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# 'The participation group means that I'm low ability': Students' perspectives on the enactment of 'mixed-ability' grouping in secondary school physical education

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## Abstract

Mixed-ability grouping is widespread in primary schools and in several subject areas in secondary schools in England. Notwithstanding, there is scant research on mixed-ability grouping in the education literature, particularly in terms of its impact on students' experiences. The research reported in this paper employs enactment theory to provide original insights into the diverse practices and complex contextual factors that shape students' perceptions and experiences of mixed-ability grouping in physical education (PE). Enactment theory acknowledges that school decisions about grouping policy are impacted by wider education policy and other contextual influences, and that the expression of grouping policies in specific subjects and classrooms is navigated and negotiated by students as well as teachers. The paper draws on data from in-depth, semi-structured focus groups with 41 Year 10 (aged 14–15) students in a mixed-gender secondary school in England to explore the different ways in which students are positioned and position themselves in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping in PE. Findings reveal many

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contextual factors, including ability and gender discourses, school and subject cultures, and the broader policy context, influencing students' positioning and learning experiences in mixed-ability PE. The discussion explores distinct differences in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3 (aged 11–14) and Key Stage 4 (aged 14–16) and identifies students as *enthusiasts*, *critics*, *entrepreneurs* and *copers* in grouping policy enactment. The study affirms the need for educators and professionals to critically engage with the construct of ability, and in turn mixed-ability grouping policies and pedagogic practices in PE.

#### KEYWORDS

ability, secondary education, mixed-ability grouping, physical education

### Key insights

#### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses how mixed-ability grouping is enacted in PE in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 and considers how particular enactments are experienced differently by students in mixed-ability PE lessons.

#### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Drawing on focus group interviews involving students at a mixed-gender secondary school in England, the paper provides rich insight into students' varied experiences of mixed-ability grouping in PE and the ways in which these experiences are mediated by particular constructions of ability, gendered discourses, school and subject cultures, and the wider policy context.

## INTRODUCTION

While there is an extensive international literature on different forms of ability grouping, particularly streaming and setting, mixed-ability grouping has attracted comparatively little research attention. This paper directs attention specifically to the complexities and potential inequities inherent in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping in the subject area of physical education (PE). Before exploring important features of that subject context, we first clarify the terminology used throughout this paper. *Streaming* is considered the most rigid form of ability grouping, with students assigned to classes based on an overall assessment of their general ability and remaining in these classes for all or most subjects (Sukhnandan &

Lee, 1998; Ireson & Hallam, 2001). *Setting* is a more flexible and nuanced arrangement, with students assigned to classes based on their attainment in a particular subject only (Francis et al., 2020; Wilkinson & Penney, 2014, 2021a). Thus, where sets are serially ordered (i.e., from highest to lowest), a student may be in a high set for one subject and a lower set for another. *Mixed-ability grouping*, which is the prime focus in this paper, differs from streaming and setting insofar as there is no attempt to group together students of similar ability in forming class groups (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Instead, classes are formed (either randomly or purposefully) with the intent that each will include students with a broad range of abilities (Francis et al., 2020). As Taylor et al. (2020) have discussed, combinations of these grouping approaches may also be used in individual schools. Furthermore, irrespective of the type of grouping used to determine class groups, teachers may use *within-class grouping* to divide a class into smaller groups for specific activities and/or purposes. Within-class groups are frequently based on ability and/or prior attainment but may also reflect students' working relationships, behaviour and/or attitude to learning (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Francis et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2016). Pertinent to this research is the recognition that ability discourses and other factors prospectively shape how various students are positioned as learners in mixed-ability teaching contexts.

In considering the mixed-ability grouping literature, it is notable that attention has primarily been directed towards analysis of students' attainment outcomes, particularly in mathematics, English and science, rather than investigation of the actual practices deployed by teachers and their impact on students' experiences. Further, the limited research that has directly explored students' perceptions and experiences of mixed-ability grouping has invariably focused on mathematics and English in secondary schools (see, e.g., Venkatakrisnan & Wiliam, 2003; Tereshchenko et al., 2019; Francome & Hewitt, 2020). This is despite recognition that these are not the curriculum areas in which mixed-ability grouping is most frequently utilised (Hallam et al., 2008; Office for Standards in Education [OFSTED], 2013; Taylor et al., 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2016). In a survey of 233 teachers from 45 secondary schools in England, for example, Hallam et al. (2008) found that 92% of art, 86% of music, 80% of drama and 58% of PE lessons were taught in mixed-ability groups. Recent data from a national survey of 375 secondary schools in England by comparison revealed that mixed-ability grouping was fully or partially being used in less than 26% of schools for mathematics and less than 55% for English (Taylor et al., 2020). 'Partial' approaches included mixed-ability grouping with a separate bottom or nurture group, mixed-ability grouping with a separate top or stretch group and mixed-ability grouping with separate top and bottom groups (Taylor et al., 2020).

While much research investigating grouping (including our own work) has focused on schools in England, preferences for particular approaches, differences in approach in different subjects and the impact that both between- and within-class grouping approaches have on students and their learning are undoubtedly matters of international interest. The PISA survey in 2018, for example, revealed that across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, 43% of students attend schools where they are grouped by ability into different classes for all or some subjects, with the remainder retaining mixed-ability grouping (OECD, 2020). The PISA survey also reported that 54% of students attend schools where within-class grouping is used for all or some subjects (OECD, 2020). We suggest that such data points to a need for an expansion of research examining mixed-ability grouping, as well as the within-class grouping practices employed in various mixed-ability settings.

