set again, it's too hard and I won't learn anything"</p> <p>"something's the clever are good at and some things the not so educated are good at"</p> <p>Student's described the ways in which teachers used a small proportion of the students as reference points</p> <p>"look at these 5 people, they have finished, hurry up!"</p> | | <p>"we all need helpers in our class"</p> <p>Set 4 pupils spontaneously drew a comparison with what they felt set 3 was life</p> <p>"it's sooooo different"</p> <p>"you get treated differently"</p> | <p>"in lower sets you can get away with more stuff"</p> <p>"if you're in a higher set they think you can do things a lot more"</p> | <p>"they want to see who's clever"</p> <p>"they mainly focus on your actual ability so the work is really suited to what you can do" (not achieve?)</p> <p>"they don't want to put everyone in one set because it will be too hard for some"</p> <p>"you get work that's right for you"</p> <p>"I wouldn't want to be in the middle set because I think I couldn't do it"</p> <p>"they need something easier"</p> <p>"better to be in a group that you know is right for your brain" (implies a fixed thought of intelligence)</p> |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, Wiliam and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------------|---|
| | | | | | | <p>“some people can’t learn as fast as us”</p> <p>Abilities in different subjects not being catered for</p> <p>“I’d put the brainy ones not near me” (contrast to Egalitarian of French, English children brought up with the sense that some are brainy and some are not)</p> <p>“not so clever and someone who’s clever”</p> <p>“the more intelligent encourage the less intelligent”</p> <p>Ability groups made pupils more aware of their differences</p> <p>Enable pupils to establish where they were in the pecking order</p> <p>“weren’t so clever we were in lower</p> |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, William and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|---|--|---|--|---|--|---|
| | | | | | | <p>groups and that made you feel uncomfortable”</p> <p>Pupils demonstrated a self-perceptions in accordance with their teachers (had internalised their assumptions)</p> <p>“clever ones in a higher group”</p> <p>“one that weren’t so clever in a lower”</p> |
| <p>Justification of ability grouping: world view</p> | <p>Not an important concept to French teachers – heavily ingrained in the mind-set of English teachers</p> <p>Comparison of French and English classroom practice; English teachers differentiated task according to ability, French teachers showed no differentiation of task</p> <p>English teachers viewed</p> | <p>Students held strong beliefs that individuals have different strengths and weaknesses and that it is helpful to learn from each other</p> <p>“classes should have a mixture of everyone and then everyone could learn from everyone, because it’s not like the dumb ones don’t know anything, they do know it”</p> | <p>Notion of ability central to teachers’ rationale for ability grouping</p> | <p>Perceived as ‘right’ within the teacher discourse community</p> <p>Normalise taken for granted meanings</p> <p>Teachers constructed ability to include notions of, for example, behaviour, attitude and potential</p> <p>“we still have the crazy system of testing...that’s the way we’re judged so</p> | <p>class size of low-attainment groups were small...make more teacher time available...maximising learning opportunities (echoes of French teachers, that differentiation is on support available, not task)</p> <p>In some cases grouping policies followed a whole school policy whereas in others devolved to subject</p> | <p>“better to be in a group that you know is right for your brain” (implies a fixed thought of intelligence)</p> <p>“I’d put the brainy ones not near me” (contrast to Egalitarian of French, English children brought up with the sense that some are brainy and some are not)</p> |

| Themes/concepts | Raveuad (2005) | Boaler, William and Brown (2000) | Araujo (2007) | Marks (2014) | Dunne et al (2011) | Hallam, Ireson and Davies (2004) |
|-----------------|--|--|---------------|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| | <p>differentiation as adjusting task according to 'ability'; French teachers viewed differentiation as providing different levels of support</p> <p>The systematic creation of same-ability groups in England reflects a widely held assumptions that it is absurd to expect children to tackle the same degree of difficulty – “unrealistic and unfair”</p> | <p>“I think they should give you the work and what you get is what you get. They shouldn't try and ain you for something, because, you never know, you could get an A”</p> | | <p>we have to go down that road”</p> | <p>department (subjective, then?) The rationale for particular in-school grouping configurations was often informed by personal pedagogical ideologies</p> | <p>“not so clever and someone who's clever”</p> <p>“the more intelligent encourage the less intelligent”</p> <p>Ability groups made pupils more aware of their differences</p> <p>Enable pupils to establish where they were in the pecking order</p> <p>“half the clever people and half the not so clever people”</p> <p>“I'm one of the clever ones”</p> |

