



# Questioning ability grouping in the Welsh Foundation Phase

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## Background Literature

In the primary school and more particularly the early years, setting by ability in literacy and numeracy is now standard practice (Marks 2011; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017) despite its apparent lack of efficacy and debilitating long-term effect (Swann et al. 2012). This research explores the key debates around ability groupings and the impact of this on children's academic self-concepts within the Welsh Foundation Phase, which places children's self-worth and well-being at its core. If this policy intervention is to become more than mere rhetoric in Wales, research needs to focus on the ways young children are grouped in the Foundation Phase and the effect this grouping may have on the development of their academic self-concept. Research and theory on self-concept is multidimensional with overlapping layers of definition. For the purposes of this research, academic self-concept refers specifically to an individual's self-concept and beliefs towards specific academic domains (Bong and Skaalvik 2003). The foreshadowed problem at the heart of this research is that ability and ability setting is a social construction and that teachers' and schools' interpretation of ability can have significant effect on young children's emerging academic self-concept (Hamilton and O'Hara 2011; Hart, Drummond, McIntyre 2014; Swann et al. 2012). It is through the stories of young children that we might better understand these effects and thereby enhance their experiences, lives and learning (Bruner 1996).

## ETHICS

A school was approached to discuss the research opportunity and permission granted from the head teacher following a full discussion of the research aims and methods. From here, specific children were chosen for the study using purposive sampling and parents/carers informed about the study's intentions. A formal information sheet was distributed to relevant parents/carers outlining the aims of the study and their child's role in the research. Informed consent was obtained via the children's parents/carers and the individual participants; using a formal opt-in (age-appropriate) consent form. Given the sensitivities around the age of the participants, the school's safeguarding procedures were made clear. All names were changed to ensure anonymity and interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical standards of the institution and BERA guidelines.

The research sought to answer the following questions:

- What are young children's perceptions of groupings in the Foundation Phase?
- How do these perceptions shape their emerging academic self-concept?

## Methods

The study is framed by Bernstein's (1996) three democratic pedagogical rights: enhancement, inclusion and participation. Research was carried out in a suburban primary school in southeast Wales and utilised a purposive sample of 24 children aged between 5 & 6 years with an equal gender and 'ability' split. Interviews were conducted with every child utilising a semi-structured protocol and transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed a line by line analysis of the transcripts (Glaser 1978) where key words/phrases were highlighted. Themes were then drawn which resembled reporting patterns within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Focus was on the child's voice and the maintenance of authenticity (Burman 2008). At this point theoretical concepts from the literature were used to provide further sensitivity and to give the themes greater clarity (Strauss 1987).

## Results

The findings suggest that young children's perceptions of ability setting are strongly related to their emerging academic self-concept. It was evident that the children in the study expressed what I term 'experienced-derived understandings' of setting and ability grouping as it related to their classroom and classmates. The meanings they attach to these perceptions are tied to their perceived capability in maths and literacy, often divergent in their expression, and comparative to their peers. The analysis revealed three inter-related themes: **expectancy; reciprocity; and altruism.**

**Expectancy:** a great deal of this element of their self-concept relates to expectations and how they valued themselves in terms of their ability and how that translated into success or otherwise.

**Reciprocity:** virtually all the children in the study expressed a preference for some form of friendship grouping over setting by ability.

**Altruism:** where the children appeared to prefer classroom organisation that reduced perceived inequalities between them and their classmates

'Q: How do you feel in your group? [child in 'low ability' group]

A: Sad, 'cos sometimes I'm not very good at it [work]. And then I feel a little bit sad.'

'...sometimes I would like to be with Henry in that group but he is in the group that do loads and loads and loads and loads of writing and I can't do that...'

'...Cos there's a good group and they could make fun of the bad group and that's not very good...But even if you're not friends with the bad group you still don't have to laugh at them because they're not very good.... It isn't very nice really...It isn't nice to say they're not good at maths or writing.'

'...we go into different groups to do our jobs (work) and some are quite easy, some are hard and some are really hard.'

## Discussion

Children in the early years have clearly defined perceptions of ability/ability groupings in the classroom. Although they appeared to judge themselves using simple distinctions: good and bad, hard and easy, high and low, their comments show their academic self-concept to be formed around a series of 'expectancy traits' (Wigfield and Eccles 2001) defined by self-evaluations or those of the teacher. Their academic self-concept was characterised by a sense of reciprocity underpinned by altruistic tendencies. These were of a different order to that defined by Marsh, Byrne and Yeung (1999), Guay, Boivin and Marsh, (2003), and Wigfield *et al.*, (1997) who saw it as individualised where self-concept grows from continued success. In this study it was a collective reciprocity that was more prevalent combined with a sense of altruism where setting by ability was not always perceived to be in the interests of all (Nowak 2006).

## Conclusions

Given these early findings, further research needs to be carried out to see if this reciprocal altruism is prevalent across schools in a variety of settings. This might help policy makers and practitioners develop more incentive based classroom structures that encourage cooperation in the interests of all pupils which in turn may improve outcomes as well as increase opportunity, co-construction, and social mobility. Furthermore, ability groupings disguised with colours (and other approaches) need to be removed and replaced with individual work patterns that involve all the class with appropriate pedagogic support, as the children see through the camouflage. Lastly, schools and teachers need to balance the 'hidden subsidy' (Bernstein 1996) that some children receive from their home environment, particularly present in Wales, as it de-incentivises the need to change ability setting patterns.

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