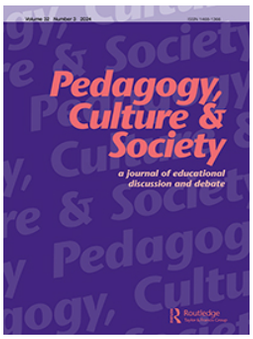

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Learner experiences of low attainment groups in the context of a rights approach to education

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ABSTRACT

Participation is seen as an important right for learners, though there is lack of evidence to understand learners' views on classroom practice. This includes decisions about grouping learners, for example, in terms of their prior attainment or perceived 'ability'. This research took place in Wales where children's rights are strongly promoted as an educational approach, but where there is also evidence of widespread attainment grouping in schools. Focus groups and interviews were carried out with secondary school learners in lower attaining groups ($n = 70$) and teachers and teaching assistants ($n = 10$) to understand experiences of learning support. Findings suggest strong learner satisfaction with groups, but also lack of movement between groups that reinforced ability hierarchies in schools and supported the development of negative identities for some learners. There was a lack of consensus among educators about the purpose of attainment grouping, with some seeing it as a way of addressing systemic issues within the school.

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Introduction: participation as an educational agenda

The concept of learner voice emerged over five decades ago and is associated educationally with the development of caring, responsible and ethical schools and the promotion of democratic values (Arduin 2015). The term participation has been linked to voice in more recent years and similarly upholds the educational benefits of teachers listening to learners and learners being actively engaged in school processes and planning (Keisu and Ahlström 2020). Research indicates a range of educational benefits from learner participation, including the development of learner capacities in communication, decision-making and advocacy (Merrick 2020; D. L. Mitra 2008), support for well-being through experiences of being listened to and valued (Coombes et al. 2013) and increased motivation to learn and engage in school life, particularly for those at risk of disengagement (D. Mitra 2018). Academic benefit follows from children and young people becoming more 'visible' to

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teachers through the sharing of their views and perspectives on learning (De Sousa, Loizou, and Fochi 2019; Messiou et al. 2016) and from the provision of feedback on specific aspects of classroom practice (Niemi, Kumpulainen, and Lipponen 2015). Increased learner participation is also associated with the improvement of schools through the development of a culture of inquiry, exploration and innovation for improved classroom practice and enhanced learner achievement (Kools et al. 2020).

Participation as an agenda is strengthened by its association with the idea of children and young people as rights holders and the obligations and responsibilities this brings to bear on institutions (Jones 2011). Global conventions and legislation that recognise children and young people's right to be heard in turn place a duty on adults to consult them. Participation forms one of the three broad areas covered by children's rights – sometimes referred to as the 3P's – which also includes protection and provision (Quennerstedt 2010). Research on the 3P's finds that unequal weight has been given to these categories of rights, with provision often less of a focus than participation, and children and young people less likely to be consulted about provision (Fairhall and Woods 2021). Within educational contexts, for example, learners are more likely to be asked about whole school issues, such as anti-bullying or recycling, than about classroom practice and pedagogical decision-making (Merrick 2020; Whitty and Wisby 2007). This is despite evidence that learners improve academically when teachers consult them and use their views to inform the curriculum and instructional practices (D. Mitra 2018).

Tensions relating to participation and rights point to fundamental tensions within modern day childhood as a social structure. As James, Jenks and Prout (1998) have noted, recognition of children and young children's agency sits uncomfortably with the need for adults to protect them and to be in control of situations. In education, it is the case that children's and young people's voices can be challenging for teachers since learner views tend to bring perspectives that are distinctive and question basic assumptions about practice (Ainscow and Messiou 2018). Teachers may struggle to see what contribution learner interests and concerns make to their professional expertise and may brush over or be selective about what they hear (Ainscow and Messiou 2018). Teachers must balance competing demands in carrying out their role, including, importantly, demands associated with standards and performativity alongside parental choice and learner participation. Attention to participation and rights, particularly as they relate to provision, may be seen as a threat to the central concern of any school to demonstrate learner achievement (Tan 2011). Unsurprisingly perhaps, research indicates that listening can often be tokenistic in school contexts (Sales and Vincent 2018; Tan 2011) and ultimately disempowering as an experience for learners (D. Mitra 2018).

