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An exploration of the impact of pupil grouping on peer relationships in three primary schools: implications for inclusion

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by

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Abstract

This empirical study took place over one academic year, in three primary schools in the North of England, with a total of 189 Year 5 and Year 6 children. Child voice was central to the research design and was used to explore the impact of pupil grouping on peer relationships and inclusion.

A case study methodology was adopted and data were gathered using focus group and individual interviews with children. Further data were collected using observations and sociometric methods.

Thorough analysis of the data found that children perceived that there were several reasons why they were grouped in particular ways. These reasons were related to perceptions of ability and perceptions of good working relationships. This study revealed that these decisions, made by teachers, did not have a negative impact on existing friendship groups. In other words, regardless of the grouping arrangements, children still remained a part of their original friendship group. However, the structure of ability grouping did create a notion that children were different and had different qualities and characteristics which were dependent on which ability group they belonged to.

By observing the actions of teachers in creating the groups and assigning meanings to these actions, opportunities were created for children to develop views that some children were intrinsically different as learners. Ultimately, the meaning and level of importance that children seemed to attach to these grouping decisions influenced who children believed they could and could not work with. Moreover, it influenced who children valued as a work partner. The conclusions drawn from the study provide new and original understanding related to the negative impact of ability grouping on peer relationships and inclusion. The more formal, structured and visible the grouping is, the more importance children seemed to attach to it and the greater its negative impact on inclusion.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

This thesis begins from the premise that inclusive schools "are concerned with how people learn together, how they treat one another and how they learn to live within the common world" (Ainscow et al., 2006a:1). Inclusive education and the values which underpin it can present challenging opportunities for schools and teachers when responding to a diverse student population. However, if "educational provision [is going to] be informed by principles of equity [and] respect for others", then importance needs to be attached to the scrutiny of school and classroom practices which may act to hinder the inclusion of some pupils (Heggarty, 2007:248). The experiences which children have on a day to day basis in the classroom will have an impact on their inclusion within the school as a whole: "inclusion and exclusion begin in the classroom" (Mittler, 2000:95). The way that children are grouped, within classrooms and between classrooms, is one aspect of school experience that could have an impact on whether or not the environment is inclusive of all pupils.

Schools in England are, and have always been, responsible for the type of grouping that they adopt. On a broad level these decisions relate to whether schools organise their pupils into age related classes or whether they use mixed age classes. Further to this, decisions are then made as to whether the pupils are grouped by ability or in mixed ability groups. If schools choose to group by ability, they then make further choices about how they will achieve this aim. Some schools may choose to stream and this is when pupils are placed in a particular class based on perceptions of their overall ability. Other schools may choose to set and this is when children are taught in classes for a particular subject (usually English and maths) based on perceptions of their ability in these subjects. An alternative option is for schools to use within class ability grouping where pupils are allocated to a particular table group in the classroom based on perceptions of their ability. The decisions related to age or mixed age classes are mainly based on logistical considerations such as the size of the school and the size of each cohort of pupils. The decisions related to ability or mixed ability are far more complex and some schools use a combination of both. So they might choose to group by ability for English and maths but then

choose to use mixed ability groups for the other curriculum subjects. Arguments surrounding the use of mixed ability grouping tend to focus on equity (MacQueen, 2009; Boaler and Staples, 2008) and arguments surrounding the use of ability grouping tend to focus on raising attainment (DfEE, 1997, Ofsted, 1998).

The term 'ability' is central to this study because of its use in relation to pupil grouping practices. Children can be allocated to ability groups based on their perceived general ability or on prior attainment (Hart et al., 2004). However, the term 'ability', 'attainment' and 'achievement' often become conflated or are used interchangeably (Dunne et al., 2007). Traditionally it has been claimed that ability or intelligence is a general factor which could be measured through IQ tests or similar standardised tests and "is seen as a genetic inheritance, a given amount of innate, general cognitive power distributed according to the normal patterns of variation of all naturally occurring phenomena" (Hart et al., 2004:6). This general factor is perceived to remain constant throughout life and therefore is fixed and immutable. Therefore when a child is defined as being 'high ability' or 'low ability', this can sometimes act as a description of what the child is and will always be. As such, "ability labels not only *explain* differences in attainment but also *predict* future events" (Hart et al., 2004:6).

Attainment on the other hand is a "national indicator of pupil learning and progress" and "attainment outcomes are influenced by, and produced through, the multiple, complex and inter-subjective social processes in schools" (Dunne et al., 2007:5). Sternburg (1985) argues that tests can only measure what has been learnt and are therefore measuring access to knowledge or learning opportunities rather than raw intelligence or ability. As such, tests measure attainment in a particular subject at a particular point in time and this provides the understanding that attainment is not fixed: it develops over time and in line with educational opportunities provided. Hart et al. (2004) also provide a cautionary message with regard to the use of the term 'ability'. They state that educational discussions about children revolve around classifying them as being a particular ability or having a certain level of intelligence (ibid). However, the fact that these words are used does not necessarily mean that they exist or that everybody has the same understanding of words such as 'ability' and 'intelligence' when they use them (ibid). These authors question whether, in

using the term 'ability', the implication is that there are very precise and particular differences between 'more able' and 'less able' that will always be present, or that a test has revealed a current difference in children's ability to perform certain tasks (ibid).

Schools in England have followed a statutory National Curriculum since 1989. Alongside this, is a process of regular testing where pupils are expected to meet specific standards at certain points in their education. Schools are compared against each other locally and nationally in league tables and are accountable to outside bodies, such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). As a consequence, attainment of pupils is important and needs to remain high (Hallam and Parsons, 2013a; Trigg-Smith, 2011; Whitburn 2001). Further to this, the return to using setting as a form of ability grouping seemed to be in response to the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) and National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1999). The intention of both of these strategies was to raise standards.

The previous Labour government (DfEE, 1997:38) recommended grouping by ability and in their white paper 'Excellence in Schools' stated that

> Unless a school can demonstrate that it is getting better than expected
>
> results through a different approach, we do make the presumption that
>
> setting should be the norm in secondary schools. In some cases, it is
>
> worth considering in primary schools.

Ofsted (1998) also seemed to support the use of setting on the basis that it would be effective in raising standards in the core subjects of English and maths. Following this, the previous Labour government in their green paper "Schools: Building on Success" (DfEE, 2001:51) advocated "further increases in the extent of setting within subjects". Before becoming Prime Minister, David Cameron stated in his leaders speech in Bournemouth:

> Individual children have individual needs, individual abilities
>
> individual interests. Real equality means giving every child the
>
> education that is best for them. That should mean more setting
>
> and streaming within schools - so each child can develop
>
> at the speed that works for them (Cameron, 2006).

This seems to indicate that the present government sees ability grouping as being beneficial, not only for raising standards, but also of educational benefit for the child. It allows children to be responded to as individuals and have their individual needs met. In addition to this, when the present Coalition government have expressed preferences and recommended a grouping method, then grouping by ability has always been the preference. This is demonstrated by the fact that more recently, there were rumours that the government would make setting compulsory in all secondary schools, resulting in the education secretary Nicky Morgan being forced to deny this (Morrison, 2014). However, a group of researchers from King's College London have been commissioned by the government to undertake a study with Year 7 and Year 8 pupils in 120 secondary schools (ibid). The purpose of this study is to try and separate the structure of setting from the impact of teaching to determine why some groups of pupils are falling behind. In other words, is setting the problem or is the approach to teaching within certain sets the problem (ibid).

It is therefore apparent that the previous Labour government and the present Coalition government see ability grouping as having a positive influence on standards and equality within education. These preferences could be related to the observations made by Ofsted about the inconsistencies of mixed ability teaching (Ofsted, 1995).

The arguments for and against ability grouping date back over many decades and remain relatively unchanged over time. Although, the previous and present government recommend setting as a structure which will increase attainment, the academic literature presents much more mixed findings which call into question the efficacy of setting. Arguments for ability grouping seem to start from the premise that there are significant enough differences between the abilities of different children to warrant teaching them in separate classes. These arguments discuss the perceived advantages of grouping by ability and these relate to increased attainment (Hallam and Parsons, 2013a; Macqueen, 2013); meeting the learning needs of the pupils (Kutnick et al., 2006; Hallam et al., 2004b); teaching is easier because the class are perceived to be homogenous (Boaler, 1997a) and increased opportunities for whole class, focused teaching (Boaler, 1997a). However, there are other arguments which

relate to the perceived disadvantages of ability grouping. Ability groups are seen as inequitable because in separating by ability, there is segregation across other factors as well, such as culture, gender, socio-economic background (Rosenbaum, 1980; Hallam and Parsons, 2013b). In addition to this ability grouping is seen to undermine the self-esteem and academic self-concept of certain groups of pupils and also affects their liking for school (Ireson et al., 1999; Hallam and Ireson, 2003). Further to this, ability grouping alters how teachers respond to certain groups of pupils (Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004); affects curriculum access (Dupriez, 2010) and set placement can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hallam et al., 2004a; Parsons and Hallam, 2014; Campbell, 2013).

My own personal interest regarding this much debated issue began during my career as a teacher which was set against a backdrop of change regarding attitudes towards ability grouping. I began my teaching career in a large junior school in the North of England in 1988. For the initial decade of my career all classes were taught as mixed ability groups. However, with the advent of the National Strategies, and the increased focus on end of key stage results, the grouping policy that the school adopted changed from mixed ability classes to set groups for maths and English. Gradually, over a number of years, the general consensus of opinion developed, for all members of staff including myself, that the set groupings were responsible for good end of key stage results in both of these core subjects. It was felt that the ability groups allowed the teaching strategies and the pace of each lesson to be much more focussed to meet the needs of individual children in each group.

In 2010 I left teaching to begin a Masters Degree in Inclusive Education at the University of Hull. This gave me the opportunity, through research for the dissertation, to explore teachers' and children's perceptions of ability grouping in one junior school. Through the use of group interviews with children, individual interviews with teachers and classroom observation, the feelings about and practicalities of ability grouping were explored. The findings revealed that the majority of pupils and all of the teachers were in favour of ability groups and there was a concurrence of opinion that its usage allowed a better quality of targeted teaching that allowed the educational needs of the children to be met.

My doctoral research, builds upon this Masters study as I was interested to explore pupil grouping more broadly, rather than just focusing on set grouping. I also wanted to see what impact different approaches to grouping might have on peer relationships and inclusion. I chose only to engage with the views of children because I felt strongly that it was the children themselves who would be able to reveal the extent to which grouping impacted on peer relationships and inclusion. Therefore the key rationale for this research study is that issues which may impact on the inclusion of some or all children cannot possibly be fully understood unless researchers engage with the children who experience these issues first hand. As such, the perceptions of children are very important in evaluating whether particular school systems are effective in providing an inclusive environment and it is important not to presume what these views might be based on other evidence. It is with this understanding that that I chose only to consult with children in this research study. This is not to say that the views of teachers and other adults who work in the school are unimportant. Rather that if pupils develop certain understandings about school structures or assign particular reasons to decisions that are made, then, for them, this is their reality.

This study aimed to explore the impact of pupil grouping on peer relationships and sought to understand whether pupil grouping also had an impact on inclusion. This empirical research study took place over one academic year, in three primary schools in the North East of England, with a total of 189 Year 5 and Year 6 pupils. A case study methodology was adopted.

The three primary schools were chosen specifically because they exhibited a range of different approaches to grouping. The "Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools" (Ofsted, 2002) looked at how schools dealt with the organisation of the curriculum subjects after the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy and National Numeracy Strategy. 31 schools were consulted and all these schools fell into one of the following models:

- Model 1 am: literacy and numeracy; pm: foundation subjects
- Model 2 am: literacy and numeracy with a foundation subject to provide variety and make better use of the longer morning session; pm: the remaining foundation subjects
- Model 3: literacy and numeracy taught at different times during the day, but often at the start of a session when the pupils were fresh

- Model 4: the elements of the literacy hour and the daily mathematics lesson taught at different points in the day, rather than as complete lessons
- Model 5: the content of the literacy and numeracy frameworks taught, but integrated within planning for the whole curriculum which made teaching objectives for all subjects clear and explicit (Ofsted, 2002:17).

Model 1-3 were the most frequently observed by Ofsted in this study. However, models 4 and 5 were considered more innovative because, rather than the literacy and numeracy strategy governing the curriculum model for the school, the literacy and numeracy strategy were adapted to meet the particular curriculum model of the school. One of the schools that was part of this research study (Newton Park) had a curriculum design that was aligned with Model 1. The curriculum of another school (Bridgeford) was aligned with Model 2 and the curriculum of the third school (River Close) used the most innovative of the designs, Model 5, which effectively 'hid' literacy and numeracy within the other subjects. As such, two of the schools, Newton Park and Bridgeford adopted a curriculum structure that allowed the implementation of setting, whereas the curriculum design at River Close could not accommodate setting. Further to this, the approaches to and values underpinning the curriculum at River Close meant that setting would not have been implemented in this setting.

The principal research questions were:

- What are children's perceptions of the decisions behind certain grouping arrangements?
- What understanding can we gain from children about the importance of friendship in relation to pupil grouping arrangements?
- What impact does pupil grouping appear to have on inclusion?

The thesis is divided into nine chapters, including this introduction.

Chapter two is divided into three main sections which explore the literature on grouping, peer relationships and inclusion. The chapter begins by broadly detailing the decisions which influence grouping structures before looking more specifically at ability and mixed ability grouping. The criteria used and the reasons behind allocating children to these groups is explored and this is then

followed by a discussion of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of these two types of grouping. The second section of the chapter concentrates on peer relationships and the third section on providing understanding related to inclusion. A summary of is provided at the end of the chapter to highlight the importance of the connections between grouping, peer relationships and inclusion.

Chapter three explores the methodology adopted in the research study. The research is positioned within a qualitative framework and the overall design is explored in relation to selection of schools, ethical considerations and research with children. In addition to this, the methods of sociometric measures, interviews and participant observation are explored in detail with specific reference to the literature.

Chapter four presents an overview of the three schools where the research took place.

Chapters five, six and seven explore the findings that relate to the three research questions.

Chapter eight discusses the relevance and significance of the findings in relation to inclusion.

Chapter nine presents the conclusions from the research study, explores the implications for practice and the limitations of the study. Finally, recommendations for future research are suggested.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This review initially aims to explore the literature related to the way in which children could be grouped in classrooms and the decisions which influence these groupings. Following on from this, the criteria used and the reasons for allocating children to both ability and mixed ability groups will be explored. Advantages and disadvantages of both of these types of grouping structures will be presented and discussed. Further to this, an understanding will be provided related to how different authors view the ways in which pupil grouping could impact on peer relationships and what impact this in turn could have on inclusion. The review of the literature refers extensively to empirical research based on the context of the UK. However, international literature will also be used where appropriate.

2.1 Grouping and decisions which influence grouping structures

Campbell (2013), states that children are grouped in a variety of different ways, both between classes in a school and within classrooms. She further argues that children may be subject to different levels of grouping (ibid.). An example of this could be a child who is placed in a particular class in the year group based on their age, might also be placed on a particular table in that classroom based on their perceived ability. Blatchford et al. (2008) propose that there are two levels of grouping: one within the school and one within the classroom. Decisions regarding allocation of children to classes are generally made at management level. However, within class grouping seems mainly to be a decision left to individual teachers (Kutnick et al., 2006). These decisions, made by individual teachers, mainly relate to whether within class grouping is ability based or mixed ability (Hallam et al., 2000). However, some schools have particular policies which ensure that within class grouping is consistently and uniformly applied in all year groups (Davies et al., 2003). Baines et al. (2003) concur with this view and see school grouping as being nested contexts. Children are grouped at the point of school entry but are then subject to further methods of grouping in the classroom environment. McPartland (1987:7) states that

> The practices of grouping, staffing and scheduling in particular schools
> and grades will be influenced by the demographic characteristics of students
> and staff (such as the school's enrolment size, grade levels, heterogeneity
> of student background, and distribution of teacher specializations),and by
> the school's underlying pedagogical assumptions about how best to deliver
> instruction to its students.

This suggests that pupil grouping is unique to individual schools and that there are a number of external factors that the school cannot control which will influence the allocation of children to classes and the grouping of children within classes. Gillard (2008) argues that there are several types of groups that children could be allocated to within schools: year groups, vertical groups, streaming, setting, within-class ability grouping, banding, mixed ability and random grouping. These grouping structures are sometimes initiated due to practical constraints and sometimes related to policy or particular pedagogical understandings. It is important to define these key terms relating to how children could be grouped.

When children are placed in year groups, they are grouped according to their chronological age and so within each class the range is no larger than 12 months (Gillard, 2008). Mostella et al. (1996) argue that using the criterion of age when grouping children also helps to create classes of a similar skill level. They state that older children will generally have a higher skill level so the use of age grouping helps to minimise the range and level of skills within each class. However this still creates issues related to birth date as research by Crawford, et al. (2007) shows that the youngest children in the year cohort (those born in August) perform less well academically than those who were born in September.

Vertical groups are classes that contain children from more than one year group and may result from the fact that the year cohorts are too small to allocate one year group to a single class (Gillard, 2008). However, this author argues that some infant schools, which are not constrained by pupil numbers, still choose to group pupils in vertical groups as a matter of policy.

Streaming occurs when children are placed into groups after a judgement has been made related to their perceived overall intelligence or ability. These classes represent a hierarchy and once assigned, children are taught in these classes for all subjects (Campbell, 2013).

Setting is sometimes referred to as ability grouping or tracking and occurs when children are regrouped for particular subjects based on their perceived ability in these subjects. Children are allocated to hierarchical groups usually based on test scores for individual subjects such as maths and English (Campbell, 2013).

Within-class ability grouping "refers to [the] division of a class into sub-groups, based on measured or perceived ability, for the purposes of general teaching or of teaching of a specific subject" (Campbell, 2013:5).

Gillard (2008), states that banding is another method of grouping for particular subjects based on perceived ability. It is similar to setting but is usually used with larger cohorts of pupils and there is more than one class in each band (ibid.). Generally the top 25% form one band, the bottom 25% another and there is a broad middle band consisting 50% of the cohort (ibid.).

Mixed ability groups are classes which contain a broad spread of perceived ability. If there are a number of mixed ability classes in a year group then there should be equality between the groups related to ability, gender and ethnicity (Gillard, 2008).

Random Grouping is rare (Gillard, 2008). No account is taken of ability but groups could be based on an alphabetical list (ibid.).

There have been a number of studies looking into the ways in which, and the motivations behind how schools group pupils and also how teachers choose to group pupils. Tibbenham et al. (1978) conducted research looking at pupil grouping in schools. They looked at a number of factors that could influence decisions when allocating children to groups such as school location, school size, class size, social background of the catchment area, range of pupil ability and the general values that the school held. These researchers looked specifically at comprehensive schools and whether any of the above factors influenced decisions to group by ability in sets or streams or whether to use

mixed ability grouping structures. The underlying aim of the study was to see whether comprehensive schools embraced the ideal of non-selection and made the system reflect society and its diversity and therefore by default create a greater level of tolerance and democracy. In the views of these authors the idea of setting or streaming in comprehensive schools would recreate the same effect as separating children out into grammar and secondary modern schools based on their ability. The study ultimately found that over 90% of pupils in the English comprehensive schools in the study were taught in sets or streams. It was found that in the schools that chose to use streaming to group their pupils, there were a high proportion of children within the school whose parents had manual jobs. In the schools that chose setting, there were a high proportion of pupils from non-manual backgrounds. The structure of setting is generally seen as being more flexible than the structure of streaming, with children being moved much more easily between set groups based on performance, as I will explain later. The findings of this study show, that in relation to schools who choose to adopt streaming, a key motivational factor seems to be related to the particular values that the schools holds. It could be argued that these values relate to a notion of fixed intelligence and a possible belief that children from families where parents work in manual jobs are more likely to work in manual jobs themselves.

In a more recent study, Hallam et al. (2004b) looked at the changes in grouping practices since 1990 in primary schools in England and the reasons and motivation for these changes. They concluded that most changes in pupil grouping were related to the need to raise academic standards. When looking at the reasons for grouping and the changes to grouping structures, three key areas emerged. The first key area was learning, where grouping decisions were related to differentiation, raising attainment and developing pupil skills. The second area was teaching and grouping decisions here related to potential benefits that could be envisaged and academic subject considerations such as the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy. The final key area related to practical issues where grouping decisions were made on the basis of school or cohort size or on the basis of the availability, or ease of allocation, of human or practical resources. These three key areas were deemed to underpin a move from mixed ability to ability groupings. It would seem then that schools saw

ability grouping as being a key factor in raising attainment and helping to support the delivery of a very prescriptive Literacy Strategy that was introduced with the intention of raising standards in reading and writing which would impact upon the Standard Assessment Tests at the end of each Key Stage. Blatchford et al. (2008) in their survey of recent research highlighted other areas of importance that schools and teachers considered when making decisions about grouping, both within the school as a whole but also within individual classrooms. These authors acknowledge the points that were raised previously relating to learning and teaching and the physical characteristics of the school and cohort size. However, they also raise other issues which impact on grouping decisions. The first of these is academic subject concerns which may encourage schools to alternate between different grouping strategies depending on the subject discipline. Schools may also want to make use of individual teacher expertise for certain subjects. Secondly, these authors state that grouping decisions may be influenced by the availability of a range of resources. These could be human resources such as teaching staff, teaching assistants and parents, or environmental resources such as classroom space and space within the timetable. A final point that is of importance is the resulting evaluations of the effectiveness of previous grouping structures. Blatchford et al. (2008) state that schools may make adaptations based on the success or lack of success of structures implemented previously.

Not only do schools make decisions about how to group cohorts of children into classes, teachers also make decisions about how to group children within classrooms. Kutnick et al. (2005a:1) argue that within class grouping

> Is an ambiguous term which may refer to practical seating arrangements, various group sizes (ranging from individuals to the whole class) and compositions (ability, gender age etc), and the assignment of various classroom learning tasks.

Although the grouping and allocation of children to classes may be seen to be much more constant over time, it could be argued that classroom grouping structures do not remain static for each lesson or even during the course of a lesson. The understanding that group size may range from just one child up to the whole class would indicate that teachers will use different ways of grouping children during the course of the lesson to suit different methods of instruction.

The reference to learning tasks also indicates that different subjects and activities would require different types of grouping. So within class grouping would seem to be a much more fluid and flexible arrangement.

Kutnick et al. (2005a) conducted a naturalistic study aimed at looking at the range of different grouping strategies within secondary school classrooms and teachers' explanations for the groupings that they chose to adopt throughout the course of different lessons. Their results showed that in most cases group formation was related to individual teacher preferences, behaviour and the physical environment of the classroom such as the amount and design of classroom furniture and the number of pupils in the group. Whole class grouping tended to be used at the beginning and end of lessons and smaller groupings for the middle section. They stated that "teachers often associated large (whole class) groupings with control and assessment of learning material; small groupings for discussion; and individuals for application and practice" (Kutnick et al. 2005a:14). Baines et al. (2003) looked at the nature and use of grouping practices in primary and secondary schools in an attempt to see whether and how grouping structures changed with the age of the children. Key points emerged from this study which indicated that as children became older the manner in which they were grouped in classrooms changed. Older pupils were more likely to experience some form of ability grouping and more formal seating arrangements. The researchers explained these findings as being a reaction to a decreasing amount of adult support in classrooms as the children got older. They state that grouping in the classroom and between classrooms, by ability, could be seen to make the task of teaching, without extra adult support, much easier because work could be differentiated for individual groups. Another key finding was the fact that grouping in classrooms affected pupil interaction. Groups of 4-6 pupils at primary age lead to most work being individuated i.e. that although pupils were allowed to interact with each other they had an individual task to complete. A predominant use of row and paired seating at secondary age lead to a higher prevalence of peer interactive work. The results of this study links with the views of McPartland et al. (1987) who stated that grade level was a strong correlate of all school practices including ability grouping and teacher assignment.

There seems to be number of generic factors that seem to be important when teachers make decisions about grouping. These factors seem to underpin and be applicable to all grouping decisions regardless of whether they were based on perceived ability or mixed ability. The first of these is for teachers to be able to meet the pupils' academic needs through strategies such as differentiation and, in doing so, have a positive effect on learning and attainment (Hallam et al., 2004b; Kutnick et al., 2006). Secondly, teachers expressed the importance of flexibility in the grouping structures to enable them to teach more effectively and respond to the requirements of different subjects (Hallam et al., 2004b). This seems to indicate that one method of grouping does not suit all subjects and therefore teachers need to have the flexibility to adapt aspects of their pedagogy and to be able to do this in a fluid and responsive manner. Peer relationships are also an important consideration and teachers seem to want to ensure that pupils can develop the social skills and be able to work together (Hallam et al. 2004b). As such, an importance was also placed on reducing or eliminating incidents of poor behaviour (Hallam et al. 2004a). Sometimes this involved teachers taking gender into consideration as mixed gender groups were seen to assist with good behaviour (Hallam et al., 2004a). On other occasions teachers considered friendships groups if these arrangements were able to promote good work habits (Kutnick et al., 2006) Finally, there was also a wish to create a cultural mix within groups (Kutnick et al., 2006).

Therefore, the grouping of children within schools and classrooms seems to be partly a response to practical and logistical considerations, partly to do with pedagogical considerations but also due to the influences of government policy. Many of the grouping structures adopted have the perceived ability of the children as an important factor influencing where children are placed both within classrooms and between classrooms. From a whole school perspective there seems to be a need to narrow the potential range of ability of the teaching group either by grouping children based on their chronological age or by setting, streaming or banding cohorts of pupils. This leads to fairly fixed groups where there is little potential for change or movement. Individual class groupings seem to be more flexible and formed as a response to different lessons.

In the following sections, research into ability grouping and mixed ability grouping will be explored.

Ability groups are formed when children are separated into groups based on their perceived ability. There are several distinct types of ability group, as previously mentioned. However, I wish to focus on two specific forms of ability grouping: setting where children are allocated to classes for a particular subject based on their perceived ability and within-class ability grouping where children are assigned to desks in the classroom based on their perceived ability. These two particular methods of grouping pupils are important to this study because they were adopted by two of the schools where the research took place. However, there will also be some understanding provided related to streaming; certainly in relation to the effects of streaming on peer relationships. In the context of this thesis, it is important to explore whether some of the effects of streaming could be reproduced when assigning pupils to set groups or allocating them to within class table groups.

A longitudinal study conducted by Hargreaves (1967) focused on streamed classes in one secondary modern school in the North of England. What emerged from this study was that in organising pupils into five streams and then responding to them in different ways, teachers could influence how pupils felt about each other. The higher the stream, the more positive the views of the teachers about the pupils and the more connection the pupils felt with the overall values of the school. In addition to this academic stratification introduced by the teachers, there was a resulting social stratification in the pupil group. Friendships became almost entirely restricted to the particular stream that a pupil was in. Moreover, pupils developed negative views and feelings towards pupils who were not in their particular stream. The negative views about each other were the most extreme between those pupils in the highest stream and the lowest stream. These findings are significant when exploring the impact of ability grouping on peer relationships. Even though streaming and setting are different forms of ability grouping, pupils are still being allocated to groups based on perceptions of their inherent natures as learners. Judgements are being made related to which pupils are considered sufficiently similar to enable them to be taught together. The grouping structures themselves present an overt message to the pupils related to differences in their ability and allow comparisons to be made. In addition to this, the study by Hargreaves (1967) demonstrates that streaming had an impact on how pupils felt about each other

and how they felt about the school. Pupils developed positive peer relationships with pupils within their own stream and pupils in the higher streams felt much more positively about the school. I wish to explore whether setting and within class ability grouping might engender similar responses in the pupil population.

In the following sections, the initial aim is to develop an understanding related to the criteria that are used and the decision making processes that are involved when allocating children to ability groups and mixed ability groups. Secondly, the reasons behind schools choosing to use these particular grouping practices will be explored. Finally, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of ability and mixed ability groupings will be detailed.

2.2 Criteria used to allocate pupils to ability groups

The following table details the criteria that are considered by schools and teachers when allocating children to ability groups.

Table 1 – criteria used when allocating pupils to ability groups

Criteria used when children are allocated to ability groups	
Tests are used to allocate children to ability groups – school devised tests, standardised tests, baseline tests and statutory tests.	Davies et al. (2003) Ireson et al. (2002a) Hallam and Deathe (2002)
Test information is considered more important in maths and science than in English.	Ireson et al. (2002a)
Tests can be supplemented by additional information	Ofsted (1998)
Additional information from school reports	Davies et al. (2003)
Additional information from talking to pupils	Davies et al. (2003)
Additional information from talking to parents	Davies et al. (2003)
Parental pressure if parents do not agree with the decision that the school has made regarding group allocation or movement between groups.	Davies et al. (2003) MacQueen (2013)
Teacher knowledge of the child	Davies et al. (2003) Ireson et al. (2002a)
Classwork is taken into consideration	Hallam and Deathe (2002)
Whether teachers think that the child might respond better to a male or female teacher	Davies et al. (2003)
Some children exhibiting poor behaviour can be allocated to a lower group regardless of their perceived ability.	Blatchford et al. (2008)
Separating problematic groups of pupils	Ireson et al. (2002a) MacQueen (2013)
Some pupils that were seen to be disruptive were placed in lower groups.	MacQueen (2013)

Keeping children with some friends	Ireson et al. (2002a)
Consideration of gender to create balanced groups	Ireson et al. (2002a)
Lower sets are generally smaller than higher sets. This enables children with SEN to be catered for without having withdrawal groups.	Ireson et al. (2002a) MacQueen (2009) MacQueen (2013) Kutnick et al. (2006)
The size of the year group affects the number of sets	Ireson et al. (2002a) Hallam and Parsons (2013a)
Some schools are beginning to look at motivational and attitudinal factors when allocating children to sets.	Ireson et al. (2002a)
Making sure that some pupils had good role models	MacQueen (2013)
Some average students were placed in high sets to make sure that numbers in other sets were kept low	MacQueen (2013)

It can be seen from the table above that a range of factors are used when allocating pupils to ability groups and therefore, it could be argued that in most schools these decisions are not just based on the results of tests. Teachers also take other work related factors into consideration such as seeking opinions from other adults who know the pupils well and looking at other performance data from classwork and previous school reports. In addition to this, other child-related factors are also important such as gender, teacher interpretations of attitude towards the subject, behaviour and motivation. There is also an understanding that teachers wish to respond to the needs of particular groups of pupils such as those defined as having special educational needs by reducing the size of certain groups and also respond to individual pupils with regard to a consideration of the gender of the teacher. A study conducted by Davies et al. (2003) looked at how decisions were made to allocate children to groups and how schools documented their decisions. Views of teachers and children were consulted. The researchers believed that it was not enough to rely purely on data from tests in order to create ability groups and their findings supported this understanding. They realised that at primary level many factors influenced the way groups were formed. However, although these other factors are present in the literature there is still a strong feeling that these factors provide supplementary information. The important information, which dominates the decisions that are made, is provided by the results of tests.

2.3 Reasons for allocating children to ability groups

Schools have many reasons for using ability based grouping systems. Davies et al. (2003) noted that there has been an increase in ability grouping in primary schools as a result of pressure to raise standards; the publication of league tables and also recommendations by the previous government in their white paper 'Excellence in schools' (1997) which stated that ability grouping should be considered normal practice in secondary schools and be highly recommended in primary schools. Schools are accountable to outside bodies and therefore attainment needs to be high (Hallam and Parsons, 2013a; Trigg-Smith, 2011; Hallam et al. 2004b.) Teachers perceive that setting has a positive impact on attainment (Hallam and Parsons, 2013a; MacQueen, 2013) and also assists in the preparation for national tests (Hallam et al. 2002). Ireson et al. (1999) link an increase in setting to a response to the National Curriculum and the levels and assessment requirements that came with it. They argue that, in schools, children are generally grouped on the basis of their age but may be working higher than or lower than the expectations for their age. Being able to group children based on the results of tests helps schools to deal with these perceived differences in ability. Trigg-Smith (2011) concurs in part with the views of Ireson et al. (1999) but rather than taking the view that the National Curriculum has been instrumental in pushing schools towards ability grouping she believes that it has encouraged schools to think more about the way pupils are grouped. She argues that "policies promoting inclusion and social cohesion which are based on premises of equity, often conflict with accountability policies, which demand that schools also take extraordinary measures to raise attainment levels" (Trigg-Smith, 2011:29). Whitburn (2001), states that the move towards setting is curriculum based. She argues that usually differences in attainment within the class have been managed by table ability grouping and differentiation but her view is that the requirements of the National Numeracy Strategy has seen schools move towards setting for mathematics. The feeling that the demands of certain subjects can be met more effectively through ability grouping is apparent in the literature and particularly related to maths (Ireson et al.2002a). Many teachers thought that maths was the most suitable for setting and the least suitable for mixed ability teaching

The reasons for these differences are likely to be related to

the extent to which learning in these subjects is perceived as

linear and building directly on prior knowledge and the extent to

which differentiation can occur through learning outcomes rather

than the setting of differentiated tasks (Hallam and Ireson (2003:354).

Baines et al. (2003) state that, as pupils get older, they are more likely to experience whole class, ability based groups for the core subjects. In relation to the points made above, the fact that the maths curriculum is more highly differentiated through tiered papers in secondary school, could be one reason why more secondary schools set for maths. In a study by Kutnick et al. (2005a) maths classes showed the highest proportion of setting.

Boaler (1997a) presents an additional view as to why some teachers favour ability grouping. Her view is that teachers find it easier to respond to pupil need based on the perception that the class is a homogenous group. Ability grouping is seen to reduce the heterogeneity within the class and as a result the view is that similar students can be taught together because they will have similar requirements. This in turn leads to an assumption that the whole class can be taught from the front and the lesson can be pitched at the correct level to suit all pupils.

