A case study of the effectiveness for learners, of mixed ability groupings, to enable successful delivery of ‘Curriculum 2008’ at KS2, by Ruth Coakley.

Abstract
The case ‘mixed ability groupings’ versus ‘setting’ at primary school is currently an educational motif. Curriculum 2008 has encouraged a move towards ‘collaborative and small group’ learning.

My aim was to investigate the effectiveness of mixed ability groupings in delivering Curriculum 2008 at KS2. I based my case study on a Year 6 mixed ability, mixed gender class of 24 learners from an inner city school in Wales. This school has been delivering the new curriculum for the past year and utilises various types of grouping for learning.

I found that in this class the school is effectively delivering the new curriculum and that there is an overwhelming preference from the learners of all abilities, regardless of gender, to work within small groups, organised into mixed ability groupings.

Research Questions
1. Is learning in mixed ability groups effective for learners of diverse abilities?
2. Is there a gender preference towards the use of ‘collaborative poster work’ for recording?
3. Is there a preference amongst learners to work within mixed ability groupings?

Rationale
Smith and Sutherland (2000)state “some pupils develop quite early in their school careers a negative sense of themselves as learners and feel the system is rejecting them. It is therefore vital to discover how young people perceive organisation and how effective this organisation is.”

This case study is important due to the ‘infancy’ of Curriculum 2008 and the move towards ‘collaborative learning’ where there is a lack of research of its impact on learners in KS2.

There is also contradictory research as to the best way to group children at primary level.

Methodology

Question 1 – Learning in mixed ability groups is effective for learners of diverse abilities.

I observed children working effectively

“I working productively, fully engaged, genuinely listening and developing ideas together.” (Blatchford, 2007)

I interviewed class teacher

“Children of all abilities have enhanced skills. They are much more keen and have a positive attitude to learning. They all benefit in different ways.” (Y6 teacher, 2009)

Analysis of findings
I observed learners working in mixed ability groups who previously found it difficult to stay on task, actively engaged in their learning. This supports the work by Slavein and Karwent (1985) that in mixed ability groups less able pupils tend to behave better. The quote from Image 1 reinforces this. This school does use ability groupings for maths, but in accordance with Devine’s work (1993), contrary to popular belief, the children did not appear to be aware of the fact that they were set.

Of the 24 learners who completed questionnaires about mixed ability groupings:

• 92% indicated increased confidence through sharing ideas so their work was better.

• 96% indicated they prefer to work in groups where everyone is good at different things.

• None of the learners interviewed had felt teased due to their ability.

Question 1
Research demonstrated an overwhelmingly positive response from the lower ability groups (100%) that they benefitted and preferred to work within mixed ability groups. Learners in the higher and middle ability group (80% and 72% respectively) found working in these groups beneficial. The negative responses were mainly ambivalent with the children stating that group work helped them and they enjoyed helping others, but on occasion they were happy to work in their books.

Question 2
There was no material difference in responses between boys and girls regarding collaborative poster work.

Question 3
70% of learners indicated through questionnaire that they preferred to work with children who had mixed talents. In interview this theme was more dominant with 100% of learners of diverse ability describing this as their favourite way of working.

Conclusion

Learners at this school demonstrate a positive attitude towards mixed ability groupings and group work is successful in accordance with Blatchford’s criteria from his work with the SPRing project in 2007.

I believe the mixed ability groupings were successful due to:

• school ethos. In assembly certificates are given for effort, sport and achievement.

• effective training by the class teacher of learners in appreciating differences and resolving conflict within a group.

Blatchford (2007) describes the role of the teacher as the ‘guide on the side’ rather than the ‘sage on the stage’. In the observed lessons the teacher:

• gave instruction as to what was to be achieved

• involved the children in reflection of skills, strategies and rules

• planned tasks and activities that encouraged group work.

Both statements are supported by Hallam’s research (2004) which states that “awareness of children’s place in the pedagogical order is mediated by school ethos and that ability grouping is not the only factor to affect self esteem; school size, expectations and teachers’ attitudes also play a role.”

It is evident that:

• mixed ability groupings do effectively support Curriculum 2008

• there is no gender bias in attitude towards poster work

• the children do in general, prefer to work in mixed ability groups.

Despite the success of this case study the class teacher felt that “there was a place for all types of groupings in her classroom” and in light of the few voices that spoke of finding aspects of mixed ability group work difficult, I agree. I would recommend carrying out this research in a variety of schools across Wales that utilise different types of groupings. This will enable deeper understanding of the potential powerful nature of collaborative learning in different types of ability groupings, in order that children learn how to fly.