Attainment grouping and learner voice

Attainment grouping is a commonplace practice in schools that goes to the heart of this tension between standards, performativity and learner participation and rights (Buchanan, Hargreaves, and Quick 2021). Attainment grouping refers to the practice of grouping learners according to their perceived 'ability' and can take the form of setting learners for specific subjects, streaming across a number of subjects, or less formally, organising learners into within-class groups, for example, according to table arrangements (Francis et al. 2017). Research indicates that teachers have a strong

belief in the value of attainment grouping and see it as a way of stretching those who are deemed 'higher ability' and providing focused support for those deemed 'low ability' (Taylor et al. 2017). The practice is seen as a way of delivering enhanced learner outcomes, though this is in the absence of strong supporting evidence (Cullen et al. 2020). Some positive benefit has been found for learners in higher attaining groups (Ireson and Hallam 2001), but learners in lower attaining groups are more likely to have a reduced curriculum and less effective pedagogy (Sharples, Webster, and Blatchford 2016). The label of 'low ability' has an enduring effect, moreover, with learners deemed as such early in their school career continuing to have this label in the long term (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018).

Learners tend not to be consulted about placement within attainment groups, with judgements about someone's 'ability' and academic best interests made solely by teachers (Taylor et al. 2017). What is of significance here is that teachers sometimes engage in 'fixed ability thinking', which is the belief that we are born with a fixed amount of ability and that this is the dominant factor in our learning. For inclusive education, fixed ability thinking is especially problematic since positive teacher beliefs about learners and open-ended expectations about what they can do have been found to be important factors in the achievement of enabling environments (Florian and Beaton 2018).

Research into the views of learners in lower attaining groups indicates they have mixed feelings about attainment grouping as a practice. A large-scale survey conducted by Hallam and Ireson (2006) found that lower attaining and disadvantaged learners expressed a preference for mixed-attainment groups, seeing these as more cooperative, fairer and supportive of friendship. This study found that grouping by attainment had a negative impact on confidence and supported the development of negative learner identities, particularly for those identified as lower attaining. More recently, Archer et al. (2018) reported that learners in the lowest sets in secondary schools had the most negative feelings about attainment grouping for reading and maths, whilst Tereshchenko et al. (2019) found that lower attaining learners were more positive about mixed-attainment grouping as a way of creating spaces for collaboration and community that benefit all learners. Similarly for primary-aged children, Hargreaves, Quick and Buchanan (2021) found that the experience of lower attaining groups was a disempowering one that resulted in pupils feeling isolated, misrecognised and experiencing shame.

Lower attaining learners have also described positive aspects of non-mixed groups, however, for example, that they provide less intimidating learning environments and places where learners feel more competent and not 'left behind' (Hallam and Ireson 2006; Tereshchenko et al. 2019). Gripton (2020) found that responses to attainment grouping were highly individual in nature because learners focused on different physical, social and pedagogic features of learning environments in making assessments of their experience. This research describes some lower attaining learners experiencing satisfaction with their group, but others frustration and feelings of exclusion. In a study of young people's spatial orientations to attainment grouping practices, Brown (2017) found that learners generally enjoyed being in lower sets and saw them as places where they experienced a strong sense of belonging. Positive experiences of lower sets included supportive relationships with teachers and accessible learning tasks. This author notes,

however, that attainment groups materially recreated hierarchies within the secondary school setting that were enacted by learners in their interactions with each other as well as internalised in sometimes negative thoughts about themselves.