Finally, ability grouping allows resources to be allocated much more effectively (Hallam and Parsons, 2013a). These resources could be related to teacher expertise, teaching assistants to support certain pupils and physical resources to support learning (ibid.)

2.4 Criteria used to allocate pupils to mixed ability groups

The following table details the criteria that are considered to be important when teachers allocate children to mixed ability groups.

Table 2 – criteria used when allocating pupils to mixed ability groups

Criteria used when allocating pupils to mixed ability groups	
Friendships	Davies et al. (2003) Hallam et al. (2000)
Maintaining good behaviour	Davies et al. (2003) Hallam et al. (2000)
Maintaining positive working relationships	Davies et al. (2003) Hallam et al. (2000)
Ability of pupils within the group to remain on task	Davies et al. (2003) Hallam et al. (2000)
Making sure that pupils with SEN were only in certain classes so that adult support can be targeted.	Ireson et al. (2002a)
To place pupils considered to be disruptive into separate classes.	MacQueen (2009)
Creating a balance of gender	Hallam et al. (2000)

2.5 Reasons for allocating children to mixed ability groups

When looking at the criteria that schools use to allocate children to mixed ability groups, there are close similarities between these and the reasons that teachers presented with regard to ability grouping. The majority of the supplementary considerations which were used secondary to, but in conjunction with test scores, appear to dominate the decisions made in mixed ability classrooms. Therefore rather than prioritising an understanding of ability, teachers make their decisions based on social and relational issues. However, when exploring grouping structures within a range of schools, Kutnick et al. (2005b) found that 90% of groupings were made up of friends or a mixture of friends and others. Of these friendship and mixed ability groups, 76% were similar ability and 81% same gender. Therefore, even though the intention of the teacher is to create groups that are more diverse related to ability and gender the resulting groups do not necessarily reflect this intention. The teachers who used mixed ability grouping structures, seemed to have particular values and beliefs which underpinned their decisions. Just like the teachers who chose to group by perceived ability, they also believed that their decisions would result in higher pupil attainment at the end of the key stage (Hallam et al., 2000). They also believed that mixed ability groups were a way of raising standards for all groups of pupils (Davies et al., 2003). The reasons which they

gave for this increased attainment though were very different to the reasons given by the teachers who chose to use ability grouping. The teachers, who ability grouped, saw increased attainment as being as a result of teachers being better able to respond to pupil need. This response was through a reduction in heterogeneity, targeted resources, targeted adult support, a differentiated curriculum across groups and teaching the whole class from the front of the classroom. In other words, teachers seemed to hold themselves and their particular actions and responses solely responsible for pupil outcomes. However, when looking at the responses from teachers in mixed ability classrooms, they seemed to see progress and increased attainment as being related to peer support and collaboration. In this context, the teacher did not have the sole responsibility but a shared responsibility with the class. In a study by Hallam et al. (2000), teachers spoke about mixed ability groups providing opportunities for children to work together with other pupils of differing abilities in a collaborative way. Teachers believed that the children that they perceived as being lower ability had the benefit of listening to the contributions of those considered to be higher ability. In other words, they had positive academic role models. As a result of this collaboration and support, pupils developed their social skills and all pupils seemed to more confident as a result.

Many of the studies which explored the criteria used by schools to allocate pupils to mixed ability or ability based groups, also consulted with pupils to determine what they perceived these decisions to be based on. Many of the responses bore a clear resemblance to the revelations gained from the adults in the school. A study by Hallam et al. (2000) investigated the opinions of children related to ability grouping. They looked at pupils' awareness of grouping structures within the school and their findings showed that pupils had an understanding of grouping and the reasons leading to groups being formed. The understanding gained from these pupils seemed to reflect the understanding gained from their teachers. Pupils thought that one of the reasons for setting was to help them get the best education. Pupils thought that setting was implemented so that teachers could give pupils work which was matched to their ability. They referred to 'brainy children' who could do hard work in the top set, while other children could work more slowly because they were perceived to struggle. Pupils thought that one of the reasons for setting was so that

everyone was the same and therefore no time was wasted. They perceived that they were in ability groups because children in the different groups worked at different speeds and it was their ability that caused them to work at a certain pace. Pupils also thought that another one of the reasons for setting was that some pupils needed more help from the teacher. An additional reason in their view was the fact that teachers were good at different subjects and therefore some teachers could help children more effectively. In a subsequent study by Hallam et al. (2004a), children referred to national testing as a reason for setting and perceived that ability groups could help them prepare for SATs. In addition to this, pupils perceived that they were in ability groups so that work could be matched to their differing abilities. They thought that children in different sets got different work. They also understood that sometimes behaviour was a factor that teachers considered when allocating children to groups.

When discussing mixed ability groups, pupils thought that mixed ability classes enabled them to get ideas from other pupils and enabled everyone to work together (Hallam et al. 2000). These arrangements made the classroom far more equitable because it meant that they did not make fun of pupils assigned to a lower group (ibid.). Logistically, pupils thought that the teacher wanted to achieve a mixture of girls and boys on each table and also believed that the teachers did not put all the friends together on one table otherwise they would talk (ibid.).

2.6 Advantages of ability grouping

There are a number of perceived advantages to ability grouping and these advantages were expressed by Head teachers, teachers and pupils. These advantages were mainly related to outcomes for pupils and meeting the particular needs of all pupils but with emphasis on those pupils who were considered to be high achievers and those considered to be low achievers. These factors seemed to have a positive impact in the pupils' confidence, liking for school, self-esteem and self-concept. Schools that chose to use ability groups seemed to regard test information as being a reliable indicator of ability and academic potential (Ireson et al., 2002a). As such, true ability and potential was perceived to be able to be measured with standardised tests or Cognitive Ability Tests (ibid.).

Once children have been allocated to sets based on the results of tests and supplementary information has been taken into consideration, it enabled them to be taught more effectively (Dupriez, 2010; Muijs and Dunne, 2010). As a result of the heterogeneity of the class appearing reduced, there was a belief that attainment could consequently be increased (Slavin, 1987). Head teachers thought that ability groups were beneficial in raising attainment in literacy and maths (Kutnick et al. 2006) and primary school teachers thought that setting improved the academic outcomes of all pupils (Hallam et al., 2000). The advantages related to progress and achievement seemed to focus on the children who were allocated to the higher groups. Teachers believed that ability grouping enables and accelerates the progress of those children perceived to be higher ability (Hallam and Ireson, 2003; Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004; Kutnick et al., 2006). This view is also held by some pupils who thought that ability grouping helped them achieve well in SATs (Hallam et al., 2004a; Hallam et al., 2000). They believed that this was because they were not held back by pupils who they considered to be less able (ibid.). A number of studies focused on attainment in relation to ability grouping. Ireson et al.(2002b) stated that for pupils with similar attainment at key stage two (KS2), the children in the higher group made better progress, this was particularly evident in maths. Ireson and Hallam (2001) found that pupils in high sets achieved one quarter of a grade more at GCSE, when compared to those in mixed ability groups. Two very recent studies also drew attention to the benefits of separating children perceived as being more able from others in the cohort. Higgins et al.(2013) argued that high attaining learners benefit from being in separate classes or being part of specific withdrawal groups. They found that progress for these children could be accelerated by 3-12 months. Parsons and Hallam (2014), when looking at streamed groups as opposed to set groups, revealed that being in a top stream, when compared to children not in streams, lead to higher academic attainment in reading, writing, maths and science at key stage one (KS1). Although these gains in attainment are focused on the higher groups, Higgins et al. (2013) stated that certain types and conditions of ability grouping can have positive effects on the progress of lower attaining pupils. The circumstances that they suggest are a reduction in the size of the group, involvement in 'catch up' programmes and the allocation of experienced and competent teachers to this particular group.

Advantages related to ability grouping were not just restricted to increased attainment for some groups of pupils. There were also advantages related to teaching and being able to meet the needs of all pupils. Slavin (1987) argues that it is easier to respond to the needs of all pupils if the teaching group is homogenous. Hallam and Ireson (2003) concur with this point of view when stating that both teaching and classroom management become easier and it enables teachers to match work to pupil need. MacQueen (2009) revealed that Head teachers believed that teachers could meet the academic need of pupils more effectively when teaching ability groups. However, she does state that this view was not upheld in teacher interviews or classroom observations. When the class is considered to be made up of homogenous or similar pupils, the teacher is able to adopt a didactic, teacher lead approach and this is seen to be much more efficient (Baines et al., 2003). Support staff can be targeted and ability grouping allows teachers with particular subject specialisms to be used to target specific groups (Hallam et al., 2000). Primary school teachers thought that it enabled them to be more focused when teaching the whole class (ibid.).

With regard to those pupils perceived to be higher ability, the teacher is able to increase the lesson pace and the level of work (Muijs and Dunne, 2010). Teachers are able to meet the needs of these pupils by providing a more challenging curriculum (Askew and Wiliam, 1995) and this spurs the high achievers to work even harder (Slavin, 1987; Hallam and Ireson 2003). As a result, pupils in higher sets prefer ability grouping (Hallam and Ireson, 2006). Their interest in school is maintained, as are good student/teacher relations, which is in contrast to students in other groups whose interest in school and teacher relations decline over time (Vogl and Preckel, 2013).

Regarding those pupils who are considered to be low achievers, ability grouping enables teachers to provide individual attention and consolidation of work (Muijs and Dunne, 2010). This often manifests itself in the creation of smaller groups for these pupils (Davies et al., 2003). In addition to this, children who are considered to be lower achievers are prevented from having to compete with other high achieving pupils and as a result they have a chance of experiencing success (Slavin, 1987).

Ability grouping also seems to have a positive impact on pupils' confidence, liking for school, self-esteem and self-concept. MacQueen (2009) found that students in schools that adopted setting, were less negative about their life at school. A similar finding emerged in the work of Vogl and Preckel (2013) in relation to pupils who were in 'gifted' classes. MacQueen (2009) states that this increased liking for school could be related to increased confidence as a result of pupils working at a level that is right for them. Hallam and Deathe (2002) noted that as children gain more experience of ability grouping they tend to like it more. However, these authors did comment that, in this particular study, the views of the children in middle and upper sets had disguised the views of those children in the low sets. With regard to academic self-concept, Ireson and Hallam (2009) found that this was higher for maths, English and science for children in the higher ability group. This was found to be so even if their actual attainment was similar to children placed in the middle and lower group. Therefore, in this study, group placement made a difference as far as the pupils were concerned. However, in research conducted by Liem et al. (2015) looking at the effects of streaming in secondary schools in Singapore, they reported that pupils have a higher academic self-concept if they achieve more highly than their peers within their particular ability group. They argue that pupils have a tendency to compare themselves with other students who they regularly come into contact with; those students in the same class group or ability group. They seem to compare what they are able to do with what most others seem capable of. As such, "the smarter my peers in general, the less capable I see myself; the lower the achievement of my peers in general, the more capable I see myself" (Liem et al., 2015:84). Therefore, this study illustrates that the reference point for children is not necessarily which group they are in, but how they attain in relation to their peers within that group. Findings from a previous study revealed that streaming has a positive effect on the academic self-concept of middle and low attaining pupils (Liem et al., 2013). Both these studies seem to provide support for the argument used by teachers in support of ability grouping, namely that lower attaining pupils will not have their confidence undermined by children who they perceive as being significantly more capable (Hallam and Ireson, 2003). Vogl and Preckel (2013) noted that pupils in gifted classes not only experienced a higher academic self-concept but also a higher social self-concept. The authors believe that this could be related to the fact that they no

longer feel alienated or rejected by their peers. This observation was also present in the work of Hallam et al. (2000) who stated that primary teachers thought that setting helped to eliminate the stigmatisation of certain pupils. Teachers thought that high ability pupils would be bullied and teased in mixed ability classrooms and could also be inhibited by negative values from their peers (Hallam and Ireson, 2003).

Pupils also showed an understanding of why they believed ability grouping to be advantageous. In research conducted by Hallam et al. (2004a) which focused on the opinions of pupils, they revealed that pupils thought that setting enabled better teaching, better explanations, enabled harder work to be given and also that work could be set at an appropriate level. In addition to this pupils thought that it gave them the opportunity to work with a different teacher and also different pupils (ibid.).

As a final point, some teachers felt that it could aid transition from key stage one to key stage two if the same ability grouping strategies were adopted in both key stages (Hallam et al., 2000). A similar point could be applied to the transition between primary and secondary school.

2.7 Disadvantages of ability grouping

Slavin (1987), states that one of the strongest arguments against the use of ability grouping is based around equity. He argues that ability grouping creates an academic elite and could therefore be considered undemocratic. Rosenbaum (1980) states that ability groups do not just segregate by ability, they also segregate by race, class, culture and socioeconomic background. Mostella et al. (1996) concur with this final point and state that grouping by ability has implications related to socio-economic segregation and also ethnic segregation. When studying ability groups in secondary school environments, Ireson et al., (2002a:164) noted that "an uneven balance of groups in terms of social class, ethnicity, gender and season of birth also indicates that factors other than ability are implicated when pupils are assigned to groups". In relation to age, a recent study by Campbell (2013) showed that older pupils within the year group were up to two times more likely to be found in the highest set, stream or group; whereas the youngest were up to two times more likely to be

found in the middle or lowest set, stream or group. These patterns were most evident when streaming and least evident when ability grouping within a class but the pattern was still significant (ibid.). A further study by Campbell (2014), which focused on streaming, found that older pupils were more likely to be found in the highest stream. Hallam and Parsons (2013a) found that autumn born children were over represented in the top set (4 out of 10) and summer born children were over-represented in the lowest set (3 out of 10). In relation to gender, boys are significantly over-represented in the low sets and girls in the high sets (MacQueen, 2013). Hallam and Parsons (2013b) noted that there were a higher percentage of boys in the lowest literacy set, when compared with other set groups. This pattern is also evident when streaming (Campbell, 2014). When looking at socio-economic background, social segregation is increased when early structured grouping practices are introduced (Hallam and Parsons, 2013a). Reid (1986) believes that in differentiating from an academic perspective one cannot help but also differentiate from a social perspective. McQueen (2009:2) also argues that the system of setting is "reflecting and reinforcing a class hierarchy". This view is upheld by Kutnick et al. (2005b) who argue that achievement has been linked with social class and lower socio-economic groups perform less well. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be assigned to the lower sets (Higgins et al., 2013), whereas the opposite is true for children from more advantaged backgrounds (Hallam and Parsons, 2013b). Children in the top sets are more likely to have excellent general health and better attendance (Hallam and Parsons, 2013b). Again the opposite is true for those children allocated to the lower sets. There is also a strong relationship between the qualifications of the child's mother and the set group of the child (Hallam and Parsons, 2013b). The child tends to be in a higher set if the mother has good qualifications i.e degree level or higher (Campbell 2014). In addition to this, children in the lower set are more likely to come from single parent families (Hallam and Parsons, 2013b). Campbell (2014) also noted that children with a recognised special education need are also more likely to be in the lower group or stream. Therefore, it can be seen that in stratifying the pupil population using one criterion, such as ability, stratification along many other dimensions happens as a consequence. Ireson and Hallam (1999) looked at the claim that ability grouping had a long term social effect because of the fact that the lower sets contained more socio-

economically deprived pupils and also pupils who could be at risk from educational and social marginalisation such as ethnic minorities and boys. They believe that this could have an effect on lifelong learning because ability grouping could "be perceived as denying educational opportunity to particular groups of pupils" (Ireson and Hallam, 1999:349). Ireson and Hallam (2001) see the detrimental effects of ability grouping as not only affecting present educational opportunities but also impacting on future opportunities by limiting life chances and perpetuating the cycle of social exclusion. Dupriez (2010) states, that from a social point of view, the school classroom needs to reflect the diversity of population that people could meet as part of their everyday adult life.

In addition to arguments surrounding equity, there are other strong arguments related to the disadvantages of ability grouping. These include: the reliability of test information; restricted movement between groups; impact on the way teachers view pupils and the resulting impact on pedagogy; impact on self-esteem, self-concept and liking for school; impact on attainment; impact on peer relationships and narrowing of the curriculum. These arguments will be explored in the following sections.

Test data alone can be unreliable when allocating children to sets and other data needs collecting to supplement test data and give a broader picture (Ofsted, 1998; Davies et al., 2003). It is also recognised that there are difficulties when trying to equate achievement, attainment and potential (Ireson et al., 2002a). Ireson and Hallam (1999) argue that there are issues related to the placement of pupils in groups based on the assumption that they are a similar ability, particularly if a single test is used to allocate children to those groups at the exclusion of other evidence. This calls into question the reliability of testing in determining the particular ability of children. This point is very important considering that the results of tests are used to allocate children to groups and are also seen as a measure of ability. Heathers (1967) believes there to be a danger if groupings are formed on the basis of IQ or on the scores achieved in an intelligence test because learning characteristics will not be adequately represented. He argues that "a student's ease and rate of learning varies greatly from one learning task to another. Also, his level of achievement varies considerably from one curriculum area to another, and from topic to topic or task to task within each area" (Heathers, 1967:14). This would indicate that

IQ is not accurate in determining individual subject competency or in predicting aptitudes in particular elements of subject knowledge and skills. Consequently it would seem that ability is mutable and not fixed and therefore needs to be assessed within the context of individual curriculum subjects. Traditionally it has been claimed that ability could be measured through IQ tests and, more recently, in schools through statutory and non-statutory testing giving rise to levels of attainment. These tests lead to children being labelled as 'more able', 'less able', 'high ability' and 'low ability'. These categories are often linked to something fixed and unchangeable within the child and seem to have been legitimised in schools because of the drive to track pupils' progress as they move through the education system (DCSF, 2009). These labels seem to act as descriptions of what the child is and will always be. Sternburg (1985) discusses an alternative view that intelligence needs to be seen as developing abilities rather than the fixed characteristics of an individual. As such, tests can only ever measure what has been learnt, so in effect they are measuring access to knowledge or opportunities given. As such, it can be argued that tests, at best, can only measure attainment at one point in time indicating that ability is not a constant factor and part of someone's physiological make-up like height or hair colour.

Ireson et al. (2002a) raise a further issue related to the reliability of test scores. They argue that when test scores are used, there is very little difference in test raw score between children allocated to a higher group and children positioned in the group below. Sometimes children may even have scored exactly the same, yet are placed in different groups (ibid.). McIntyre and Ireson (2000) noted that there was an overlap in test scores between children in the top and middle set and children in the middle and low set. These discrepancies could be a result of logistical considerations because when test scores are used there has to be a point where one group has sufficient numbers and so the next child on the hierarchical list would be allocated to the group below. It could also be argued that some pupils might be disadvantaged through schools using particular types of tests or reporting test scores as raw scores rather than standardised scores. However, it could also happen as a result of teachers using other criteria to supplement the test data. Davies et al. (2003) state that allocation of particular pupils to particular sets is sometimes related to their

behaviour. Schools may attempt to separate particular pupils from others and also allocate pupils seen to have problematic behaviour to a more experienced teacher. Eder (1981) believes that inattentive or challenging pupils tend to be located in the lower ability set and that this inattentive behaviour spreads to other members of the group. She argues that "those students who were likely to have more difficulty learning [are] inadvertently assigned to groups whose social contexts were much less conducive for learning" (Eder, 1981:159). This concurs with the findings of other research studies which also state that more behaviour problems are located in the lower sets (Hallam and Ireson, 2003; Hallam and Parsons, 2013; Campbell, 2014). Research by Campbell (2014), states that teachers' perceptions of pupils' ability and attainment are linked with children's placement in streams. Campbell (2014) also found that there was an overlap concerning children who scored the same on cognitive tests but were in different streams (Campbell, 2014).

Davies et al. (2003) state that once groups are formed based on particular results and decisions, there needs to be flexibility and sufficient mobility between groups based on achievements, monitoring and reassessment. This opportunity to review decisions is particularly important for all pupils in all groups and supports the view that the set group is not a homogenous group but a varied group that need responding to on an individual basis. However, they also recognise that even if the progress of pupils was reviewed on a regular basis there are other issues that may lead to group movement being restricted such as the lack of physical and logistical space in a different set. As a result pupils can "become 'stuck' in groups because the structures do not facilitate ease of movement" (Davies et al., 2003). Ireson et al. (2002a) concur with this view that although flexibility of movement between sets is good for pupil motivation, in reality it is often difficult to achieve. They put forward a number of arguments related to why pupil movement is restricted. Firstly, it is often the case that different sets cover different work at different times, and so by moving groups a pupil might end up missing or repeating work. Top groups work at a faster pace and therefore this decreases flexibility and movement between sets (MacQueen, 2013). Pupils in lower sets know that there is little chance of moving because they are not being taught material that appears on the test (Boaler et al., 2000). Secondly, it was noted that some schools saw a problem

in responding swiftly to assessment outcomes because teachers could not always be sure whether the score related to ability or to underachievement. "Some schools [were] grappling with the problem of whether motivational or attitudinal factors should be allowed to influence their decisions, while others [were] concerned to find ways of distinguishing between ability and attainment" (Ireson et al., 2002a:172). This highlights the fact that a range of data, potentially over a period of time, are needed both when allocating pupils to sets and also when moving pupils between sets.

Slavin (1987), in his review of the literature on ability grouping, raised a further disadvantage related to the way teachers react to teaching certain groups. It seems that the allocation of a group label linked to the perceived ability of the children within the group triggers teachers to alter their views about children and their potential. This in turn leads to their pedagogy being altered. The labels given to groups trigger the assumption that each class is a homogenous group. Consequently the range of need within the group is significantly underestimated by teachers. In mixed ability classes there is an expectation that a variety of need will have to be met, but in ability groups, lessons are "often conducted as though students are not only similar, but *identical* in terms of ability, preferred learning style and pace of working" (Boaler et al. 2000:48). These authors believe that the label of the ability group automatically stops teachers responding to individual differences and also restricts the pedagogy that they use. They believe that success and failure within set groupings is entirely constructed by teacher expectation. Other research also shows that set groups are seen as being a homogenous group and consequently teachers do not seem to differentiate with tasks or resources (MacQueen, 2009; Coe et al., 2014). Therefore teachers do not seem to feel the need to respond to pupils on an individual basis and recognise individual strengths and weaknesses (Boaler et al., 2000). When speaking with pupils about their experiences of set groups, Hallam et al. (2000) noted that pupils also felt that their individual strengths and weaknesses were not being recognised. MacQueen (2009) raises a possible explanation for this in stating that it takes teachers longer to get to know pupils in the set group situation. She states in a subsequent study that it is possible that teachers of regrouped classes do not know the pupils as well and therefore are not able to respond effectively to individual need (MacQueen, 2013). Some

schools actively did not give teachers two sets of the same level because there was a chance that they would meet the same children (ibid.). Ireson and Hallam (1999) believe that a combination of teacher expectation, stereotyping, lesson structure and curriculum opportunity lead to an inferior education for low ability pupils. They also warn that ability grouping can lead to the labelling and stereotyping of pupils based on 'typical' characteristics. Ireson and Hallam (2005:299) argue that those children "in top streams are seen as bright, hardworking, and interested, while those in low streams are seen as lacking in ability, lazy and poorly behaved". MacQueen (2013), states that pupils in low achieving groups are seen as having different needs from pupils in high achieving groups. She argues that

> Terms such as 'challenge', 'expectations', 'quality work',
>
> 'independent research' and 'extension' [are] used in
>
> relation to high achievement groups, whereas discussion
>
> of low-achieving groups more often included terms such as
>
> 'remember', 'slower pace' and 'remediation' (MacQueen, 2013:304).

This view is upheld by Dupriez (2010) who believes that the perceived abilities and characteristics of certain children in certain groups lead to an inequality of educational opportunity where students are no longer allowed equal access to curriculum content and quality of teaching. He states that "the content of what is taught is not exactly the same, real working time may vary substantially, teachers adjust their expectations and requirements to the level of the class" (Dupriez, 2010:20). In addition to this, pupils are often reminded about which set they are in to reinforce the expectations (Boaler, 1997a).

When looking at the way in which children are responded to in different sets, there "are changes not [only] in the strategies for achieving certain goals but in the goals themselves" (Dupriez, 2010: 24-25). Many researchers noted that ability grouping alters the pedagogy adopted by teachers. Ireson et al. (2005) revealed that even teachers who are used to mixed-ability teaching tend to alter their pedagogy when teaching set groups. They tend to respond to the stereotype. Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) state that teachers tend to overestimate the children in the top groups and underestimate the children in the lower groups. Baines et al. (2003) argue that ability grouping encourages a

didactic, teacher lead approach to learning which engenders passive rather than autonomous learners. Boaler et al. (2000) concur with this view and state that teachers' practices are narrowed and they become more prescriptive and focused on the textbook or the whiteboard. As a result they are less likely to use practical, problem solving and investigational approaches (ibid). In addition to this, literacy and maths are the only subjects that are tested at the end of key stage two and Hall et al. (2004) believe that this is instrumental in altering the pedagogy of teachers.

In the lower attaining groups, teachers' low opinions about the capabilities of the children are implicitly and explicitly transmitted to them through the ways in which they treat the pupils and what they say to the pupils (Boaler et al., 2000). Research suggests that children experience an inferior, watered down and very often repetitive curriculum that perpetuates their position in this group. Pupils are assigned to lower groups with a label that indicates that they are lower achievers and this leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Good and Marshall, 1984). Ireson et al. (2002b:313) concur with this view in stating that children in lower ability groups "have less access to the curriculum and [are] taught in more structured ways, with more repetition, less discussion and greater use of practical activities". As a result, children are not given the opportunity to demonstrate higher level skills that might secure their access into a higher group. Clarke and Clarke (2008) concur with the view that expectations for pupils in the lower sets are lower and consequently pupils' position in this group becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. They state that

> Students in lower classes are perceived to be less able to handle challenging tasks, leading to the provision of less challenging work, given in smaller and smaller 'chunks', often making tasks so step-by-step that little thinking is required (Clarke and Clarke, 2008:3).

Pupils in lower sets are often given manipulatives such as cubes and counters which restrict their ability to work with larger numbers because of the time spent having to count them all out (Marks, 2014). As a result of the opportunity to work with larger numbers being restricted, so is the pupils' ability to attempt work which would appear on a test paper and this perpetuates their position in

the group (ibid.). This has the resulting impact that while top and middle sets are being prepared for tests, lower sets do not have this opportunity to practice (ibid.). In addition to this, pupils in the lower sets are taught at a slower pace (Boaler, 1997a; Coe et al., 2014); given less demanding work (Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004); work that is repetitive (Marks, 2014) and based on copying rather than thinking (Boaler et al., 2000). This view is upheld by many authors who, when interviewing children to discover their perceptions of ability grouping, revealed that many children felt that they were in the wrong set and the work was too easy (Boaler et al., 2000; Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004; Hallam et al., 2004a; Hallam and Deathe, 2002; Hallam and Ireson, 2007). However, requests for harder work were not generally responded to (Wiliams and Bartholomew, 2004; Boaler et al., 2000). MacQueen (2013), states that teachers are of the opinion that low achieving pupils cannot cope with group work and therefore need teacher directed learning. A further reason for lower groups being denied the opportunity to work collaboratively is related to behaviour (Marks, 2014). Lower groups tend to be engaged in individual work where conversation is not permitted (ibid.). Conversation is seen to lead to behaviour problems (ibid.).

In the top groups, it was generally found that the pace of the lesson reflected the teacher's perception of an able group and the pedagogy reflected that perception. Boaler (1997b) states that top set students are taught as though they are a completely different type of pupil. They do not have difficulties with anything and do not need explanations because they automatically understand (ibid.). Teachers in high ability sets tend to present work at a fast challenging pace with only brief explanation given (Wiliams and Bartholomew, 2004). This pace is often too fast for the majority of children in the top set (Boaler 1997a; Coe et al., 2014). Boaler (1997b:170) stated that top set students, when asked to describe how they were expected to work, used "words like speed, zoom, fast and whizz". Boaler et al. (2000) believe that children are disadvantaged in top set groups. They believe that top set children have to cope with pace, pressure, complex vocabulary and a lack of explanation from the teacher: Subjects are often glossed over quickly in the belief that the children will understand quickly (ibid.). They state that top set children have a fear of losing their place in the set if they are perceived to be struggling or if they frequently ask for clarification (ibid.).

Teachers also seem to see a connection between perceived ability and the pace at which children are able to work. Hall et al. (2004) noted that when children were positioned in sets, they were given the same work and the same timeframe for completion. These findings are similar to Boaler et al. (2000) who state that as a consequence of this, some children have to wait for others to catch up and some children never catch up or complete work given. This ultimately leads to some pupils feeling pressured because they are expected to work at a particular pace (Boaler, 1997a).

Researchers also noticed that the curriculum is often different in each set group. As such, teachers seem to be acting as 'gatekeepers' to allow or deny access to knowledge. Children located in the top set are given more knowledge and pupils thought that these children had access to more exciting and interesting work (Hallam et al., 2000; Hallam et al., 2004a).

Ability grouping also seems to alter teachers' opinions of and perceptions about pupils in relation to assessment. This advantages the top set still further and disadvantages the lower sets. Campbell (2014), when looking at the effects of streaming in KS1 noted that placement in a particular stream influenced teacher perceptions about pupils and this was evident when teachers made their assessments at the end of KS1. In this study, all children took a cognitive ability test (CAT) before the teachers made their assessment but the teachers were not privy to the outcomes of these tests. Campbell (2014:32) revealed that "on average, children placed in higher streams are judged and assessed disproportionately favourably, and children in lower streams at a disproportionately lower level". This was the case even though these pupils may have scored very similarly on the CAT.

From a whole school policy perspective, there are issues concerning how teachers are allocated to particular sets and the reasons underpinning these decisions. Teachers allocated to the top set are generally well qualified and experienced whereas teachers allocated to the lower sets are generally less well qualified and less experienced (Wiliams and Bartholomew, 2004). This issue was highlighted in a recent study by Marks (2014). She argues that the lower sets can end up being taught by the weakest or least experienced teachers; a teaching assistant or Higher Level Teaching Assistant or a 'floating'

teacher (ibid.). The strongest teachers tend to be located in the higher groups (ibid.). In their research, Boaler et al. (2000) noted that lower set groups tend to experience frequent changes of teacher and also teachers who are not subject specialists. Teachers seem to have a preference for teaching higher ability groups and do seem to like teaching students who they perceive to be weak (Dupriez, 2010).

A further disadvantage of ability grouping is the impact that it has on pupils' self-esteem, self-concept and liking for school. This impact is seen in high ability groups as well as low ability groups. Ireson and Hallam (2005) present the view that ability grouping impacts on areas other than those related to academic issues for "such as [pupils'] attitudes towards school, motivation, self-esteem and their sense of belonging to or alienation from school" (Ireson and Hallam, 2005:298). They argue that children need to feel part of the school community and accepted by teachers and peers. "When children are setted,…, clear messages about where they are in the pecking order and how they are valued are transmitted" (Hall et al., 2004:812). As such, being good at an important subject, can also translate into being good generally (ibid.). If pupils are aware of their position within an ability hierarchy, then their placement becomes an identity and a self-fulfilling prophecy (Campbell, 2013). They adopt the role that has been assigned (ibid.). Hall et al. (2004) found that the Year 6 children who were part of their research study were very aware of their set grouping and also of the seemingly unfair allocation of time and children to booster classes i.e the lowest achieving children either were not allowed to go, or received a reduced number of hours. Hall et al. (2004) found that "not only are these pupils acutely aware and absolutely accepting of the crude hierarchy of ability in the year 6 classes, they [recognised] and [resented] the unfairness of a system that blatantly [gave] more to the more able" (Hall et al., 2004:805). In the children's eyes (and it was also noted that this is also the case for the teachers) the more able pupils were valued more. This leads the authors to argue that "teachers need to be aware of the messages that they are giving to their pupils about what they value and ensure that all pupils feel valued" (Hallam et al., 2004a:531). It could be argued that ability grouping in this context is a measure of worth or worthiness because children are compared with each other and against a scale of performance nationally and consequently the less able

children are marginalised. Ireson et al. (2001) also argue in their research that "Heads in the more highly set schools clearly saw the level of stratification in the school as a reflection of stratification in society. Those in partially set and mixed ability schools placed a greater emphasis on valuing all pupils and a pragmatic approach towards ability grouping" (Ireson et al. 2001:323).

Ability grouping can therefore undermine confidence and instil the idea that it is not possible to improve performance through effort (Higgins et al., 2013). This view is upheld by Cullingford (1997) who suggests that children are aware from early primary age that success and hard work are not necessarily connected and that "there are always more difficult things to strive towards, things they cannot do or easily understand. Children get frustrated at their own lack of ability" (Cullingford, 1997:60).

Research highlights many issues related to self-esteem and academic self-concept in relation to ability grouping (Ireson and Hallam, 1999; Hallam et al., 2003; Davies et al., 2003; Ireson and Hallam, 2009; Alpert and Bechar, 2008). Ireson and Hallam (2009) differentiated between academic self-concept and general self-concept when discussing the negative effects of ability grouping. They believe that academic self-concept is detrimentally affected because "interest, enjoyment and perceptions of competence affect students' intentions towards learning and thus their achievement, course choices and future careers" (Ireson and Hallam, 2009:211). It is therefore possible to argue that children, depending on which ability group they were part of, could develop positive character traits that would support present and future learning but alternatively could develop negative traits which could slow down or prevent learning taking place. It is clear then that there are many strong arguments that focus on the self-esteem and self-concept of children, particularly those operating in the lower ability groups. Ireson and Hallam (2009) argue that a high level of stratification seems to be consistent with lower levels of academic self-concept. A later study by Hallam and Deathe (2002) found that as setting increased and became more defined, there was a greater negative effect on pupils' maths self-concept. In addition to this, the longer pupils remain in the lower set, the greater the negative effect on maths self-concept, general self-concept and general school self-concept (ibid.). Ireson and Hallam (1999) believe that other research both in England and America suggests that children

of lower ability may have this negative self-image regardless of the way in which they are grouped. They state that "it seems likely that the effects on self-esteem are mediated by the behaviour of teachers and peers and that these in turn are affected by school ethos" (Ireson and Hallam, 1999:348). This argument suggests that it is not just the structure of ability groups that transmits a message to children about their ability in relation to other pupils. Pupils may perceive themselves as performing less well within the academic context of the school and this may be related to the interactions that they have with adults and other pupils. The interactions between pupils and teachers may be affected by the overall ethos and value system that underpins the policy and practice of the school.