Appendix 5: Parental information sheet and consent forms



Research Project – Exploring ability grouping in schools

Dear Parent/Carer,

My name is Chloe Greig and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist based in North Yorkshire, currently working in local schools in the area. I am in my final year of an Applied Doctorate in Educational Psychology course at Newcastle University. I am about to begin my thesis research exploring the use of ability grouping in schools.

I would like to speak with parents of children in year 7, such as yourself, about your views on ability grouping practices previously used in your child's primary schools and currently used in your child's secondary school. I am interested in exploring your experiences and understanding of grouping practices used, and how involved you felt in this process. All of your information will be kept private and confidential.

If you would like to have a discussion and have your views heard, please return the form attached to reception and I will be in touch to arrange a date and time to meet. Alternatively, please feel free to contact me and we can arrange a date to meet.

If you have any further questions or concerns, feel free to contact myself (c.greig2@ncl.ac.uk) or Dr Simon Gibbs (my research supervisor and Director of the Doctorate at Newcastle University) at simon.gibbs@ncl.ac.uk (0191 208 6575).

Thank you!
Chloe Greig

Consent Form

Please tick each box if you agree.

- I have read and understood the information sheet.

- I know that the discussion will be voice recorded and that any personal information will be kept private (anonymised and stored on a password-protected computer).

- I know I am free to ask questions at any point.

- I know if I take part in this study, I can choose to withdraw at any stage and my details and views will be erased.

- I would like to take part in this study.

Name:

Date:

Signed:

Appendix 6: Example of transcript and initial codes

| Initial code | Participant words |
|--|--|
| Size and location of school | She was in a very small village school for primary |
| Different age groups working together | She was often with different year groups Had like year 1 and 2 working together, year 3 and 4 working together |
| Number of children in school | You've got 39 children in the whole school |
| Knowledge; acceptance that levels were 'true' | I just knew she was working where she needed to be Knew the levels she had |
| Differentiation of task; assuming | There would be differentiation I suppose within the task |
| Acceptance; not questioning methods | It was just how it was done |
| Logistics; justifying not questioning methods | I mean it's logistics as much as anything else |
| Targeted work towards ability in certain subjects | Work was able to be targeted more towards the ability levels for things like literacy and numeracy |
| Being stretched and held back; pro's and con's of working with different age groups | If you're in year 3 and you're working with year 6's it can stretch you on, but if you're in year 6 and working with year 3's it can hold you back |
| Children's understanding/knowledge; ranking by ability; pecking order; hierarchy | My daughter could tell me... exactly where everyone in the class stood ability wise from year 6 down to year 3 |
| How children worked out the pecking order; observing others | How they could answer questions, what they were doing, what sort of activities, what their work was like |
| Children's knowledge of what others could do; pecking order | They knew. They just knew. They knew who, within the whole class, was able to do what, almost a pecking order I guess |
| Daughter knowing where she is in the hierarchy; competition | She knew exactly where she stood, she knew exactly who was snapping at her heels |
| Birthdate and academic ability; relationship between maturity and academic ability | He's a September birthday, the others are May and July. Academically he's much more able than them. It's more maturity than anything else |
| Concern around child being stretched enough | I've had my concerns with him in year 3 – is he being stretched enough? |
| Knowing who is able; children's knowledge of ability; either able or not? | My son (year 3) can tell you who's the able ones in year 1 and 2 They know, they just know |
| Children knowledge of individual differences; reporting back to parents | He can tell you that so and so has got learning difficulties, she finds it really difficult and so and so is really really clever and he's doing this and that |
| Labelling; justifying difficulty through exceptional behaviour | There's a child in year 1 who is exceptional. His mum says she's beginning to understand why he was such a difficult baby |
| Individual differences; can't be both – either you're very able or have learning difficulties? | In year 2 there's some very able kids and others who have learning difficulties |
| Differentiation; proud parent; bragging; competition among parents | If they are working in groups it will be differentiated. There is the differentiation. My son is doing maths work that nobody else in his |