The educational context in Wales

The study reported here took place in Wales, one of the four devolved nations of the UK. The education system in Wales is distinctive to the other UK nations in its traditional forms of educational governance, commitment to comprehensive education and endorsement of the professionalism of teachers (Power 2016). Wales has been pioneering in the promotion of universal children's rights underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Smith 2019) and was the first nation to appoint a Children's Commissioner. Legislation has established the duty on government Ministers to have due regard for the UNCRC when exercising their functions and this has been extended to persons and public bodies with care and well-being responsibilities. In education, recent curriculum reform has re-affirmed this commitment to children's rights with the discourse of voice, participation and person-centredness used extensively in recent government documents (CCW 2017; Welsh Government 2020, 2021b). Recent reform of the system for special educational needs (SEN) (now termed 'additional learning needs' or ALN) has similarly placed the views of children, young people and parents at the heart of decision-making processes in schools (Welsh Government 2021a).

Research in the Welsh education context, however, suggests an inconsistent picture in terms of practice in relation to children's rights and participation (Croke and Williams 2015). Studies that focus on how children and young people enact their rights in classrooms are limited though suggest that children's participation may be infrequently used for planning provision and marginal to learning activities (C. Taylor et al. 2015). There is also evidence of the widespread use of attainment grouping in Wales (Hallam and Parsons 2013), including evidence of the practice being used from an early age (John 2022) and extensively with learners previously identified as having special educational needs (Welsh Government 2019). Related to this, what is notable about the recent reform of the system for ALN is that learners previously identified as having special educational needs may not meet the requirements of new criteria and could become identified simply as 'low attaining' given the use of attainment grouping in schools (Welsh Government 2021a).

Though research has been carried out in the Welsh context in relation to learner views about the enactment of rights within education (CCW 2019), there has been no research to date on learners' views of the practice of attainment grouping. In this paper, we first present our research which gathered the voice of the learner but also that of the teachers and teaching assistants who were leading groups. We then produce a sociological analysis of our findings that draws on ethics, children's rights, and the rights and responsibilities associated with different social groups within ethnomethodology. Conclusions centre on the need to recognise the ways in which a learner's voice is constrained by the system in which it is situated, where a desire not to be included may be more urgent than expressing dissatisfaction with the system itself.

Methods

This paper presents findings from the qualitative fieldwork of a larger study that also included an online survey of grouping practices used in primary and secondary schools. The overall aim of the study was to explore the practice of grouping in two regions of Wales. For the qualitative fieldwork, the views of learners taught in lower attaining groups and their teachers were sought to address the following research questions:

(1) What were the experiences and perceptions of grouping practices of learners in lower attaining groups and what were their messages to their teachers?
(2) What factors influenced educators' decisions about the formation and teaching of lower attaining groups?

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in seven secondary schools (four in the south-east region of Wales and three in the south-west region) which were selected to provide a representative sample in relation to the following: size, socio-economic disadvantage, urban or rural location and percentage of learners with ALN. The sample ensured that there was a representation of schools that are higher and lower than, as well as similar to, the national average for each of these characteristics. Schools were also sought to provide a range of grouping practices used with learners with regional contacts consulted about this.

In order to address the research questions, three methods of data collection were used: focus groups with learners in lower attaining groups, interviews with individual learners, interviews with teachers and support staff. Firstly, information was gathered from learners who were being taught a range of support groups including lower sets for literacy and numeracy, low streams where learners were taught for most of their subjects, and nurture groups for social-emotional support. Two such groups in each school were invited to take part in focus groups, and it is noted that there was a high proportion of learners previously identified as SEN in each group. In total, 14 focus groups were carried out with 70 Year 8 and 9 learners (aged 12–14 years) and, of these learners, 36 were girls and 34 were boys.

Research into student experiences of attainment grouping has found that focus groups combined with individual interviews is an effective method for working with young people (Tereshchenko et al. 2019). Thirty-one follow-up interviews were therefore conducted with learners from the focus groups who had elected to be interviewed individually. The objective of these interviews was to provide individuals with a more private space to share their views and experiences, particularly those they did not feel comfortable expressing within the focus group (Renold et al. 2017). Learners were asked about their experiences of groups including, what they valued in terms of support, their priorities for the future and messages they would like to share with their teachers. All focus groups and learner interviews took place as face-to-face meetings in schools with appropriate COVID-19 risk assessment protocol and procedures adhered to.