This study contrasted to much previous research by directing attention to mixed-ability grouping in PE and by foregrounding student perspectives. Our focus on PE particularly acknowledged that, first, in many instances secondary school PE in England continues to feature gender-differentiated curriculum provision and groupings, with girls and boys separated

for core (non-examined) PE (Wilkinson et al., 2016), and second, that conceptualisations of ability in PE frequently privilege discourses of sport performance that also have an inherent gendered dimension (Evans, 2004; Croston, 2014; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a, 2021b). While gender-differentiated PE has a long history in England (Fletcher, 1984; Kirk, 1992), the picture internationally is varied. Single-sex PE is a common feature of secondary schools in the USA, Finland and many Muslim countries, whilst mixed-sex PE is more prevalent in secondary schools in countries such as Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2020). However (and notwithstanding the grouping approach used), gendered discourses are acknowledged internationally as powerfully shaping understandings of ability in PE and sport, and as, therefore, an important consideration for pedagogy in PE globally (OECD, 2019). Furthermore, sport discourses, within which gendered discourses are invariably intertwined, retain a privileged standing in PE internationally. PE also stands out as a teaching and learning context in which students' bodies, physical competencies and performances are very publicly on display, with feelings of scrutiny, inadequacy and/or failure all potentially magnified and perceptions of ability prospectively distorted (Evans, 2004; Croston, 2014; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a). Accordingly, this study aimed to generate a nuanced and contextual understanding of students' perceptions and experiences of mixed-ability grouping in secondary school PE in England, and in so doing, offer new insight into debates about mixed-ability grouping policy and practice in secondary schooling, particularly in relation to issues of equity. We employed enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2011) to specifically pursue the diverse practices and complex contextual factors that shape students' perceptions and experiences of mixed-ability grouping in PE. As we outline below, the application of enactment theory recognises that school decisions about grouping policy are impacted by wider education policy and many other contextual influences, and that the pedagogical expression of grouping policies in specific subjects and classrooms is navigated and negotiated by students as well as teachers (Ball et al., 2012; Löfgren et al., 2018; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a, 2021b).

## Mixed-ability grouping: policy and practice

As indicated above, the widespread adoption of mixed-ability grouping in many subject areas in secondary schools in England contrasts with grouping by ability, and specifically the practice of setting. Successive governments (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2005; Conservative Party, 2010) and Ofsted, the school inspectorate in England (Ofsted, 2013), have variously claimed that mixed-ability teaching provides insufficient stimulus for higher attaining students to improve because teachers frequently pitch their lessons at the middle of the group. Schools have therefore been encouraged to employ setting to 'ensure that students are sufficiently challenged and make good progress' (Ofsted, 2013, p. 10). Yet there is no unequivocal evidence that setting improves academic attainment and/or that it should be considered preferable to mixed-ability grouping. Meta-analyses, literature reviews, and research studies show that ability grouping (i.e. setting and streaming) has no overall positive effect on student attainment, with a small negative or zero effect on lower attaining students and a small positive effect on higher attaining students (Slavin 1987; Sukhmandan & Lee, 1998; William & Bartholomew, 2004; Higgins et al., 2015). Further, mixed-ability grouping has often been found to have positive effects on the attainment of lower attaining students, with neutral to positive effects on the attainment of higher attaining students (Ireson et al., 2002; Venkatakrisnan & William, 2003). Research has also shown that mixed-ability grouping can foster greater self-confidence and attitudes towards learning, particularly among lower attaining students (Higgins et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2020).

However, as Francis et al. (2020) note, simply grouping students in mixed-ability groups 'will not of itself yield positive outcomes' (p. 143), nor necessarily benefit all students. Research shows, for example, a tendency for teachers to pitch lessons at mid to low attaining students in mixed-ability groups (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004; Ofsted, 2013; Wilkinson & Penney, 2014, 2021b). This may mean that the needs of higher and some lower attaining students are not adequately addressed, potentially resulting in boredom, anxiety and/or indiscipline (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Francis et al., 2020). Nonetheless, research evidence indicates that teachers are more likely to provide a greater variety of activities and more differentiated work in mixed-ability classes than in setted classes (Ireson et al., 2002; Wilkinson & Penney, 2014, 2021b; Wilkinson et al., 2021).

What is very evident from research focusing on both setting and mixed-ability grouping is that grouping policies are not applied in uniform ways and nor do they have a uniform impact. Rather, grouping arises from differing interpretations and enactments of grouping policy in different schools, departments and classrooms, and reflect the direct and indirect influence of many factors, both internal and external to an individual school (Wilkinson & Penney, 2021b; Wilkinson et al., 2021). The impact of grouping policies on teaching and learning similarly needs to be understood as nuanced and negotiated by both teachers and students (Francis et al., 2020; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a, 2021b). This research employed enactment theory, as developed by Ball and colleagues (Ball et al., 2011; Braun et al., 2011; Ball et al., 2012), to pursue two issues in particular; first, the ways in which various dimensions of context shape the pedagogy of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3 (aged 11–14) and Key Stage 4 (aged 14–16); and second, the ways in which mixed-ability grouping is experienced, navigated and negotiated by different students in PE. In relation to the former line of inquiry, enactment theory provided a framework of four inter-related dimensions of context, prompting exploration of the distinct and collective influence of *situated*, *material*, *professional* and *external* aspects of context (Braun et al., 2011; Ball et al., 2012) shaping particular pedagogical enactments of mixed-ability grouping. Table 1 outlines the factors associated with each dimension.