Liem et al. (2013), however, found that students in higher ability streams had a lower English and maths self-concept than students in lower ability streams. These authors also found that self-concept was more influenced by stream average attainment than school average attainment. This view seems to be supported in the research conducted by Boaler (1997) in relation to top set pupils. She states that pupils felt a competitive pressure because they were not only aligning themselves with the expectations of the teacher; they also needed to be aware of how others in the group were responding. Children in the top set can feel that they are not valued if they feel that they are not perceived to be in line with the expectations of the teacher (Boaler et al., 2000).

Some authors suggest that not only does ability grouping affect how children perceive themselves as learners it also negatively affects their feelings about school and education (Ireson and Hallam, 1999;Davies et al., 2003). If these negative feelings were perpetuated they would have a harmful impact on lifelong learning. Ireson and Hallam, (1999) looked at research suggesting that ability grouping had an effect on polarisation of pupils and alienation. This view highlights the fact that, when grouped according to perceived ability, sharp divisions are physically introduced that could encourage the children to see themselves as intellectually or academically different. Ultimately this could alienate pupils in all ability groups. Ireson and Hallam, (1999) discussed the fact that higher achieving pupils may develop an enthusiasm for school and respond much more positively to the demands of the school whereas children in lower groups may experience the opposite effect. They argue that "the research

suggests that children in unstreamed classes have healthier and more positive attitudes towards school" (Ireson and Hallam, 1999:348).

Increased attainment is perceived to be an advantage of ability grouping. However, Ireson et al. (2001) believe that setting does not have a positive impact on attainment. This view is supported by the research of Whitburn (2001) who found that there were no benefits in placing primary aged pupils in sets for maths. She stated that "children should continue to have the social and equitable benefits that derive from mixed ability teaching" (Whitburn, 2001:425). Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) however, disagree in part with this view and argue that there are small gains in attainment for the higher ability pupils but, because of losses at the lower end, there is no rise in the average level of attainment. This concurs with the findings of Whitburn (2001) and MacQueen (2013). A large amount of research has been conducted looking at the impact of ability grouping on attainment. Kutnick et al. (2006) found that in their case study schools that employed setting as an organisational device for maths and literacy, scored consistently lower than schools that used mixed ability groups. For pupils of similar attainment at KS2, children in middle and low sets do not make as good progress as pupils placed in high sets when they move to secondary school (Ireson et al. 2002a). These authors also note that if pupils are placed in a low group at the beginning of secondary school (even though they scored in a similar range at KS2 to other pupils placed in higher groups), this may mean that they will never have access to the higher tier papers at GCSE. This will have a resulting impact on further education and employment. Ireson and Hallam (2001) found that students in the lower groups achieved one quarter of a grade less at GCSE than other who were in mixed ability classes. Similar findings were revealed when looking at streaming. Parsons and Hallam (2014) revealed that being in the middle and bottom streams, when compared to children who were not in streams, lead to lower academic attainment at KS1 in reading, writing, maths and science. Maths was the most strongly affected (ibid.). Higgins et al. (2013) believe that setting is most detrimental for the mid to low achieving learners. Being in the lower set is not helpful in raising attainment (ibid.). In fact pupils in the lower set can have their potential attainment limited by 1-2 months every year. Setting also has the result of widening the achievement gap between the children placed in high sets and the children

placed in low sets (Whitburn, 2001; Dupriez, 2010; Marks, 2014; Parsons and Hallam, 2014).

Ability grouping also seems to have a negative impact on children's peer relationships. Boaler (2008:21) stated that ability grouping "does not provide students with opportunities to respect students who are different from themselves". As a result, when researchers asked pupils about their experiences of being in particular groups, many reported incidents of bullying. In one study by Hallam et al. (2004a) 40% of pupils had witnessed teasing or had been teased themselves. Pupils revealed that children in the higher sets were teased but the more derogatory teasing was aimed at the lower set (ibid.). In addition to this, pupils felt that children in the lower set were stigmatised (ibid.) This view is also upheld by Boaler (1997a). In a study by Hallam and Ireson (2003), teachers also thought that pupils could be stereotyped and labelled by their peers as a consequence of the particular set that they are in.

Pupils' peer relationships are not just affected by incidents of teasing and bullying; pupils also felt that the structure of set groups separated them from their friends (Hallam et al., 2004a). As a result of this, pupils felt that they had fewer opportunities to access peer support (Ireson and Hallam, 2006). Boaler et al. (2000) also noted that pupils in the top set felt that they could not ask friend in other sets to help them because they were in the top set and should know it all. For children in the lower groups, whose set contained a reduced number of pupils, they had a smaller pool from which to draw friendships (MacQueen, 2013). Also, from a relational point of view, ability grouping minimises the support network between teacher, pupil and parent because an expectation has been set (Hallam et al., 2004b). It becomes less important to search for reasons as to why pupils are experiencing difficulties (ibid.).

A final point in relation to the disadvantages of ability grouping is that, as a result of ability grouping, the curriculum is narrowed to prioritise literacy and maths because they are the ones which are setted and tested (Hall et al., 2004). Other subjects are therefore marginalised.

2.8 Advantages of mixed ability grouping

Mixed ability grouping has advantages related to teaching and learning, equity, peer relationships and self-concept.

Teachers who taught mixed ability classes seemed to recognise that they needed to respond to a range of ability and adopt different approaches (Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004; Boaler et al., 2000; MacQueen, 2013). Teachers believe that mixed ability groups provide pupils with positive role models (Hallam and Ireson, 2003) When looking at the teaching of maths, Whitburn (2001) noted that lower achievers have the opportunity to observe how middle and high achievers solve problems. They get to develop learning strategies with more able pupils, they gain greater insight and also have their misunderstandings corrected (ibid.). Pupils have access to higher level work in mixed ability classrooms (Boaler and Staples, 2008). Boaler et al. (2000) stated that attainment in maths is not consistent across all areas of maths and therefore mixed ability teaching allows pupils to show strengths in these other areas. In research conducted by Ireson et al. (2002b:312) "teachers reported that pupils of all abilities [had] similar access to the curriculum, [participated] in the same activities and [were] taught in the same ways". As such all students are exposed to the same learning opportunities (MacQueen, 2009).Pupils also felt that working in mixed ability groups, at a pace that was right for them, led to a greater level of understanding (Boaler, 1997a). In relation to attainment, Whitburn (2001) found that children attain higher in maths when taught in mixed ability groups. This concurs with the findings of Boaler (1997a) who revealed that the most able students in mixed ability classes attained more highly than their counterparts in high set groupings. 3% scored an A/A* in the mixed ability class as opposed to 0.5% in the high set group. Ireson et al. (2002b) also found that lower attaining pupils made more progress in mixed ability groups. Achievement helps pupils feel part of the school and therefore mixed ability grouping "may reduce the detrimental social and emotional effects of exclusion and stigmatisation that have been associated with traditional practices of ability grouping in schools" (Alpert and Bechar, 2008:1600).

Mixed ability classrooms are also seen to be more equitable. Pupils felt that these groups promoted equal opportunities (Hallam and Ireson, 2006) and

Boaler and Staples (2008:21) stated that "heterogeneous grouping…allowed students to interact with others from different social classes, cultural groups and ability levels and to broaden the ways they regard other students".

With regard to peer relationships, Boaler and Staples (2008) argue that children working in mixed ability groups show concern, not only for their own learning, but also for the learning of others. Hallam et al. (2004a:2) state that in mixed ability classes "social adjustment, social attitudes and attitudes to peers of different ability were 'healthier'". This is reflected in the views of pupils who stated that they liked mixed ability groups because they could help each other and they were able to work with pupils who they would not necessarily choose to work with (Hallam et al., 2004). This in turn enabled them to extend their social circle (Hallam and Ireson, 2006). Pupils also thought that mixed ability groups enabled them to work with friends (ibid.). Better rapport is also developed between teachers, pupils and parents in mixed ability classes (MacQueen, 2009).

Finally, pupils in mixed ability classes have a much more positive view of their academic achievement than pupils in schools that employ setting (Ireson and Hallam, 2009). These authors state that self-concept was most positive in schools with the least amount of ability grouping.

2.9 Disadvantages of mixed ability groups

Ofsted (1995) stated that mixed ability teaching is seen as problematic for teachers. When teaching mixed ability classes, teachers do not always respond to the differing needs of children in the class and tend not to differentiate by task or resources (MacQueen, 2009). Teachers also felt that in mixed ability classes, the higher ability pupils cannot be stretched (Hallam and Ireson, 2003). However, research also shows that there are disadvantages in some of the ways that teachers react when given a mixed ability class particularly if these reactions are related to ability and drawing attention to difference. Therefore, teacher expectation for children of different abilities also has impact in a mixed ability classroom. Rubie-Davies (2010) conducted a study looking at high and low differentiating behaviours in teachers and this resulted in a self-fulfilling

prophecy effect. She argues that high differentiating teachers have a relatively fixed view of ability and believed this ability to be innate within the student. As a consequence the teacher could have little impact on progress and achievement. These teachers tended to ability group within their class but there was little if no flexibility between the groups to reflect progress made. Low differentiating teachers used mixed ability groupings and allowed students to collaborate. These teachers were skill orientated rather than answer orientated and believed that all children could learn. Difficulties that children experienced related to their work, encouraged these teachers to reflect on the way that they could support more adequately rather than seeing difficulties as being as a result of something deficient in the child.

Some researchers have looked at teacher effect on the way some children are perceived by their classmates. These studies show that even in mixed ability classrooms it is possible to draw attention towards perceived differences in ability through the way that the classroom is organised and the way lessons are delivered. Mikami et al.(2012) argue that some teachers might interact differently with children of different abilities and therefore, even in mixed ability classrooms, the notion of an academic status hierarchy can be evident. They believe that an academic hierarchy could influence a social status hierarchy and that would mean that children who were perceived as being academically unequal could also become socially unequal. The evidence from their study indicated that teacher practices may relate to peer relationships. Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) talk about unidimensional classrooms as ones that draw attention to the hierarchy of perceived ability. They state that the more consistently the academic hierarchy is reinforced through lack of differentiation, grouping patterns and formal performance evaluations, the higher that consensus of opinion about ability. They hypothesise, based on the work of other authors, that there will be three effects of academic hierarchy on friendship choices: the popularity scale will correlate with the academic achievement scale; there will be more children seen as isolates because friendship choices will be based around a few children deemed to be able; and finally friendship choices may be related to academic status. Boaler and Staples (2008) also see disadvantages to unidimensional classrooms because success is measured in very narrow ways and a clear hierarchy of competence is

established. Multidimensional classrooms value a range of abilities and success can be seen more broadly and as a result there are more ways to be successful (ibid.). Hughs and Zhang (2007) use the phrase 'teacher differentiating behaviour' to describe the ways in which teachers treat high and low achievers in different ways. When children are aware of this, their view of their classmates' ability becomes closely correlated with that of the teacher. The authors state that pupils are more aware of each other's abilities in competitive rather than cooperative classroom environments and are therefore able to make more comparisons between themselves and others. This, in turn, will have particular impact on low ability children because "the availability of social comparison information may also have consequences for children's peer relations" (Hughs and Zhang, 2007:410). It could be argued that if teachers are able to influence children's opinions about the ability of their peers, then it is also possible that they could influence the way children value each other in relation to perceived ability and consequently who they choose to be friends with.

Teacher effect in forming and sustaining intergroup attitudes in children formed the basis of an experimental study by Bigler et al. (1997). They assigned children to colour groups and then asked some teachers to make functional use of these colour groups and other teachers to ignore them. Their research concluded that when attention was drawn to different groups in very overt ways, it affected children's attitudes to their own group and the group perceived as being different. Children tended to see their own group as being largely positive and the other group as having negative traits. In classrooms where the colour differences were ignored, children saw equality across and within the groups. The researchers stated that

> Individuals show better memory for negative behaviours
> performed by out-group than by in-group members, and
> are more likely to attribute negative behaviours performed
> by out-group members to dispositions (rather than situations),
> whereas the reverse is true for in-group members (Bigler et al.
> 1997:530)

These findings would have significant impact on the arguments surrounding ability grouping and inclusion because, not only would teachers influence a recognition in children that some pupils were more able than others, but some children could develop attitudes about other pupils seen to be part of other groups and view them not just as being different, but negatively different and not likely to be chosen as friends.

The power of teacher expectations is evident both in the literature for ability grouping and the literature for mixed ability grouping and this is seen to lead to an inequality of educational opportunity for children. Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000) state that teacher expectation, even when it is not based on accurate information, can have an effect on student performance. As such, they argue that high expectations are important for all children regardless of which social or ethnic group they may be a part of and particularly important for those groups who have traditionally been seen as underachieving. They discuss the self-fulfilling prophecy effect stating that "the teacher's expectation of children at the point of entry to school can set in train powerful processes that profoundly shape children's subsequent school careers" (Pelligrini and Blatchford, 2000:169). Expectations could be linked either to what the teacher thinks the pupil is likely to achieve or to what the teacher thinks the pupil ought to achieve. These two different outlooks are important for pupil outcomes because if the teacher believes that nothing can be done then this can be very problematic for the pupil (Pelligrini and Blatchford, 2000). However, if the teacher believes that change and improvement are possible then this in turn is likely to have a positive impact on attainment (ibid.).

It could be argued that teachers may treat certain pupils differently because there is a pedagogical reason for doing so. However, the concerns arise when this differential treatment is misplaced or based on circumstantial or stereotypical views. In this context, teacher expectation may bring about "a change in children's performance rather than just reflecting it" (Pelligrini and Blatchford, 2000:173). Stereotypical views can be influenced by a number of factors such as whether the child is seen as being a pleasure to teach or a behaviour problem; how affluent the family is and how educated the parents are (Blatchford et al., 1989). Rist (1970) identified other factors which impacted on how students' academic potential was viewed. These factors included where

the family home was located; whether the family received welfare support; whether the child had medical needs; how siblings of the child were viewed by other teachers; the child's physical appearance and level of cleanliness; how verbally confident and articulate the child was and finally whether the characteristics of the child were aligned with the background of the teacher. Weinstein (2002) also concurs with these views in stating that teacher expectations are sometimes prompted by visual differences e.g. when a child wears glasses. She also identifies other perceptions of difference which may lead to unequal educational opportunity such as "language, financial means, educational exposure, cultural ways, and a variety of disabilities" (Weinstein, 2002:32). In addition to this, she also identified gender as being a contributing factor (ibid.). These qualities, although used to make academic judgements, are actually not related to academic potential. However, in the research of Rist (1970) these characteristics were still used to make predictions related to which children would learn quickly, which children would learn slowly, which children would be successful and which children would not be successful. Once these assumptions have been made, this in turn has an impact on curriculum coverage because teachers then act as gatekeepers, allowing or denying access to certain activities or learning opportunities (Blatchford et al., 1989; Rist, 1970; Weinstein, 2002). Rubie-Davies et al. (2006:430) concur with this view and state that "expectations may be exemplified in the learning opportunities provided, in the affective climate created and in the interactional content and context of the classroom". In addition to this, the way that teachers respond to certain children also undergoes a change and this in turn influences the pupils' self-perceptions (Pelligrini and Blatchford, 2000;Weinstein, 2002).

Weinstein (2002:103) states that "clues about ability can be found not only in the interactions between teachers and students but also in the structural organization or microsystem , of classroom life, in which such interactions are embedded and in which opportunities to learn are both allocated and evaluated". These clues may relate to the way children are grouped in order to be taught, where they sit in the classroom, the colour of their book and the name given to the group. As a consequence, students may develop a deficit view of themselves based on the way in which the teacher responds to them. They may believe that failure is due to factors within themselves which they

cannot control and therefore effort and perseverance are futile (ibid.). Wentzel and Wigfield (1998) concur in part with this view but state that it is interactions with both teachers *and peers* which support the development of these views. They state that "students' perceptions of self-efficacy and competence appear to be based in part, on what they learn by watching and interacting with teachers and peers" (Wentzel and Wigfield, 1998:164). These authors reveal that if children believe that they will do well in a particular subject or on a particular task, they tend to do better. The impact of self-belief seems to be a stronger predictor of future attainment than the impact of prior attainment (Wentzel and Wigfield, 1998). In addition to this, if students believe that they can achieve on a given task they are more likely to show willingness to do the task and also to demonstrate perseverance and tenacity if they experience difficulties in the completion of the task (ibid.). Structures, such as ability grouping, "can lead students to focus more on their perceived competence, and may lead to an increased perception of ability as an entity state rather than an incremental condition" (Wentzel and Wigfield, 1998:165).

Weinstein (2002) argues that many teaching approaches are based on particular fixed views that teachers hold about certain children. If potential is seen as being fixed rather than malleable and related to something deficient in the child, then the teacher is very restricted and limited about what they can do to enable the child to make progress (ibid.). If potential is malleable then teacher approaches can have an impact on progress and achievement. She states that "assessment generally proceeds apart from teaching and testing does not inform instruction" (Weinstein, 2002:33). In saying this, she seems to infer that teachers adopt a medical model view and show a reluctance to look at factors outside of the child that can be adapted e.g. the method or style of instruction. Weinstein (2002) also warns that when children experience difficulties in one subject area, this can lead to judgements being made about competence in other subject areas. Pelligrini and Blatchford (2000: 178-179) state that there is a logical process which charts the route from teachers' stereotypical assumptions about particular children to a self-fulfilling prophecy which supports these initial erroneous assumptions:

"1. Teacher has an ideal type – that is, characteristics necessary for success – and this is related to social class;

2. Students on entry are subjectively evaluated in terms of the presence of these characteristics and put into groups expected to succeed (fast learners) or fail (slow learners);

3. The groups are differentially treated by the teacher – the fast learners receiving most teacher time. Slow learners are taught infrequently, receive more control and receive little support from the teacher;

4. Interactional patterns become rigid and caste-like with the completion of academic material widening over the year;

5. The process continues into later years but is now no longer based on subjective judgements but on objective performance information (which the judgements originally served to cause)."

The literature on the effects of ability grouping raises many issues related to inclusion and marginalisation. Primarily the practice of labelling children because they are assigned to a particular group would seem to influence the way that they are taught once part of that group and this in turn impacts on academic outcomes. It could be argued that ability grouping raises awareness within the pupil cohort related to academic competency and this in turn could affect how certain pupils are viewed. The way that pupils perceive each other could influence who they choose to interact with and form friendships with. It is therefore necessary to explore what factors lead to the formation of peer relationships.

2.10 Peer relationships

Peer relations occur within the different environments and contexts that the child inhabits and these relationships can be defined by the type of interactions that occur with the other members of the peer group. Pelligrini and Blatchford (2000:33) argue that friendships "involve reciprocity (equality) and commitment; are affiliative rather than attachment based (as with parents); involve common interests; and are egalitarian. Friendships between children are therefore symmetrically and horizontally organised, as opposed to adult-child relations which are asymmetrically and vertically organised". Hartup (2009) states that peer relationships are different from other forms of social grouping because they are based on equality rather than power. "Whether considered in terms of chronological age, cognitive capacities, or social experience, peer relations are unique forces in human development because the individuals involved are

equals" (Hartup, 2009:16). In a primary school environment it could be argued that the wider peer group would be made up of all the children who attend the school because these children potentially have the opportunity to interact with each other. They are similar, although not identical, because they are part of the primary age range. Contextually, their social experience will have some similarities because the children all attend the same school. When looking at children's interaction with members of the peer group, Kindermann and Gest (2009) see different levels and patterns to the interaction that takes place and they differentiate between social crowds, interaction groups and friendship groups. This would suggest that children have a range of different types of relationships within the peer group and it could be argued that these relationships serve different purposes and are formed in different ways.

Kindermann and Gest (2009:102) see social crowds as being quite a loose relationship between children which is based on "reputational labels assigned to individuals *by their peers* that involve stereotypes about personality and behaviour". This type of relationship seems quite intangible and children may not be aware of which social crowd they belong to because the allocation is based on how they are perceived by other children. Indeed, some children may be perceived as belonging to more than one social crowd, for example if they are seen to be both hardworking and good at sport. Interaction groups suggest a much closer relationship between children because these groups are formed on the basis that children want to work or play together. The final level of peer relationship defined by Kindermann and Gest (2009) is that of the friendship group. They see this as evolving out of "feelings of liking between individuals" (Kindermann and Gest, 2009:102). This model of the intensity of peer relationships suggests that children experience different levels of engagement with their peers.

I am going to focus on the concept of the friendship group as this seems to be one of the closest peer relationships that children experience at school and it could therefore be argued that it has a higher level of importance and value for children.

Berndt and McCandless (2009) argue that friendships have similarities with other relationships but they are also distinctive in their own right. These authors

concur with the view of Kindermann and Gest (2009) in saying that friendship is based on liking another person but they extend our understanding further by stating that other characteristics are also important such as trust, mutuality, knowledge of the person, sharing, benevolence and regular and prolonged contact. They state that the depth and extent to which these characteristics manifest themselves might indicate the depth or level of friendship. This implies that not only are there levels of engagement in the broad category of peer relationships but also levels of engagement within friendship. Rather than being an absolute definition or one particular category of peer relations, Berndt and McCandless (2009) see friendship as being on a continuum between people being the very best of friends and being strangers. They believe that no clear boundaries can be drawn between whether a person is described as being 'a good friend', 'just a friend' or 'an acquaintance'.

Bukowski, et al. (2009) recognise that friendship is a positive connection but also reveal that it has positive consequences. They state that "friendship can be defined as the strong, positive affective bond that exist between two persons and that are intended to facilitate the accomplishment of socio-emotional goals" (Bukowski, et al., 2009:218). This definition raises two important issues related to friendship: firstly whether friendship is purely dyadic and secondly whether the friendship has to be reciprocated.

Fabes, et al.,(2009) state that children follow certain patterns in their social development, and also in their ability to interact with their peers. Children begin, early in their development, playing alone or alongside others to eventually acquiring skills to be able to play cooperatively with others. In the preschool years, dyadic play predominates yet as the child moves into the junior years, "play becomes more highly organised and elaborate, and involves complex, rule-orientated games that may include groups of children" (Fabes, et al., 2009:47).

It could be argued that mutuality is important when thinking about friendship because there is a difference between being friendly towards another person and having a friendship with that person. Friendship implies a degree of continuity to the friendliness and a decision to enter into a relationship that involves continued friendliness by both parties over a period of time. Research

aimed at finding out about friendship groups sometimes raises issues related to the mutuality of friendship and when data is looked at superficially, it may seem to suggest that some children's friendships are not reciprocated. Berndt and McCandless (2009) argue that results are affected by the methodology used to gain the data. These authors state that when looking at research into friendship groups, researchers rarely allow children free choice over who might be in their friendship group. In many examples the methodological framework either restricts children's choices to a sample list of possible choices e.g a class or restricts the number of friendship choices that the child is able to make. In both of these cases children are faced with having to make 'best fit' decisions. If children are allowed a completely open choice, mutual connections often become visible even though there might be some asymmetry related to the perceived ranking or value placed on the mutual friendship choices. Ladd (2009) also stated that when the research methodology purely relied on interviewing children about their friendship choices or getting them to write about their friendships, similar problems arose regarding the reliability of the data. He argued that it is important to triangulate these methods with observation so that the researcher is able to see what is actually happening in a natural situation.

Pelligrini and Blatchford (2000:31) argue that there are many factors which influence friendship choice such as "age, length of acquaintance, contact made at a previous school, shared interests, and personal characteristics like giving help, sharing a sense of humour, not being bossy, and working together". They also state that boys and girls tend to have different friendship patterns with boys tending to be less exclusive and therefore having a greater number of friendships (ibid.). There is a tendency though for children to engage in same sex friendships (ibid.). Some of these points suggest that children form their friendships with peers who are similar to themselves and have characteristics in common with themselves. Bukowski, et al. (2009) argue that these common characteristics are identified by children when forming friendships and are based on characteristics that are important to them. If a child thought that sporting prowess was important then they would identify potential friend based on this characteristic. However, Bukowski, et al. (2009), warn that, when

studying friendships, it is important to determine whether the observed similarities existed before the friendship began. In other words, it is important to know whether selection was based on similarity or whether the similarities happened as a result of and during the friendship. Kindermann and Gest (2009) concur that it is essential to design research frameworks that allow causal inferences to be made that would enable explanations to be put forward related to why friendship groups demonstrate internal homogeneity. They question whether these apparent similarities show "diagnostic information about individuals, the functioning of social systems, or selection processes? Or is this information about the developmental effects of groups?" (Kindermann and Gest, 2009:112).

Hallinan and Sorensen (1985) argue that although children look for similarities and common characteristics when choosing friends, the amount of opportunity for prolonged interaction is also a factor that determines whether the friendship will eventually be made. It could be argued that pupils working in the classroom have increased access to interaction with each other and that, by virtue of the fact that they are in the same classroom, will have some similar experiences. It could therefore be argued that if teachers make decisions about grouping pupils, then they are also influencing patterns of interaction that may lead to friendships between children in the groups that they have created. Hallinan and Sorensen (1985) argue that often children are grouped within and between classes based on perceived personal characteristics. Academic achievement is one personal characteristic and therefore by grouping children with similar achievement together, either within the class setting, in streamed classes or in ability groups, teachers are highlighting similarities between children. When pupils become part of a group, new similarities emerge because "students assigned to the same ability group engage in the same learning tasks, use the same materials, and are exposed to the same pace of instruction" (Hallinan and Sorensen, 1985:486). Hallinan and Smith (1989) believe that the search for similarity when making friends has greater importance for older pupils than for younger pupils. It could be argued that children who work together could see themselves as being similar and therefore there is a higher likelihood of friendship formation. They also warn that teachers not only highlight perceived similarities in the way they organise the classroom and group pupils within the

class, but also in the way they emphasize certain qualities and achievements of individual children. "The more a teacher emphasizes grades and test scores, the more cliques are likely to be homogenous with respect to achievement because of the importance attached to academic performance" (Hallinan and Smith, 1989:901). These authors found in their research that changes in friendship pattern mirror changes in grouping structure that have happened as a result of changes in test score.

Berndt and McCandless (2009) found in their research that the number of friendships that a child had was strongly correlated with peer acceptance. So their ranking within the wider peer group would have an impact on their individual ability to form friendships. Cillessen (2009) argues that sociometric status varies in different settings. As such, the set grouping, the class and the playground all might yield different results regarding children's number of and quality of friendships. He states that "a person who is accepted in one social context may not be accepted in another if the norms on which status evaluations are based vary by context" (Cillessen, 2009:84). This understanding leads us to believe that different characteristics are possibly perceived as being important in different contexts, or that characteristics that are more superficial are highlighted in certain contexts. Killen, et al. (2009) argue that when rejection takes place, it may not be on the basis that a child lacks social skills, it may be based on the characteristics that the child is seen to have and these may be related to qualities such as gender, race and ethnicity. These authors recommend that adults need to create positive learning environments that allow children who outwardly may be perceived to be different to be able to mix.

> Exclusion based on group membership, such as gender, race, and ethnicity, contributes to prejudice, bias and discrimination, which can have detrimental effects on children's academic performance, create a general environment that perpetuates hierarchies and inequalities, and lead to negative long term outcomes, such as injustice in the workforce and societal setting (Killen, et al., 2009:251).

This would suggest that in the search for sameness or similarity, children may make friendship decisions based on what they see to be similar or different. Following this argument, the outward manifestations of difference such as gender and race may lead children to believe that they have no or little similarity with certain children and therefore reject possibilities of entering into friendship. These decisions could eventually become self-perpetuating because if children believe that they have no commonality with certain children within the school context then they may not look for commonality within any other context.

Hallinan and Sorensen (2009) warn that teachers, in the way that they group pupils, may highlight differences of race, gender and social class. In their research they discovered that when teachers chose to group pupils by ability they also inadvertently created clusters of pupils who were a similar race, gender or social class, because in these classrooms achievement was also linked to these features. They state that when "ability is correlated with race or social class, then ability grouping promotes friendships among students with similar background characteristics and may encourage race, ethnic, and social class cleavages in the classroom" (Hallinan and Sorensen, 2009:499). Therefore it is possible that teachers when deciding on their grouping structures, alert students to perceived differences within the peer group that could ultimately serve to create factions that may be unable to see commonality within their makeup. Dishion and Piehler (2009) concur with the views of Hallinan and Sorensen (2009) as they also believe that the ways that teachers group pupils can create issues related to children's friendship choices. In their research they looked at intervention strategies aimed at reducing behaviour in school that was perceived as being problematic. They speak of 'peer contagion' which "describes a mutual influence process that is not intentional, purposeful or planned, but is initiated and maintained by social dynamics" (Dishion and Piehler, 2009:589). In situations where pupils are grouped together because it is perceived that they have similar characteristics, these contexts provide opportunities for the characteristics that are causing concern to be reinforced by the peer group and become positive characteristics in the eyes of the child because a common bond has been created. This is also seen in the research conducted by Hargreaves (1967) where, in a streamed environment, the boys not only tend to draw their friendships from the stream that they are in, but also

adopt and exhibit particular attitudes, values and characteristics which are consistent with the stream that they are in. The lower the stream the more negative these attitudes and values seemed to be and the fact that they were held by all, created a sense of community and a certain level of cohesion.

Bukowski, et al. (2009) discuss the fact that when children initiate friendships with other children on the basis of mutual similarities they then spend time reinforcing the mutual bond by a process of reciprocity. These authors believe that reciprocity is fundamental to friendship and define it not in the context of mutual liking but in the context of acting in a similar way either by mirroring or copying. Hartup (2009) extends our understanding of this process further by explaining it in the context of social identity. He states that once groups are established they create an identity which notes the differences between themselves and other groups. Members see their group as having positive features and see others more negatively. "Members reinforce these characteristics during interaction within groups, and these validations enhance group identity and solidarity" (Hartup, 2009:15).

It could therefore be argued that in grouping pupils based on perceived characteristics, and as a consequence highlighting commonalities between members of the group, teachers can create and perpetuate negative as well as positive relationships between pupils.

Friendships and peer relationships also seem to have an impact on the ways in which children are able to work together in the classroom context in relation to specific types of task. Pelligrini and Blatchford (2000) state that there are very specific ways in which friends interact. These ways are different from the ways in which non-friends interact. These interactions are important when exploring the ways in which children cooperate and collaborate with each other in the classroom environment. Zajac and Hartup (1997) believe that positive relationships between pupils enhance on-task behaviour and motivation and therefore friends should be given the opportunity to work together as often as possible. These authors raise an argument, put forward by teachers, that placing children in friendship groups results in off-task behaviour because friends have the potential to distract one another (ibid.). However, in response to this, they differentiate between 'friendly' and 'friendship' and state that

cohesiveness and positive working relationships occur when friendship networks are dispersed rather than exclusive (ibid.). In saying this, they are proposing that looser positive relationships are more beneficial than neutral or negative relationships and therefore "collaboration between friends may differ from collaboration between non-friends" (Zajac and Hartup, 1997:4). Pelligrini and Blatchford (2000:27) state that one of these differences relates to the way in which friends negotiate conflict and argue that friends "make a series of adjustments and conciliatory gestures" to ensure that positive interactions can resume. It is the view of Zajac and Hartup (1997) that friends will feel much more secure giving and receiving advice and guidance and also that this advice and guidance will be more appropriate to the child receiving it, due to the closer relationship between the two pupils. Zajac and Hartup (1997) state that in socially and academically challenging situations friends react differently to each other when compared with non-friends and are therefore able to cooperate much more efficiently. Challenging situations might occur as a result of the academic content of the task: perhaps those tasks which involve higher level skills of problem solving or creativity. When friends work together on complex tasks they generate more on-task talk and are more active, constructive and democratic in their discussions (ibid.). They are also able to deal with conflict in a positive manner because they are able to "explore one another's points of view with some comfort" (Zajac and Hartup, 1997:7). Friends are also a source of emotional support, particularly in stressful or difficult situations and these situations could be of an academic or social nature (Pelligrini and Blatchford, 2000). In situations that are more socially orientated the interactions are also much more positive. An example of this is when task resources are more limited. In this context friends exhibit prosocial behaviour and positive body language; they cooperate much more efficiently because of their ability to take turns and share and finally, because of their positive interactions, they tend to remember more about the task (Zajac and Hartup, 1997). In addition to this, friends are more likely to challenge negative behaviour in each other and adopt a more mature stance on social issues (ibid.).

Research suggests that friendships are valuable for social development and also have an impact on cognitive development (Pelligrini and Blatchford, 2000). Friendships therefore are important from a school perspective for a variety of

reasons. Children who have friends are more developed socially and therefore have more positive social relationships with others (Pelligrini and Blatchford, 2000). For those children who are friendless, the opposite seems to be the case (ibid.). Although Pelligrini and Blatchford (2000) focus on the positive role that friendship can afford for cognitive development, Wentzel and Watkins (2002) extend this benefit to positive peer relationships in general. They state that "peer relationships have the potential to provide students with a sense of social relatedness and belongingness, which in turn can motivate positive engagement in the social and academic activities of the classroom" (Wentzel and Watkins, 2002:367). Wentzel (1991) identifies three aspects of social competence: socially responsible behaviour; sociometric status and self-regulatory processes such as goal setting, interpersonal trust and problem solving styles. She defines socially responsible behaviour as being the rules and norms which govern social interaction in the classroom such as cooperation, positive group participation and respect for others (ibid.). Wentzel (1991) then provides understanding related to the link between student grades and aspects of social competence in stating that socially responsible behaviour mediates the relationship between grades and the other two aspects of social competence. As such, friends and positive social relationships can influence academic outcomes and social competence is related to academic competence (Wentzel, 1997). The research conducted by Wentzel suggests that children's relationships with peers and teachers can be categorised along similar dimensions and these relationships are related to motivation at school and to academic performance (Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel, 2004; Wentzel, 2009 Wentzel et al., 2010). With regard to peer relationships, if these are supportive they will be signified by a sense of belonging (ibid.). As such, children will perceive that they have emotional support; be accepted by their peers and feel part of a friendship network (ibid.). This in turn will lead to motivational self-processes which manifest as social and academic goal pursuit; a sense of emotional well-being and a sense of efficacy (ibid.). Finally, this will result in positive outcomes for the child in terms of prosocial and responsible behaviour and good grades (ibid.).