As noted by Sharples et al. (2016), a range of educators may be involved in leading learning support groups within schools including teachers and teaching assistants. Ten

practitioners including seven teachers and three teaching assistants who were leading groups within five schools were interviewed individually on Microsoft Teams. A topic guide was developed for these interviews which focused on eliciting practitioner views and experiences around what they viewed as the educational benefits of the group and the nature of learning support.

Ethical considerations

Research that seeks to engage *with* children and young people as subjects, rather than *on* them as objects (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008), positions them as competent and capable participants who have valuable insight into their everyday experiences. Children's and young people's constructions of reality are of interest with often creative methods seen as best suited to support the sharing of these (Veale 2005). For this research, we were aware that the experience of being in a lower attaining group could potentially be a difficult and stigmatising one for participants and, for this reason, were concerned that the research should be conducted as ethically as possible. We underlined for schools as gatekeepers that participation in the focus groups was voluntary and that potential pupil participants should feel free to opt out of the research. Follow-up interviews were offered at the beginning of focus groups as a way of ensuring participants did not feel they had to share everything they wanted to say within the group and had access to a more private and anonymous space for this. Within focus groups, we also asked learners to imagine they had a new member of the group and asked them to describe the group to them, setting out an empty chair for this purpose (Shephard and Treseder 2002). It was thought that this approach would engage pupil participants creatively and facilitate reflection in a meaningful but non-direct way that reduced the need for personal narratives.

The study was approved by a sub-committee of the Faculty of Life Sciences and Education Ethics Sub-Committee at the University of South Wales. Following this, documentation in relation to the approval was logged by members of the research team with the relevant ethics committees in their HEI.

Data analysis

To analyse the data, the researchers employed a reflexive thematic analysis which, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), allows for the searching of themes across an entire data set. To this end, researchers initially individually coded transcribed information from learner focus groups and learner and practitioner interviews to develop a set of findings determined by the data, that is, common themes, ideas and patterns of meanings, as well as by the research questions for the project. Subsequently, these were reviewed and discussed by the research team as a way of allowing relationships within the data to be explored and for overarching themes to emerge. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) note the benefits of such discussion as a way of allowing relationships within the data to be explored and to ensure that the research process is both rigorous and valid (Rose and Johnson 2020). Findings in relation to the emerging themes are set out in the discussion below.

Findings

Support groups were an important site of belonging for learners

Almost all learners expressed satisfaction with their experience of lower attaining and learning support groups, naming favourable teacher–pupil relationships, positive teacher attitudes, engaging activities and clear communication among practices that were appreciated. Teachers in particular were described positively, as patient, friendly, kind, encouraging and easy to talk to. One Year 8 pupil described her teacher as 'amazing', a Year 9 pupil described his teacher as 'the best', and a further pupil said that teachers in her learning support groups were 'not like normal teachers'. When asked why learning support was effective in his lower stream, one Year 9 pupil said, 'Because the teachers show respect to me, and I show respect back to them'.

Satisfaction was expressed by learners in relation to the nature of learning activities. Learning tasks were regularly described as well organised, slower paced, achievable, engaging and 'fun'. Of particular importance for many of the learners was the knowledge that they could ask for support when needed and that support was readily available. One Year 9 pupil said she appreciated being able to ask for extra instruction in her smaller support group without 'wasting people's time', which was her experience of the larger group. The fact that groups were often smaller was seen as a benefit since this increased the availability of support. Lower attaining groups were distinguishable for many learners in terms of their favourable staffing ratio, with one learner commenting that he needed that reassurance 'when I'm really struggling' and that this gave him confidence. Learners also referred to the quality of the support they received. One Year 9 pupil, who was taught full time in a lower stream, expressed this in the following way:

> The main teachers, with my dyslexia and all that, if they explain it long and they're going through and through, I'll go off and it blurs out in my mind. But with [teacher], I ask her, and she just cuts it up in short pieces. She doesn't cut it up in long pieces because I can't remember it. I understand it a bit more then and I can do it. (Individual interview)

The environment where groups took place was described by many learners as supportive. Noise in larger classes was mentioned frequently as a problem for learning and many learners experienced their support group as quieter, calmer and more comfortable as learning spaces. Some pupils described needing a quiet space to be able to regulate themselves emotionally and recover from the pressures of being in a busy, larger classroom. For example, learners in a nurture group, which was made up of six pupils, described it as a calm space where they could be spread out, but also as a place where expectations were different and there was less feeling of pressure. One Year 8 pupil described his smaller literacy support group as a quiet place where the pressure of learning was reduced. For him, learning in the larger group could be 'stress work' which he defined as:

> Work that you might not know and then they force you to do it and when you say you don't know what to do then they'll have a go at you 'cause they'll say, why didn't you listen and all that.

For this pupil, his smaller group was described more positively in this way:

> It can help you and they don't put you under any pressure. It will calm you down and they don't yell at you if you don't do something, and you can always ask questions. (Focus group, literacy support group)

A positive feature of groups was the relationships learners experienced with their peers. Several of the groups had learners who had been in the same group for two or more years and this meant that learners sometimes knew each other well. Whilst a few learners described difficult conditions in their group because of the poor behaviour of some pupils, many described their group as a safe space where they felt less awkward about asking for and receiving support. Some learners described their peers as 'really good friends' with whom they could 'have a good laugh' and who they looked forward to seeing each day.

When asked about priorities for the future, many learners stated they wanted their group to continue in its current form. In some focus groups, this was a unanimous response, with all learners saying the support they received was essential to their learning and sense of well-being in school. Some learners commented that the idea of being taught in a larger class was concerning, with one Year 9 pupil in a lower stream commenting that 'going back to class would be hard'. Many learners, however, felt that teachers needed to prioritise friendships in organising groups. Some learners said that it was important someone should have at least one friend in a group and should not feel isolated. Being able to get along, not feeling intimidated and feeling a sense of belonging in a group were thought to be further important considerations for teachers, who were recommended by some learners to consult them more about the formation of groups.

Attainment groups reinforced ability hierarchies within schools

There was an indication that the practice of attainment grouping contributed to the reinforcement of ability hierarchies within schools. Some learners expressed frustration with the lack of movement between groups, for example, one Year 8 pupil in an English lower set commented that moving up a set was only possible if 'you are good at assessments', but that some learners were not. In the same focus group, another pupil said:

> There's no opportunity to change a class. So, say if you're succeeding in the classroom, you can't get up into a higher set. You're stuck in this set for the whole year. (Focus group, English lower set)

Five out of the 14 focus groups we spoke to were placed in a lower stream where they were taught for all their lessons. Some of these pupils, many of whom had previously been identified as having special educational needs prior to reform in Wales, had been in the same group for several years and some schools participating in the research said they operated such a class in each year group. Learners acknowledged the usefulness of the support they received, whilst expressing frustration at the inflexibility of grouping practices in their school and the lack of consultation about their placement in the group. A Year 9 pupil, who had been taught in the same group for 3 years, had mixed feelings about grouping practices in his setting. He said:

> I don't really like being in set three because I feel like I'm not the same as everybody else, but I know I'm getting my work done and I know it's easier for me. But I feel like, I don't know, I could achieve more. I reckon I could get more work done if I was in a higher set 'cause I'd be more determined to stay in there. (Individual interview)

This pupil stated a belief, which was shared by others, that learners should be set by subject and should be in higher or lower sets depending on capabilities in relation to specific areas of learning.