In relation to the second focus, on students, enactment theory provided a further framework facilitating the exploration of students as *actors*, positioned by grouping arrangements but also variously positioning themselves in the enactment process (Ball et al., 2011, 2012). The interest here was in how different students 'read', received and responded to PE teachers' enactment of mixed-ability grouping policy and thereby adopted different actor positions, including those of enthusiast or critic. Enactment theory thereby recognises that students are not passive recipients or receivers of grouping policy, but rather play an active role in shaping the pedagogical expressions and experiences of grouping policy (Löfgren, et al., 2018; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a). The section that follows expands upon issues that previous research in PE, and in secondary education more broadly, has raised pertaining to the positioning and experiences of students in grouping policy and practice.

**TABLE 1** Examples of factors associated with each dimension of context

Situated	Such as school demographic, values and traditions pertaining to PE and sport
Material	Such as facilities, staffing, equipment and timetabling for PE
Professional	Such as school culture, expectations and pressures on staff
External	Such as wider policies and systems impacting grouping policy, including Ofsted inspections

## Students' positioning and perspectives on grouping

Research examining students' perceptions and experiences of grouping structures has repeatedly identified that ability level is an important variable. Research that has primarily focused on mathematics and English has shown that higher attaining students are more likely to favour setting, whereas lower attaining students are more likely to favour mixed-ability grouping (Hallam & Ireson, 2006; Tereshchenko et al., 2019; Francis et al., 2020; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021b). In Hallam and Ireson's (2006) large-scale survey of over 5000 Year 9 (aged 13–14) students, for example, a significant proportion of lower attaining students preferred mixed-ability grouping because they felt that working alongside higher attaining students facilitated their learning and increased their confidence. However, these researchers also found that where mixed-ability grouping was the predominant approach in a school, there was greater student preference for learning in mixed-ability classes, suggesting that students' familiarity with particular arrangements may be important. Other research (see, e.g., Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Francis et al., 2020) has shown that mixed-ability grouping can have a negative impact on high attaining students' motivation, because class work is often not sufficiently challenging or varied. More recently, Tereshchenko et al.'s (2019) study of 89 Year 7 (aged 11–12) students provided a more nuanced understanding of student preferences and perceptions, showing that while many higher attaining students expressed preferences for setting, they also identified a range of benefits of mixed-ability grouping, including the opportunity to help lower attaining students in their learning and to work alongside students with different backgrounds, strengths and interests. In Tereshchenko et al.'s (2019) study, a significant number of higher and lower attaining students also suggested that mixed-ability grouping provided more equitable access to teachers, resources and the curriculum than setting arrangements.

Grouping practices are also acknowledged as influencing friendship patterns in primary and secondary schools, particularly when students are in the same group for most or all classes (Newbold, 1977; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Hallam & Ireson, 2006). Newbold (1977), for example, found that most students in schools using streaming and/or setting tended to choose those of similar ability as friends, whereas a greater number of mixed-ability friendships were formed in schools using mixed-ability grouping.

In PE, research exploring grouping (and ability-based grouping or setting particularly) has also brought to the fore equity issues pertaining to students' access to and opportunities for learning and revealed the ways in which discourses of motor-skill proficiency, sport performance and/or fitness are privileged in many applications of ability grouping (Evans, 2004; Croston, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2016). Further, our previous research showed students in PE to be attuned to setting policies and how they may be positioned by them, but also by gender discourses coming into play in PE (Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a). Notably, students demonstrated capacity to (in some instances) resist and re-negotiate their positioning by performing and/or behaving in ways that may counter perceived negative impacts of setting and/or enable them to mediate tensions between ability discourses and gender discourses in PE. For example, some boys allocated to bottom sets for PE sought to validate their masculinity (to peers and teachers) by misbehaving and/or acting aggressively and competitively (Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a). Some girls allocated to top sets for PE expressed a need to put minimal effort into PE lessons due to perceived conflict between the acknowledgement of their ability in this context and their femininity. Other girls recognised certain activities, including dance and aerobics, as avenues via which they could safely and legitimately perform (and combine) femininity and ability in PE (Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a).

This research acknowledged a comparable lack of student insight into how mixed-ability grouping is enacted by PE teachers, and more particularly, what impact particular

enactments of mixed-ability grouping have on various students' learning opportunities and experiences in PE. As indicated earlier, the study sought to pursue the various factors prospectively shaping the enactment of mixed-ability grouping, including the intersection of gender and ability discourses, and critically examine the consequent positioning and experiences of different students in mixed-ability PE lessons. The study also recognised that grouping and teaching practices may vary between PE in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, with the latter incorporating examination PE studies as well as core curriculum PE. Two research questions guided the study, reflecting the enactment perspective outlined above:

- How do various contextual factors (*situated, material, professional* and *external*) impact the ways in which students experience mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4?
- How do gender discourses and gendered practices impact students' experiences and positioning in the enactment of mixed-ability PE in these Key Stages?

As we explain below, these research questions were explored via a qualitative case study of mixed-ability grouping in PE in a secondary school in the north-east of England.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

The case study school was purposively selected because of its strong commitment to mixed-ability grouping in all subject areas except mathematics. Further details of the case study school are presented in [Table 2](#). Pseudonyms are used for the school, and later students, to maintain anonymity. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Northumbria University.