The next section explores definitions of inclusion and also discusses how certain grouping practices have the potential to impact on inclusion.

2.11 Defining inclusion

Historically, inclusion has been viewed as a move to educate all children, but particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities, within the mainstream setting. Florian (1998:13) states that "the term inclusive education has come to refer to a philosophy of education that promotes the education of all pupils in mainstream schools". This statement by Florian (1998) seems to focus on the inclusion of pupils defined as having special educational needs. However, Messiou, (2006a:313) suggests that "inclusion can not be concerned only with those children defined as having special needs". Exclusion from and marginalisation within the educational system can happen as a result of many issues such as race, social class, religion, academic performance and behaviour. However, as Messiou (2012a) states, it is not always helpful to look at children as belonging to particular groups, such as the ones listed above, when exploring inclusion and marginalisation. Marginalisation can happen as a result of very subtle issues and is not necessarily related to having particular characteristics. She goes further in saying that when children are seen by practitioners as belonging to a particular group there is a danger that an assumption will be made presuming that the child is marginalised or more dangerously that if a child does not belong to a particular group then they will not experience marginalisation. The point made above is very important to this study, particularly in the context of ability grouping. Over recent years teachers have been encouraged to focus on the progress of specific groups of children vulnerable to underachievement such as children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children defined as having special educational needs. These groups are often overrepresented in the lower ability sets and there has been a move to 'close the gap' between these children and their higher attaining counterparts (DfES, 2004a; DfES, 2004b; DfE, 2013). If teachers only focus on children in these specific groups, then there is a danger that other children experiencing marginalisation may not be recognised. Therefore, in this thesis I am adopting the stance that assigning labels to children can act to hinder inclusion. The practice of labelling does not sit easily alongside arguments related to social justice and human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind" (UN General Assembly, 1948:

article 2). Donnelly (2013:274) argues that in practice this does not happen and the right enshrined in Article Two is only upheld in situations where the distinction or discriminatory practice is related to "ill will or causes unjustifiable harm". However, the central issue here is that if people are supposed to be equal then it works against the tenets of human rights for some groups to be considered deficient or inferior and consequently receive different treatment and denied opportunities which other groups have access to (ibid.). Alexander (2010:133) argues that "principles of personalisation and choice do not sit easily with beliefs about the value of collective learning and equity. Wider public concerns about social exclusion and social justice also cannot easily be separated from personalisation in education". In the context of education, he states that "moves towards inclusion have also highlighted the long-standing tension between the desire to respond more effectively to particular identified needs and a reluctance to pigeonhole children with these needs as 'special' in all respects" (Alexander, 2010:126). However, these fixed categories are often inflexible and therefore fail to recognise the complex interactions that are rooted in the lived experiences of the children themselves (ibid.). This can lead to a deficit understanding of particular children based on the label that has been allocated and therefore the label itself can create barriers to learning. Hence there seems to be a correlation between being different and being disadvantaged (Alexander, 2010). Focusing on the label can lead to stereotypical ways of thinking and acting and responses tend to "focus primarily on the strengths and weaknesses of children, rather than on the opportunities and constraints found in schools" (Alexander, 2010:128). Fraser (2012) introduces a conceptual spectrum related to recognition and redistribution. In order for a group to be specifically *recognised* they need to have characteristics which mark them apart as being different from all other groups and this may result in cultural injustice (ibid.). However, *redistribution* leads to groups campaigning to be similar to others because they are exposed to stigma as a result of the economic factors that are mobilised to respond to the fact that they are perceived as different and needing additional support (ibid.). In a social context the extra and the additional seems to be focused on the more vulnerable groups in society. The effects of labelling, or recognising certain groups within an educational setting is located at the recognition end of Fraser's spectrum (Fraser, 2012). Within the discussion on recognition and

redistribution, Fraser (2012) also uses the terms affirmation and transformation. Both of these terms are connected with an attempt to correct inequitable outcomes. Affirmative strategies tend to promote group difference and ultimately lead to stigmatisation. Transformative strategies, on the other hand, tend to reduce difference and inequality and remove the possibility of stigma. In this model, ability grouping in education seems to be aligned with affirmative strategies because perceived differences in ability are made very visible and overt through the hierarchical structure of the groups. These groups are then responded to in different ways and this seems to exacerbate the differences between the groups. However, mixed ability teaching could be perceived as being more equitable and aligned with transformative strategies because the system is changed for all and therefore there is a reduction in the possibility of seeing differential treatment and consequently certain groups may not be seen in a negative light.

An inclusive school therefore needs to remove barriers of physical, academic, social and cultural accessibility but also view pupils and engage with pupils as individuals rather than viewing them as being part of a particular group. Hall et al. (2004:801) state that inclusion "involves all learners participating in the learning". This view concurs with the understanding gained from Ainscow et al. (2006b:295) who are of the opinion that schools should develop ways of "increasing participation and broad educational achievement of *all* groups of learners" particularly those who are at risk of experiencing marginalisation. Mittler (2000:95) although agreeing in part with the arguments expressed by Hall et al. and Ainscow et al., believes that the focus should not just be on the participation of children within the classroom but in "the quality of their participation in the whole range of learning experiences provided by the school". In saying this, and introducing the word 'quality' into his argument, it is clear that participation alone is not enough. It has to be of value to the child and apply to all learning experiences.

Corbett (2001:19) states that inclusive education is more than just being present in a mainstream classroom "of dubious quality. It is about having access to good quality teaching". This more dynamic view of inclusion was upheld by the Department of Education and Skills – DfES, (2004a:28) who argue that "inclusion is about much more than the type of school that children attend: it is

about the quality of their experience; how they are helped to learn, achieve and participate fully in the life of the school". Both of these views demonstrate that inclusion is not a static position, it happens at the interface between teacher and pupil, between pupils themselves and between the pupil and the school environment. As a result of this understanding, and central to my research, is the belief that teacher decisions and school structures such as class grouping will have an impact on the inclusion of pupils. Ainscow (2007:155) believes that "the identification and removal of barriers" is central to inclusive practices. Schools, working towards creating a more inclusive learning environment will not and cannot progress unless school organisation and certain teaching approaches are scrutinised closely to prevent children struggling on the periphery of the educational experience and consequently being marginalised. Messiou (2012b) describes marginalisation as being similar to being on the outside of a circle. The boundaries of the circle encompass those children who are included within the setting: those on the outside are marginalised. However, as Messiou explains, these boundaries are mutable for children depending on the context and the setting. As such, children who may find themselves outside the circle, for example, in one classroom context, may not experience marginalisation in another classroom context or on the playground. The understanding developed by Messiou (2012b) is particularly important for this study on grouping and peer relationships. In separating children from their original class group in order to form ability groups, teachers may unwittingly create situations where some children are marginalised. Therefore the points made previously related to marginalisation, removing barriers, increasing the quality of participation and raising educational achievement are central to my research on pupil grouping. If particular organisational structures such as grouping have an impact of creating barriers to learning and participation or have an effect of reducing or stagnating pupil achievement then the use of these structures needs re-evaluating.

In addition to this, inclusion is not just about *responding* to diversity within the school population, it is also about *valuing* that diversity (Ainscow, et al., 2006a). It is my view that it is the way in which schools respond to diversity, which then impacts on how pupils appear to be valued by the teachers and each other. Notions of ability could be seen as one facet of diversity. Decisions which are

made in schools are underpinned by attitudes and views about certain pupils, and the way in which schools group pupils, within and between classes, is one of these decisions. Central to the rationale of this research, is the fact that choices made by teachers as a result of their particular views and attitudes about children may also end up altering children's views and attitudes about each other. Therefore, deficit and positive views of difference can be generated on the basis of teacher's responses to certain pupils and this in turn would have an impact on inclusion.

Although I stated previously that inclusion is not just concerned with pupils defined as having special educational needs or disabilities, research in this field does provide interesting and thought provoking information about how deficit views of difference can hinder inclusion. In many studies, these views of difference are generated by the way pupils are responded to in the school context. Therefore it could be argued that understanding gained in these studies could also be applied to children who do not have SEN or disabilities but who are treated differently for other reasons, such as their perceived lack of ability. In the DISS project (Deployment and Impact of Support Staff), Blatchford et al. (2012) conducted a large scale, naturalistic study looking at the role of support staff in schools. The findings demonstrated that the support given by teaching assistants (TAs) was mainly for low attaining pupils and pupils defined as having special educational needs (ibid). Middle and high attaining pupils rarely, if ever, experienced TA support (ibid). In addition to this, the children working with TAs are often separated from the teacher, from their peers and from aspects of the curriculum when working both within and outside the classroom (ibid). Worth (2013) concurs with these findings in relation to students with disabilities who are often physically separated within the classroom environment. This physical separation is often emphasised by the presence of a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) which in turn highlights a deficit view of difference. In the study conducted by Blatchford et al. (2012), they found that the TAs felt that their presence was considered a stigma for some children. If the LSA always sits with the child, and in doing so restricts the child's ability or opportunity to interact with their peers then there are a number of factors that would impact on inclusion regarding these particular children. Firstly, a view could be generated that the child is incapable of attempting any activity without

support and this in turn could lead other pupils to believe that this pupil would have nothing of value to offer to should they choose to work together (Holt, 2004a). Secondly, the physical separation of this pupil from the rest of the class could lead other children to create reasons in their own mind as to why the child was set apart (Holt, 2004b). As a result of this, the child may be viewed in a stereotypical way because their actual capabilities are not known (McGrath and Noble, 2007). Finally, other children may assume that the teacher has good reasons for separating the child and this in turn may influence their willingness to interact with this child in social situations (Morrison and Burgman, 2009). In the MAST project (Making a Statement), Baines et al. (2015) studied the experiences of children with a statement of special educational need in mainstream settings. One of the findings of the study was the realisation that peers were often reluctant to work with a child who had a statement. This reluctance was tentatively attached to the

> poor social and or communication skills on the part of the
>
> pupil with SEN which included: withdrawn or shy behaviour,
>
> a dominant, aggressive or confrontational manner, or inappropriate
>
> or odd behaviour possibly targeted at trying to improve relations
>
> with peers (Baines et al., 2015:21).

However, this study also recognised that the actions of the school in providing assistance and support for the pupil were also integral in perpetuating this social isolation. This final point could create implications for how the pupil feels about themselves if they are rejected socially by their peers (Prince and Hadwin, 2013; Bossaert et al., 2013; Avramidis, 2010).

Particularly in the context of my own study these realisations are very important because I want to gain an understanding related to whether teacher decisions about grouping impact on children's peer relationships and friendships. Also, and more specifically, whether these teacher decisions lead children to form their own opinions about who they can and cannot work and socialise with. If teachers, through their actions, are able to influence how children feel about each other, then this would have significant implications for the creation of an inclusive school environment (Hodkinson, 2007). It is therefore vital to

investigate the processes which "influence the development of distinctive classroom cultures, which may include and exclude certain children" (Kershner and Pointon, 2000:76). Further to this it is important that everyone within the school setting considers "how far their own actions create barriers to inclusion" (Allan, 2003:177). Northfield and Sherman (2004) argue that academic issues are placed above social issues in schools and this in turn influences how pupils respond to each other. A competitive rather than supportive atmosphere emerges and as a result some children are marginalised because they are unable to compete with the values, standards and norms that have been created. Within the literature on disability an understanding develops that there is a difference in the way that children are viewed depending on whether they are perceived to have an intellectual disability or a physical disability. As a result, children are viewed differently in different contexts depending on whether the emphasis is on academic ability or on physical ability (Benjamin et al., 2003). This links with the work of Messiou (2012b), explained earlier, regarding marginalisation and how the boundaries of the circle are mutable for different children in different contexts. In a classroom context, where the emphasis is on academic issues, children who are able to achieve highly would be advantaged and more accepted (Nepi et al., 2013) whereas the opposite would be the case for children who were perceived as being low achievers (Nowiki and Sandieson, 2002). Therefore by drawing attention to perceived differences in ability, it is possible for teachers to influence how children view each other (McGrath and Noble, 2010).

Central to my argument, therefore, is the understanding that inclusion must be about a process of constant evaluation and dialogue to ensure that pupil differences are not seen as limiters and barriers to learning and achievement and that every aspect of the school includes and engages all pupils. Thomas and Loxley (2001:119) state that inclusion provides

> A framework within which all children – regardless of
> ability, gender, language, ethnic or cultural origin – can
> be valued equally, treated with respect and provided with
> real opportunities at school.

Mittler, (2000) believes that it is important that inclusive practice takes into account all pupils, particularly those at risk of marginalisation. He states that

supporting pupils to have access to available provision is not enough, and argues that "there must be scrutiny of what is available to ensure that it is relevant and accessible to the whole range of pupils in the school" (Mittler, 2000:4). This would indicate that a degree of responsiveness on behalf of the teacher is vital in ensuring equity for all learners (Corbett, 1999; Heggarty, 2001). These authors reinforce the view that issues which inhibit the inclusion of all children need bringing to the surface so that changes can be made in light of concerns that are raised. If teachers make decisions about how they group pupils within classes and between classes, then they are also likely to evaluate the success of these grouping arrangements based on criteria which hold particular importance for them. If this is the case then the views of the children, who have direct experience of these grouping structures, would never be heard. This is not to say that teachers do not take pupil view into consideration when making decisions about grouping but it is important to highlight the importance of involving children in the decision making process. It is important that children understand the reasons behind these teacher decisions, believe that they are fair and also feel that they have a positive impact on the learning experience (Messiou, 2012a). Therefore, as part of the rationale for this research, I would argue that if teachers wanted to create a truly inclusive environment for all pupils, then they would need to involve the pupils in the evaluation process.

Todd (2007) believes that one of the hallmarks of inclusive practice is involving children in whole school decisions but she also states that this is not a common practice. She argues that children should be consulted and involved in helping to make decisions that will ultimately affect them. This view implies that the agenda for improvement has already been discussed at adult level and the children are then consulted for their views on pre-determined issues. She states that "education cannot be inclusive without collaborating with children and parents in ways that enable their perspectives to influence the development of schools and systems" (Todd, 2007:13). Casey (2005) believes that listening to children's views is an extremely important part of inclusion. She states that

> Listening to and consulting with children, acting on their
> recommendations, following up on the views that children
> have expressed and involving them in the on-going
> processes are important in all children's settings (Casey, 2005:24).

Messiou (2006a) concurs with the views of Todd and Casey and states that when collecting views related to inclusive practices it is the views of children that are particularly important because they experience first-hand the impact of inclusionary or exclusionary practices. However, she argues that "children's voices can be viewed as the challenging starting point for the creation of more inclusive practices within schools" (Messiou, 2006a:314). In saying this, she is placing much more importance on the views and ideas of children because their contributions are seen as a *starting point* for moving towards more inclusive practices rather than just having a viewpoint on issues that adults consider to be of importance. Messiou (2011), argues that using children's views as a starting point for schools moving forward with inclusive practices, can "bring to the surface features that are important for promoting inclusive education" (Messiou, 2011:1). She warns that issues at the root of marginalisation for some learners may not be uncovered unless emphasis is placed on listening to the views of children.

Inclusion therefore is about a high quality of school experience, both academically and socially, for all pupils. It is important not to view inclusion as being a response to a particular group of pupils such as those defined as having Special Educational Needs. Further to this, the labelling of different groups of pupils based on implicit or explicit characteristics (particularly those that would lead others to assume that problems or deficits lie within the individual make-up of a particular child) would seem to work against the values of inclusion. In fact the allocation of labels to children who might be viewed as being vulnerable to marginalisation can actually divert attention away from other pupils who might be experiencing problems within the school context for very particular and subtle reasons. In order to be able to move towards a more inclusive way of working schools need to find ways of accessing the views and opinions of children about matters that are important to them. Children have first-hand experience of the systems and organisational arrangements which schools use. Grouping is one of these systems that children have direct experience of and the decisions made by schools and teachers when allocating children to groups could ultimately affect their peer relationships and consequently their inclusion within the school. It is therefore important to explore what particular grouping

structures are used by schools and how these might impact upon the inclusion of all pupils

2.12 Summary of the findings from the literature on grouping, peer relationships and inclusion

Many studies have looked into the social and educational effects of ability grouping in the form of setting at both primary and secondary level and some of these have consulted with pupils and teachers in order to gain a deeper understanding of the positive and negative effects of setting. The literature highlights a number of key advantages and disadvantages related to ability grouping. The advantages relate to a number of key areas:

a) Teachers perceive that they can teach more effectively because the class is homogenous or similar in relation to perceived ability.
b) Teachers can respond to the academic needs of all children.
c) Children make better progress and achieve more highly.
d) Children placed in the lower groups can experience a feeling of success.
e) Children placed in the high sets develop a high academic self-concept.
f) Introducing ability grouping in Key Stage 1 aids transition into Key stage 2 and similarly in the transition between primary and secondary school.

The disadvantages of ability grouping also relate to a number of key areas (some of which seem to contradict the advantages that have been listed above):

a) Ability grouping impacts on the way that teachers view pupils and this has a resulting impact on the pedagogy that they use and the expectations that they have of specific groups and individuals.
b) In separating pupils into different classes based on their perceived ability, there is segregation related to other factors as well. As such, ability grouping is seen as being inequitable.
c) There are issues related to the reliability of test information to allocate children to groups.
d) Ability grouping structures are fairly inflexible and there is limited movement of pupils from one group to another.

e) The attainment gap is widened.

f) It has a negative impact on peer relationships.

g) The curriculum is narrowed as an emphasis is placed on English and maths.

When looking at and comparing the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping, a number of important issues emerge. One important advantage of ability grouping is that teachers believe that they can teach more effectively and respond to the needs of individual children when children are grouped based on their perceived ability. However, based on the evidence in the literature, the pupils are responded to differently, but these responses do not seem to be evident within each particular group. The differences in approach are evident across the different groups but the pedagogy of individual teachers within the group is narrowed. The group itself seems to be viewed as being homogenous and therefore the need for different approaches and different resources is not recognised. The response to different needs has already been achieved by assigning the pupils to a particular group where these needs can be met. As such there seems to be a feeling that all children within the group can be taught from the front, require identical work and will complete this work at an identical pace. So rather than responding to individual children, the teacher is responding to the group label. There is also evidence in the literature that the label assigned to the group is also connected with a range of typical characteristics that are used by teachers to define the children that are part of that group. This in turn influences the way that the group is taught. Therefore, teachers give implicit messages about their expectations and what characteristics typify group membership. These implicit messages are projected in the type of work that is given and the pace that the children are expected to work at. Teachers sometimes reinforce their expectations explicitly to remind children what the characteristics of the group membership are. There seems to be an understanding that children have been allocated to a group because they are similar and therefore the expectation is that they will remain similar. The literature also suggests that the expectations that teachers have of particular groups affects the way that they view the work of those children and more importantly how they assess the work of those children. Assessments of children in a high set are viewed more favourably and marked more leniently

because the expectation is that these children are supposed to be high attainers. The opposite is so for those children who have been allocated to one of the lower sets. This perpetuates the cycle of advantage and disadvantage for those groups of pupils and set placement is more likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Another perceived advantage of ability grouping is increased progress and attainment. However, evidence in the literature states that this only applies to the children in the higher sets. For the children in middle and lower sets the opposite is the case. When looking at the assessment information that is used to allocate children to sets, research shows that there is often very little difference between children placed in consecutive sets and in many cases there is an overlap. However, the academic outcomes for these pupils do not reflect their very similar starting points. Some literature states that the academic self-concept of children in the higher groups is raised because they are successful and achieve highly. However there is some conflicting evidence to suggest that this may not always be the case, as it depends which reference point the child uses to make their comparison.

In the literature on peer relationships attention is drawn to the fact that there are different levels of engagement with peers and differences in how children are viewed based on the characteristics that they are perceived to have. Children within the broad context of a setting are often assigned reputational labels by their peers. These labels are assigned based on limited evidence and therefore can be stereotypical. Previously, it was mentioned that teachers assign particular characteristics to pupils because of the group that they are in; it is also possible that children could also make these judgements based on negligible or limited knowledge. In addition to this the literature also spoke about children looking for similarities when choosing friends. If teachers reinforce these similarities in a very overt and explicit way, then more friendship choices are likely to be based on the similarities that the teacher has drawn attention to. Therefore, as mentioned previously, if teachers transmit messages to the pupils in a particular set group that they are similar (or even the same) then this could in turn influence children's friendship choices. These messages could be transmitted by the approaches that teachers use in the classroom, the work that they provide for the children and the expectations that they reinforce through

their verbal interactions. When teachers decide to use certain grouping structures they alert pupils to differences that the children may not previously have been aware of. These grouping structures also provide opportunities for certain characteristics to be reinforced and a group identity to be formed. Children may align themselves with the group identity and this could impact on who they choose to be friends with or even who they feel they can and cannot work with. If pupils align themselves with certain characteristics as part of a group identity then it further highlights the differences between the groups. Children who are part of the group are seen as being similar but children who are not part of the group are seen as being different. These differences could be viewed as being negative.

In the review of the literature, there does not seem to be any studies related to whether teachers, when they make decisions regarding pupil grouping based on ability, also have a resulting influence over peer relationships and possibly friendships. The literature on peer relationships indicates that one of the factors influencing friendship formation between children is an awareness of similar characteristics. Perceived ability could be one of those characteristics. Therefore decisions that are made when grouping pupils in the classroom and between classrooms could have an impact on who children think they can work with, who they develop friendships with and how they view children in different groups. This in turn would have an impact on inclusion.

Based on this gap, this research aims to understand whether teacher decisions regarding how they group pupils within classrooms has an influence on peer relationships. The study will investigate whether teacher decisions about grouping influences pupil views towards members of their peer group and whether this in turn can influence who they are able to or choose to make friends with. Although perceived ability could be one pupil characteristic that could be highlighted through particular grouping strategies or through particular teacher practices, this research also aims to uncover whether other grouping strategies also have an influence on friendship formation. This research would have impact within the field of inclusion and inclusive school development because a clearer understanding in this area could support how schools are able to move forward with regard to the educational and social inclusion of all pupils.

Chapter 3 – Methodological Framework

Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology that was used when conducting a multiple instrumental case study. The study was aimed at eliciting the views of children regarding whether decisions made by teachers when grouping children within classes and between classes, had an impact on their peer relationships. It details the steps that were taken throughout the course of the research project to prepare the tools for data collection; the methods used for gathering and analysing the data; and also problems that were encountered along the way. The intention of the research study was to gain an understanding related to how children perceive the factors which influence teachers when they group pupils within the classroom. In addition to this, the research aimed to explore the impact of grouping, particularly in relation to ability grouping, on children's peer relationships and ultimately on their inclusion within the school setting.

3.1 Research paradigm

This research study is located in the post-positivist paradigm. Anderson and Arsenault (1998:5) state that this paradigm "accepts values and perspective as important considerations in the search for knowledge". This research investigates the social world, and deals with human responses to situations and is therefore naturalistic and interpretative. Understanding related to the feelings and reactions of my participants within their particular contexts was sought and consequently the data gathered was qualitative in nature. Cohen et al. (2007:19) state that research of "the social world can be understood only from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the on-going action being investigated". It deals with direct experience and it is the people themselves that define the reality. Basit (2010:16) states that qualitative methodology is based on subjective views and these help the "researcher to explain social reality as it is perceived and created by the research participants themselves".

The data gathering phase of the research took place over one school year in three separate primary schools. The study sought to understand whether teacher decisions related to pupil grouping in the classroom had an influence on peer relationships. The initial focus was to investigate whether teachers, when they grouped pupils based on their perceived ability within classroom and between classrooms, were actually promoting a segregated rather than diverse mix of friendships on the playground. Although perceived ability could be one pupil characteristic which could be highlighted through particular grouping strategies or through particular teacher practices; this research also aimed to uncover whether other grouping strategies also had an influence on peer relationships. This research aimed to understand the views and feelings of children about these particular grouping practices.

The principal research questions, based on engagement with the literature, were

1) What are children's perceptions of the decisions behind certain grouping arrangements?
2) What understanding can we gain from children about the importance of friendship in relation to pupil grouping arrangements?
3) What impact does pupil grouping appear to have on inclusion?

Case study methodology was used in order to gather the data for this research. Opie (2004:74) argues that "a case study can be viewed as an in-depth study of interactions of a single instance in an enclosed system". This understanding that the field is clearly defined is reinforced by Punch (2009) who refers to the case as a bounded context. Therefore it was important that the case was clearly defined at the beginning of the research study. Gillham (2000:1) states that a case study investigates a specific case

> to answer specific research questions (that may be fairly loose to
>
> begin with) and which seeks a range of different kinds of evidence,
>
> evidence which is there in the case setting and which has to be
>
> abstracted and collated to get the best possible answers to the
>
> research questions.

Cohen et al. (2007:253) state that "case studies can penetrate situations in ways that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis". Basit (2010:20) argues that

> a case study presents a rich description and details of
>
> the lived experiences of specific cases or individuals and
>
> offers an understanding of how these individuals perceive
>
> the various phenomena in the social world and their effect
>
> on themselves.

The view that case studies provide very rich data is upheld by Hartley (2004:323) who extends our understanding in stating that "case study research consists of detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time, of phenomena, within their context". Flyvbjerg (2004:422) concurs with the view that the use of a case study as a research strategy results in a depth of understanding and argues that a case study is "important for the development of a nuanced view of reality". Yin (2003) refutes the beliefs that case studies can only be used as a preliminary strategy for research and that they are in some way a less rigorous method of enquiry. He argues that case studies contribute to knowledge of a particular group or situation and that literature can provide the theoretical framework on which the case study can be designed. The decision to use case study methodology was made because this provided the framework to be able to explore pupil grouping in three different school settings. The research study engaged with not only *whether* classroom grouping affected peer relationships and inclusion but also *how and why* it affected these relationships. Yin (2003;1) argues that

> case studies are the preferred strategy when 'how' or 'why'
>
> questions are being posed, when the investigator has little
>
> control over the events, and when the focus is on a
>
> contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.

The idea that data can be collected over a long period of time, with a variety of methods, suggest that case studies also lend themselves to be used as part of ethnographic inquiry. Ethnographic research is located in the post positivist paradigm and could be defined by the research design and the methods of data collection employed within it. The research techniques that were employed in

this study were closely aligned with ethnographic enquiry. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) believe that there are no clear cut boundaries between this form of social research and any others, mainly because when looking at the methods employed to gain data there are many overlaps and similarities. This view seems to indicate that ethnography is not necessarily a specific form of research that involves certain approaches and activities that set it apart from other forms of social research. Other authors, such as Geertz (1993) and Willis and Trondman (2000) provide further insight into specific features that they see as being central to an ethnographic approach. Geertz (1993) argues that ethnography involves selecting participants who will be of interest to the study and also able to provide important insight. He also states that it is important to develop rapport with the participants and will ultimately involve transcribing texts and keeping a diary, among other things. Willis and Trondman (2000) see ethnography as being a personal mind-set and an approach to the way the data are collected and represented rather than just the adoption of a collection of tools to obtain the data. Geertz (1993) argues that, when conducting research that is ethnographic in nature, the researcher does not just report on what is happening, they also look on a much deeper level and analyse the meanings, reasons and interpretations that surround the events or actions. In doing this, the raw data is placed in a context that both describes and explains it and enables the description to become 'thick' rather than superficial (ibid).

Therefore, although employing a case study approach, this research is also aligned with many of the central tenets of ethnographic inquiry, such as the length of time spent in the setting, keeping field notes, developing a rapport with participants and gatekeepers and the collection of rich data. As such, it seems that this study reflects the views of Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) that were presented earlier. However, there is one very important reason why this research may not be considered as an ethnography by some authors. Very particular to ethnographic study is the understanding that, within the physical context of 'the field', the ethnographer needs to integrate into the society or culture that they are researching in order for them to understand more about the events and actions of their study. Geertz (1993) states that in order to conduct ethnographic research you almost need to 'become' one of the members of the culture being studied. He believes that you need to act like them, think like

them, react like them in order to try and truly understand their perspective and motivation. It is about being at one with the participants. Although trying to develop rapport with my participants, the fact that they were children meant that I could not have been seen as so culturally similar that I became one of their group.

In order to follow this particular line of inquiry, I spent a prolonged period of time in each school setting, collecting data in a variety of ways, identifying how groupings and peer relationships evolved and possibly changed over the academic year and engaging with participants in formal and informal situations in order to gain a deep level of understanding related to my research questions. Punch (2009:123) argues that working in an in-depth manner, using a variety of methods can actually provide important understanding about a research area particularly when "complex social behaviour is involved, as in much educational research".

Stake (1995) and Yin (2003) differentiate between different types of case study depending on what the purpose of the study is. They state that some case studies can focus on a single case (these are referred to as single case design), yet others use a number of cases during the course of the research (these are referred to as multiple or comparative case studies). They further differentiate by stating that some studies can be purely descriptive, some evaluative and others exploratory. Stake uses the term 'instrumental case study' rather than 'exploratory case study' and states that this type of case study seeks to understand something that may be revealed by studying a particular case. Thomas (2011:98) argues that "with an *instrumental* case study, the inquiry is serving a particular purpose. So the case study is acting as an instrument – a tool". My research study took the form of a multiple instrumental case study. Punch (2009:119) states that "the *instrumental case study,* [is] where a particular case is examined to give insight into an issue, or to refine a theory". In the context of this research, I wanted to gain insight into whether the methods used by teachers to group children had an impact on the children's peer relationships. I conducted my research in three primary schools in the North East of England and so used a multiple case study as opposed to a single case study design. As such, my cases were the three schools and the unit of analysis was the way in which pupils were grouped and the impact that this had on peer

relationships. Thomas (2011) argues that a case study is made up of two halves which usually hold equal importance: the subject (person or place) and the analytical frame (the unit of analysis which gives the study purpose and direction). However, with a multiple case study he states that the focus is on the unit of analysis because "each individual case is less important in itself than the comparison each offers with the others" (Thomas, 2011:141). This raises a very important issue related to whether the data generated through case study research can be compared with other cases or can be said to be applicable to other cases. Thomas (2011:3), argues that "a case study is about the particular rather than the general. You cannot generalise from a case study". However many authors believe that generalisations can be made. Wiersma and Jurs (2005) state that a multiple case study enhances the generalisability of the research and the data gathered can also be used for comparative reasons. Yin (2003:32) believes that "the mode of generalisation is 'analytic generalisation', in which a previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case study". Bassey (2001) makes a distinction between scientific generalisation and 'fuzzy' generalisation. In the former, the researcher would claim a clear and precise causal link, whereas in the latter, the researcher would claim a possible causal link. He argues that "a fuzzy generalisation is one that is neither likely to be true in every case, nor likely to be untrue in every case: it is something that *may* be true" (Bassey, 2001:10). These three authors present specific ways in which tentative generalisations can begin to be made either through studying multiple contexts, comparing with previously developed theory from research already completed by other researchers or finally by creating broad generalisations that may be true in some similar contexts. As such, a multiple instrumental case study, such as the one that I undertook, might begin to explore possible relationships and uncover particular results that may be applicable to other cases. However, it must be acknowledged that when conducting research of the social world it is often difficult to defend direct causal links between one phenomena and another. After discussing the findings from this research study, I will explore where possible 'fuzzy' generalisations can be made in relation to those findings.

3.2 Selection of schools

This research took the form of a multiple instrumental case study, seeking to understand views and issues relating to how classroom grouping affects children's peer relationships and therefore there was some flexibility as to which schools could be chosen for the research. I decided to choose primary schools as the contexts for my case studies because, having spent 23 years teaching in primary schools, I felt that I had a secure knowledge and understanding about policy and practice related to the teaching of this age range. I felt that this understanding would support my research and assist with the development of productive working relationships with both staff and pupils. It would also help me to understand much more readily the different school contexts and the organisational structures that I encountered while working within the three schools. However, it was important not to make assumptions during the data collection and analysis based on my own particular experiences.

I chose to use three schools within the North East of England and these schools were chosen based on particular characteristics related to how they grouped pupils. These characteristics are explained in detail in chapter four but all three schools were selected on the basis that they chose to group pupils in very different ways. Two of the schools (Bridgeford and Newton Park) used the structure of set groups to organise pupils for literacy and maths teaching. However, because of the greater number of children within the Bridgeford cohort, the way that children were allocated to particular set groupings in Bridgeford was very different from the methods employed by Newton Park. River Close was chosen on the basis that it did not use ability grouping in the form of setting and, during the initial contact with the school, it was portrayed that the school did not use perceptions of ability in order to group children. However, during the course of the research, it became apparent that although River Close did indeed have very different and arguably more flexible responses to grouping children, there were occasions when children did have particular places in the classroom where they sat for some lessons and that these places were based on notions of ability.