Dissatisfaction was also expressed in relation to the level of challenge within groups. Some learners felt that the slower pace of their group was a barrier to making progress and meant they were not stretched. A number of learners thought expectations about what they were capable of were low among teachers. One Year 8 pupil in a literacy support group commented:

> What I don't like about being in [class name] is the way they treat you like you are still in Year 2. They still treat us like we are still little. Sometimes it can help, sometimes it can't. If they treat us like we are little, we end up expecting that is what is going to happen throughout the whole year and it's not . . . We should all get treated the same, not some people getting treated like little kids and other people getting treated like they are already adults (Individual interview)

Some teachers expressed the belief that grouping learners based on attainment was necessary given the wide discrepancy in the level of difficulty of academic tasks for learners of the same age. Some of these educators stated their belief in the 'high ability' of some learners and 'low ability' of others, seeing this as necessitating the practice of non-mixed attainment grouping in their setting. Teachers associated several challenges with this, however, including reduced learner confidence and motivation as well as the development of negative learner identities. Although the stigmatisation of learners in lower attaining groups was not viewed as a problem by learners and teachers in some schools, in other settings it was an issue. One teacher of a Year 8 lower set maths group made the following comment:

> They don't like it [being in the lowest set]. Yes, that is an issue. There is a stigma definitely. They know that it's the bottom set and they do say oh, we're in the thick group or things like that. So yes, that is a disadvantage. It doesn't help with self-esteem and doesn't help with morale. It does switch some of them off, they think oh well we're thick anyway, we can't do maths 'cause we're in Set 4.

Several teachers mentioned that learners did not always like missing subject lessons and that Year 7 learners sometimes did not like being taken out of class for a learning support group at the start of their secondary school career, though eventually got used to the idea and often grew to like it. One teacher of a Year 9 literacy support group said:

> [When they are first taken out] they hate it, to be honest. They think why am I out? I don't want to be out. It's almost like a stigma to it. As the years go on, they realise that it is a benefit to them and lots of pupils want to attend which they're not supposed to. They see it as a positive rather than a negative now.

There was evidence learners had developed negative identities, with some describing themselves as 'dull', 'dumb', 'weirdos' and 'not the most clever of classes'. Some learners resisted feeling negatively about themselves, however. One Year 8 pupil in a literacy support group said she had a range of feelings about her capabilities as a learner, commenting:

> Sometimes I feel normal, sometimes I feel like I am a little kid again, sometimes I feel like I am ready for anything. (Individual interview)

Divergent views existed about the purpose of attainment groups

Lower attaining groups and learning support groups were frequently described as comfortable environments compared to subject classes where learning was more manageable and enjoyable, where 'little wins' could be celebrated more easily, and where learners felt safer and better understood. Building the confidence of learners – expressed by one learning co-ordinator as changing 'I can't' mindsets into 'I can' – was seen by many teachers as a vital aspect of their role. Teachers said that some of their learners had had poor prior experiences of learning, felt anxious about being in larger subject classes and found it difficult to come to school. For this group of learners, the small size of classes and higher staffing ratios was thought to be supportive since this allowed greater flexibility to respond to learners' immediate needs. For some teachers, smaller groups, where pupils were taught for all their lessons, were thought to be more conducive to creating feelings of emotional warmth and togetherness. One Year 9 teacher described her classroom in this way:

> It's quite a warm environment because they [pupils] are together all the time, they're not split up into sets. They're together all the time, they form nice bonds and the presence of the TAs in the group as well are a consistent presence. It is quite like a little family. We try and get that across to them that we're all learning together, we're all in the same room, we're all finding things a bit tricky sometimes in lesson.

This view of the purpose of support within groups tended to focus on the internal needs of learners. Groups were described as an effective system of bringing together learners who would otherwise 'fly under the radar' in larger class groups. By contrast, some educators described their group as having the purpose of providing support to learners who were experiencing difficult issues within the school, for example, difficult relations with particular subject teachers. In this case, staff saw their role as engaging in 'restorative conversations' with teachers, whilst giving learners time out in a setting that was less pressured. One teaching assistant, who was leading this kind of well-being support group, commented:

> I feel they benefit by having someone that doesn't judge them, doesn't scold them if you like for misbehaving and someone who they feel is on their side.