Westfield used two variations of mixed-ability grouping in PE. In Key Stage 3, students were organised into mixed-ability groups for PE based on their mathematics sets, but with boys and girls taught separately in PE. Grouping according to students' mathematics set can be problematised in relation to the spread of abilities consequently arising in PE classes and whether, therefore, the arrangement can be considered a full or 'pure' form of mixed-ability grouping. However, both teachers and students at Westfield recognised this arrangement as constituting mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3, and a recent national survey of over 900 secondary schools in England has affirmed that creating 'de-facto' mixed-ability groups for PE based on setting in another subject is not uncommon.<sup>1</sup>

In Key Stage 4, students selected their own mixed-ability group in core PE by choosing between two curriculum pathways: the Performance pathway and the Participation pathway. National research indicates that establishing 'pathway' options is not an unusual practice in PE in Key Stage 4 in secondary schools in England.<sup>2</sup> At Westfield, this approach was a department-level arrangement designed to allow students to take ownership of their own learning and thereby maintain engagement and participation in PE. As shown in [Table 3](#), the pathways were organised around different curriculum activities (individual activities for Participation and team for Performance), while maintaining gender differentiation (with each pathway consisting of two single-sex girls' groups and two single-sex boys' groups—eight groups in total).

As we illustrate below, the Participation pathway was portrayed as recreational, with individual activities framed as 'less competitive' to promote students' confidence and enjoyment in PE. In contrast, the Performance pathway emphasised team activities as competitive, with the intent of thereby promoting students' motivation and achievement in PE.

For Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, all students were timetabled for 2 h of single-sex core PE per week and each activity in the curriculum was taught over a period of 6 or 7 weeks. In Key Stage 4, students who were studying General Certificate of Secondary Education



**TABLE 2** Details of the case study school at the time of study

<b>Westfield</b>	
<b>Type of school</b>	<b>Local authority maintained</b>
Age range	11–18
Gender	Mixed
Students on roll	1600 (rounded to the nearest 100)
Students achieving grade 5 or above in English and mathematics GCSEs	60% (average for English secondary schools = 43%)
Percentage of students eligible for free school meals	7% (average for English secondary schools = 20.8%)
Percentage of students with English as an additional language	4% (average for English secondary schools = 16.1%)
Ofsted grade	Outstanding

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest 10% or 1%.

**TABLE 3** Details of the activities in the participation and performance pathways

<b>Pathway</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Girls' Participation pathway	Athletics, dance, tennis, trampoline, badminton, gymnastics
Girls' Performance pathway	Netball, rugby, football, hockey, rounders, handball
Boys' Participation pathway	Table tennis, athletics, tennis, trampoline, badminton, gymnastics
Boys' Performance pathway	Basketball, rugby, football, hockey, cricket, handball

(GCSE) PE were timetabled an additional 2h of mixed-sex mixed-ability PE per week. These lessons were classroom-based and focused on the theory aspects of the GCSE PE course. GCSE PE is mostly assessed through examination and incorporates both practical and theory components, although the exact nature of each component varies across examination boards. Westfield followed the Pearson Edexcel syllabus for GCSE PE (Pearson Edexcel, 2020). There were no additional hours allocated for the practical aspects of the GCSE PE course. Instead, core PE time was used to enable GCSE PE students to practice and improve their skills (alongside non-GCSE PE students) and to allow teachers to monitor and assess their progress in relation to the specifications for the practical component of GCSE PE.

## Data generation and analysis

Semi-structured focus groups were held with a total of 41 Year 10 (aged 14–15) students (21 girls and 20 boys) over a 6 month period in the 2018–2019 school year. Interviews were also conducted with seven PE teachers in the school to contextualise students' perceptions

and experiences of mixed-ability grouping in PE. Data from the teacher interviews have previously been reported (see Wilkinson & Penney, 2021b).

Students in Year 10 were selected as participants for the study because of their recent transition from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4. Recruitment of Year 10 students offered efficiency in enabling us to collect data on students' experiences of mixed-ability grouping in PE in both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, but 'point-in-time' data collection that calls for participants' reflection on both past and current experiences has limitations. Longitudinal design and/or simultaneous data collection with multiple year cohorts could usefully be employed in future, larger scale and longer duration research.

For the selection of a sample of Year 10 students, the Head of PE at Westfield was asked to randomly select an equal number of girls and boys from each of the Performance pathway and Participation pathway groups in Year 10. The only instruction provided was to select 12 girls and 12 boys from each pathway, giving a total sample of 24 girls and 24 boys. The Head of PE also assisted in obtaining parent/guardian consent for students to participate in the study. Students may feel disempowered to exercise their right to non-participation when they are recruited to research by their teachers. In an attempt to overcome this problem, the primary investigator met with all 48 students in advance of consent forms being sent to their parents/guardians. The nature and purpose of the study was explained to the students, and they were informed that their participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that their non-participation would have no bearing on their schoolwork or grades. This meeting with the students also sought to redress the power balance by establishing a sense of trust with students, for example, through encouraging dialogue about the study and providing an opportunity for them to ask questions. Seven students did not return a signed parent/guardian consent form and were therefore not included in the study. Details of the final sample are shown in Table 4.

In addition to parent/guardian consent, written assent was obtained from students prior to the focus groups being held and verbal assent was obtained from students at the beginning of each focus group session.

A pilot study was also conducted, involving one focus group with six Year 10 boys from the Performance groups and another with eight Year 10 girls from the Participation groups. None of these students were part of the main sample. In line with previous research (see, e.g., Krueger & Casey, 2008; Braun & Clarke 2013), we found that the relatively small-sized focus group was easy to manage and provided students with sufficient time and opportunity to share their views and experiences. The decision was therefore made to interview students in groups of six or fewer in the main study and to also maintain single-sex and

**TABLE 4** Details of the focus groups

Focus group	Pathway	No. of students	Students
1	Girls' Participation	5	Macey, Rose, Jess, Amber, Sadie,
2	Girls' Participation	5	Abbie, Katie, Lucy, Amy, Kate
3	Girls' Performance	6	Nicole, Rachel, Sophie, Mia, Andrea (GCSE), Emma (GCSE)
4	Girls' Performance	5	Georgia, Sharelle, Olivia, Emily, Maya
5	Boys' Participation	5	Tom, James, Max, Paul, Andrew
6	Boys' Participation	5	Chris, Charlie, Shaun, Matthew, Harry
7	Boys' Performance	5	Karl, Javed, Ross (GCSE), Peter (GCSE), Mark (GCSE)
8	Boys' Performance	5	Mike, Will, Sam, Archie (GCSE), Kevin (GCSE)

pathway-specific grouping, enabling students to participate in discussions alongside their direct peers from PE lessons. This familiar peer environment has been shown to make children feel safer and more comfortable interacting with an adult researcher (Bryman, 2015).