| Initial code | Participant words |
|--|---|
| | year is doing because they can't cope with it, tried and couldn't manage it |
| Less able children aware they're not doing well | I think the less able are very aware, they know they're not doing as well |
| Child self-categorising | They start categorising themselves from a very young age |
| Differences; black and white, literal thinking; either you can or can't, even at reception | From reception, they know who can write and who can't write, who can read and who can't read |
| Children's self-concept/efficacy at year 1; concept of can or can't | They go into year 1 and think "I'm think, I'm no good, I can't read" |
| Birth date as justification for why a child can't do something | It could be that they are a 29 th August birthday |
| Gender as justification for why they're not ready to learn | And are a boy and they're just not ready |
| Knowledge; can and can't; black and white thinking | They do know from a very young age who can and who can't |
| Children's experiences | It depends on what experiences they have |
| Children trying to make sense of differences in ability; able child trying to reason for differences; less able oblivious to differences | The larger lad was working with this theory that the size of his head made him cleverer than the smaller lad...so he was already trying to find a reason for it but again he was a more able kid, the less able, I don't think, I mean they're almost oblivious |
| Relationship between behaviour and ability | I've seen it act out with behaviour and all sorts from the less able |
| Children knowing they can't do the work leads to them kicking off | Because they know they can't so it's easier to kick off than it is to try and do the work |
| Children feeling set up to fail | I think they feel that, maybe, maybe they're set up to fail |
| Benefits of ability grouping; categorising | I think that's where grouping comes into its own because if you've got the work level correct and they are achieving within their level |
| Grouping raising self-esteem | Their esteem is going to be better than if you put everyone at the same |
| Judge ability in every subject | You've got to judge them on their ability within every single subject |
| Balance between grouping and self-esteem | It's finding that balance somehow to try and help the self-esteem |
| Home life and self-esteem | Which can also come from home unfortunately |
| Different types of ability | I mean you have practical ability You have artistic ability, you have academic ability, you have physical ability |
| Ability vs intelligence; within child view | I think ability is very different to the notion we have in this country of intelligence. If you are not academically able therefore you are unintelligent |
| Drawing on own experience/skills; justifying own lack of ability | Ask me to draw a brilliant picture and I'm not going to be the best person on the plant, but I'm reasonably academically able |
| Defining ability; using the skills you have (not skills you can learn?); fixed view | Very much I think it is a skill in all sorts of areas. Getting the best out of the skills that you have and recognising that whatever skills you have, if you try your hardest you're going to get the best out of yourself, but it's not always easy |

| Initial code | Participant words |
|--|---|
| Stretching the more able and supporting the less able | You need to get everyone working so that you are stretching the more able ones and supporting the less able ones |
| Ability grouping is beneficial | I personally believe that ability grouping, teaching towards the child's ability, is beneficial |
| Questioning intentions behind ability grouping (arose through discussion); benefit of child or teacher | The question in my mind now is, is it easier for the benefit of the children or the ease of the teacher? Surely it makes it easier if you are only focusing on a specific group target |
| Pressure from government; target driven society | Now with pressure from government being so target driven, there's a pressure to get here and here |
| Easier to ability group; easier to focus on most able children | Maybe it's easier to focus on the most able and getting them to the highest level |
| Different aspirations; possibilities for most able vs assumptions for least able | Maybe it's easier to focus on the most able and getting them to the highest level and then with the least able, it's more about how to get them to a certain standard, possibly level 4 |
| Pressure to meet targets; education of the child lost within pressure of targets | The whole education of the child gets lost within pressure to meet certain targets |
| Parental wants; competition among parents | Parents just want to know what level their child is at. If they are not in top set then they don't want to know |
| Parental ego; stigma | Parents of children in top sets want to know their children are in the most able group. There's a stigma. |
| Assumptions around ability and home life and family background | I think generally speaking, the children who are in top sets, are more able because they come from more able, more supportive backgrounds. People make assumptions based on family background and everything else |