Some teachers and teaching assistants felt that they were providing support that could be provided in the larger class, but that this depended on the disposition of individual teachers. One teaching assistant who ran literacy support groups expressed the hope that the ongoing programme of educational reform in Wales, specifically changes to the system for learners with ALN, would tackle resistance by some subject teachers:

> I think with the new ALN Code hopefully those teachers that are not quite as supportive of those students and of ALN and the flexibility that's needed in teaching, I think it should hopefully make a bit of difference . . . That's going to help us as well because, a lot of the time, the onus is put on us to sort out issues in the classroom that really can be tackled with just a little bit of tweaking.

Many teachers believed the organisation of learning support in its current form needed to be maintained so that learners had safe spaces in school. This second view was supported by a small number of learners who described difficult prior experiences of learning and who suggested subject teachers needed to address their practices. One Year 9 pupil suggested teachers needed to consider how they communicated, whilst a Year 8 pupil thought the onus was on teachers to provide clearer detail when setting tasks. A group of Year 8 and 9 learners within a behaviour support group felt that strictness, which they defined as teachers being 'hard on you and shouting at you', was not helpful and resulted in lack of motivation.

A small number of learners provided ideas about different practices that could be used with groups. One Year 8 pupil in a literacy support group said that there should be more mixed attainment teaching within her school. She based her arguments on the opportunities for peer support that such groups provide. A Year 8 pupil in an English lower set thought that setting should be done on the basis of learner confidence, whilst some learners thought groups needed to be organised flexibly with more movement between groups. Many learners felt that teachers needed to prioritise friendships in organising groups. Finally, a Year 8 pupil noted that the use of setting on the basis of perceived ability was an unfair practice that publicly and unfairly marked out people as unequal. This pupil felt that all teachers needed to be competent in teaching learners who required support:

> I don't like the teachers showing who is intelligent and people who are not intelligent. It's like comparing who is intelligent and who is not . . . but some teachers don't give more details on the subject. (Focus group, English lower set)

Discussion

In response to our first research question, which sought information in relation to the experiences and perceptions of grouping practices of learners in lower attaining groups, an important finding was that groups were important sites of belonging for many learners. Most learners expressed strong satisfaction with their experience of learning activities, instruction and readily available support. Teacher–pupil relationships, in particular, were thought to be important and described in highly positive ways. In this respect, the findings reported here reflect previous research in this area which also found that learners appreciated the positive teacher–pupil relationships that were aided by smaller class sizes (Mazenod et al. 2019), less intimidating learning environments (Hallam and Ireson 2006) and enhanced support for individual needs (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018). In their research, both Brown (2017) and Greenstein (2014) found that pupils expressed a strong sense of enjoyment and belonging in relation to their groups and a liking for the teacher, their peers and the work. As with this study, however, these authors found a lack of movement between groups and formation of negative learner identities, which they argue reinforced the position of lower attaining pupils as a marginalised one.

Interestingly, Greenstein (2014) describes teachers as making sense of the support they provided in terms of familial caring relationships and feelings of togetherness and trust, something that was evident in this study too. She argues that the translation of learning

support into a situation of care overlays family values onto the work of learning support teachers and ultimately serves the purpose of maintaining the existing status quo within a school. As Greenstein points out, family values essentialise belonging, reproduce hierarchies and remove the idea of community-based assemblies where equal citizens can choose to opt in or out. Care relations imply power inequalities and require attentive respect and cooperation between the carer and caree to avoid paternalistic disempowerment (Kittay 2011).