The criterion of ability grouping, in the form of setting, was an important factor in school choice for a number of reasons. This form of ability grouping might raise awareness of the perceived academic competency of children in the eyes of

their peers and this in turn could influence who they choose to interact with and maintain or develop friendships with. Also, although this study intended to look at other reasons for grouping which teachers use within the school context, ability grouping was a focus. When consulting the literature on ability grouping it was seen to have many negative academic and social outcomes for children but, although there are studies which look into how children in the lower groups are viewed by their peers, there are no studies which track its influence on friendship groups and children's peer relationships.

The choice to approach a school that did not use ability grouping in the form of setting was to enable triangulation of the data sources and to develop an awareness related to whether the possible impact on peer relationships was different when the children were organised differently. Wiersma and Jurs (2005:210) suggest that

> the additional sites or cases may involve some diversity
> in order to provide some range for the observations. If
> cases are to be compared and contrasted, additional
> sites or cases may be selected because of the absence
> or variation in some characteristics.

It is important to note that difficulties arise when trying to compare and contrast data gained from different cases because no school context is the same and should not be viewed as being so. However, if similar themes or categories began to emerge through the data analysis process it would enable tentative comparisons to be made relating to my research focus. This is an area that will be explored later when discussing data analysis. Another factor that influenced school choice was the willingness of the school to allow me to work with children at the upper end of the junior age range in Year 5 (aged 9-10 years) or Year 6 (aged 10-11 years). I wanted to specifically work with this age range because these children would have been used to the particular grouping practices that the school chose to adopt for the longest time, compared to children in other year groups. As a result of this, they would arguably be the most influenced by the grouping structures. Silverman (2000:106) argues that

> in independent, unfunded research, you are likely to choose
> any setting which, while demonstrating the phenomenon in

which you are interested, is accessible and will provide
appropriate data reasonably readily and quickly.

This was certainly a factor in my choice of schools and led me to approach schools who had worked with me on previous occasions. River Close knew me as a Teaching Practice Tutor for Initial Teacher Training students; Newton Park was accessed through a colleague who I had previously worked with, but who had recently been appointed Deputy Head and was able to initiate conversations with the Headteacher; and Bridgeford was where I had previously been employed as a teacher. In the context of the first two schools, my personal connection with the research environment was quite remote. However, regarding Bridgeford, I had much more knowledge of this school and had to be careful not to let this wealth of understanding influence my study, both in the way that I reported events but also in the way that teachers and pupils perceived me. The teachers in Bridgeford knew me as a teacher but also in recent years knew me as a researcher and have worked with me in that role. The pupils that I worked with had not previously been taught by me but they were familiar with seeing me in the school on numerous occasions both as a teacher and as a researcher. Over the year of data gathering, I chose to only work as a researcher and not be involved in teaching any classes in the school. I felt that this was an important decision to make because I wanted the children to view me as being a researcher and not see me as being a teacher or a member of staff. However, although I distanced myself from the role of teacher, I still felt compelled to be more formally addressed as Mrs Adderley as opposed to adopting the more relaxed situation of children using my first name. This was mainly because I wanted to maintain consistency of approach across all three schools and being known as anything other than Mrs Adderley in Bridgeford would have been difficult.

In all three settings, I had preliminary discussions with the Headteacher about being able to focus the research on the older junior year groups. Initially I had proposed just Year 5 for the study because I believed that schools would be reluctant for me to work with Year 6 because of statutory end of key stage testing and the pressures related to this. However, River Close was very specific that they wished me to work in Year 6 and consequently I adjusted my

chosen sample group to be either Year 5 or Year 6 rather than be restricted to one or the other. The reason that the Headteacher of River Close gave, was the fact that she believed that the Year 6 group represented the culmination of their work as a school and their commitment to a particular way of working. She stated that statutory end of key stage testing did not interfere with the way in which their curriculum was structured. In addition to this she felt that the Year 6 teacher would be particularly cooperative and willing to work with a researcher. This problem of schools acting as gatekeepers and restricting or redefining the research project is an issue experienced by researchers. Barker and Weller (2003) discuss how negotiations with Headteachers with their own priorities and agendas can result in adjustments having to be made to planned research projects. They state, in relation to their own research, that "the head teacher, positioned within the school environment with its own set of socio-spatial expectations and processes, was powerful enough to redefine the entire research project" (Barker and Weller, 2003:212). I felt that it was important to work flexibly with each of the schools but was also aware that, while needing to negotiate access to organisations, the focus of the entire study was not lost or compromised. I felt that, in relation to my own research, it was an acceptable compromise to work with either Year 5 or Year 6 depending on the preference of the school.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Punch (2009:49) states that "research in education inevitably carries ethical issues, because it involves collecting data from people and about people". Working with children in schools in order to collect my data raised very specific ethical issues.

Before commencing my research, I gained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Hull (see Appendix A). A formal letter was sent to the Headteacher of each school outlining the aims of the research and my proposed methodology (see Appendix B). The school was assured that anonymity and confidentiality would be adhered to at all times. The consent of parents was also obtained before any children participated in focus group or individual interviews (see Appendix C). Prior to interview, I also asked for the

verbal permission of pupils, whose parents had allowed their children to take part, to make sure that they were happy to be interviewed.

3.4 Research with children

Central to this research study was the understanding that by engaging with children's voices, information related to grouping and its impact on peer relationships could be revealed. I mentioned previously that in order to ascertain the impact that certain school structures, such as grouping, could have on children, it was important to ask the children themselves. This is in preference to assuming how they might feel based on other evidence. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015:21) argue that

> Research involving children and young people has often
> privileged the adult's view of the world, building upon a
> perception that the adult, being older and more experienced
> must necessarily know more of the world of children than
> they may know themselves.

Therefore working solely with children to conduct this research study provided a challenge because "children are not used to expressing their views freely or being taken seriously by adults because of their position in an adult dominated society" (Punch, 2002:325). This is certainly an issue within a school setting and an issue that I had to consider. Initially, I was an adult that was unknown to the children in River Close and Newton Park: whereas in Bridgeford I was known to be a teacher who had previously taught there. As a consequence I needed to find ways of addressing the power imbalance. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) recognise that it is very difficult to completely remove the imbalances of power that exist between adults and children. Physical characteristics alone, such as age, emphasise these imbalances. As such, these authors discuss ethical symmetry and this relates to the fact that the relationship between the researcher and the child needs to be just and respectful. As mentioned previously, I ensured that I asked the children's verbal permission before embarking on any of the activities with them. I also gave them opportunities to

choose not to be involved in the activity if it was inconvenient with them at that particular point in time. However, I also gave these children opportunities to return later if they wished. An example of this was when the break-time bell went during an activity and I assured the children that if they wished to leave and come back after break then they were free to do this. I also gave the same flexibility to those children who thought that they would miss a particular subject that they enjoyed. In addition to this, there was one situation at Newton Park when one of the boys ended up in a focus group where the rest were girls. He looked unhappy and again the option was given for him to wait for a group where he would not be the only boy and he took this option. Finally in River Close, one of the boys said that he did not want to be part of the individual interviews (even though I had chosen him as one of the sample group). I accepted this, but after a few weeks he approached me and asked whether he could be involved and again I agreed.

Respecting the children's wishes related to when they chose to be involved with the research was one of the strategies that I used to try and reduce the power imbalance. A further strategy was in the choice of tools for data collection which were participatory in nature. This enabled the children to have some "control over the process" and helped to ensure that what they said was valued (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998:342). In using activities which involved the participation of the children, I hoped to provide my participants with opportunities to be able to express their opinion using materials that they were familiar with, that were visually appealing and that prompted discussion. As such, I wanted the emphasis to be on the conversation that was generated as a result of the activity rather than the focus being on the interaction between me as the researcher and them as the participants. The activities employed will be discussed in subsequent sections in this chapter.

3.5 Data collection schedule

Table 3 – overview of the phases of the research project

Term Dates	Activities undertaken as part of the research design	Methods used
<u>Phase 1</u> 10th September – 26th October (7 weeks)	- Getting to know the setting and the people who worked in the setting. I worked in classrooms to get to know the children in addition to spending some break-times on the playground. 1 day/ week (7 visits) was spent in each of the 3 schools. - Collecting class lists and ability group lists. - Recording where children were sitting in the classroom and in set groupings. - Initial sociometric data from children regarding their friendships - Preparation of tools for trial focus group. - Conducting and evaluating the trial focus group.	- Observation and informal interaction with children. - Informal liaison with teachers/admin - Collecting sociometric data from the children in Year 5/6 in each school. - Taking fieldnotes
<u>Phase 2</u> 5th November – 21st December (7 weeks)	- Began to analyse sociometric data. - Conducted focus group interviews with all children who had returned consent slips. - Continued to collect informal data and field notes. - Transcribed and began to analyse focus group data	Interviews with children.
<u>Phase 2</u> 8th January – 8th February (5 weeks)	- Completed the final focus group interviews. - Prepared criteria for individual interviews and observations.	Interviews with children.

Phase 2 18th February – 22nd March (5 weeks)	• Prepared tools for individual interviews and observations. • Conducted and evaluated a trial individual interview and classroom observation.	• Informal observation on the playground. • Informal observation in the classroom
Phase 3 9th April – 24th May (7 weeks) 3rd June – 19th July (7 weeks)	• Individual interviews and classroom and playground observations. • Transcribing and analysing the individual interviews	• Informal observation on the playground. • Informal observation in the classroom • Interviews with children

The three school case studies ran in parallel and this did cause some problems for me as a researcher as there was a large amount of information to remember and deal with at the same time (Gillham, 2000 and Bassey, 1999). However, I felt that it would not have been beneficial to my research to run three sequential case studies. Each phase of the project, from the initial gathering of sociometric data and seating plans, through to the focus groups and then the individual interviews with selected pupils, afforded me the opportunity to gradually develop a depth of information about grouping and its impact on peer relationships. The length of time over the whole school year spent in each particular setting was an important factor for me, not least because it assisted in developing relationships with the children and adults that I hoped would ultimately allow them to feel much more comfortable engaging in conversations with me. I feel that these important relationships would not have had sufficient time to develop if I had only allocated one term to each school.

Therefore, this research project involved a commitment to working within each school for at least one day per week for the duration of the academic year, starting in September 2012. As such, the data were gathered over a long period of time and involved developing good working relationships with both the

teachers and the pupils. I aimed to work initially with all children within the year group in each school rather than choose a small sample. This was because the children interacted with each other within classrooms, between classrooms and on the playground and therefore to restrict my sample would potentially lead to the loss of important data. As the research progressed, the number of children who were being studied became smaller. Initially this was due to external influences because not all parents responded to the letter asking permission for their child to be part of the study or they refused their permission. However, as the research progressed, I purposefully chose, using very specific criteria which will be explained later, a small number of children with whom to conduct individual interviews.

I spent the first half of the Autumn Term familiarising myself with the school setting and the children within the year groups where I would be working. This initial familiarisation supported many aspects of the study, particularly related to being able to identify the children who I would be working with when they were in different settings around the school. In order to recognise them on the playground and when they moved to different set and class groupings, I needed to know the children really well. As I mentioned previously, the underlying methodology had some similarities with ethnographic enquiry. Brewer (2004:316) sees an ethnographic approach to involve the building of relationships and trust. He argues that "this bond of trust is premised on the same qualities people bring to all social relationships – honesty, friendliness, reciprocity, openness, communication and confidence building. Trust is rarely instantaneous and normally builds slowly". Also during this initial half term I was able to gather data on the general school setting and broad academic and social information about the pupils in the year groups that I was studying.

3.6 Data collection methods

I used a range of methods in order to gather data for this research and those methods included sociometric testing, focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The following sections explore these methods and explain how they supported the gathering of my data.

3.6.1 Sociometric Testing

Hoffman (2001) argues that sociometry is based on the understanding that individuals make choices about interpersonal relationships. These choices may involve who is considered to be a friend, but also who is considered to be central to the group and which people appear isolated or rejected.

Moreno (1934:11) states that a sociometric test is "an instrument used to measure the amount of organisation shown by social groups". He states that the test expects the person to make choices about members of a group that they are already part of or hope to be part of. He elaborates by stating that the test has to have criteria, so rather than just asking someone who they like or dislike, it is important to have a context such as asking them who they would like to *play* with or *work* with. The definition given by Hoffmann (2001) demonstrates that people make choices about who they build relationships with but Moreno (1934) extends our understanding by stating that these relationships depend on a context. Therefore people who may be rejected, isolated or marginalised in one context may not experience this if the context is changed. Messiou (2006b) sees marginalisation as being similar to being outside a circle, the boundaries of which are determined by social constructions of normality. She argues that these constructions of normality "are likely to change from one setting to another" (Messiou, 2006b:52). This understanding is particularly important for my research when thinking about pupil grouping and its impact on inclusion. Children who might appear marginalised or rejected in the context of the class group may not appear marginalised or rejected when the context changes to the set group and visa versa. Also, children who may not appear to be marginalised in the classroom may experience marginalisation on the playground. Therefore, when I gathered sociometric information at the beginning of the research project from all children, I wanted to think about their peer relationships both in the classroom and on the playground. As a result of his research, Moreno (1934) also claimed that younger children tend to be left out of groups because they have been forgotten whereas older children are left out "due to the attitudes members have formed in respect to each other" (Moreno, 1934:55). This claim is also very significant in the light of my research

because I initially wanted to explore whether pupil grouping had an impact on friendship formation. I wanted to focus on whether, when children are grouped based on their perceived ability or when teacher practices highlight children's perceived ability, this influences who children choose to be friends with. More importantly I wondered whether children's perceptions of perceived ability may be one of the factors that influenced their attitudes towards other children and therefore one of the factors that influence friendship and peer relationships.

In order to collect the sociometric data, I employed a modification of the 'Sociometric Measures Tool' found in the Manchester Inclusion Standard Pupil Voice Toolkit (Moore et al., 2004). Rather than asking the children to just name three children that they would *like* to play with on the playground I wanted to focus on what was actually happening on a day to day basis on the playground and in the classroom in order to gain an understand of whether pupil grouping does have an influence or impact on peer relationships. As such, I wanted to gather information related to the reality of whom the children *actually* played with and were friends with. I then compared this with further data gained from observations within the classroom related to table groups and who children worked with to see if there were any connections between the two. I also combined this information about peer relationships in the classroom and on the playground with information related to the particular set groups that the children were in to see whether there were any connections. In other words, I wanted to see whether children who were perceived to be of a similar ability and therefore placed in the same ability groups, actually stayed in these groups on the playground. I also recorded other characteristics about each of the playground choices such as gender and whether or not the child was on the SEN register. This enabled me to begin to explore whether pupil grouping had an influence on children's peer relationships and perhaps ultimately on inclusion. Scott (2000) argues that using an unlimited choice question to find out about friendships or asking pupils to name a certain number of friends (as in the Manchester Inclusion Standard Pupil Voice Toolkit, which recommends 3) is sometimes problematic. He puts forward another alternative and suggests a roster where a number of names appear and individuals choose from the list which people they would consider as friends. He states that in using this method, individuals can also rank or rate their friendships with others. I chose to use each child's year

group list as my roster and, although I did not want children to rank their friendships, did ask them to make the distinction between 'regular' and 'sometimes' friends. I also made a slight adaption to the suggestion that Scott (2000) gives in allowing the children to write the names or initials of other children who they play or work with that did not appear on this list because they were part of another year group. In the literature review, Berndt and McCandless (2009) stated that it is important, when trying to gain understanding about children's friendships, that the methodological framework does not restrict children's choices to a narrow sample choice. Otherwise, it is argued that children are left with having to make a 'best fit' choice that does not truly represent their opinion. The decision to use a year group list as opposed to just a class list was important, particularly when gaining information about whom children played with on the playground in Newton Park and Bridgeford, because there was more than one class in the year group and consequently children had access to all the year group on the playground. However, the decision to give children access to the full year group list also presented problems particularly in Bridgeford because of the large numbers of pupils. In River Close and Newton Park, the list fitted on one sheet of A4 but Bridgeford required two sheets (see Appendix D). In addition to this, the layout of the sheet was fairly complicated and there was a possibility that the instructions given and the layout of the sheet might have caused a problem for some children. The activity was presented to the whole class at the same time and so there could have been children who did not understand but who chose to remain quiet. There were, however, some children from different classes who did raise their hand to ask for clarification. While watching the children complete the activity I did notice that some children were having difficulty following the columns across the page to put a tick in the right box next to the right name. Also, pupils would be more familiar with their own class list rather than other class lists from their year group. This realisation might have meant that some children could have had difficulty locating particular pupils quickly and effectively. In some rooms the class teacher or the Teaching Assistant supported some children in making their choices and clarifying instructions. However, although there were some problems related to the presentation and completion of the activity, I felt that using a tick system was better than asking children to list names as this could have been quite tiring and demoralising for some children. A more ideal solution would have been to

sit individually with each child and go through the sheets on a one to one basis, but this would have been far too time-consuming. A compromise might have been to gather together small groups but I felt that in this situation the children would have been much more aware of the choices that each child was making and this could have influenced responses given by others.

The sociometric information was analysed to see if there was a link between pupil grouping and pupil friendship and this data was also compared with data gained through observation. This allowed triangulation of the data gathered through sociometric measures with data gathered from naturally occurring situations. I mapped out friendship choices as social atom diagrams (Moreno, 1934) which reflect which children different pupils have chosen and who has chosen them (see Appendix E). To enable me to explore the social atom diagrams much more fully and gain an understanding about the impact of grouping and in particular ability grouping on friendship, I added extra information onto the diagram relating to perceived ability. For the children in the two schools that use ability grouping in the form of setting, I annotated the social atom diagrams with information detailing which ability group each child is part of and whether they make choices of children in a similar group to themselves (see Appendix E). For the children in River Close I used information gained from the teacher about perceived ability. In addition to this, I created to graphs to show all the mutual regular and sometimes friendships of the children and which ability groups these friends were part of (Appendix F).

3.6.2 Focus Groups

I conducted focus group interviews with all of the children who returned parental reply slips stating that they were allowed to be part of the research project. In line with the ethical considerations I made sure that I also gained the verbal permission of each child before commencing the interview. In River Close and Newton Park close to half of the cohort replied positively – River Close 17 out of 28 and Newton Park 24 out of 49. In Bridgeford a much higher number of children replied – 85 out of 112. Therefore 126 children took part in focus group interviews out of a possible 189. Using focus group interviews enabled me to

gain children's perspectives in a broad and general way on some issues that are important to my study. They also provided data that would be followed up during individual interviews and assisted with the triangulation of data gained from participant observation. The issues that I explored through the focus groups related to children's perceptions of what decisions may be behind the classroom grouping structures and also what factors and characteristics children look for in a person they would choose to work with and a person they would choose to play with. I did not choose to access in depth more sensitive data related to inclusion and marginalisation and individual friendship choices through focus group interviews.

Cronin (2001:165) states that a focus group "consists of a small group of individuals, usually numbering between six and 10 people, who meet together to express their views about a particular topic defined by the researcher". Also, in this type of interview, the interviewer acts as a moderator or facilitator and the interaction between the group members is of high importance. I used focus groups to investigate children's perception of classroom grouping and how decisions are made when grouping children within classrooms and between classrooms. I also wanted to gain an understanding of if and how classroom grouping impacts on children's friendship formation. It was therefore important to consult primarily with the children themselves to see how teacher decisions related to grouping in the classroom impact on their social networks on the playground. Thompson (2008) argues that the viewpoints of children are unique and they offer insight into areas that would otherwise be overlooked. She believes that omitting their input could lead to inaccurate interpretations on behalf of the researcher.

I conducted two pilot focus group interviews in Bridgeford to test the tools and activities that I wanted to use. After evaluating the successes and problems encountered during the first pilot, I was able to make adaptations before conducting the second trial interview. I had anticipated that each interview would last approximately 30 minutes and would involve two key activities. My intention was to focus on one class at a time so I only needed to liaise with one teacher in an attempt to minimise disruption.

The first focus group activity related to the first research question and explored children's perceptions of the decisions behind their groupings and their attitudes towards these. I used a large rectangle on a piece of A2 paper which represented the classroom floor plan and coloured rectangles cut out of card that represented the individual desks that are pushed together to create the table groupings.

Figure 1 – Interactive classroom map tool for the focus group (Activity A)
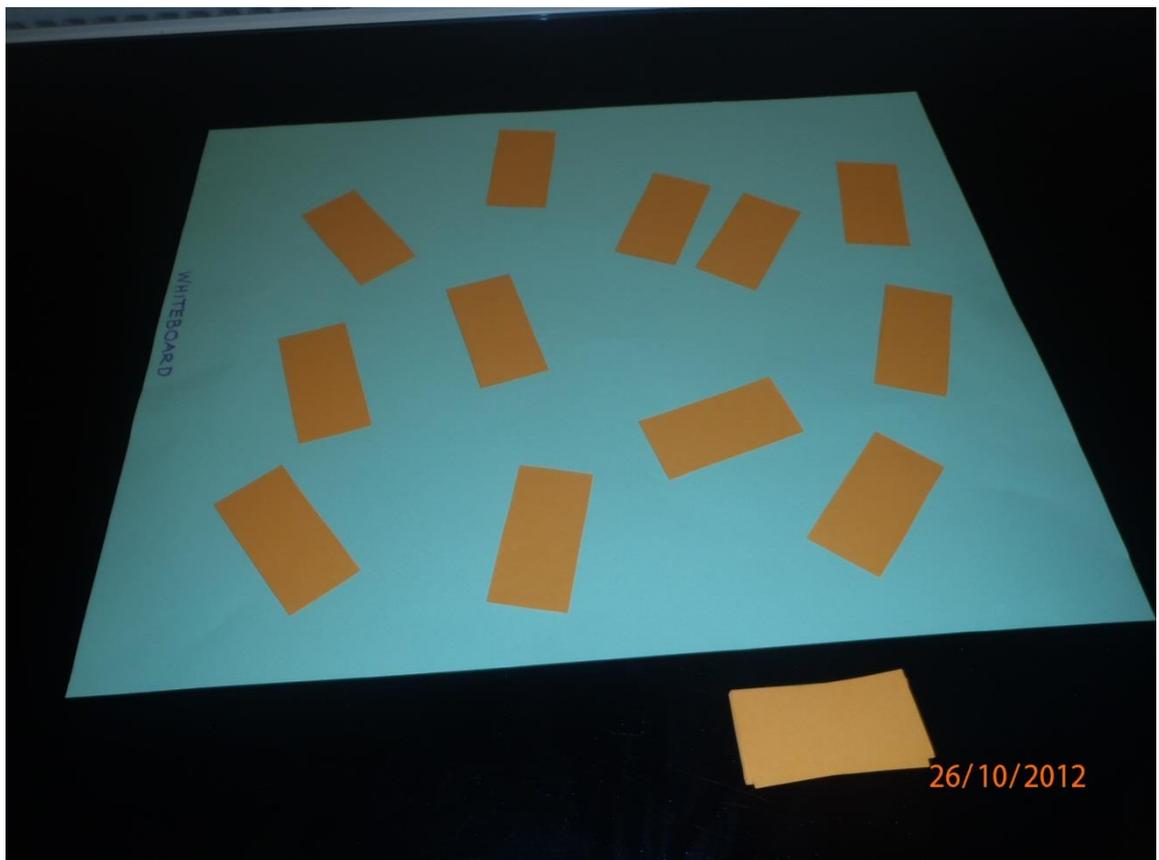
The children were asked to arrange these coloured rectangles on the classroom plan to show how the desks in their classroom were arranged and this allowed me to explore questions such as:

- Why are the desks arranged like this?
- Where do you sit?
- Do you always sit here?
- How do you feel about where you sit?
- Who decides where you sit?

- How do they decide where you sit?
- Do the groupings change? Why?
- Where would you like to sit?

I also used laminated photographs of the other classroom layouts taken when the children were not present in the classroom.

Figure 2 – photograph of class 6A

Figure 3 – photograph of class 6B

Figure 4 – photograph of class 6H

Figure 5 – photograph of class 6TM

These allowed further discussions related to the way that the children are grouped at other times when they move to set groups.

- How are the literacy and maths groups formed? What decisions are made?
- Do children move to different groups? Why?
- How are the tables arranged in these groupings?
- How do people decide where you sit?
- Do people move tables?

The interactive classroom map tool (Activity A) with the card rectangles worked well and generated much discussion about why the children were seated in particular places, decisions behind the seating arrangements, their feelings about where they were seated and where they would like to sit. I decided not change this activity because it was successful. However, the photos of the different classrooms that they might be in when moving to set groupings for literacy and maths, were not as useful and I did not use them in future interviews. They did not really add anything to the discussion about groupings and decisions behind grouping.

Activity B began to address the issues in the second research question related to the impact of ability grouping on friendships and friendship formation. It involved discussions related to the characteristics of people that each child would choose to work with and the characteristics of people that they would choose to play with. I used two pictures of children placed on A2 paper. These pictures were gained from Google Images. One picture showed two children working together in a classroom (Figure 4) and the other picture was of children on a playground (Figure 5).

Figure 6 – Picture of two children in a classroom

(Thoughtful children working together in a classroom n.d.)

Figure 7 – picture of children on the playground

(Children on the school playground n.d.)

I also used some prompt cards with words on reflecting different characteristics and qualities for them to be placed next to the 'work with' or 'play with' picture. I also had some blank cards for children to add their own ideas. I had the intention of adding these new ideas to the suggestion pile for subsequent groups.

Figure 8 - examples of word cards

Likes to talk	Is quiet	Is well behaved	Is helpful
Good at sport	Same gender as me	In my maths or literacy group	Sits next to me
Has similar interests to me	In my class group	Is kind	Tries their best
Has a sense of humour			
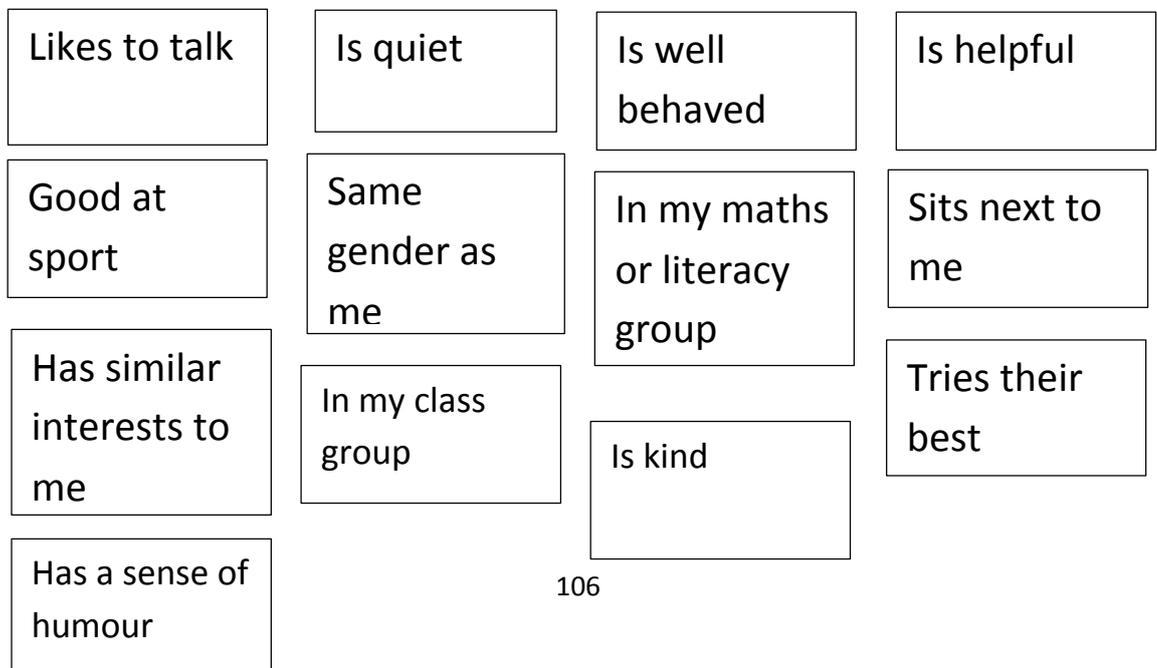
This activity helped me to explore issues such as:

- How do you choose your friends on the playground?
- Are the people that you like to work with similar to the people that you like to play with?
- Is it easy for everyone to make friends?
- Do friendship groups change on the playground? Why do they change?

The activity worked well and generated a lot of discussion. The first trial group considered both sheets of card and the central area carefully (see figures 9, 10 and 11)

Figure 9 – qualities that are considered important on the playground
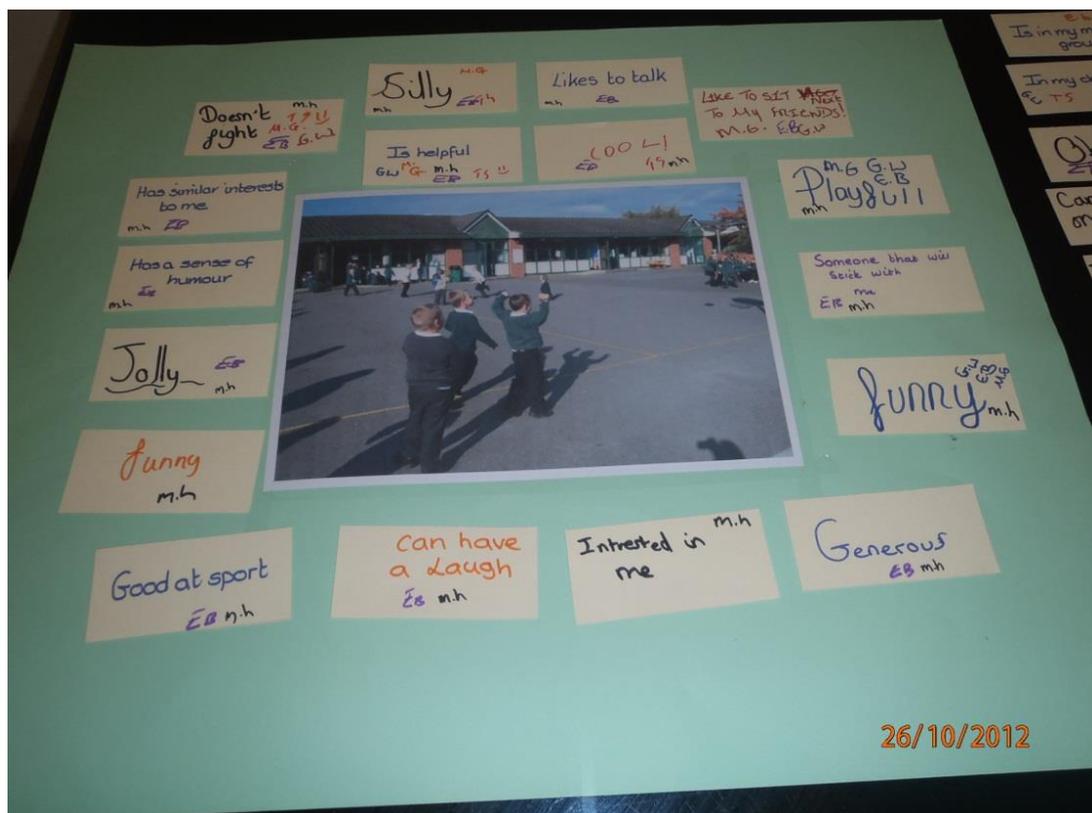
Figure 10 – qualities that are considered important in the classroom
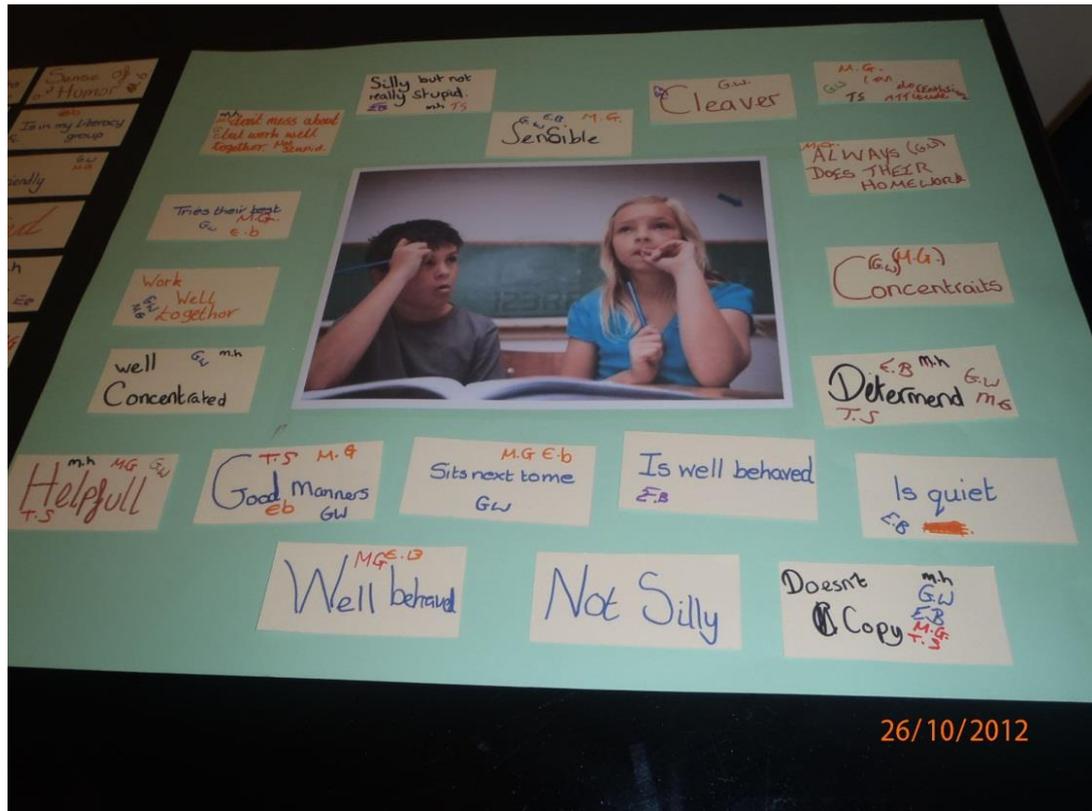
Figure 11 – qualities that are considered important in the classroom and on the playground
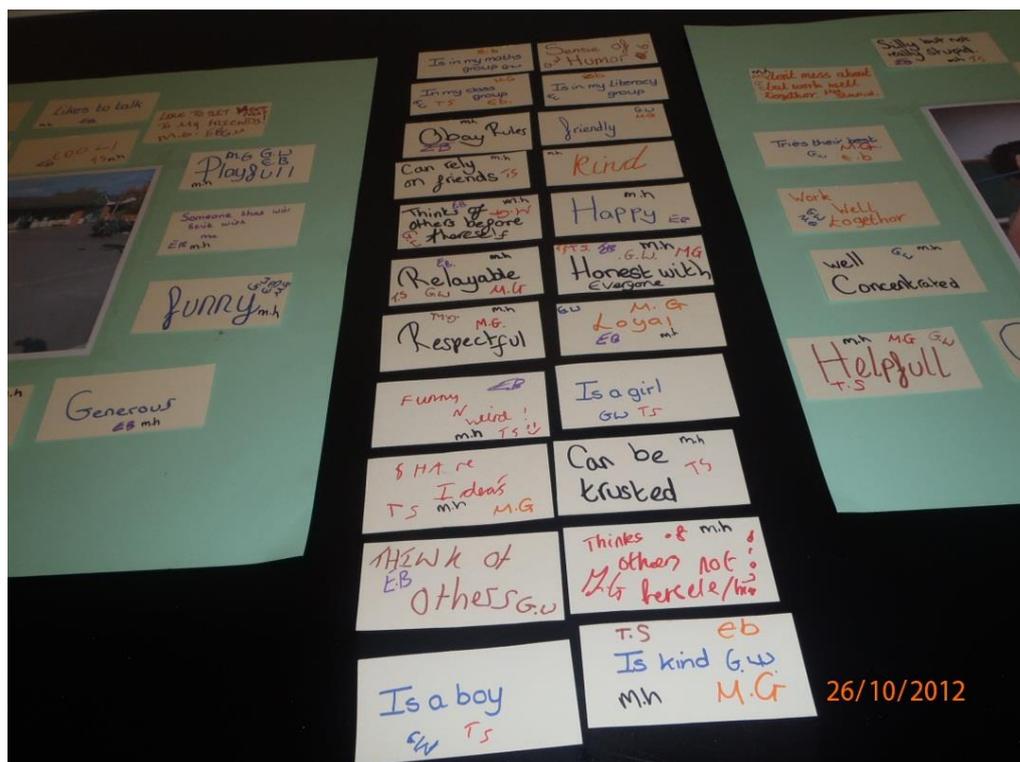
However, some improvements needed to be made before I conducted the interview with the second focus group. I thought while watching the children that it was important to give them the opportunity to personalise the cards with their initials and this would help prevent repetition of ideas. If they saw a card on the desk that they agreed with, they could put their initials on it to show that they agreed rather than write the idea out again and repeat what was already on the sheet. They also initialled my cards as well so that meant that they could not really be reused. This change to the plan was implemented immediately.