In the main study, eight focus groups were conducted in total, lasting between 41 and 52 min. All focus groups were conducted in an empty classroom in the school at a time scheduled by the Head of PE. Students were interviewed at the end of the school year (June) to allow for reflection on their experiences of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3 and Year 10. Questions posed to the students covered four main topic areas: perceived reasons for mixed-ability grouping in PE (including the pathway approach in Key Stage 4), selecting pathway groups in PE in Key Stage 4, perceptions of mixed-ability grouping in PE and experiences of mixed-ability teaching in PE.

All focus groups were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded using a systematic process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Data analysis was conducted by the primary investigator, with the second author consulted on selected interpretations and coding with the intent of ensuring accurate application of the policy context and actor frameworks. Prior to coding, the transcripts were read multiple times to gain a sense of the data corpus. Transcribed data were also reduced by identifying text segments that appeared pertinent to the research questions. These text segments were then read multiple times to identify themes. Text segments that appeared to carry similar meaning were ascribed a provisional category label and the data were further analysed to assess their accuracy and comprehensiveness (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A second stage of analysis then explored the relationship of category labels and data extracts to the dimensions of context identified by Ball et al. (2012) and the policy actor framework of Ball et al. (2011). In each step of analysis, the process continued until the data were saturated.

The findings and discussion below focus on three overarching themes from the dataset. The first two, relating to mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3, respectively highlight students first as policy *enthusiasts*, and second as *critics* and/or *entrepreneurs*. In considering the findings presented in these two sections, we remind readers that mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3 at Westfield was formed on the basis of students' placement in sets for mathematics. The third section turns attention to PE in Key Stage 4 and reveals the ways in which ability discourses strongly frame students' understandings and experiences of 'mixed-ability' (pathways) grouping in PE in this Key Stage. Attention is also drawn to the overt role of gender discourses in shaping how students are positioned and position themselves in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 4. In this Key Stage we identify *enthusiasts*, *critics* and *copers*. Across the three sections we identify and illustrate aspects of the *situated*, *material* and *external* dimensions of context that particularly influenced the roles that students were able to take in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping policy in PE in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Mixed-ability grouping in PE in key stage 3: students as policy enthusiasts

Situated factors, and specifically the values and culture of Westfield, were highly influential in shaping the ways in which students engaged with and experienced the policy of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3. As the following comment illustrates, students highlighted the importance placed on learning together and supporting one another's progress in the school and associated these values with the principles of mixed-ability grouping:

The ethos of the school is about working together and respecting one another. Mixed-ability grouping reflects that. (Paul, Boys' Participation)

Nearly all students who participated in the focus groups expressed support for the policy of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3, principally because they were enthused by the opportunity to learn with and from one another. Students also valued the social inclusivity of mixed-ability grouping. This was particularly so for girls, who were effusive about the social and emotional advantages of learning with their friends. In the following comments, Amy and Mia draw on gender-related discourses to justify their preferences for mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3:

I think we're probably a bit more cooperative than the lads. We probably care more about being comfortable in PE as well. So, mixed is good because you aren't separated from some of your friends. (Amy, Girls' Participation)

I think we prefer being with our friends more. So, I think mixed suits us. It's good because we are all together.

(Mia, Girls' Performance)

Students recognised that mixed-ability groups in PE in Key Stage 3 were based on set placements in mathematics and, as such, included students across the ability spectrum. As one student described it:

You might be good at maths, but when you come to PE you might be rubbish. It's totally different. So, the groups had a massive range. (Andrew, Boys' Participation)

Recognising differences in abilities, several students stressed the importance of teachers adapting work to meet their individual needs. Drawing on their experiences, they reflected upon how this could be achieved in mixed-ability PE. Andrew, for example, explained:

The differences were massive, so teachers needed to help every single person in the group. They needed to go through things a little bit slower or make things a bit more challenging. (Andrew, Boys' Participation)

Overall, students spoke positively about mixed-ability teaching in PE in Key Stage 3 and identified several pedagogical strategies, including collaborative learning, peer tutoring and group work, that had a positive impact on their learning experiences. Many students felt that their learning experiences were enhanced by the opportunity to work alongside others with different strengths and weaknesses. This was particularly evident in comments from students in the Participation groups, who identified that the input and support of 'more able' peers was imperative for their learning. James, for example, commented:

If you're not very good at PE and you're surrounded by other people who aren't very good at PE, then it's not going to help you. So, mixed is good because you've got the more able to learn from. (James, Boys' Participation)

As we explain in the next section, students frequently made links between group labels and ability levels, describing the Participation groups as the less able groups and the Performance groups as the more able groups.