Appendix 7: Process of focused coding

| Focused codes → | Formed from initial codes → | Formed from participants narrative and memo writing |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Hierarchy and pecking order | Ranking by ability Pecking order Hierarchy Children knowing where they stood Children knowing who is able Child awareness of grouping | “My daughter could tell me...exactly where everyone in the class stood ability wise from year 6 down to year 3.” (HS1) “The less able are very aware, they know they’re not doing well.” (HS1) “They knew who, within the whole class, was able to do what, almost a pecking order I guess” (HS2) “She knew exactly where she stood and who was snapping at her heels.” (HS2) “They knew which place they were in, they would always know where they stood.” (HS2) “I think children are aware of where they are at in the class. Even if you say ‘oh that’s the red group, the children know.” (LS1) “The children know it more than anyone” (HS3) “They know who’s got the best academic ability and who hasn’t” (HS3) |
| Either you can or you can’t | Either able or not Fixed view You can or you can’t Natural ability Knowing who is able Literal thinking | “My son can tell you who’s able in year 1 and 2” (HS1) “From reception, they know who can write and you can’t write, who can read and who can’t read.” (HS1) “They go into year 1 and think ‘I’m thick, I’m no good, I can’t read” (HS1) “They do know from a very young age who can and who can’t” (HS2) “Because they know they can’t so it’s easier to kick off” (HS2) “There are those children who just always seem to naturally do well and have that natural ability” (HS3) “There are practical people who can’t do academic stuff to save their lives” (HS3) “...if they’ve got any ability” (HS4) |
| Pressure from targets | Pressure from government Target driven society | “Now with pressure from government being so target drive, there’s a pressure to get here and here” |

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|---|--|---|
| | <p>Pressure to meet targets Obsessed with grades Grades and targets Pressure, pressure, pressure Pressure Pressure causing physiological symptoms</p> | <p>“The whole education of the child gets lost within pressure to meet certain targets” “Now we’re obsessed with grades” “It’s all about grades and targets. It’s all pressure, pressure, pressure.” “It’s a lot of pressure” “I’ve heard from other parent’s who’s children have stopped eating, stopped sleeping, had stomach pains due to the pressure.” “I think children accept the pressure but the pressure is hard” “There’s so much pressure to do extra work outside of school” “...they’re under pressure because the children just below them are trying to get in. The teacher’s are also under pressure and that doesn’t help.”</p> |
| <p>Different types/aspects of ability</p> | <p>Different types of ability Different aspects to ability Some people are good at some things and other people are good at others Idea of ‘other ones’ Practical people Different abilities Skills in other areas</p> | <p>“I mean you have practical ability. You have artistic ability, you have academic ability, you have physical ability.” (HS1) “Some people are good at some things and other people are good at others. Some people can be much better at practical, you know doing things with their hands, other people might be really good at maths but then you get them to go out and do something practical and they don’t know where to start.” (LS1) “Some children with academic ability will get the better jobs but if you want anything done quickly then it’s the other ones.” (HS3) “I would like to think that everybody has a particular ability in something” (HS3) “We can’t all be highly academic because that just doesn’t work in life” (HS3) “There are practical people who can’t do academic stuff to save their lives” (HS3) “It must be really hard for children who are practical to go through all the schooling” (HS3) “You can see children with different abilities and different walks of life. It may be a sporting ability, artistic or academic.” (HS4) “Skills in other areas...all those social skills of supporting others (LS2)</p> |