It is important to remember that there is slippage in schools between teachers developing relationships with pupils based on knowledge and developing relationships based on care. Teachers have a pedagogical role in schools, but they also have a pastoral one and where situations become emotionally charged, for example, someone gets hurt, teachers can easily move between these two roles by adopting a more openly caring attitude towards a pupil. In his influential work in ethnomethodology, Sacks (1972) has shown that member categories of social groups based on knowledge support different sets of relations and carry different rights and responsibilities compared to social groups based on care. Pedagogical relations tend to prioritise knowledge and foreground epistemic rights and responsibilities, whilst pastoral relations tend to prioritise care and foreground affective rights and responsibilities (Bateman 2015). Thinking in terms of the 3 P's of children's rights (Quennerstedt 2010), rights relating to protection are more readily associated with care relations, and rights relating to educational provision are more readily associated with pedagogical relations based on knowledge. In this study, there is considerable evidence of pupils commenting on and making assessments of the educational provision they experienced, including the quality of instruction, the nature of tasks and the usefulness of learning support. They were positioned by many of their teachers, however, as in need of care and the focus of protection. What learners saw as the problem – often systemic issues within the school – became for some educators a problem of emotion in terms of the learner, that is, poor prior experiences, low confidence and lack of motivation. It is interesting to note that a rights approach to education was not a defence against this positioning of pupils. Indeed, as Ahmed (2010) argues, where emotions coalesce around a subject, this often highlights the person or persons at the centre of an issue rather than the system itself.

It is possible that the ability hierarchies that were established in schools served to eclipse the necessity of balancing teacher judgement with learner views. Learners in this study were not consulted about their placement in groups, which suggests they were not seen as having insight into this aspect of their learning. Findings from this study suggest, therefore, that rights conceptualised as capability for decision-making do not clearly extend as a concept to other capabilities, for example, the capability to learn and to have insight into this. It is evident in this study that learners placed teachers at the heart of educational matters. This is something that Quennerstedt (2016) also found in her research into children's formulation of their rights. She found that children identified rights in relation to aspects of teacher–pupil relationships not covered by Articles on education, which tend not to mention teachers. Our second research question sought the views of educators about their decision-making in relation to grouping and it was apparent that divergent views existed among teachers, however, something that has been reported previously about the Welsh context (Conn and Hutt 2020; Knight et al. 2022). For some teachers in the study reported here, the issue was a structural one of poor

teacher–pupil relations in general classrooms that necessitated the formation of smaller and more supportive groups.

We are aware that learner appreciation of teaching in support groups challenges findings of previous research in this area, which suggests that intensive support produces poorer pedagogy and less progress in learners over a school year (Webster and Blatchford 2019). We note from our study that the majority of groups were led by teachers rather than teaching assistants, and that the teaching assistants we spoke to were experienced and well qualified (for example, one was qualified as a teacher). This fact may have had a positive impact on the quality of teaching in these groups. However, we note that what learners were describing were feelings of belonging in smaller groups *relative to their prior experiences of general classrooms*, and in this way, we believe our findings are aligned with previous research in this area. We suggest that findings from this research highlight failures within the wider system. A small number of learners and some staff made this point explicitly, though many did not and this raises the importance of recognising the ways in which voice is situated and constrained. In expressing their views, students positioned themselves in relation to their current situation rather than to some ideal of inclusive education. We conclude that in a high-pressured system organised as ability hierarchies, expressing a desire not to be included may be more important than expressing dissatisfaction with the system itself.

We suggest therefore that this research raises the need for closer attention to the principles of inclusive education, most notably, the value of diversity to school communities and difficulties associated with seeing some learners as the 'problem' rather than structural issues within schools. We suggest that this is an imperative at this time in Wales where ongoing reform means that many learners identified previously as having special educational needs will become 'low attaining' under new arrangements. In addition, children's rights need to be more clearly articulated in terms of pedagogical practice, specifically that learners who are deemed lower attaining nevertheless have important knowledge about their learning experiences that can usefully inform educational provision. Rights in relation to protection should also be more equally distributed in order to ensure respectful pedagogical relationships across all classrooms. It cannot be assumed that rights as a perspective on education will do the important work of developing shared understandings in relation to teaching practice and its underpinning pedagogical principles. As Ainscow (2023) has recently argued, without this shared understanding of the direction of travel within an education system, progress towards inclusion will be difficult.

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