Some students also recognised that teachers used within-class grouping to cater for diversity in PE lessons in Key Stage 3. The physical space and equipment available for PE in the school made smaller group work feasible and enabled the values of inclusion espoused by the school to be expressed in this enactment of mixed-ability grouping. The informal and flexible nature of these smaller groups was well received, with students noting that they provided a safer and more secluded space for them to demonstrate their abilities and thereby reduced the impact of labels and stigma. Abbie and Paul commented:

The smaller groups were good because you didn't have to perform in front of everyone. (Abbie, Girls' Participation)

They [groups] were always based on something different and you were never in the same one for long. So, you didn't get labelled as the worst group. (Paul, Boys' Participation)

Students also associated mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3 with equal opportunities for all, regardless of ability. Here, students were again making sense of mixed-ability grouping in relation to dominant discourses (including diversity and equality) in the school. Lucy, for example, explained:

The school says that we are all different, all equal. So, no matter what ability you are, you should get the same opportunities. Last year [i.e., in Key Stage 3] we were all given the same opportunities to participate and do well in PE. (Lucy, Girls' Participation)

As the next section shows, not all students shared this view of mixed-ability grouping in PE, and some adopted notably contrasting positions to the enthusiasts.

### **Mixed-ability grouping in Key Stage 3: the critics and entrepreneurs**

Alongside evidence positioning students as enthusiasts in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping policy, we also encountered critics, challenging the ways in which the policy was enacted in PE in Key Stage 3. This was particularly the case among students in the Participation groups, who described how peer tutoring, and specifically the repeated use of 'more able' students in the role of helper, left them feeling patronised by PE teachers. Rose, for example, commented:

They [PE teachers] always used the same girls to explain and demonstrate things. It put you down and made you feel like they had their favourites. (Rose, Girls' Participation)

A small number of students from the Participation groups also associated aspects of the situated and material contexts with negative experiences of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3. These students explained that they felt vulnerable and exposed in mixed-ability groups because the public nature of the PE environment meant that ability differences were more conspicuous. Tom, for example, remarked:

It's [PE] not like other subjects, is it? There's no hiding in PE. So, even though I liked mixed-ability grouping in Year 9, I didn't like having to put myself out there in front of the better people. (Tom, Boys' Participation)

Some students in the Participation groups were also seen to be entrepreneurial, adopting a range of strategies and techniques to compensate for their perceived lack of ability in PE in Key Stage 3. These strategies tended to differ for boys and girls, with girls sometimes demonstrating their femininity by exerting limited effort in PE and boys sometimes asserting their masculinity by acting aggressively and competitively in PE. The following comments from Tom and Amy demonstrate the complex interplay between gender-related discourses and the situated and material dimensions of context:

It's different for boys and girls, especially in PE. So, even if you weren't that good, you still needed to be trying to avoid being judged by the more able ones. You couldn't get away with it because everyone could see if you weren't trying. (Tom, Boys' Participation)

There's still stereotypes ... Like that we should not be good at PE. I think that's why it was easier to give up and not try. You've usually got the boys close by as well and you do not want to be a sweaty mess in front of them. (Amy, Girls' Participation).

There were also some murmurings of discontent about the grouping policy among students in the Performance groups. Some of these students acknowledged that they might have made better progress if they were grouped with others of similar ability in PE in Key Stage 3. Notwithstanding, most maintained support for mixed-ability grouping because they enjoyed its inclusive and collaborative nature. Archie explained:

I mean, we would've probably got more out of PE [in Key Stage 3] if we were in ability groups, but we liked being able to help others. (Archie, Boys' Performance)

It was also evident that students who were studying GCSE PE in Key Stage 4 perceived PE in Key Stage 3 to be relatively low stakes because their results had no bearing on their examination grades. Consequently, they were largely unconcerned about any potential negative effects of mixed-ability grouping on their learning and progress in PE in Key Stage 3. Ross' comments reflected the impact of the wider external policy context upon students' engagement with mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3:

I mean sometimes lessons were a bit boring if you were helping the lower ability out all the time, but our results didn't really matter then. They didn't count towards your GCSEs. (Ross, Boys' Performance)

As Ross and his peers acknowledged, Key Stage 4 presented a very different context for 'mixed-ability' grouping, teaching and learning in PE at Westfield.

### **'Mixed-ability' grouping in PE in Key stage 4: ability matters!**

Students acknowledged that they were formally taught in mixed-ability groups in PE in Year 10. However, they expressed strong views that the mixed-ability pathway groups were based on constructs of ability. Students were very aware of the meanings attached to the pathway descriptors and described how they conveyed a sense of hierarchy. Georgia, for example, commented:

I think it's the power of the words. You have to perform rather than participate to be good at sport. Participation ... It's just taking part for enjoyment. It's not really about being good at sport. (Georgia, Girls' Performance)

Students tended not to describe the pathways using their official labels. Instead, they frequently referred to the Participation pathway as the 'low ability' pathway and the Performance pathway as the 'high ability' pathway. Max and Sadie, for example, commented:

The Participation group means that I'm low ability. (Max, Boys' Participation)

The Performance pathway is higher ability. Like the sporty ones.  
(Sadie, Girls' Participation)

The process of students selecting one of the two pathways for PE in Key Stage 4 was framed by teachers in terms of student choice. Students themselves recognised school values (and thus, the situated context) reflected in the process, with Emily explaining:

I think we picked them [pathways] in our first lesson. The teachers showed us what was in each pathway and told us to choose our pathway based on what activities we liked best. The school encourages us to have our say on things. So, I think that's why we were given the choice. (Emily, Girls' Performance)

While comments such as these pointed to students feeling empowered to choose their own pathway, the public nature of the process was acknowledged as compromising student choice. Pathway decisions, especially those of students who were not taking GCSE PE, were therefore influenced by friendship groups and/or, relatedly, where they felt most comfortable as learners, rather than by activity preferences. Olivia and Charlie shared their experiences of selecting their pathway in PE in Year 10:

It's our choice, but it's really awkward. You're influenced by what your friends want to do. I wanted to be in Participation because I like gymnastics and dance, but most of my friends wanted to be in Performance. So, I went in Performance because I didn't want to be by myself. I know they [teachers] say not to, but people just follow their friends. (Olivia, Girls' Performance)

I mean I didn't pick Participation because of the activities. I just thought I'd be more comfortable being away from the people doing GCSE. (Charlie, Boys' Participation)

For those students taking GCSE PE, being in the Performance groups was perceived to be important, even if some of their preferred curriculum activities were in the Participation pathway. Peter commented:

I mean they [teachers] say they're not ability groups, but the Performance groups have the more able students in them. So, if you're taking GCSE, you want to be in there. (Peter, Boys' Performance)

Students in the Performance groups particularly were open enthusiasts for the de-facto ability grouping that materialised with the pathway 'choices'. Both boys and girls who were working towards GCSE PE regarded Key Stage 4 as high stakes and consequently, a context in which they needed to be able to engage in more challenging tasks without being held back by 'less

able' students. The following comments speak to the influence of performativity on the desire of these students to be taught in ability groups in PE in Key Stage 4. In contrast to the Key Stage 3 emphasis of cooperation and valuing of diversity, the GCSE PE context brought to the fore an individualistic outlook:

If you're doing GCSE PE, you don't want to be dragged back by less able people. You need to be with people at a similar level to be pushed harder. (Andrea, Girls' Performance)

It sounds harsh, but I do not want to be helping out the lower ability like last year. I need to be pushed with others at my level to get a good grade. (Mark, Boys' Performance).

Among students in the Participation groups, enthusiasts were also evident, but different discourses and interests were at the fore of their views. Some students, such as Tom, supported the de-facto ability grouping because they believed it would insulate them from the negative peer pressure that they had experienced in the Key Stage 3 mixed-ability setting:

PE isn't that important to my future. So, I'd rather be away from the more able to avoid the same pressures that I had last year. (Tom, Boys' Participation)

Most of the girls wanted to remain in mixed-ability groups in PE in Key Stage 4 because it enabled them to be with their friends. The supportive peer relationships that developed in PE in Key Stage 3 were viewed as important in enabling girls to continue to feel comfortable and confident in PE, with Jess' comments typical of many:

You enjoy PE more when you're with your friends. You're definitely less comfortable when you're not with them. So, it'd be better staying in mixed. (Jess, Girls' Participation)

Among the boys in the Participation pathway, James was a critic of the Key Stage 4 grouping scenario, explaining that:

I like PE and want to get better. So, I need the more able around me. They really helped me last year. I just didn't feel confident enough to go in performance. (James, Boys' Participation)

Others, such as Charlie, countered ability discourses with the emphasis that choosing their own pathway meant that they experienced less stigma than they would have otherwise:

If the teachers put us in groups, we'd probably get called more. But we don't really because it was our decision, and it wasn't [overtly] based on ability. (Charlie, Boys' Participation)

Further evidence of students as policy critics came to the fore, however, when some of the pedagogical implications of the pathway grouping were explained. There was consensus among students that the pathway approach to grouping students had led teachers to alter their pedagogical practices. For example, several students suggested that teachers paid much less attention to differentiation and groupwork in PE in Year 10 than they had in PE in Key Stage 3. Students indicated that teachers pitched resources and teaching strategies at the middle of the



group, with this tendency resulting in some students being insufficiently challenged and others being unable to cope with the pace and level of work:

I think they just see us all as similar ability now. So, they probably get lazy and don't feel like they need to provide us with different things. They just target things to one level, which doesn't help the better or worse people. (Chris, Boys' Participation)

This was a source of frustration for many students who, while acknowledging that the pathways reduced the range of ability in each teaching group, affirmed the importance of teachers adapting their teaching methods to meet the learning needs of individual students. Chris continued:

The groups are more similar this year, but we still have different needs. So, teachers need to like change things up to meet them. (Chris, Boys' Participation)

In the Performance pathway groups, some students, and particularly those who were not studying GCSE PE, expressed similar frustration, with Javed, for example, struggling with the pace and pitch of teaching:

I don't really enjoy being in Performance because it's all a bit too advanced. Teaching is all based around GCSE students. (Javed, Boys' Performance)

Most students in the Performance pathway, and especially those studying GCSE PE, were, however, enthusiasts in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Year 10. Emma, for example, commented:

It's great. The teaching is challenging, and it pushes you on. (Emma, Girls' Performance)

Students also reported that teachers held different expectations of them according to their pathway. These expectations were seen to be reflected in the pedagogical practices adopted by teachers in different pathways and in the learning and participation opportunities available to students beyond the curriculum. Students in the Performance groups reported that they experienced more independent, fast-paced and challenging work, while those in the Participation groups recognised the slower and less demanding nature of their learning experiences in PE in Key Stage 4. Students in the Performance groups were also judged to be privileged in terms of access to extracurricular clubs and teams. These experiences served to legitimise and strengthen students' beliefs about their ability in PE, as is shown in the following comments:

They [PE teachers] don't tell you, but I know I'm in the bottom group because I'm not doing very challenging work. (Macey, Girls' Participation)

It is obvious that the Performance groups are high ability. They're pushed a lot more than the Participation groups to attend after-school clubs and things like that. (Harry, Boys' Participation)