Although this first trial focus group interacted well, I thought that it might be better for them to have one piece of card to focus on as a smaller group (a pair or a three) to collect ideas and then to share with the whole group later. I chose to adapt the activity by placing both photographs on one piece of card so that smaller groups could work together and then share ideas later (see figure 12).

Figure 12 – amended A2 sheet for the playground and classroom
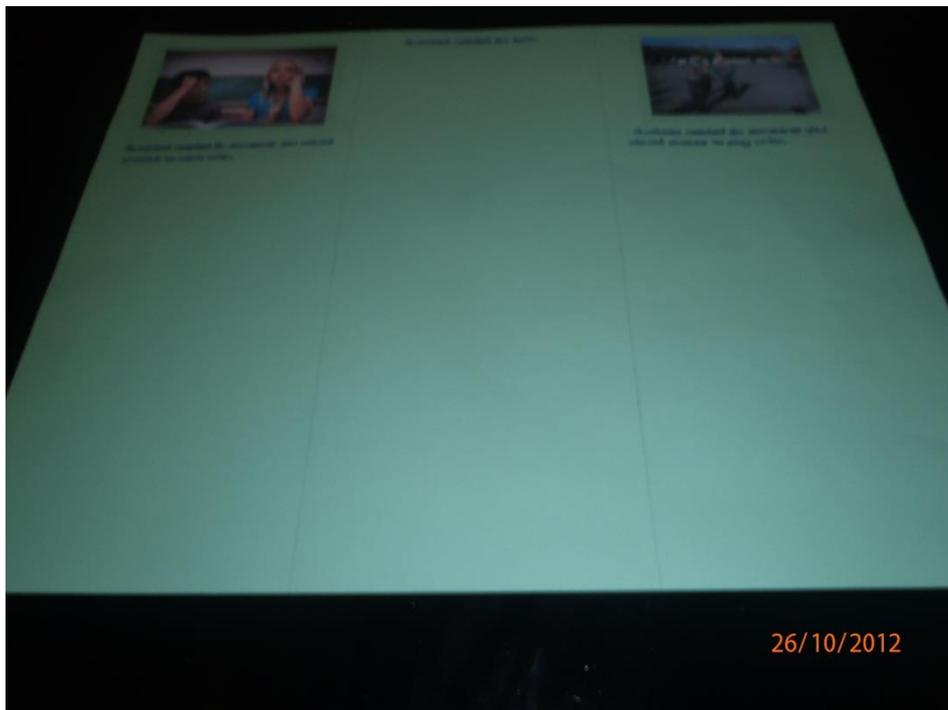
Rather than using pieces of blank card to write suggestions on I chose to change and use post it notes (see figure 13). This also meant that I did not have to write the children's ideas out on a piece of paper immediately the interview

was finished because the post it notes were stuck to the card and could therefore be transported. I also realised that it would be time-consuming to keep writing out my suggestions of certain qualities onto pieces of card so I printed out a sheet with them on for the children to refer to (see figure 14). This was not as successful as having the individual cards to move into different areas. I felt that the children ignored them and tended to focus on their own ideas instead. Therefore I decided to laminate two or three sets and give the children some blu-tac so they could still move them and initial them, but they would be re-useable.

Figure 13 – post it note activity
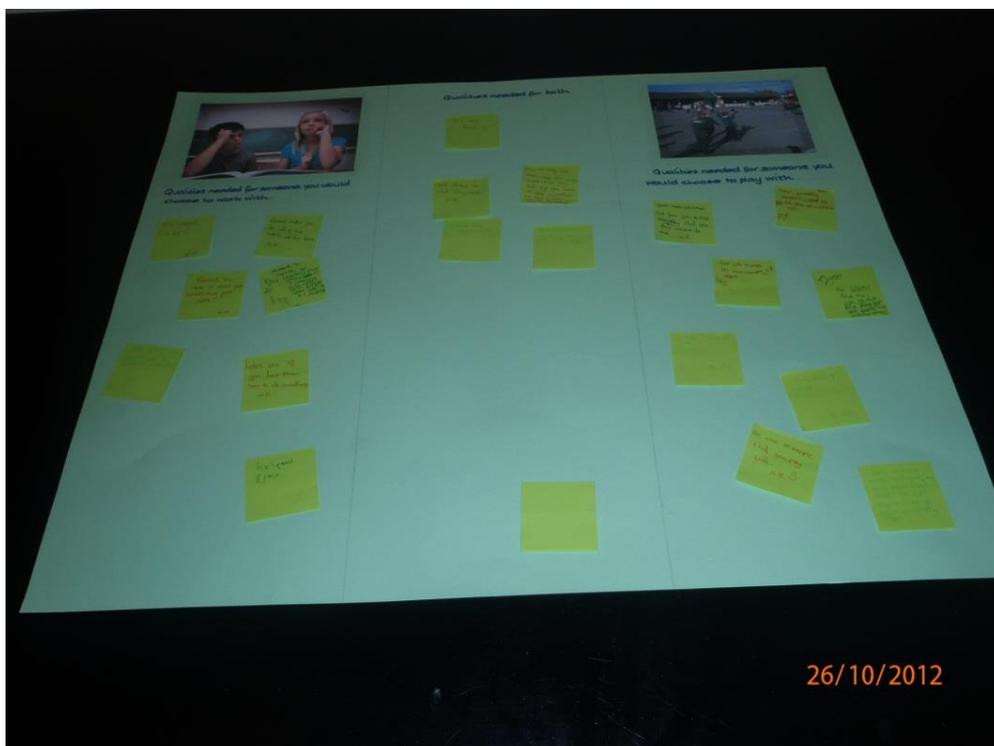
Figure 14 – post it note activity with prompt sheet
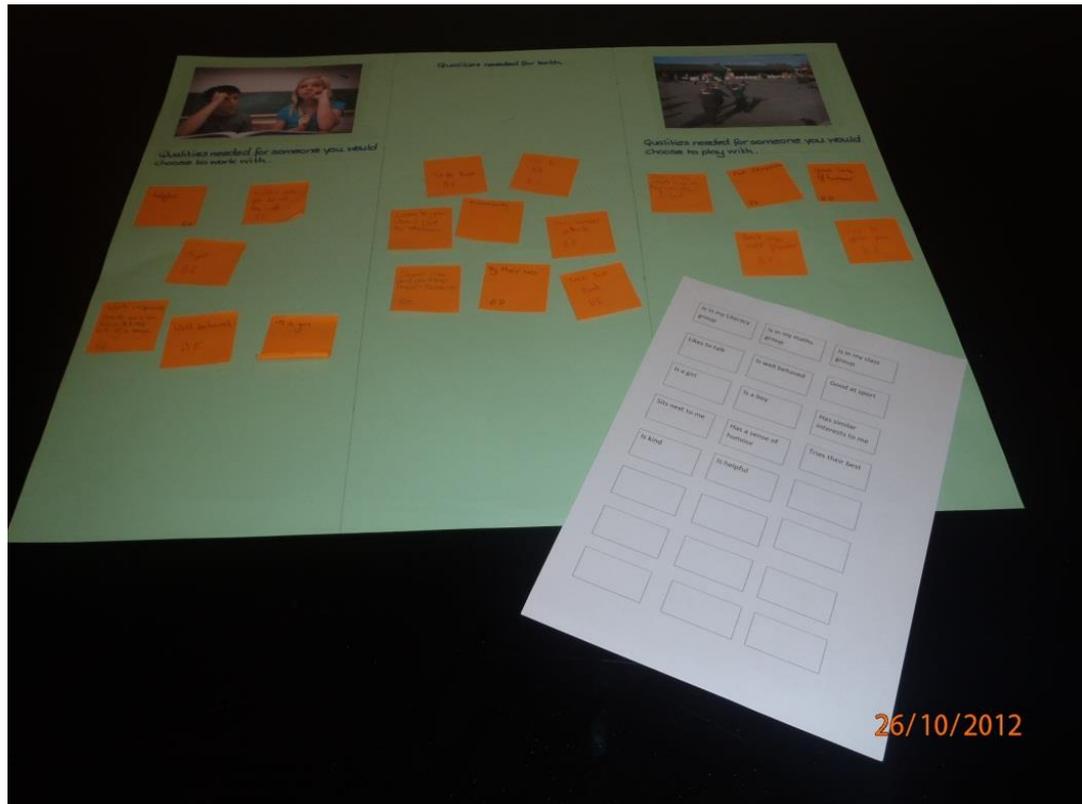
Problems of power can occur when adults interview children and this in turn can raise issues of the reliability of the data obtained as children may not express their true feelings. Cohen et al (2007), state that when interviewing children it is important that they do not feel uncomfortable or intimidated in the interview setting. This was also one of the reasons why I chose to conduct the initial round of interviews in focus groups to try and reduce the balance of power between myself and the children. Punch (2002:325) states that

> Children are not used to expressing their views freely or
>
> being taken seriously by adults because of their position
>
> in adult-dominated society. The challenge is how best
>
> to enable children to express their views to an adult researcher

It was my intention that in using approaches that were participatory and working in role as a facilitator of conversations, rather than adopting a dominant and directed approach, I could make the children feel at ease. I mentioned at the beginning of this section that adult focus groups may consist of up to ten members. However, I chose to interview the children in groups of four or five mainly because I wanted to maximise the opportunity for each child to express

their opinions and I felt that groups larger than this may mean that some children may have little opportunity to speak. Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) state that a very distinctive feature of focus group interviews is that interaction is encouraged between the participants. Morgan (1988:18) concurs with this view and argues that "is that the participants' interaction among themselves replaces their interaction with the interviewer, leading to a greater emphasis on participants' points of view". I felt that the use focus groups could potentially have advantages related to the fact that children may feel more comfortable expressing opinions in a group forum, also ideas expressed by one child may trigger similar or contrary feelings in another. This view is upheld by Kruger and Casey (2009) who believe that questions addressed to a group have a different impact to those asked in a one to one interview. They state that "as participants answer questions, their responses spark ideas from other participants. Comments provide mental cues that trigger memories or thoughts" (Kruger and Casey, 2009:35). Problems did arise however during the course of some focus group interviews. These problems mainly arose because some children were more confident and dominant and consequently this lead to others not having an opportunity to express their opinion or feeling that they could not contradict the opinion of another child. An example of this is shown in two conversations from a particular focus group where one child dominated the conversation and either would not allow another child in the group an opportunity to speak or would make it extremely difficult for this particular child to offer an opinion (see Appendix G). Bloor et al., (2001:49) argue that the "facilitator must not just avoid domination of the group by individual members, but must also seek to encourage contributions from the more timorous". I also had to be careful to ensure that the vocabulary that I used during the interview, when phrasing the questions, was easily understood by the children. Punch (2009:47) states that when interviewing children, the researcher faces problems related to "verbal competence, and the capacity of children to understand and express abstract ideas". He also argues that, up until quite recently, children were seen as objects in the research process but now believes that there is a move towards a much more subjective child-centred view, "a concern with children's perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, views and opinions…how children interpret and negotiate their worlds, and the way in which their construction of experience shapes their perceptions and views" (Punch, 2009:46). The use of focus groups

to gather data from children not only provided a context in which I hoped that they would feel more comfortable expressing their views, but it also gave an opportunity to elicit views from members of the educational community that until recent years have remained hidden or under-explored.

When analysing the data from the focus groups it was important to view the data as having emerged from a group context. The detailed analysis of the focus group data will be explored in a subsequent section. Cronin (2001:176) states that "the group is the unit of analysis, not the individual participants". However, Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) maintain that there needs to be a balance between the overall impression from the group but also the need to recognise individual voices. They argue that "the researcher should try to distinguish between opinions expressed in spite of, or in opposition to, the group and the consensus expressed or constructed by the group" (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999:16).

The use of a voice recorder enabled the data to be captured accurately although it was sometimes difficult to identify individual voices on the recording. I therefore found it important to transcribe the conversations as quickly as possible after the interview while the situation was still fresh in my mind and also to make notes of other feelings and impressions related to each interview session.

3.6.3 Individual Interviews

A semi-structured interview format was used to conduct individual interviews with children. Robson (2002:270) states that a semi-structured interview

> Has predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based upon the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included.

Because my research is qualitative in nature, I wanted to allow my participants opportunities to express their opinions on areas that I perceive as being important to my research area. However, I also wanted to afford them the opportunity to raise other issues that might be of interest and lead to other avenues being explored in future interviews. As such, I designed an interview schedule to refer to and use as a prompt but I did not intend to stick rigidly to the question order or question phrasing. A more flexible approach such as this, enabled me to follow lines of inquiry with additional questions therefore creating a much more fluid and fluent discussion. My research is interpretative and naturalistic because I want to deal with human response to situations. Basit (2010:16) states that qualitative methodology is based on subjective views and these help the "researcher to explain social reality as it is perceived and created by the research participants themselves".

Punch (2009) believes that interviewing is a very powerful method of gaining an understanding about people and their particular situations. It enables the researcher to access "people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality" (Punch, 2009:144). As such, an interview does not just gather facts and information it also allows an insight into a much deeper level of understanding related to people's personal beliefs, attitudes and how they interpret the different contexts and settings that they are part of. Gillham (2000:65) argues that semi-structured interviewing "is the most important form of interviewing in case study research".

The use of the semi-structured interview has many advantages. As I mentioned earlier, although questions were written down to refer to, there was also opportunities for flexibility related to the order of the questions, the way the questions were phrased, the addition of extra questions based on responses given and also provision to respond to information that the interviewees reveal. Rapley (2004:18) argues that the point of an interview is "to follow the interviewee's talk, to follow up on and *to work with them* and not strictly delimit the talk to your predetermined agenda". Gillham (2000) recommends using prompts if some interviewees do not mention a particular topic that others have mentioned. He believes that this is not leading the interviewee but it ensures that interviews have comparable coverage when it comes to the data analysis. I

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did not use prompts because I thought that this could lead children to say things that they do not necessarily consider important. I think that the absence of some issues in some interviews as opposed to others actually revealed more about different groups.

My criteria for choosing children for the individual interviews was related to evidence taken from

- the sociometric data
- focus group interviews
- my field notes and informal observations

More specifically the evidence needed to show that:

a) The child has identified explicitly that friendship is an important factor in working relationships in the classroom. *Data drawn from focus group interviews.*
b) The child has lessons when they are seated in the classroom with other children who are part of their friendship group on the playground. *Data drawn from sociometric tests and field notes.*
c) The child has lessons when they are not seated in the classroom with other children who are part of their friendship group on the playground. *Data drawn from sociometric tests and field notes.*

Criterion a) applied to all of the chosen children in all schools. When looking at the data from the focus group interviews, I looked firstly at the activity where the children had been asked to think about certain characteristics or factors that would be important for a good working partnership. Although I am aware that focus group data has to be looked at as being generated by the whole group rather than individuals, I had asked the children to put their initials next to their individual contributions on the post-it notes so that I would be able to identify some individual input. There were many comments that could be interpreted as being connected with friendship but I chose only the children who had explicitly used the word 'friend' as an important factor for a working partnership. I disregarded other derivatives of the word such as 'friendly' because I believe

that it was not close enough to the meaning that I was looking for. There were 12 children from Bridgeford who met criterion a), 7 children from Newton Park and 7 children from River Close. A total of 26 children took part in individual interviews.

For Bridgeford and Newton Park criteria b) and c) apply to different degrees because of the lessons where they move to ability groups. However, it is important to note that in River Close the children remain at all times in their class group. For most of the time they are seated with children of a similar perceived ability on their tables and therefore there will be some children where just b) applies and some children for whom just c) applies. It is not possible in this context to have a combination of b) and c). Appendix H demonstrates the evidence related to one child who meets the criteria required for individual interview.

26 children across the 3 schools met the criteria for individual interviews. I devised 3 activities for the individual interviews and conducted a trial interview to allow the activities and tools to be changed or amended if necessary after evaluating the success of the trial. Punch (2002) argues that many research methods used with children are chosen based on an assumption that children are either the same as or different from adults. She further argues that there is another possible perspective that views children as being similar to adults but with having specific competencies that can be used to gain access to their understanding of the world. The use of more visual methods helps access some of these specific competencies. She argues that "using methods which are more sensitive to children's particular competencies or interests can enable children to feel more at ease with an adult researcher" (Punch, 2002:330). This is not to say that children are incapable of engaging with methods used in research with adults, but by slight adaptation or using different tools children can be more actively involved rather than passively responding. As a result this could lead to a greater depth of response.

The first activity involved the information from the sociometric tests related to who they played regularly or sometimes with (see figure 15 and 16). In figures 15 and 16, I have used information from Gina's cards. Gina is a pseudonym and

her cards have been rewritten to protect the identities of the children that she has mentioned. The children's names on the cards are also pseudonyms.

Figure 15 – Gina's information card for regular friends

"I like to sit next to my friends"

This statement came from the focus group interview.

Who I play with regularly

Emma

Sarah

Beth

Sandra

Mandy

Rebecca

Penny

Hattie

Nina

Alice

The names highlighted in yellow have come from the sociometric data for Gina. When this list was presented again to Gina she circled Mandy and Rebecca and wrote 'special friends' next to them.

The names highlighted in blue, were originally on Gina's list of sometimes friends but she now wanted to add them to the regular friends list.

All the children are from Gina's class.

Figure 16 – Gina's information card for sometimes friends

Who I play with sometimes

Alice

Ben

Sally

Hattie

Nina

Penny

Samantha

Annie

Rhia

Anastasia

The children highlighted in blue were transferred to the regular friends list.

The children highlighted in green gained from the sociometric data and were 'sometimes friends'

Gina crossed out the children that are highlighted in red.

Rhia and Anastasia both come from a different class to Gina.

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This initial activity enabled the children to engage again with the sociometric data that they had provided earlier on in the school year. It also allowed them to make alterations to this data if required. These alterations might be made because friendships may have changed over time. Questions that were raised when looking at these friendship lists related to

- Do you want to make any changes to your lists?
- Do you want to add anybody's name?
- Do you want to remove anyone's name?
- Do you want to move anyone from one list to the other?
- Are there some friends on the list that are more important to you than others?

It can be seen in figures 15 and 16, above, that adaptations to the lists have been made. These adaptations have been described in the comment boxes placed next to the lists.

My second activity focussed on the table groupings for maths, literacy and class and involved a discussion about feelings related to these groupings. For this activity the children discussed and recorded who they were sitting with on their table group in different lessons (see Appendix I). It was then possible to explore feelings related to the seating arrangements. I used feelings cards (see figure 17), for two main reasons. Firstly, I wanted the child to be able to make more than one choice related to their feelings and I wanted to leave open the possibility of having conflicting feelings about a grouping arrangement. Secondly, I wanted the child to be able to add their own additional feelings to the set of cards (I had a number of blank cards to enable this). In the trial interview I also used cards – always, sometimes, occasionally, quite often and never – to attempt to develop a greater depth to the discussions. I decided though not to continue with the use of these cards and instead to use questioning to elicit a greater depth of information.

Figure 17 – feelings cards

Words written on the feelings cards
Frustrated
I don't look forward to the lesson
Isolated
Dislike
Sad
Lonely
Unhelpful
Happy
Helpful
Content
I look forward to the lesson
Eager
Like

This activity allowed me to explore questions such as:

- Who sits on your table in each of the lessons?
- Who decided where you sit?
- Which groups were chose for you and which did you choose?
- How do you feel about each of these groups?
- Why do you feel happier in this group than that group?
- Do you work with any of your friends in these groups?
- How do you feel about working/not working with your friends?
- What is it about a friend that makes them good to work with?
- Does the fact that you move to a set group affect your ability to work with friends?

This activity worked well, particularly with the feelings cards, and some children did add their own contributions onto the blank cards, which could then be used again in subsequent interviews. The fact that the names had to be added onto the blank table groups added focus to the grouping arrangements in preparation for the discussion about them. It enabled the discussion to focus on what was actually happening and the feelings associated with being in different groups, working with different people.

The final activity explored who the children would choose to be in their ideal working group. From the information that the children provided, I wanted to see whether links could be made with the sociometric data and the ability group lists. I wanted to see whether children would choose friends as part of their ideal group and also whether they would choose children in the same ability group to themselves or different ability groups. I gave the children a choice as to whether they wanted to use a blank sheet of paper to draw their own desk arrangement and add children's names onto it, or whether they wanted to use a table template to write names on (see figure 18).

Figure 18 – template for the ideal group
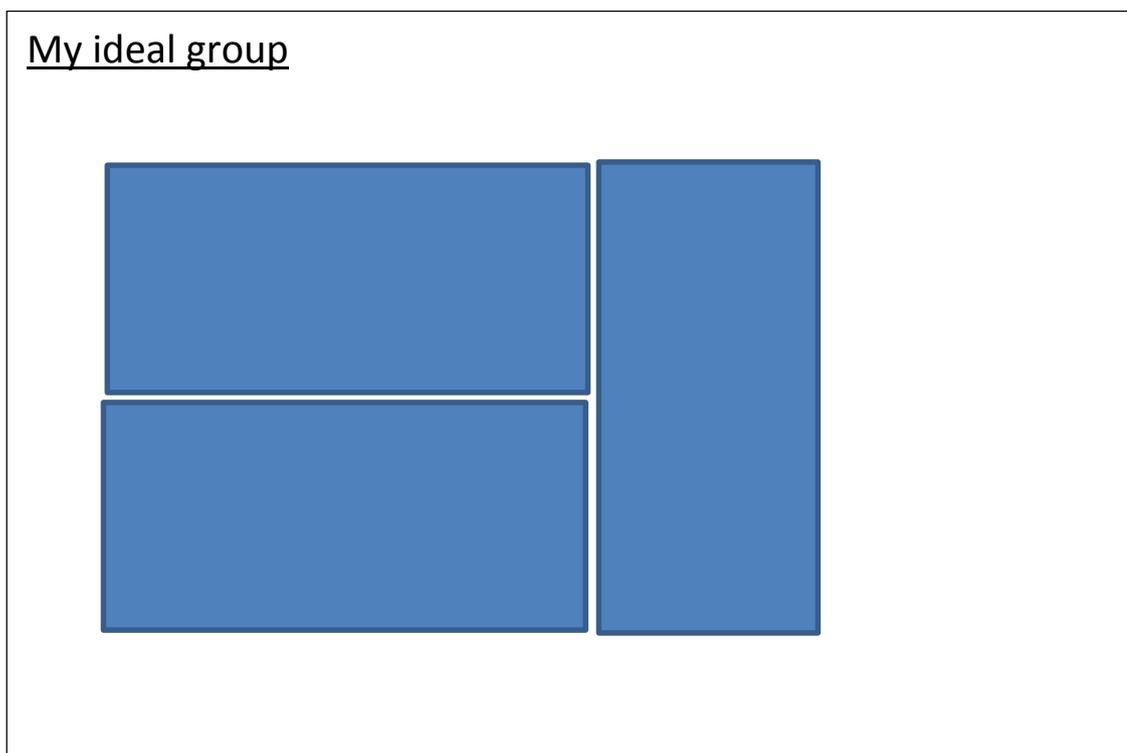
This activity allowed me to explore questions such as:

- If you had a choice, who would you like to work with?
- Why would you like to work with these people?
- How would this different group make you feel?
- Is there a reason why you have placed particular names in particular places?

All individual interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder but the children's permission was sought before it was switched on. The use of a voice recorder raises ethical issues of anonymity and confidentiality. On the one hand it allows the interviewer to connect on a much more personal level with the participants because eye contact can be achieved and body language can be noted. However, the fact that there is a permanent and accurate copy of the interaction means that a huge amount of trust is afforded to the researcher. As with the focus group interviews the transcripts were written up as soon as possible after the interview to preserve accurate memories of the interaction and also to allow notes to be made related to personal impressions of the interview context and interaction.

3.6.4 Participant Observation

Data for this research was also gathered through observations made on playgrounds and in classrooms. Observation affords the researcher "the opportunity to gather 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations" (Cohen et al., 2007:396). Basit (2010:118) argues it "requires us to *see* what is happening, rather than what we *want* to happen, or *think* is happening". Gillham (2000) states that one of the advantages of being a participant observer is the fact that you become a temporary member of the group being observed and are therefore more likely to see the informal reality of situations.

Punch (2009:154) argues that when adopting a qualitative methodology, "the researcher does not use predetermined categories and classifications, but

makes observations in a more natural open-ended way". However, I concur more with the views of Hopkins (1993:78) who states that "when the focus is broad, the more likely it is that the observer, who having no criteria to turn to, will rely on 'subjective' judgements". Because of this fact, my observations on the playground and in the classroom were focused and specific. Initially, I decided that I would observe each of the children, who met selection criteria for my individual interviews, on the playground and in the classroom. One of the reasons that I wanted to observe the children's interactions on the playground was to triangulate the data from the sociometric tests and see who they were actually playing with. I intended to watch the interactions on the playground for each child during a 15 minute morning or afternoon break-time and use photographs of these interactions. I hoped to see which children were consistent members of the group (regular friends) and which seemed more peripheral to the group. The photographs of these interactions would then be used during the individual interview to generate discussion about real events. Harper (2002:13) states that

> the parts of the brain that process visual information are
>
> evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal
>
> information. Thus images evoke deeper elements of
>
> human consciousness than do words.

Based on this understanding, I hoped that sharing photographs with the children of their own break-time interactions would enable them to recollect their thoughts and feelings much more clearly. Thompson (2008:3) argues that visual images seem "to offer different ways to elicit the experiences, opinions and perspectives of children and young people, as well as new means of involving them as producers of knowledge". Prosser and Schwartz (2005:124) argue that photographs can be shown to "individuals or groups with the express aim of exploring participants' values, beliefs, attitudes and meanings, and in order to trigger memories, or to explore group dynamics or systems". It would have been very important therefore that, in order to trigger memories, the photographs were context and person specific so that the interview could explore the reality of that particular child's interactions and relationships on the playground and

develop an understanding, through questioning, of how these relationships are formed. However, in practice this proved very difficult and disappointingly the idea had to be abandoned because I found it impossible to get close enough to the groups on the playground without being seen because of the number of children on the playground. In addition to this, I wanted to obtain natural representations of playground interactions rather than 'staged' pictures or children behaving differently because they knew that they were being watched and photographed. I thought about giving the individual child a camera to record their interactions but I realised that this would be artificial and would not achieve the natural groups that I wanted. Therefore I decided not to use photographs as prompts but to rely on informal individual observations and notes.

I found, when conducting a trial observation that I was able to track an individual child and the group that they interacted with fairly easily. However, it was difficult to keep at a distance and not be noticed. On the particular day that the trial observation took place, the weather was cold and the individual child who I was observing and the group around them spent a lot of time huddled in doorways and then going into the girls' toilets. Therefore it was difficult to decide whether to watch from the corridor or whether to try and observe from the playground without being seen to be watching the group. In reality, my observations on the playground did not seem to add much depth to the data. I found that on some occasions I could keep track of a child and their interactions for the whole break-time. However, on other occasions, particularly when the school field was used in the summer months, it was difficult to follow individual children. It was also very difficult to make judgements about whether the interactions were related to friendship. I couldn't assume that because children happened to be playing together, that they were necessarily friends or that children who were not playing together were not friends. I could make tentative assumptions about friendship with some children. An example of this was when one child would wait for another child in the cloakroom after literacy or maths. They would both go onto the playground together and spend all break-time together involved in conversation. However, when a large group of children were playing together, the relationships between the members of the group were not clear. In all three schools many of the sample pupils that I had chosen

to observe played in large groups; football, games which involved chasing and catching and games on playground equipment and apparatus.

In the classroom I used a semi-structured observation schedule which focussed on the individual child in a literacy, maths and class lesson and allowed me to watch their interactions. Appendix J shows a blank observation sheet. This format worked well and allowed me to record interactions as well as field-notes. I also had a notebook for further field-notes when space ran out on the sheet. I recorded pupil to pupil interactions because this would give me an understanding of whether they were able to work with the other pupils on the table and the nature of their work relationships. The main complication arose when children were asked to move to the carpet. Sometimes my view of the child who I was observing was obscured but I could still identify usually who they were sitting next to and when their hand went up. The only adaptation I made to my original plan was to record the interactions of everyone on the table (not just my sample pupil). I thought that this was important because it would be significant if there was a high level of interaction going on between others on the table but it might not involve the child that I was watching. If I had only recorded the interactions of the individual child then I would have had nothing to compare the working relationships on the table against. I also noted teacher pupil interaction for the whole table because this also gave an indication about how involved they were able to be in the lesson and possibly have comfortable they felt about contributing in front of members of their group. I could not attach an annotated observation sheet because it contained the actual names of the children, teachers and support staff. However there is an example below which uses pseudonyms.
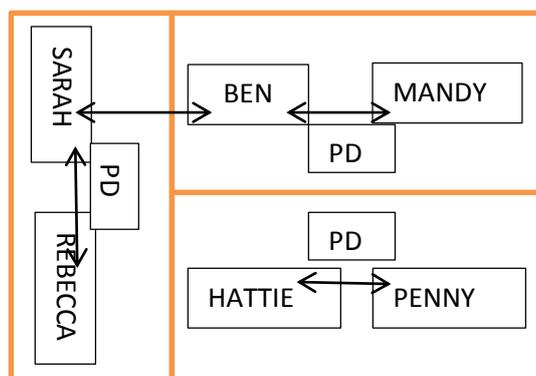
In order to quickly make note of interactions between the children, between the children and a TA and the children and their teacher, I employed a coding system:

HR – Puts hand up and gets to respond to a question.

H – Puts hand up and doesn't get to respond.

AQ – Answers a direct question from the teacher without putting hand up.

HH – Puts hand up to receive help from the teacher.

PD – Paired discussion initiated by the teacher.

Arrow – an arrow indicates conversations or interactions initiated by the children with each other, or conversations between a TA and the child. I used a tally system next to the arrow to record the number of interactions between specific children.

At all points in the research process I was reflective in relation to my role in the research process and demonstrated reflexivity when reviewing the methods and their resulting impact on the study. King (2004:20) states that "reflexivity refers to the recognition that the involvement of the researcher as an active participant in the research process shapes the nature of the process and the knowledge produced through it". Gillham (2000:28) argues that as a researcher "you strive for a level of detached honesty which acknowledges your own place in the scheme of things". The use of coding systems, such as the one detailed above, assisted with gaining an objective view when observing because these codes could be applied consistently to all the classroom observations. When conversations took place between the children, I acknowledged that I could not be sure what these conversations were about because of the fact that I was observing from a distance. However, I was able to record in the fieldnotes whether the interaction was verbal or whether it was an action (such as handing someone a pen) or a gesture (such as smiling or frowning). In other words, I tried to record the specifics of what was actually happening rather than my interpretation of it.