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| <p>Knowing the child</p> | <p>Lose so much of the child As long as she is happy Different priorities Forming as a person Not seeing what a child is capable of ‘Right let’s see what he can do’ People getting hung up on labels Not seeing the child Consequences</p> | <p>“It’s too subject related and you lose so much of the child” (LS2) “It’s a real shame if this achievement and ability takes over, the child matters a lot more.” (LS2) “I can’t even remember what place my child comes in you know because it doesn’t matter to me as long as she is happy” (LS2) “I want to see her smile. I want her to come home and be buzzing with what happened in the day, and I don’t mind if that’s a social thing that happened or an academic achievement you know that’s all great because it will form her as a person” (LS2) “I don’t feel like ever really said ‘right let’s see what he can do’ (LS1) “...people getting hung up on one or two little words and phrases instead of really seeing what children can do” (LS1) “If my child doesn’t want to do work at home then we have to talk about the consequences” (HS3)</p> |
| <p>Competition and pride among parents</p> | <p>Competition among parents Parental ego Stigma Competitive parents Different priorities Competition Extra tuition Proud of son Bragging Admiration Excitement at who her daughter will be in 2 years</p> | <p>“Parents just want to know what level their child is at. If they are not in top set then they don’t want to know.” (HS1) “Parents of children in top sets want to know their children are in the most able group. There’s a stigma.” (HS1) “You have a group of parents who are there because they want their children to be safe in the water and make friends...then there are the parents who go to gala’s every weekend and they just talk about medals” (LS2) “I know some parents who at primary school have gotten their children extra tuition” (HS3) ““There’s a certain amount of competition” (HS3) “Academically he’s much more able than them” (HS1) “My son is doing maths work that nobody else in his year is doing because they can’t cope with it, they tried it and couldn’t manage it” (HS1) “I admire the person she has already become and I can’t wait to see who she will be in 2 years time or 5 years time” (LS2) “..her spellings, she could look at them in the morning and know them, she learns quickly” (HS3)</p> |

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|---|---|---|
| | | <p>“There are those children who just always seems to naturally do well and have that natural ability...that was always my child” (HS3)</p> |
| <p>Stretching high ability and supporting low ability</p> | <p>Being stretched and held back Concerned Stretching and supporting Possibilities for most able vs assumptions for least able Child not being pushed Stretched Stretched, pushed and challenged</p> | <p>“If you’re in year 3 and you’re working with year 6 it can stretch you on, but if you’re year 6 working with year 3 it can hold you back” (HS1)</p> <p>“I’ve had my concerns with him in year 3 – is he being stretched enough?” (HS1)</p> <p>“You need to get everyone working so you’re stretching the more able ones and supporting the less able ones” (HS1)</p> <p>“It’s easier to focus on the most able and getting them to the highest level, and then with the least able it’s more about how to get them to a certain standard, possible level 4” (HS1)</p> <p>“My son was never pushed, I think the teachers thought he was alright there you know tickety boo” (LS1)</p> <p>“I just think as long as the children are being stretched, then I’m fine with that (HS3)</p> <p>“It can certainly push the ones who need pushing...I’ve very happy for children to be pushed...I think they do need to be stretched...and those who need more support need that support” (HS3)</p> <p>“That’s why children are always being pushed to get up to the top sets” (HS3)</p> <p>“My children have always benefited from being stretched and pushed and challenged” (HS4)</p> <p>“This is a great way of supporting the less able and pushing the more able” (HS4)</p> |
| <p>Parental experience of isolation at secondary</p> | <p>Loss of communication with staff Child as a go between Parent isolation Don’t see other parents Loss of support network and being able to talk Never knowing what’s going on at secondary Relying on child to tell you</p> | <p>“When they move from primary to secondary you lose that communication with school staff because all you’ve got is you child coming home and telling you” (HS2)</p> <p>“At secondary you don’t meet other parents so don’t have a chance to talk, you’re never at the gate so you don’t see other parents” (HS2)</p> |