In adopting a critic position in relation to the enactment of mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 4, these students thus highlighted aspects of mixed-ability grouping as inequitable and exclusionary, including the distribution of teachers' time, attention and resources, and the link between pathways and access to after-school clubs. Indeed, the curriculum offered to students

in the Participation pathway openly undermined their opportunities to access extra-curricular clubs and teams, which were largely organised around competitive team activities. Matthew recognised this inherent inequity, saying:

We're at a disadvantage because after-school clubs are pretty much all team games and we're doing individual activities [in PE]. (Matthew, Boys' Participation)

The capacity and willingness of various students to exercise agency was influenced, positively or negatively, by the interplay of individual and contextual factors, including the values and ethos of the school, their pathway choice and their educational and vocational aspirations. For example, some students in the Participation pathway explained that the emphasis on student voice in the school afforded them opportunities to question and challenge mixed-ability grouping practices in PE. At the same time, however, their comments also spoke to the power relations at play that positioned them as receivers in a policy process that privileged dominant discourses of ability in PE, and at the same time reflected the influence of external policy discourses of accountability and performativity:

I mean we're not happy about things, but there's no point in saying anything. We don't matter as much because we're in Participation. (Chris, Boys' Participation)

Those students who were studying GCSE PE felt entitled to preferential treatment from teachers because of the importance of their attainment for the department. They recognised their relative empowerment in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping policy in PE in Key Stage 4 and, as such, spoke as influencers (Löfgren et al., 2018; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a) in the grouping policy enactment:

They [PE teachers] need to prioritise our needs because we're the ones doing GCSE. Our results are important to them. (Mark, Boys' Performance)

If there's something we do not like, we can tell them [PE teachers] and they'll listen more because we are the higher ability group.  
(Andrea, Girls' Performance)

Finally, we also identified students as copers (Löfgren et al., 2018; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021a) in policy enactment. These students drew on the low subject status of PE to negate their potentially inferior positioning in the Participation pathway. Andrew was typical of several students conveying indifference, in saying:

I'm not bothered to be honest. I'd be more bothered if it was in the low ability group in maths because it's important for my career. (Andrew, Boys' Participation)

This data again speaks to subject and school cultures and wider policy contexts all playing a part in shaping different students' perspectives and positioning in mixed-ability grouping.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The findings of this study provide unique insights into the direct and indirect impact of dimensions of context on students' perceptions and experiences of mixed-ability grouping in PE, and their positioning as actors in the grouping policy enactment in Key Stage 3 and

Key Stage 4 at Westfield. In PE in Key Stage 3, most students expressed positive views of mixed-ability grouping because they believed that its underlying values, including equality, respect of difference and inclusion, accorded with those of the school. Mixed-ability grouping was also seen to promote positive relations between students, with some appreciating the help they received from their peers and others willing to provide support and assistance because this was also recognised as a 'low stakes' learning context for them. The internal and external policy contexts appeared to align in supporting students' positive engagement with discourses of difference and inclusion in PE.

These findings relating to mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 3 at Westfield are broadly in line with previous research in mathematics and English showing that students tend to prefer the grouping arrangements adopted in their school, and relatedly the arrangements with which they are familiar (Hallam & Ireson, 2006). They also affirmed, however, that students' perspectives and positioning in mixed-ability PE can vary significantly. This was reflected in our identification of critics and entrepreneurs.

In PE in Key Stage 4, teaching and learning in 'mixed-ability' groups at Westfield saw students positioned and positioning themselves very differently, with dominant discourses of ability (centring on motor skill performance in team sport settings) in PE strongly framing the enactment of grouping at this Key Stage and shaping many students' engagement with it as policy actors. Students' enthusiasm for the de-facto ability grouping that existed under the banner of chosen pathways reflected pressures of examination course contexts (for students in the Performance pathway) and a continued valuing of supportive learning relationships (among the girls in the Participation pathway particularly). Enthusiasm was, however, tempered by students recognising pedagogical limitations and inherent inequities in the opportunities that they were variously able to access or excluded from in PE in Key Stage 4. Students thus understood the significance and implications of their pathway 'choice' for their educational experiences and opportunities in PE in Key Stage 4 and not all were enthusiasts; some students were critics and others were copers.

Our data also affirmed that students draw on gender discourses to inform and explain their choices and behaviours as policy actors in the enactment of mixed-ability grouping in PE. At Westfield, the interplay of gender and ability discourses particularly influenced girls' positioning in relation to the different forms of mixed-ability grouping they encountered. As previous research has stressed (see e.g., Flintoff et al., 2008), there is a need for more studies that pursue more nuanced and, particularly, intersectional approaches in exploring differences in students' experiences and opportunities. The limitations of our sample and data precluded this approach from being pursued in this case study.

Finally, we reiterate Ball et al.'s (2012) emphasis that 'context is a mediating factor in the policy enactment work done in schools – and it is unique to each school – however similar they may seem to be' (p. 40). While our findings should be read in this light, we also suggest that they raise issues worthy of further investigation in larger scale research, with national and international reach. We see a particular need for further research and research-informed practice that seeks to challenge embedded inequities in PE grouping practices that centre on narrow definitions of ability, and the continued privileging of discourses that marginalise and exclude many young people. We also highlight the power of student voice in extending understanding of the learning experiences, environments and relations that students value and are seeking in PE (and other subjects) and in providing clear visions of more equitable and inclusive practices. Acknowledging this potential, as well as conceptualising students as policy actors, offers an important orientation for school leaders, teachers and researchers to leverage in efforts to advance grouping policies and practices in PE, and in secondary education more broadly.

## ETHICAL STATEMENT

The study was conducted in line with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> We have recently conducted a national survey of grouping practices in PE and the publication of findings are in progress.

<sup>2</sup> See footnote 1.

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