All of the methods discussed so far, and the way that I have chosen to use them, are qualitative in nature and some authors argue that qualitative research, because it is based on the subjective views of participants, struggles

to demonstrate reliability and validity. The data are generated and interpreted by people and it is the people themselves that define the reality. It is therefore necessary to put in place measures to ensure that the data gathered has robustness. Cohen et al. (2007:141) believe that "the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour" aides triangulation of data. Silverman (2000:177) states that "*triangulation* refers to the attempt to get a 'true' fix on a situation by combining different ways of looking at it or different findings". Gillham (2000) extends this understanding in stating that the information from different sources needs to agree so that the researcher can ascertain that the truth is being seen. Basit (2010) concurs with this view that a variety of methods of data collection aide triangulation. I used observations, interviews and socoimetric measures to provide methodological triangulation. Gillham (2000) sees triangulation as being central to case study research. He refers to the case study as being the principal method but within this there are sub-methods such as interviews and observations (ibid). It is the use of the different sub-methods that allows triangulation. Burton and Bartlett (2009) also state that case study data are collected using several methods but they also are of the opinion that, because of this, triangulation automatically takes place. I agree that using a variety of methods of data collection assists triangulation but it is not necessarily the case that the use of different methods will ensure triangulation because sometimes, for example, interview and observational data do not converge and agree. People may say that they do one thing but actually do something that is completely different. Gillham (2000) argues that a researcher needs to adopt many measures to test the reliability of the data. He agrees with other authors in seeing triangulation as important but he also recommends looking closely at opposite or contradictory data. He states that "good researchers, are always testing their assumptions, positively looking out for evidence that challenges their understanding" (Gillham, 2000:34).

In the context of my own study, I looked for evidence within the data that I gathered to either support or question previous data that I had gathered in the study. This iterative approach was used throughout the data gathering process in order to gain a more secure understanding of the connections between information that children told me in the interviews, specific processes and interactions that I observed during formal and focused observations, information

that I had recorded as informal field notes and also data gained from the sociometric tests. Gillam (2000:13) states that if the data

> Converge (agree) then we can be reasonably confident that we are
>
> getting a true picture. If they don't agree then we have to be cautious
>
> about basing our understanding on any one set of data. That doesn't
>
> mean that one set of data is wrong (or any of them) but that the picture
>
> is more complicated than we expected.

An example where evidence from the various sources seemed to be supported was in relation to a child called Ben. In the sociometric data, Ben is mentioned on Gina's 'sometimes friends' list (see figure 16 on page 109). During the individual interview she crosses him off this list and indicates that he is no longer a friend. The details of this friendship breakdown are not only reported by these two children in their focus group and individual interviews but also by other children in their interviews as well. In addition to this, the analysis of the fieldnotes revealed that Ben had been moved off Gina's table in the class group. Informal conversations with the class teacher indicated that Ben's parents had contacted the school and asked for him to be moved because he had fallen out with Gina and was unhappy.

An example where the data from different sources do not seem to triangulate could be found when looking at the data from classroom observations and comparing it with the data gained from the individual interview. Examples of this perceived conflict in the two data sets can be seen in Appendix K (examples 2, 3 and 4). In all these examples and on initial interpretation, the observations do not seem to support the feelings that the child has expressed about their group during the individual interview. The children in these examples have stated that they have exclusively negative feelings about their group and yet they did not seem to portray these negative feelings during the observation. As a consequence, it was important to adopt a process of iteration to determine why these initial interpretations might be incorrect and, as Gillam (2000) states, the picture is more complex than was originally thought. To explore this process further, I will make reference to example 2 in Appendix K. Ben expressed solely negative feelings about his literacy group during the individual interview. Although, when observed in the literacy lesson it was not apparent that he had negative feelings towards any of the group in the way that he was interacting.

However, when these two pieces of evidence are compared side by side and field-notes are taken into account it is possible to see how the observation does support the feelings of Ben. In the field-notes I had recorded that Ben had been moved to a different location in the class group because of constant arguments with Mandy and Gina. In the initial sociometric tests Ben had stated that Mandy and Gina were his regular friends but when presented with this data in the individual interviews he crossed their names out and said that they had now fallen out. Initially, even though the group were not getting on, the teacher had been reluctant to move Ben but he then asked his parents to come in and speak to the class teacher which then resulted in him being moved. However, in the literacy lesson he was seated next to Mandy and this could have led to negative feelings. The observation shows that Ben and Mandy collaborated during the lesson in paired discussion because this is what the teacher had requested. When looking at the individual interview transcript Ben states he does try to get on but it does not really work out. He states that he actually wants to work with Sarah and Rebecca, and they do appear on his regular friends list, but because each pair on the table has been asked to work together this opportunity is not really made available. However, when consulting the observation schedule again, Ben is the only person on the table who attempts to engage with another pairing and the pairing that he chooses is Rebecca and Sarah. Therefore it can be seen that initial interpretations may be inaccurate and through using an iterative process of comparison across a number of different data sources a more accurate picture emerges.

Gillham (2000) argues that it is important to think about how representative the data is. In the context of my research, there were children who I was unable to interview because parents either refused their consent or did not reply at all. However, as I mentioned previously in the section on focus groups, 127 out of a possible 189 children took part in the research which is just over two thirds of the children. When looking back at the children who were given permission to take part in the study, there was a mix of gender and of perceived ability as demonstrated by table 4 and table 5 below.

Table 4 – perceived ability of children who took part in the study

School	Perceived ability	Number
River Close	Top	5
	Middle	7
	Bottom	5
Newton Park	Top	10
	Top/Bottom	8
	Bottom/Bottom	6
Bridgeford	Top/Top	25
	Top/Middle	11
	Middle/Middle	31
	Middle/Bottom	8
	Bottom/Bottom	10

Table 5 – gender of children who took part in the study

School	Gender	Number
River Close	Male	9
	Female	8
Newton Park	Male	8
	Female	16
Bridgeford	Male	38
	Female	47

Robson (2002) believes that when researching social situations it is almost impossible for the research to be reliable in a 'scientific' sense. In other words it is almost impossible to recreate the same circumstances to repeat the test or for someone else to follow the research design exactly. However, Cohen et al. (2007:149) argue that "in qualitative methodologies reliability includes fidelity to real life, context-and situation-specificity, authenticity, comprehensiveness, detail, honesty, depth of response and meaningfulness to the respondents".

3.7 Data Analysis

Rapley (2011) argues that data analysis involves data reduction and a move from something that is very concrete and particular to something that is more abstract. He states that

> The focus shifts from:
> what is said by participants, what you've observed them
> doing or what you read in a text (the level of description
> and summary; to exploring and explaining what is
> 'underlying' or 'broader' or to 'distil' essence, meaning,
> norms, orders patterns rules, structures, et cetera
> (the level of concepts and themes) (Rapley, 2011:276).

Scott and Usher (1999) argue that in analysing qualitative data the 'truths' lie in the interpretation of these interactions and observations. Basit (2010) concurs with this idea that it is extremely important to both analyse and interpret the data because it is important to try and gain new understanding on a familiar topic that furthers knowledge in the research area. The interview and observation transcripts were coded by annotating the text with emerging themes (see Appendix H). Gillham (2000:71) argues that after transcription it is important to go through the written documents to identify "*substantive* statements – statements that really say something". Charmaz (2006:47) states that "initial coding should stick closely to the data". By reading and re-reading the transcripts it will be possible to note similar themes that are repeated or new themes that became apparent. Some data could possibly be allocated to more than one theme. Bryman (2008:552) notes that "*any one item or slice of data, can and often should be coded in more than one way".* Rapley (2011) states that this coding or labelling needs constant reviewing and reflection upon why certain labels have been given to certain pieces of text. There is also a period of refinement where labels are looked at and modified. He also states that it is important that the relationships between the labels are identified.

Eventually, when all the emergent themes from the transcripts seem to be exhausted loose categories can then be formed between the groups of themes. Sometimes it might be necessary to develop sub-categories to organise the data still further. Lichtman (2006:169) states that "certain codes become major while others can be grouped under a specific topic and become subsets of that topic". Gillham (2000) believes that it is important to assign the categories and

codes back to the transcripts and then keep looking back at the transcripts to see if anything has been missed. He recommends the use of an analysis grid where the categories that appear for each respondent can be recorded. Wilkinson (2011:171) states that "content analysis simply entails inspection of the data for recurrent instances of some kind".

I used very similar methods to the ones described above when analysing the transcript data gained from the focus group and individual interviews. I began by annotating the transcripts, making sure that I stayed very close to the words of the participants. A short example of an annotated transcript can be seen in Appendix L. Cohen et al. (2007:461) argues that "there is no one single or correct way to analyse and present qualitative data; how one does it should abide by the issue of *fitness for purpose".* I decided to analyse the transcripts in relation to my research questions and therefore search for evidence which applied to each of those questions in turn. I started with research question one

- What are children's perceptions of the decisions behind certain grouping arrangements?

Looking closely at the annotated transcripts and by reading and re-reading the transcripts it was possible to note similar themes that were repeated or new themes that became apparent. These themes related to two main categories; teacher decisions about grouping and child decisions about grouping. When looking at the themes within these two main categories, sub-categories began to emerge. Within the category of teacher decisions about grouping, the subcategories were ability, productive working relationships, physical characteristics and movement between groups. The themes from all three schools, related to these categories and subcategories were gradually transferred to a large 'map' which was colour coordinated so that it was possible to differentiate between the three schools - blue for River Close, red for Bridgeford and green for Newton Park (see figure 19 and figure 20).

Figure 20 – Themes for research question 1 – child decisions about grouping
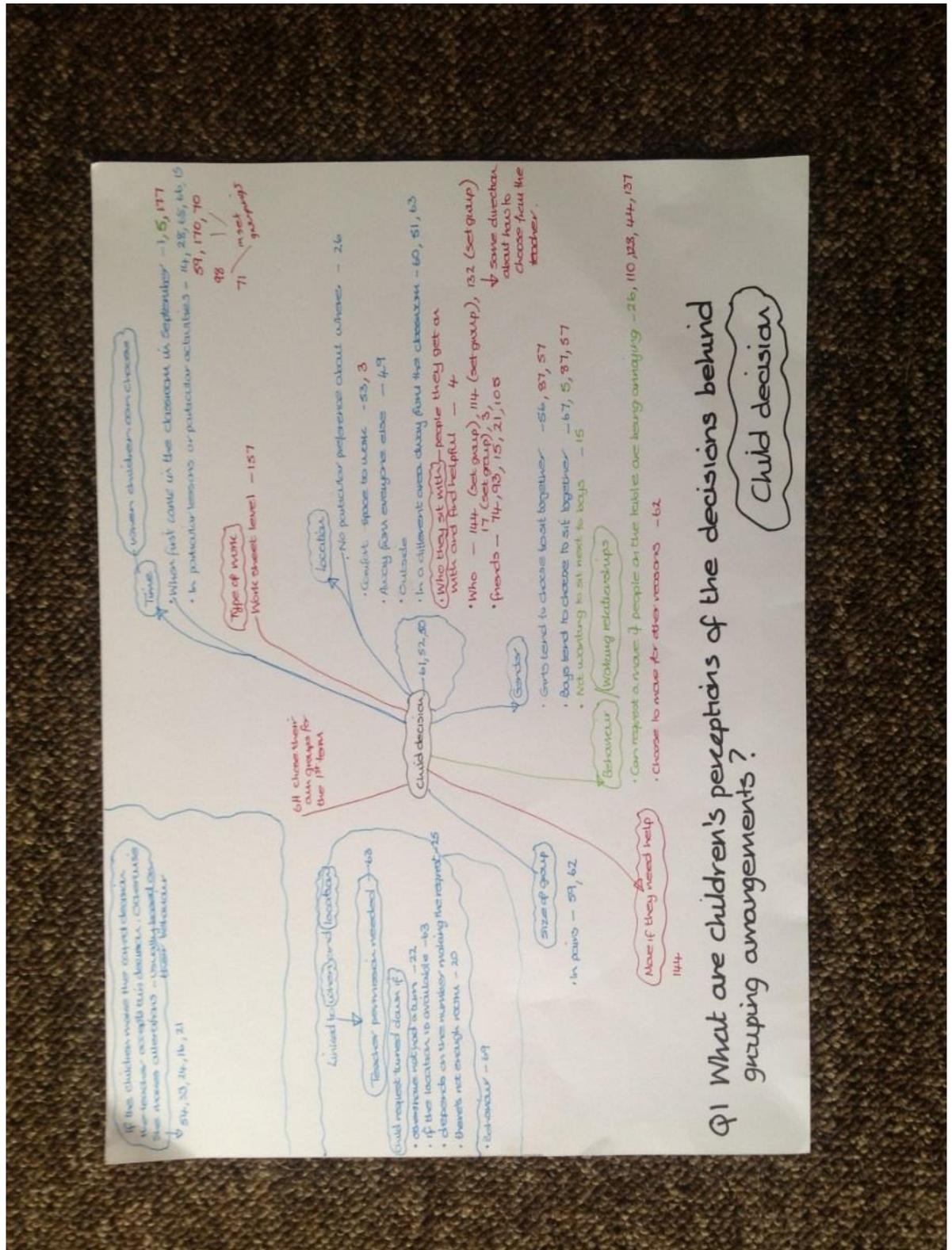
At this point, I captured chunks of text from the transcripts and placed them in evidence boxes that related to the categories (see Appendix M). Bryman (2008:553) notes that "by plucking chunks of text out of the context within which they appeared, such as a particular interview transcript, the social setting can be lost". However, I felt extremely familiar with the text of the transcripts having read them so many times that I felt that the context seemed to stay with the words even when they were viewed in isolation.

I used the techniques described above for all of the data from the focus group and individual interviews and also the fieldnotes. The data from the initial post it note focus group activity was also explored in relation to codes and categories. The conversations surrounding this data were also part of the transcripts because the voice recorder captured all of the conversations involving each focus group. However, the writing on the post it notes provided additional data related to qualities that supported good working partnerships and qualities that were considered important for playground friendships. I typed up all of the information from the post it notes onto a grid using the exact words that the children had used. I then placed number next to each statement to indicate which focus group had written each statement. Connections between these statements were then sought to enable themes to emerge (see Appendix N).

The next step in the data analysis was to look at the sheets that the children used to record their grouping arrangements and their feelings about these groups. This analysis was done in several stages and enabled links to be made with the sociometric data.

Firstly, I looked at the recording sheet for each individual child (see Appendix I) and compared the names written on the table groups for maths, literacy and class with the sociometric data for that child. I identified whether any 'regular' or 'sometimes' friends appeared as part of the table group. I then made a note of the feelings that the child had attached to each of their groupings and initially established whether the feelings were wholly positive, wholly negative or a mixture of positive and negative. The data for all participants was then collated into a table (see Appendix O).

Secondly, I recorded the actual feelings of each child related to particular grouping that they were part of (see Appendix P). The sections written in black showed groupings where children had expressed positive or mixed feelings. The sections written in red show wholly negative feelings and these were the sections where I attached evidence from the interview transcript to allow me to explore why children had these negative feelings. I was also able to compare my annotations and fieldnotes, captured during participant observations, with the feelings expressed during the individual interviews (see Appendix K).

Finally, I looked at the choices that the children had made for their ideal group. For these choices, I gain made links with the sociometric data and also with the data that I had collected on class groups and ability groups. I wanted to see what the relationship was between these choices and ability, gender, class group and friendship (see Appendix Q).

Once the raw data had been analysed and categorised, the next part of the process was to explore the significant features of the data. Bassey (1999), states that these significant features must be explored in order to create plausible interpretations. He further states that, in order to construct a worthwhile argument, these interpretations need to be tested for trustworthiness (ibid). These interpretations led to analytical statements which are firmly based in the data and are supported by examples from the data (ibid). These statements provide understanding in relation to the research questions and are formed by a process of iterative analysis and this enables these statements to be credible (ibid). In relation to this research I used a conceptual model developed by Bassey (1999) which explains the key features of the research process. The research questions that I developed led to the collection of data. These data were analysed which resulted in statements summarising significant features which could be supported with examples from the data. A process of iteration meant that there was continual appraisal of the statements and the data to ensure that the statements were robust. The statements, presented as part of the findings, were then used to create an argument in the discussion chapter. Finally these analytical statements were used as 'fuzzy' generalisations which could tentatively be suggested might apply to other contexts.

The next section of this thesis provides contextual information about the three case study schools.

Chapter 4 – Contextual information on case study sites

The research was conducted in three schools. These schools have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

4.1 Bridgeford

Bridgeford is a larger than average junior school situated in the North of England with approximately 460 pupils on roll. The age range of the pupils is 7-11 years. The majority of the pupils are drawn from two large council estates and nearly all are of white British heritage. The proportion of pupils on the SEN register is broadly average. The school, at the time of the research was rated as 'good' by Ofsted. The main school building dates back to around 1950 and houses year groups four to six. Year 3 is located in the old Victorian school building known as The Annex.

During the 2012/2013 academic year, Years 3 and 4 both had three classes per year group and Years 5 and 6 had 4 classes per year group. The school has a policy of restructuring the class groups as they move into the junior school from the feeder infant school. The infant school is on the same site but has a separate Headteacher and Governing Body.

When the children move into Year 3, they are allocated not only to class groups but also to set groups for maths. Literacy in Years 3 and 4 is taught within the class group. When the children move to Year 5 they are taught in sets for maths and literacy.

The research was conducted with the Year 6 cohort. This particular year-group is made up of four class groups but five set groupings for both maths and literacy. There are approximately 120 children divided between the five classes. Two of the classes are taught by a single teacher, one class by two teachers who job share on a 0.5 contract (2.5 days/week) and one class that is taught in the mornings by the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and in the afternoons by the Deputy Head.

The class groups in Year 6 are mixed ability and the classrooms are all located upstairs on the first floor of the building. Two classrooms are located at one end of the building next door to each other and two classrooms at the other end of the building, also next door to each other. Although these rooms are connected by an upstairs balcony walkway, the children have to go downstairs and use the main corridor if they need to gain access to the other Year 6 rooms.

Although the children are in mixed ability classes for most lessons, they are also in ability set groups for maths and literacy during the morning. These set groups contain children from all four classes and take the form of a 'top' set, a 'bottom' set and two 'mixed ability' middle sets. The middle sets are referred to as being mixed ability because they both contain a similar range of attainment and they are not hierarchical. This is the first year that the set groups in Year 6 have been organised in this way, due to budget considerations. Previously there had been five set groups for both maths and literacy and an extra teacher had been employed by the school to teach this extra group in the mornings. This allowed a slightly different structure of a 'top' set, a 'second' set, two 'mixed ability target' sets and a 'bottom' set. However, during the course of the year as a result of pressure from the Year 6 staff, a fifth set did appear which became known as the 'booster' set which operated on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday morning. It was made up of some children from each of the two middle sets. For maths and literacy, support from Teaching Assistants is located in the 'bottom' set with the children who are on the SEN register. However, there is a year group Teaching Assistant who has more of an administrative role, who supports on a daily basis in the middle sets and alternates her time between both middle groups.

In Year 6, maths and literacy lessons are always timetabled as the first two lessons of the school day with a 15 minute break-time in between. There are three other lessons, one before lunch and two after lunch. These are taught in class groups and each teacher is responsible for creating their own timetable for the other National Curriculum subjects plus Religious Education. The only exception to this is whole school worship and Physical Education where teachers are told when these will take place on the weekly timetable. National Curriculum subjects are largely taught as discrete subjects. If a child is on the SEN register then some timetabled support from Teaching Assistants is

available during class lessons. The availability of this support often influences where teachers choose to place certain lessons on their timetable. The school has a policy that all support will be given in class and withdrawal groups are only permitted for very specific intervention programmes which target speech and language development, dyslexia and social and emotional support.

Because of the large number of children in the school, Years 3 and 4 have their 15 minute morning and afternoon break separately from Years 5 and 6. For most of the school year, break-times and lunchtime play takes place on the main playground although the school does have a very large field which is used for lunchtime play in the summer when the weather is dry. The main playground is surrounded by a wooden fitness trail which is timetabled for certain classes on certain days of the week. Similarly there is a separate football pitch and a Peace Park, the use of which is also timetabled. Separate to the main playground, is a smaller yard which was the original playground for The Annex. This is used for certain children who have caused problems on the main playground and are in danger of being excluded from playtime altogether and also for other children who have struggled to fit in socially and seem isolated and marginalised. Teaching Assistants organise certain games and activities for these children to develop social skills. Children are allowed to invite a chosen friend to join them for these activities if they wish.

4.2 Newton Park

Newton Park is slightly larger than an average sized primary school and has approximately 410 pupils on roll. The age range of the pupils is 4-11 years. Most pupils are of White British heritage and the number of children on the Special Educational Needs register is broadly average. At the time of the research the school was rated as being 'good' by Ofsted.

During the 2012/2013 academic year the school had two mixed ability classes in each year group and a 'nurture group' known as The Orchard. The provision in The Orchard was to support children who were experiencing significant difficulty accessing mainstream provision as a result of specific individual needs or because of social or emotional issues.

The research was conducted with the Year 5 cohort. This particular year group is made up of 2 mixed ability classes and two set groups for both maths and literacy. There are approximately 60 children divided between these two classes. One class is taught by a single teacher and one class by two teachers who job share (one working 4 days/week and one working 1 day/week). The classrooms in Year 5 are located next door to each other.

Although the children are in mixed ability classes for most lessons, they are taught in ability set groups for maths and literacy in the mornings. These ability sets contain a mixture of children from both classes and are referred to as the 'top' set and the 'bottom' set. One child from the year group is taught in The Orchard for maths and literacy. Support from Teaching Assistants is located in the 'bottom' set for maths and literacy.

In Year 5 literacy and maths are always timetabled for the first two lessons of each day with a 15 minute break time in between. There are two other lessons which take place after lunch. These are taught in class groups and each teacher is responsible for creating their own timetable for the other National Curriculum subjects plus Religious Education. The only exception to this is whole school worship and Physical Education where teachers are told when these will take place on the weekly timetable. National Curriculum subjects are largely taught as discrete subjects. If a child is on the SEN register then some timetabled support from Teaching Assistants is available during class lessons. The availability of this support often influences where teachers choose to place certain lessons on their timetable. The support from Teaching Assistants sometimes takes place in the classroom but some children are removed to do small group or individual work with TAs outside the classroom in communal areas or in The Orchard.

All children have a 15 minute morning and afternoon break plus a lunch playtime. The times for these breaks are the same for all classes in all year groups. However, Key Stage 1 children (4-6 years) have a playground allocated specifically for them and Key stage 2 children (7-11 years) have a separate playground located further away. In dry summer weather, there is a field which connects these two playgrounds and all children are allowed to use this field but

children in Key Stages 1 and 2 must keep to the section of the field which is closest to their particular playground rather than mixing as a larger group.

4.3 River Close

River Close is slightly smaller than most primary schools. It has approximately 200 children on roll with an age range of 4-11 years. It draws its pupils from an increasingly wide geographical area partly because of its popularity and an Ofsted rating of 'outstanding'. The proportion of pupils on the Special Educational Needs register is average and the majority of children are from White British backgrounds. During the academic year 2012/2013 each year group was made up of one class.

In October 2002 River Close School was included in Her Majesty's Inspectors OFSTED publication "The Curriculum in Successful Primary Schools". This places the school as one of the most successful in the country and also one which has a national and international reputation for its innovative curriculum. As a result, the school hosts many open days for visiting teachers, governors and education experts. Although the school follows the legal requirements of the National Curriculum, they have never adopted the highly recommended (but not compulsory) National Strategies for maths and literacy. Subjects, with the possible exception of maths, are not taught as discrete elements. River Close has a commitment to children learning from practical and first- hand experiences. Much of the planning is cross curricular and topic based and many of the topic headings have historical or geographical elements to them. A high priority is placed on developing children's independent learning and their problem solving capacities.

The school has classroom areas but there are no doors to separate the classrooms from the communal working areas. Children are allowed to choose to work in these open areas as well as in outdoor areas.

The research was conducted with the Year 6 cohort of approximately 30 pupils. The class teacher was also the Deputy Head. These pupils are taught as a mixed ability class group and were visually distinct from the rest of the school by virtue of the fact that they wore black sweatshirts as opposed to red. There was one Teaching Assistant whose role was specifically to support one child within

the class who had a Statement of Special Educational Needs during the morning.

The curriculum is taught through themes and topics with many cross-curricular links. Subjects were not timetabled to specific times of the day or week and so the teacher had flexibility to determine which activities happened each day. The teacher's planning showed an overview of each term relating to curriculum coverage and objectives, but also how learning from different curriculum areas could be brought together to produce a 'best' piece of work for the topic book or for display. Children were made aware right at the beginning of each term what these 'best' pieces of work would be and how different activities and experiences would form the building blocks towards achieving each 'best' end product. Key experiences were introduced at different points throughout the term and at the beginning of each school day the teacher would create a list of activities that the children would be involved in. Sometimes these activities were allocated to a particular time in the school day but often the children had complete flexibility over when they chose to engage with each activity. This resulted in children doing different things at different times and in different places. Often children would go back to pieces of work to improve them or finish them. Allowances were made for the fact that children worked at different paces and therefore lessons did not begin and end at certain points in the day. Children moved on to the next activity when they were ready. Maths was the only subject that occurred every day, was taught mainly as a discrete subject and was linked to a textbook. There were two distinct groups, based on attainment, within the classroom for maths. For each mathematical topic that was covered within the textbook, these two groups had specific points within the book where they would begin their work. Most children started their work where a green square was displayed in the margin of the textbook. However, some children who were considered more able were able to miss this section out and begin their work at the blue circle.

In line with the very flexible approach to timetabling, each individual teacher decided when morning break-time would occur for their class and how long it would be. They were able to pick a point in the morning's activity where there seemed to be a natural break rather than having to coordinate activities around a bell system. There were no afternoon breaks.

The Year 6 group formed part of a buddy system for the Reception children to enable these 4 and 5 year olds to settle into the school more effectively. As part of their role as buddy, they would involve them in their games at break time. The school has a large playground and field with some covered areas and benches for children to sit if they wish. There didn't seem to be any restriction in the use of any of these outdoor areas. The only timetabled area was 'the cage' which was a fenced compound used mainly for football but sometimes netball. Games of football and netball were not restricted though to this cage and often took place also on the field and playground.

The three chapters that follow, explore the findings for each of the research questions.

Chapter 5 – Children's perceptions of the decisions behind grouping

This chapter will explore the data relating to the first research question:

What are children's perceptions of the decisions behind certain grouping arrangements?

According to the children's perceptions, the decisions relating to grouping fell into two broad categories: those decisions that were perceived to have been made by the teachers, and those decisions that were perceived to have been made by the children themselves. The data arising from these two broad categories will be explored separately.

The analysis of the data from both the focus group and individual interviews revealed that, according to the perceptions of the children, teachers seemed to be dominant in the decision making process regarding pupil grouping arrangements. This understanding that teacher decisions dominate the reasons behind grouping can be seen across all three school settings but was particularly apparent in Bridgeford and Newton Park. However, there was also recognition that children also make decisions about grouping arrangements or they have influence over the teacher decisions. This understanding was most clearly evident in River Close. However, children in Bridgeford, and to a lesser degree in Newton Park, recognised that they made decisions or raised issues which impacted on the way that they were grouped. This chapter will begin by exploring children's perceptions of teacher decisions related to grouping before moving on to exploring child decisions.

Teacher decisions about grouping covered a range of issues, not only relating to how children are grouped within their regular class but also related to decisions about grouping across and within ability sets in Bridgeford and Newton Park. As mentioned in a chapter 4, there were many distinct differences between the three schools that took part in the study. A significant difference however was the fact that there was substantial variation in the size of the cohort being studied in each school. This single factor had a significant

impact on the variety of options available for pupil grouping within each setting. It could therefore be argued that children's perceptions and experiences of grouping might also vary considerably. River Close was the smallest of the three settings with one class per year group and therefore Year 6 comprised a single class under investigation. Newton Park was slightly larger, with two classes in the Year 5 cohort which formed part of this research project. The children in this setting were also regrouped to form two ability sets for literacy and two ability sets for maths. Finally, Bridgeford was the largest of the three schools, with four class groups in the Year 6 cohort but also five ability set groupings for literacy and five for maths.

The themes which arose through the analysis of the data collected in all three settings, through the use of focus group and individual interviews with children, showed many similarities. However, it is important to note that although common themes were evident, which enabled similarities in grouping practices to be seen, the way in which these practices manifested themselves within each setting was distinctive. Therefore, although these common themes will be used to provide a structure to explore the findings from the data, the particular circumstances in which they occur in each school will be reflected in the way these findings are presented.

As previously mentioned, the data obtained from all three schools fell into two broad categories: those of teacher decisions and child decisions. Within these main categories there were distinct sub categories. The common themes, across all three schools, arising from the children's perceptions of the teacher decisions about grouping were related to **perceived ability**, **productive working relationships** and **physical characteristics**. The common themes related to child decisions about grouping were linked to the **circumstances** in which they are allowed to choose and the **factors** that they then considered in their choices.

In the findings chapters a coding system is used to identify where each quotation has come from. The coding system for the focus group interviews is slightly different to the coding system for the individual interviews.

In Newton Park and River Close for the focus group interviews the following system is used – NP FG1 or RC FG1- the first two letters are an abbreviation of

the school name and the next two letters and the number indicate the which focus group the information has come from.

In Bridgeford (because there were a larger number of focus groups) an additional piece of information is given – B 6A FG1 – the first letter is an abbreviation of the school name, the number and letter (6A, 6B, 6H and 6TM) indicate the class and the final two letters and number signify the focus group.

In Newton Park and River Close and Bridgeford, for the individual interviews the following system is used – NP II, RC II or B II– the first two letters stand for the school and 'II' stands for individual interview.

The coding is placed at the end of the quotation from an individual child or at the end of a conversation between two or more children.

5.1 Children's perceptions of teacher decisions behind grouping

Children in all three settings recognised that teachers made decisions which resulted in them being grouped in particular ways. When listening to the children speak about the way in which they were allocated to particular places within the classroom, the directive from the teacher was very clear:

Ben - Miss Peters told us where to sit (B 6TM FG5).

Karen - It was Mrs White and she said James, Tim, Abbie and Karen go and sit over on that table at the start of the year and that's how we got there (NP FG1).

In River Close one particular child seemed quite dismissive of the process and after relating the fact that he had been given no choice about the desk where he sat, remarked that the teacher *"just plonked us there".*

However, although it was evident through their conversations that children were aware that teachers make decisions about grouping, it was also evident that they have an understanding related to why these particular decisions are made. In the following sections the subcategories of perceived ability, productive working relationships and child characteristics will be explored.

5.1.1 Ability

Teacher decisions that were based on an understanding of ability were evident in the way that children were allocated to 'homegroups' in River Close. 'Homegroups' were the seating arrangements that the children used on certain occasions, such as registration, in River Close. However, in both Bridgeford and Newton Park, these teacher decisions related more to the way in which children were allocated to set groupings for literacy and maths, and in some cases how teachers chose to group children within the set groups. It is important to note, that children in these two schools seemed to convey a common understanding related to how children were allocated to set groupings. However, there was a wider range of views related to the ways in which children were allocated to tables within the set groups. According to children's perceptions and information gained through observations, these decisions seemed to be dependent on the preference of the teacher.

The children revealed that perceptions about their ability were key factors used when allocating them to particular groups. They also recognised that in order for teachers to be able to identify which children would be assigned to which groups, the teachers needed to have some measures or relevant pieces of information that would inform their decisions. The children put forward a number of suggestions related to where this perceived knowledge of their ability could be acquired from. One of these suggestions was information from tests and assessed pieces of work which ultimately resulted in the allocation of levels. These levels, in turn, secured placement in a particular set group.

Gina– we had SATs tests, do you know little mini ones.

Interviewer – right

Emma – the score that you got depended upon which set you were in (B 6TM FG1).

Sam – well every term we do a test and we get our marks……… we have like levels……people who are like a 3a, 3b and 3c would probably go in the lower set but people who were a 4 would probably go in a higher (NP FG1).

In Newton Park the results of these tests and teacher assessment are collated in 'Driven to Achieve' books which give present and future teachers clues about levels.

The conversations above, illustrate the link between the results of formal assessment and the allocation of a child to a particular set group. They also seem to have adopted the language of levels to talk about their progress and aspirations for literacy and maths. The following conversation is lengthy but it aptly demonstrates the importance that has developed in the minds of the children related to levels

Wendy – yes the levels….I like to see the levels and then I think oh maybe I can get a bit higher than that…..and I will try…..my last level was a 5c

Rose – mine was a 5b

Terri – I'm a 4a

Wendy – I'm hoping for the next piece of literacy work that I do which is the…….I'm going to try for a 5b, that's my target…..

Rose – my target's a 5a

Wendy – Mrs Merry hasn't set it, it's just my little……

Interviewer – one that you've set yourself…..

Rose – my target's 5a that's my personal one because last time I got a 5b…..

Claire – I'm going to try at least to get a 5c going into a 5b

Mela – (quietly) I think I'm a 3C

Terri – I think I'm a 4c, I don't know, but in Year 5 I got like 4 something…

Interviewer – right so you're always thinking about the next step…..the next level and moving forward

Wendy – in Year 5 I was like 4b or 4a and now I'm a 5b so I'm quite happy with that (B FG2 6A).

This perceived importance related to levels also raises the profile of the subjects that are tested in order to create these levels.

Patsy – I think it's because you know when we do our SATs you know in English and Maths…two of the most important subjects……well that's my opinion (B FG4 6H).