| | | |
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| | <p>Not knowing what is happening Feeling left out Indirect experience Big change for parents Not knowing Losing control Letting go Loss of parental involvement Difference between primary and secondary No networking support Hands-off Sense of detachment</p> | <p>“You lose that network of being able to talk to other parents about what is happening” (HS2) “It’s a big change from primary to secondary...you never know what’s going on, you’re relying on your child to tell you” (HS2) “I hear about it if she tells me but if she doesn’t tell me I have no idea what’s happening (LS2) “That’s been a really big change because of course in primary school you see the teacher every single day when you drop her off and pick her up. I haven’t met any of her secondary teachers and that’s a big change in my life. I can’t put a face to a name” (LS2) “It’s all out of my control, it’s the first proper letting go” (LS2) “Secondary school is different...at primary school I always went in, I was always very happy to go in and talk to the teachers. At secondary...I would expect them to phone me” (HS3) “There’s no networking support for the academic side of things. It’s different being so hands off, it’s a bit like Chinese whispers, you’re just hoping your child is telling you what’s going on at school.” (HS3) “When your child goes to secondary you feel very detached from what is going on and it’s very easy to feel like you’ve just put them on a bus and they’ve just gone” (HS4)</p> |
| <p>Labelling, accepting and justifying</p> | <p>Knowledge and acceptance Justifying ability grouping Labelling Relationship between birthdate and ability Relationship between gender and ability Relationship between behaviour and ability Home life and ability Certain classes of certain abilities No problem in top sets Going beyond the label Relationship between behaviour and frustration/confusion</p> | <p>“I just knew she was working where she needed to be, I knew the levels she had” (HS1) “It was just how it was done. I mean it’s logistics as much as anything else” (HS1) “It’s maturity more than anything else” (HS1) “It could be that they are a 29th August birthday and are a boy” (HS1) “I’ve seen it act out with behaviour and all sorts from the less able” (HS1) “I think generally speaking, the children who are in top sets are more able because they come from more able, more supportive backgrounds.” (HS1)</p> |

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|---|--|---|
| | <p>Labelling leading to support and restriction People getting hung up on labels and not seeing the child Ability grouping and labelling Challenging/questioning the system No rhyme or reason Questioning testing Acceptance; have to work with the system</p> | <p>“I think it [ability grouping] might have come out of a book, not sure which one” (HS2) “You’re always going to get certain classes of certain abilities who are going to be quite disruptive. I don’t know whether behaviour goes with ability but my son is in top set for maths and there is no problem in that class whatsoever.” (HS2) “I think it upset her to think she was only average” (HS2) “My son has global learning delay, which basically means it takes him longer to assimilate information and learn it” (LS1) “They told me they had behavioural problems with him which is not surprising as he didn’t know where he was the poor lad” (LS1) “Labelling a child can be good as you can get help and support, on the other hand it can result in people getting hung up on one or two little words and phrases instead of really seeing what children can do” (LS1) “I think it [ability grouping] can result in children being labelled” (LS1) “Teachers love reading schemes and say ‘you can’t read above a certain level’ – well of course you can! There’s no rhyme or reason to a lot of things” (LS1) “Is it necessary to test so much? Are they testing for thing wrong thing?” (HS3) “You just have to work with the system we’ve got” (HS3)</p> |
| <p>Assigning blame/attributions: internal (innate ability) vs external (teachers)</p> | <p>Can or can’t Teacher not feeling able to differentiate Teacher self-efficacy Notion of what makes a good teacher Training needs of teachers Teacher ability Middle of the road children Teacher’s threatened by extremity of need Emphasis on teacher Diffusion of responsibility to experts</p> | <p>“My son can tell you who’s able in year 1 and 2” (HS1) “They do know from a very young age who can and who can’t” (HS2) “Because they know they can’t so it’s easier to kick off” (HS2) “...if they’ve got any ability” (HS4) “His teacher there didn’t feel that she could differentiate her lessons to the point that he would be able to access them”(LS1) “A good teacher would be able to differentiate her lessons for him to gain access” (LS1) “I think that is a training need on her behalf” (LS1)</p> |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | <p>Complexity confuses/scares teachers Good vs bad teacher Teacher should adapt to child Natural ability</p> | <p>“I feel his teacher before didn’t feel like she had the ability to differentiate her lessons appropriately” (LS1) “She basically liked the middle of the road children...anyone who needed a bit of extra help and support wasn’t received well” (LS1) “Teacher’s don’t always seem to know what to do...they know how to teach the middle but they’re not given the tools to support those who don’t fall in the middle, so then they want to get an expert in to come look at them” (LS1) “The more obvious the problem is the easier it is to solve...a child who comes in with hearing problems, they get in the hearing experts...but when it’s more complex, they don’t seem to know who to go to” (LS1) “If you get a good teacher, they can adapt their teaching and everyone can learn. If you get a bad teacher, then you’re stuck really.” (LS1) “Children who just always seem to naturally do well and have that natural ability “(HS3) “...you do have to pick the ones who are naturally better” (HS3) “...if they’ve got any ability” (HS4)</p> |
| <p>Restrictive education system and the loss of childhood</p> | <p>Education of child lost within pressure of targets No time to be a child Something gone wrong somewhere Joy of learning lost It should be fun Teachers ticking boxes Education system not matching world of today Restrictive and prescriptive curriculum Tick box system</p> | <p>“The whole education of the child gets lost within pressure to meet certain targets” (HS1) “...school on Saturdays or in the holidays, why? That’s their time to get away from school and be a child. It’s all about grades and targets...there’s something gone wrong somewhere” (LS1) “The joy of learning seems to have been lost” (HS3) “It wasn’t just so teachers could tick a box on the curriculum to...everyone remembers the fun stuff, it should be fun” (HS3) “I heard somebody the other day put forward the argument that you should be allowed Google in exams. It sounds crazy but when you think about it logically that is the world of today” (HS3) “The curriculum is very restrictive and prescriptive...tick box of achievements” (HS4)</p> |

Appendix 8: Conceptual categories

| Conceptual categories → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Attributions</p> | <p>Either you can or you can't Assigning blame/attribution: internal vs external</p> | <p>Either able or not Fixed view You can or you can't Natural ability Knowing who is able Literal thinking Can or can't Teacher not feeling able to differentiate Teacher self-efficacy Notion of what makes a good teacher Training needs of teachers Teacher ability Middle of the road children Teacher's threatened by extremity of need Emphasis on teacher Diffusion of responsibility to experts Complexity confuses/scars teachers Good vs bad teacher Teacher should adapt to child Natural ability</p> |
| <p>Dissonance between the education system and current society</p> | <p>Restrictive education system and the loss of childhood Different types/aspects of ability Pressure from targets</p> | <p>Education of child lost within pressure of targets No time to be a child Something gone wrong somewhere Joy of learning lost It should be fun Teachers ticking boxes Education system not matching world of today Restrictive and prescriptive curriculum Tick box system Different types of ability</p> |

| Conceptual categories → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
| | | <p>Different aspects to ability Some people are good at some things and other people are good at others Idea of 'other ones' Practical people Different abilities Skills in other areas Lose so much of the child As long as she is happy Different priorities Forming as a person Not seeing what a child is capable of 'Right let's see what he can do' People getting hung up on labels Not seeing the child Consequences Pressure from government Target driven society Pressure to meet targets Obsessed with grades Grades and targets Pressure, pressure, pressure Pressure Pressure causing physiological symptoms</p> |
| <p>Hierarchy and pecking order</p> | <p>Hierarchy and pecking order Stretching high ability and supporting low ability Labelling, accepting and justifying Knowing the child</p> | <p>Ranking by ability Pecking order Hierarchy Children knowing where they stood Children knowing who is able Child awareness of grouping Being stretched and held back Concerned Stretching and supporting Possibilities for most able vs assumptions for least able Child not being pushed</p> |

| Conceptual categories → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| | | <p>Stretched Stretched, pushed and challenged Knowledge and acceptance Justifying ability grouping Labelling Relationship between birthdate and ability Relationship between gender and ability Relationship between behaviour and ability Home life and ability Certain classes of certain abilities No problem in top sets Going beyond the label Relationship between behaviour and frustration/confusion Labelling leading to support and restriction People getting hung up on labels and not seeing the child Ability grouping and labelling Challenging/questioning the system No rhyme or reason Questioning testing Acceptance; have to work with the system</p> |
| <p>Competition and pride</p> | <p>Competition and pride among parents</p> | <p>Competition among parents Parental ego Stigma Competitive parents Different priorities Competition Extra tuition Proud of son Bragging Admiration Excitement at who her daughter will be in 2 years</p> |
| <p>Isolation</p> | <p>Parental isolation at secondary school</p> | <p>Loss of communication with staff Child as a go between Parent isolation Don't see other parents</p> |

| Conceptual categories → | Formed from focused codes → | Formed from initial codes |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| | | Loss of support network and being able to talk Never knowing what's going on at secondary Relying on child to tell you Not knowing what is happening Feeling left out Indirect experience Big change for parents Not knowing Losing control Letting go Loss of parental involvement Difference between primary and secondary No networking support Hands-off Sense of detachment |