It was also interesting to note that, although the children from Bridgeford and Newton Park made numerous references to tests and levels and how these influenced groupings, no children during the focus or individual interviews at River Close mentioned anything related to National Curriculum levels. This

could indicate that children in this particular school do not see levels as being a factor that their teacher took into consideration regarding grouping. However, informal interactions with the children (recorded in field notes) revealed that they were aware of National Curriculum levels and statutory assessment because they used this language when discussing their work, their targets and their aspirations for the end of key stage testing. The extract from field notes below, illustrates that children in River Close attached importance to levels in relation to their work:

20/09/12 – I supported a group of boys completing their accounts of Eyam. The group was chosen by the boys - Edward, Stuart, Josh, Jake and Will. We worked on the carpet. Edward said that he really enjoyed working as a group because you were able to share good ideas. The end product was better because you got the best of everyone. He thought that it was more difficult to write on your own. The children worked really well together and shared ideas. No-one was left out and they listened to the ideas of everyone. They were very interested in my opinion of their writing. Jake in particular wanted to know what level it was. I said that I didn't really know anything about levels because I didn't want them to perceive me as a teacher. Jake did not accept the fact that I did not know anything about levels. He persisted and asked whether I thought it would score a level 5. I said that I did not know. He then asked whether it contained elements of level 5. He seemed annoyed that I refused to be drawn into giving an answer.

Although summative assessment was a dominant factor, perceived by the children, that gave clues about ability, other suggestions showed that children in Bridgeford were also aware of aspects of formative assessment that could also provide useful evidence for teachers. One child noted that performance on a day to day basis in lessons provided teachers with clues about ability and there was a feeling that this judgement was more all- encompassing than a one off test result:

Anna - All round ability, like what you're doing in your maths book….coz you're like different people and me I'm….I get higher when I'm in my maths book and within my test I don't get such a high level. I get a higher level when I'm working out in my maths book in the lesson (B 6H FG4).

Another child thought that judgements about ability were related to the amount of work that was produced and consequently the pace at which certain children worked. He explained:

Terry - Since Year 3 I was always in the bottom maths set group and its because of………the amount of work that I produce in a day…….because I can get about half of a page done…..I try my hardest and that's why I've always been in the bottom maths group (B 6TM FG3).

This particular child seems to believe that hard work does not necessarily correlate with teachers having positive views about his ability. However, in contrast, another child, who does not view herself as being 'smart' sees a very definite link between hard work and teachers having a positive view of her ability:

Louisa - So like for literacy I'm in top set but I'm not as smart as other people in the top set but I've worked my hardest to get to the top, but there's other people who haven't worked as hard as I have and they're in different ones (B 6H FG2).

Finally, the requirement of help was seen as a factor that could give particular clues to teachers about ability:

Vera - Some people need loads of help, some people don't need help, some people are like stuck on certain things (B 6B FG3).

When analysing the data from the focus group and individual interviews, it became apparent that once teachers had gathered clues related to the perceived abilities of children in the cohort, they could then use this information to make decisions about grouping. In the introduction to this chapter it was mentioned that the children in River Close perceived that these ability orientated decisions related to their regular class grouping or 'homegroups'. However, in Bridgeford and Newton Park these decisions formed the basis of their allocation to a set group, and in some cases, where they are actually seated within that set group. The next section of this chapter will explore the children's views as to how the information related to their perceived ability is used by each of the respective schools in order to group them for literacy and maths.

As mentioned previously, the children in River Close did not refer to the results of formal testing and levels as being criteria that were used by their teacher to allocate them to groups. However, they did see clear links between where they were seated in the classroom and perceptions of their ability. The children referred to these groupings as their normal places or 'homegroups' and they put forward two key factors which could determine their ability and hence their group. The first of these factors was the guided reading groups which were

numbered 1-5 (1 being the highest) and represented a hierarchy of perceived ability. Each of the classroom groups were made up of an entire guided reading group or a combination of two consecutive groups:

John - We all sit here and we're all in guided reading group 5 and people on this table are all on guided reading group 4 (RC FG2).

Lily - Our table is a mixture of guided reading groups 1 and 2, Peter's table is a mixture of guided reading groups 1 and 2 (RC FG4).

Further to this, children also noted that there were two levels of ability for maths and that these particular ability levels were concentrated in certain areas of the classroom. Children that were considered, by the teacher, to be more able, started their maths on green circle in the text book and the others began on blue square. The section labelled 'green circle' contained questions and activities of a more challenging nature whereas 'blue square' enabled reinforcement and consolidation of particular skills. One pupil noted:

May - In maths some people start on blue square, some people start on green circle and people who start on green circle are mainly around these areas and on this table they start on blue square (RC FG1).

Although these two maths levels seemed to largely correspond to the guided reading groups, it was expressed by some children that there were degrees of flexibility. This was manifested in the fact that one child who was in the lowest guided reading group was able to tackle the highest band of maths and another child who sometimes started on green circle, at other times started on blue square, depending on the maths topic:

John - It's a bit complicated for me though because I'm kind of half of Peter and half of Steven kind of thing. I'm a bit of both so sometimes I start on green circle and sometimes I start on blue square…..so it's a bit complicated for me (RC FG2).

The children in Bridgeford and Newton Park also held the opinion that ability was a key factor when teachers made decisions about grouping. It is important to understand however that decisions in these two schools were slightly more complex because, not only did they involve decisions about grouping children within each particular set group classroom, they also involved decisions about allocating children to a particular set group.

Children from Bridgeford and Newton Park shared some common ideas when discussing the allocation of pupils to set groups and these in turn linked with some of the perceptions of the children from River Close. The evidence suggests that the children are of the opinion that the set groups show a hierarchy of ability and that some children are in a higher group because they are working at a higher level. Many of the children from Newton Park talked about a higher set and a lower set whereas children from Bridgeford tended to speak about the top set, middle sets and bottom set:

Philippa - Some are high and some are low…….Mrs F is high and low and Mrs P is high and low. Mrs P's the high in literacy and the low in maths and Mrs F is the high in maths and the low in literacy (NP FG3).

Ray - Coz in maths we have different sets and we've got bottom set, second after bottom set, middle set…….

Alastair - It's set 1, set 2, set 3, set 4 (B 6A FG4).

In addition to this, there were some responses that revealed that some children knew more than other children or were perceived as being at different stages in their learning. This would account for their allocation to different set grouping:

Dianne - Because some people may be advanced and some people may be lower down, and some people may be the middle (B 6H FG4).

Teachers allocate children to different groups based on these perceived differences in ability and level so that the work given could be more easily and effectively matched to each child's particular need:

Rex - So it's not so hard for the not so clever people and not too easy for the clever people (B 6B FG2).

Children in Bridgeford and Newton Park believe that because teachers have knowledge about children's levels, it means that children of a similar level can be put together in a particular set group:

Josie - In maths if you're in the lower group and like other people are in the lower group it's not that you're bad, it's like you all…..you've all like got the same level and you might not be like all the same but you might be close together in the level (NP FG3).

Some children noted emotional as well as academic benefits related to being in a set group with others of a similar level:

Rachel - You're with people who are the same level as you. There's no one who's going to make you feel intimidated and no one that's going to be pulling you back (B 6H FG5).

However, some children from Bridgeford pointed out that they thought that the variation in ability, as highlighted by the levels, was much greater in the maths sets than in the literacy sets:

Catherine - I think in our literacy sets we're all roughly the same……but I think in maths it varies. Like in literacy we've all got level 5 on our target cards (B 6A FG1).

However, some children called into question the reliability of tests and levels when allocating children to groups. Some children felt that other children had been incorrectly placed because they were able to perform much better than expected on certain tests. They seemed confused as to why particular children were still in a lower group when it seemed clear that they were able to score more highly than some children in the group above:

David – coz some people in these lower sets are actually cleverer than the people in the higher sets and they get better marks on their tests (B FG1 6A).

Patsy – ……… Nellie and Ruth and Dianne are in top maths set and I'm in middle and some people in Nellie's set got a 4c or a 4b and I got a 4a (B FG4 6H).

Nellie – back to the thing about why we're in different sets and stuff……. Patsy was talking before and she said that she got a 4a in her maths and someone in our literacy set got a 4c and she said that it's not what you do in a test, it's what you do over time. Patsy got 73 out of a hundred and this person in our maths set got 53 out of 100 and Patsy was saying that she believed that she could be in top maths set. Some people in our maths and literacy sets could be lower ones so people in like second to top or middle could go up to the top and try and learn more stuff if they think that they're capable of it (B FG4 6H).

Other children seemed to think that tests required certain skills. Some children were just better at doing tests:

Anna – well Catherine, she's better at doing tests than work so it's different abilities that different people have (B FG4 6H).

Catherine – it's weird in tests because I don't do as well in school work you know like in normal lessons but I do better in tests and my friend Anna's different, she does really well in work and I don't do as well but she doesn't do…well she does well but she doesn't do as well in tests and it's really weird (B FG1 6A).

The children perceived that not only do the teachers in Bridgeford and Newton Park make decisions about allocating pupils to set groups; they also make decisions about where children will sit within the set group. The children from both schools revealed much more wide-ranging responses related to this and they moved away from speaking in general terms about what happens within the year group to speaking much more specifically about what happened with their particular set group and how they perceived that their set group teacher was making his or her decision. Most children could not comment on what happened in any other set other than their own. It could be argued that this is because teachers have to work together, considering the whole cohort on a given set of agreed criteria, in order to allocate the children to the set groups. However, their own personal preferences can be exercised when dealing with their own particular set group in the context of the classroom. Some children in Bridgeford had complete freedom to choose where they would sit in their set group classroom and revelations about how they made these choices will be dealt with later on in the chapter. This following section will deal with those set groupings where the children perceived that the teachers made the choice about where they sat and the factors leading to these choices being made will be considered. There were some common themes which arose out of the data analysis and those common themes also allowed connections to be made with the data gained from River Close. Similarly to the children from River Close, some focus groups in Bridgeford and Newton Park also noted that teacher decisions about table grouping within their set group, was linked to perceptions about ability. As such, there were common links which emerged across all three schools, related to children being allocated to table groups to reflect a hierarchy of perceived ability and consequently children on a similar level would sit together.

It was the view of some children in both Bridgeford and Newton Park that the teachers were responsible for making decisions related to seating arrangements within the maths and literacy set group. It was considered that these decisions were also sometimes connected to a perception of ability and some children identified the table groups in their set as representing a hierarchy of ability:

James - No there's only one table that's like the high abilities….like this table is for the high abilities like Matthew, Ellen and Rupert…….So like Ellen and Rupert, people with the best abilities…..and the next best people would sit here and then like me and Noah sit here (NP FG1).

Mark - This one is where I sit for maths, this is like the third best, second best and this is like the best table in the middle for maths but they split it out in maths because it's like setting…you've got standards (B 6B FG4).

The second quotation uses slightly different language to express the differences in levels between the tables. Rather than 'higher' or 'lower' he uses the word 'best' to express his views about the different groups. This would imply that ultimately, in his mind, there is a 'worst' table.

However there was one child in Bridgeford that claimed that, although he realised that the tables were supposed to represent a hierarchy of ability, he didn't believe that the decisions were correct:

Andrew - Well the teacher in top set in maths I think has put us in tables which are the same. I don't think it's right because some people on the table are better than each other and some people are better than the tables which are better than them if you get what I mean (B 6H FG1).

This shows a clear difference of opinion between how the child views the decisions made by the teacher and his perception of the reality of the grouping arrangement. He doesn't see himself as being part of a homogenous group and there seems to be a mismatch between his view of the abilities of other children and those of the teacher.

As mentioned earlier, children perceived that this hierarchical structure resulted in children of a similar level sitting together:

Josie - Because like whoever is on your table you're near or around the same level…..you might be just one little level higher than them….so you've got the same ability (NP FG3).

It also seems that children judge their own ability related to whereabouts in the room they are seated and who they are seated with:

Iris - I think me and Delia are the same level because we're on the same table…….we go through a pattern…….we go there, there, there (NP FG4)

One group from Bridgeford considered that it wasn't necessarily the level that children were on at the moment that governed their position on a particular table, but their predicted grade that was more important:

Robin - Well in maths, that table's pretty much…….it's what they're predicted to get in maths. Everyone on that table including me is supposed to get a 4a (B 6A FG4).

Some children are of the opinion that pupils of a similar perceived ability are grouped together and therefore the tables within the set also reflect a hierarchy of ability. It is therefore unsurprising that the location of these tables in the classroom is also significant in the eyes of these children. Pupils in all of the three schools raised the idea that proximity to the teacher's desk or the desk being located towards the front of the classroom was to enable teachers to give more help and support to these tables. They put forward the idea that if the desk was located closer to the front of the classroom then this indicated that the children on that table required more help or were not as proficient in the subject:

Kevin - Our group's closest to her and we need more help. Then it's their group, then theirs. Theirs is the furthest away (RC FG2).

Josephine - So the people who need a tiny bit more help than other people, sit round here near the teacher (NP FG5).

Rhianne - The ones who sit on this table that is near the teacher's desk it's not because they're naughty it's because they probably need more help. So it like goes in order (NP FG5).

Henry - Yes it varies because some are really good. There's the one's closest to the teachers and they're not as good….they're not as good at their maths (B 6A FG1).

It was also noted that children seated at desks in this location could be observed much more closely, by the teacher. It would always be a possibility that they would require more help as they were pupils who frequently struggled:

Lizzy - They're closer to the whiteboard so that Mrs Smith can spot them if they're stuck (RC FG1).

This factor was also recognised by the children who were seated close to the front of the classroom and, as a consequence, receive extra help:

Kevin – Luke only sits there so Mrs Smith can help him do all his work…

John – Mrs Smith's desk is literally right next to Ben's table…

Kevin – when he's doing something she can help him like read and stuff……

Stephen – and sometimes for English I move from there to there to sit next to Luke (RC FG2).

Conversely, if the desk was located towards the rear of the classroom then this indicated that less teacher help was required and the children were more independent in their ability to complete work. The children thought that there was a hierarchy of decreasing support as the tables were positioned further away from the teacher's desk:

Mark - I think these back tables are better than the front tables (B 6B FG4).

In Bridgeford and Newton Park, this need for greater support meant that children would be allocated to a group where extra adults were available to provide it:

Sebastian - Mrs Andrews, she's got a spare table and Mrs Murray or Mrs McKenzie they normally come and take a group and sit on that table for a bit (B 6B FG4).

Marc - Yes, they're all like the people who don't need help and work fine and then Mrs S and Miss K just hover around these two tables to help because Mrs P is usually teaching over here or helping over here on that desk (NP FG5).

Finally, it was considered that this particular way of grouping children allowed different work to be given to certain tables:

Delia - Well what we do is that some people have sheets and they work with sheets and other people like this side maybe would have really hard questions and like this side including this table would have quite easy questions because they're not quite ready to take on really hard things (NP FG2).

Although these perceptions were held by many children, related to how table grouping reflected a hierarchy of ability, it was by no means a view held by all the children in Bridgeford and Newton Park. Some children perceived that the table groups within their set were either random in nature or that the teacher had purposefully created mixed ability tables:

Matthew - In our maths, Mrs White does it randomly but I don't know what……about theirs. I don't know about literacy actually……I think she does it randomly (NP FG4).

5.1.2 Productive working relationships

The data from the focus groups and individual interviews in all three schools indicated that children believed that teachers sought to group them in order to create positive working relationships. It was the children's view that teachers hoped to create table groups that would get on well together, work well together and feel comfortable with each other. In order to do this, children perceive that teachers use an understanding of working relationships, friendship and behaviour in order to positively influence the way that they group children in the classroom. These points are illustrated in the extracts below which highlight that 'getting on with' and 'mixing well' also has an impact on work:

Zoe - I think that it is because we all get on together on our table because if I didn't get on with Gabby, which I do, we wouldn't sit together and work together we would argue…we all get on (RC FG3).

May - I think on some of the tables it's who you mix with best….you know with who you sit with and who you work with best (RC FG1).

Philippa - She puts you on a table that you will be comfortable on (NP FG3).

Charles - Well, we all work together really good (B 6B FG2).

Children also felt that teachers saw this ability to get on well and work well as part of the table group would manifest itself in sensible working relationships. Children would be able to communicate positively with each other, concentrate when they needed to but also have fun:

Evie - We find it easy to communicate. We know when to have a laugh, but we also know when to stop it (RC FG3).

Vera - She put sensible people together, people who would work well together (B 6B FG3).

The children recognised that sometimes teachers might have problems coordinating all of these factors on all tables in the classroom and therefore might need to adopt other strategies and solutions in order to minimise disruption or problematic working relationships. It is important to note that the children in River Close did not raise any issues related to this and this is possibly because children in River Close have a greater degree of flexibility to

seek out other children who they can work with. It was only children in Bridgeford and Newton Park that discussed three strategies and solutions that they felt were used by teachers in their schools. Firstly, they felt that teachers made use of 'good' children to set an example to and sometimes separate children who were deemed as being not as well behaved. The extracts below illustrate these views:

Iris - Me, Cath and everyone were put on that table because Mrs Black said that we were the best people and we are showing Jacob a good example (NP FG4).

Emma - I think that sometimes the teachers will put some silly people with some sensible people to calm them down and stuff. So say they put a silly person on there they would probably put a sensible person there as well (B 6TM FG1).

There was one classroom in Bridgeford which was distinctive because it was the only one where every table group was ordered alternate girl/boy. Many children from this class during focus group interviews elaborated on the reasons behind the grouping structure and it became apparent that it was based on perceptions of behaviour. Negative views were attached to the boys and their behaviour. The negative perceptions tended to generated by the class teacher in the way that she dealt with a small number of boys – namely Ray, Robert and Alistair:

Catherine – Mrs Andrews calls Ray the Puppet Master and Alistair the puppet because he does whatever Ray does (B FG 6A1).

Claire – Ray, he's the Puppet Master and then Robert, Joe and Alistair are like the puppets……….(she talks about the boys making silly noises)…. yes Ray starts it and Alistair carries it on and then Robert carries it on and then Joe does it and all like puppets being controlled by a master that is Ray (B FG 6A2).

The teacher's own feelings about these boys seem to influence how she deals with all boys in the class. There are many references made by the girls relating the boys creating chaos. Not just some boys, but all boys. As a result, the decision to sit the class girl/boy reinforces the opinion that girls are sensible and boys are silly:

Rose – like if the girls were sat next to the boys they would stop them talking to the other boys and the girls are sat next to the boys……

Claire – well what they tend to do is put a girl next to a boy because of being sensible and so the girls can say 'well don't do that because you'll be getting into trouble' (B FG 6A2).

Consequently, when talking to a focus group that contained some of the boys from the class there was a strong feeling that they wanted to distance themselves from this deeply entrenched view. Also they would not choose to work with the boys who seem to have generated this negative view of all boys:

Eloise – no wherever they are….say if all the boys were in Africa and Robert was on his own or Henry they would still try to talk to each other like shout….they wouldn't stop…..

Henry – me, I'm not friends with Robert (B FG1 6A).

David – well I would like to work with one of my friends but in the class there's a certain person who I don't want to work with…..any of the boys like Ray and Robert…..I don't really want to work with any of them (B FG1 6A).

Interestingly, when talking in a focus group to Robert and Ray. I asked them if they would choose to alter their seating arrangements if they had the opportunity. Both of them responded that they would like to be in a different class not just a different place in the same class.

Secondly, it was the children's perception that those pupils who were considered silly or poorly behaved usually sat closer to the front so the teacher could monitor them closely. This, in effect, meant that the children whose behaviour was more reliable ended up sitting further away. The second extract below, implies that for these 'more reliable' children the opportunities to communicate with the teacher are much reduced because of the focus being on those at the front:

Delia - Well it's because sometimes if you're a bit silly sometimes and you get sat at the back so the teacher can't see you, she'll put you in the front so the teacher can see if you're messing about or not (NP FG2).

Carolyn - The more sensible ones go away because she doesn't really need to talk to them as much and as for the ones that need a little bit more help or that are silly (NP FG5).

Alice - Miss Peters said – 'right that's it I've had enough. You two swap because I can trust you two but I need Jacob and Terry to be right under my nose so that I can tell' (B 6TM FG3).

Jade - The good people are at the back and all the people who talked a lot are now at the front (B 6H FG2).

The notion of friendship being of importance to teachers when allocating children to groups, arose mainly from conversations with the pupils in Bridgeford. However, there was one group from Newton Park who raised it as an issue:

Margaret - I think it's about friendship and our levels (NP FG2).

The feeling that friendship was one of the considerations that teachers took into account when grouping children, was not a factor that all of the focus groups in Bridgeford attached importance to. The discussion about friendship arose only when speaking to the focus groups from two of the Year 6 classes and this could be due to the fact that grouping within the classroom is something that individual teachers make their own decisions about. Consequently, children's experiences of and perceptions about how they are grouped can vary even within the same year group cohort:

Sally - They try to put you with your friends as well so you don't start arguing with somebody (B 6TM FG1).

Bob - I think Mrs White put us on a table with these particular people because of friends, because we're all friends in our class….hopefully (B 6B FG2).

Mark - Yes…that's it I think. Each person has got at least one friend on their table (B 6B FG4).

Some children in one class group in Bridgeford thought that their teachers looked to match up specific sorts of friends. They seemed to think that only certain friendship combinations would be suitable as working partnerships and that those friendships would not result in silly behaviour or talking:

Hattie - I think that they chose our friends but they knew we wouldn't talk in lessons (B 6TM FG5).

Beth - She put sensible friends together so they wouldn't mess about during lesson (B 6TM FG2).

As previously mentioned, there were only two classes that specifically thought that grouping decisions made by teachers, took into account knowledge of friendship. However, one of the focus groups in one of the Year 6 classes argued about the fact that their teacher made decisions which specifically

involved separating friends. These differences of opinion shown in the conversation below could indicate that friendship was indeed a factor that this teacher considered. On the one hand, it is possible that she believed that some friendships were suitable because they would lead to good working relationships and hence some children found themselves seated with friends. On the other hand, it could be argued that some friendships were considered unsuitable and would not lead to good working relationships and therefore other children found themselves in a group without friends. An alternative opinion would be to suggest that friendship was not a factor that this teacher attached importance to. Other criteria could have dominated decisions about grouping and these other factors could have resulted in some children being with friends by pure chance:

Milly - maybe she's like separated the friends so that they don't get told off for talking….

Robin – well no not really…..

Interviewer – do you think she's separated out friends onto different tables?

Ray – well there's me Robert and Joe all on one table and we're all best friends…..

Laura – I think we're separated from friends……

Kate – I'm not sure…….Wendy, Eloise and Terri are all together and they're friends…..they're all friends together on that table (B 6A FG4).

It was the view of the children that, in order to support their decisions related to gaining and maintaining productive working relationships within the classroom it was important to gather information from other sources. Discussions about teacher liaison influencing decisions about grouping arose in Bridgeford and River Close. Some pupils in both of these schools thought that their teacher had conversations with their previous teacher in order to make more informed decisions about grouping:

Claire - I think Mrs Smith and Miss Roberts…. Miss Roberts knew us better than Mrs Smith knew us, so Miss Roberts was helping Miss Smith (RC FG4).

Ella - Mr Davies will have told her a little bit (B 6B FG2).

Kirsty - Mr Davies would tell Mrs Bloom who would sit together and who would not work together (B 6B FG4).

One of the focus groups in Bridgeford, who were taught by two teachers as a job share, indicated that not only would teachers consult their previous teacher, they would also discuss grouping arrangements together:

Samantha - They've agreed on a seating plan (B 6TM FG4).

The children from this particular class also put forward suggestions related to how their teachers would discover information about friendship that they could then use to influence how they grouped children. They seemed to think that teachers gained his knowledge through their observations of children in different contexts and from speaking with children about their preferences. The comment from Alice (below) also hints at the teacher's previous knowledge of the children. It materialised through discussion that the teacher had taught this class group previously in Year 3 and she had brought this understanding to bear on decisions about how to group them in Year 6:

Interviewer – right so you think that the teacher gets clues from where.. you choose to sit with people on the carpet..then she thinks ooh…

Gina– yes and every play time, if they're on duty, they'll see us playing together (B 6TM FG1).

Mandy - At the beginning of Year 6 she sort of put us somewhere and then she said like 'who are your main friends' (B 6TM FG1).

*Alice – me and Annie are only opposite one another because Miss Peters asked Annie if we was **still** best friends and she said yes so she put us opposite each other so we would…we wouldn't mess about….she trusted us* (B 6TM FG3).

Beth - We said our friends and then she organised one of our friends to sit next to (B 6TM FG2).

5.1.3 Physical Characteristics

A further way in which children perceive that teachers make decisions about grouping is by some form of physical characteristic. Gender and height were both suggested by the children as being important.

Related to the issue of gender, children believed that teachers endeavoured to make sure that there was a mixture of girls and boys on tables:

Claire - It's not girl, boy, girl, boy but like there's a certain amount of girls and a certain amount of boys (RC FG4).

James - Me and Tim were chosen to sit next to one another because it had to go two boys and two girls on each table (NP FG1).

Some teachers not only aimed for girls and boys on the table, but specifically aimed to seat them in girl/boy order:

Kevin - I think she put a boy there and then a girl there and then a boy there and a girl there (B 6A FG3).

Similar to the discussions in the previous section about productive working relationships, only the children in Bridgeford and Newton Park believed that teachers had specific reasons for having a gender mix on the table which was related to increasing the likelihood of good behaviour in the classroom. The children in these two schools thought that someone of the opposite gender was sometimes used to separate two children who would normally mess about if seated in close proximity to one another. In addition to this they felt that single gender groups of boys mess about and therefore mixing them with girls encouraged them to be sensible and reduced the amount of talking within the group:

Delia - It means you can't be silly and the teacher keeps an eye on you…..and also like Claudia's sat here and Ellen's sat there so there's a space here so that's for……Hugh sits there so Claudia and Ellen can't mess around with each other (NP FG2).

Ella - I'm in Mrs Bloom's room….and I'm here and Billy's there….he is really naughty in maths….then you've got James, then you've got Laura (B 6B FG3).

Claire - Well what they tend to do is put a girl next to a boy because of being sensible and so the girls can say 'well don't do that because you'll be getting into trouble'

Terri - The thing is is that the boys don't tend to talk to the girls as much as the boys and the girls don't tend to talk to the boys as much as the girls (B 6A FG2).

Two of the classes in Bridgeford saw pupil height as being a factor that teachers considered when grouping pupils as this would afford all pupils a better view of the Interactive Whiteboard:

Charles - Sometimes we get put on tables based on our height as well…..coz of you're at the back you're like big.. and you can see further…..

Ben - Like Linda and Milly……

Kirsty - They're quite tall really…..and all the small ones go on the front (B 6B FG4).

Claire - Some of us…some of the taller ones are at the back (B 6A FG2).

Having looked in detail at the three key areas where children perceive that teachers make decisions about grouping, it is important to recognise that adjustments are often made if initial decisions are not satisfactory or do not have the intended outcomes. Children revealed that on many occasions' children are moved within the class group, or even between set groups, and they see these decisions being related to a change in perceived ability or performance or a problem with behaviour or working relationships. The next section will explore the reasons that children perceive to be behind movement within and between groups.

5.2 Movement within and between groups

The issue of pupil movement was raised in all three schools but comments about it were much more prevalent in Bridgeford and Newton Park. There were only three comments from River Close which saw movement between groups as being a teacher decision.

At a basic level, there was just an acknowledgement that movement took place and that it was a teacher led decision. At a more complex level, children thought about the different contexts where this movement might take place. There was movement to different groups within the classroom context. In Bridgeford and Newton Park, this movement within the classroom context could be movement within the regular class group or movement within the set group. In addition to this, children from Bridgeford and Newton Park also commented that movement between groups could also be movement from one set group to another. Firstly, this section will explore children's perceptions of teacher decisions about movement in the classroom context and then move on to explore reasons for movement between set groupings.

Children in all three schools perceived that the overriding reason for teachers to make decisions about moving pupils was linked in with negative behaviour traits and poor working relationships. These negative traits and relationships were manifested in actions such as talking too much:

Matthew - I was sat there and then I talked too much so I had to move there (NP FG4).

Marc - sometimes the teacher swaps us around so…..coz we keep talking on different tables…..

Carolyn – if someone's talking to someone….

Rhianne – you get moved…..

Ellen – you get switched round (NP FG5).

Bill - They've thought about….coz I'm in this literacy set…..when we first came in and I was on there with this load of boys and we got moved because like…….do you know like talking (B 6TM FG5).

Patsy - B*ecause people were like talking so we all got moved* (B 6H FG5).

Other traits leading to a move to another table were being mean, being silly, messing about, being naughty and finally annoying and disturbing others:

Claudia - He was being really mean to her so the teacher moved him here for a couple of weeks so that she could watch him (NP FG2).

Terri – yes but Ray and Joe kept messing around…...

Rose – and so Ray and Joe were moved to my table (B 6A FG2).

Helen - Liam moved because he was being naughty.

Carl – he was annoying other people (B 6B FG1).

Lily - If Noah keeps messing around on our table he might be getting moved because he's disturbing us and we want to get on (RC FG4).

Sometimes children are not moved into another group but have to sit on their own:

Delia - Now this table is Jonathan's place until he gets sensible   (NP FG2).

Another relationship issue which results in teachers deciding to move certain pupils is children not getting on well together as a group:

Abbie - She moved some people because either they weren't getting on or…..they weren't working well together (NP FG3).

Nick - We sat where we wanted but then she put us in seats. I used to sit there but I wasn't getting on very well so she moved me there (B 6H FG3).

Although behaviour and relationship issues seemed to dominate conversations related to why children are moved to different tables in the classroom, another

significant reason was viewed by the children to be related to the work that they produced. They saw issues such as moving up or down a level, needing harder or easier work or not producing enough work as being reasons why teachers might move certain pupils:

Iris - Jacob got moved there and Cath got moved here because she was moving up a level…..Lucy stayed there…..but Delia moved because Delia got…….like well is really good at maths and Lucy's fairly good (NP FG4).

Wendy - They kept messing about…….well they weren't working at a certain level were they…….sometimes they didn't get much work done so she moved them to my table coz my table are they people that need more help……they're the less confident ones…..so she comes to that table mainly just to help us (B 6A FG2).

Claire - Sometimes if you mess about you get moved down but if you really improve you move up…

Interviewer- is the reason for movement based on your behaviour in the group?

Claire – your behaviour and your reading (RC FG4).

Some other factors were also cited by the children as being possible reasons as to why children might be moved. These reasons included a temporary move to make up numbers on a particular table, to gain support from peers for a particular activity and finally as a result of a parent request.

As previously mentioned, in Bridgeford and Newton Park, movement of children sometimes takes place between set groups. This is a decision that children believe is made by the teachers. Children perceive that the teacher decisions related to this type of movement is closely linked to performance in maths and literacy. Children can be moved up into higher sets groups or down into lower set groups based mainly on their working level which is often ascertained through tests:

Interviewer – right you think that children can move from one set grouping to another, but why do they move?

Tim – because they've got higher ability

James – they get better

Karen – if they get better….the level

James – or they get really bad at what they're doing or get better at what they're doing (NP FG1).

Terri - In Year 5 I moved down in literacy sets but then up in maths set. I was already up but then I was moved down and then I was moved up again…… yes……it's all about like 4Cs and 5Bs (B 6A FG2).

Eloise – it's all about the tests so if they do very well in a test they go up….coz some tests are not for your education what goes on and on it's for….

Catherine – teachers….it's for the teachers so they know….

Eloise – yes (B FG1 6A).

Children also believed that teachers would gain knowledge about performance from work that was completed in lessons and this in turn could lead to changes of set group:

Delia - It's not about how sensible you are it's about your adjectives and your levels….because if you say 'meanwhile' and 'furthermore' you move up to the next set because they're level 4 words (NP FG2).

Interviewer – so there's movement between the sets then. What's that based on then?

Ella – mine was because of my punctuation. I was just struggling so they put me in the lower set and it's just easier, it's better….it's not easy for me but it's….

Charles – challenging?

Ella – it was too challenging before….now it's just my level (B 6B FG2).

5.3 Children's input into grouping decisions

Before moving on to considering child decisions about grouping, it is important to consider circumstances where children are given limited choices within the predominantly teacher lead decisions or where teacher decisions are themselves based on initial decisions made by the children. The data from all three schools showed evidence that when pupils were allowed to make choices about grouping, the children perceived that the teacher monitored these decisions very closely to ascertain whether children had, in their view, made the correct decision. If teachers viewed that the decisions made by the children were not entirely suitable then alterations to the groupings were made. This resulted in grouping arrangements that were initiated by the children but

amended by the teachers. It could be argued that these are ultimately teacher decisions, but it seemed to be the view of the children that they had had independent input and that some of their original ideas were still evident in the grouping structure:

John - Well can I tell you what happened…..sometimes in maths they let us sit where we want so long as we're near the right person and we won't talk (RC FG2).

Zoe - We're all sat on a table that we wanted to go on and if it was wrong she would swap us over but I think most people have stayed where they were sitting it's just like (RC FG3).

Delia - The teacher said to sit wherever you want and then….for the first two weeks or one week and we were just sat where we wanted to be sat and then at the beginning of the next week she told us we were all right there or whether we had to swap (NP FG2).

Karen - We could decide….she just organised us a little bit…….she checked if we like worked with them well….because she let us like stick with them for a couple…..three or four days and then checked if we worked well with them (NP FG1).

Vera - We decided…we sat where we wanted and if it wasn't working out Mrs Holmes would just move us (B 6B FG3).

As mentioned earlier, sometimes children were given limited choice in a largely teacher lead decision and this was evident in one particular class in Bridgeford where children were allocated to a particular table group in the classroom but could choose which seat they wished to sit on:

Mark - Mrs Bloom told us which table to sit on but she didn't mind which person we sat next to (B 6B FG4).

Michael - It was more like when we came in we sat on the carpet and she just said which tables we would sit at but we could sit anywhere on that table (B 6B FG3).

5.4 Children's perceptions of pupil decisions about grouping

Data related to child decisions about grouping were evident in all three schools but predominantly from River Close. The data related to *when* children were given opportunities to choose, *who* they chose to sit with and finally *where* they choose to sit. It is important to note, that issues related to children making decisions about *where* they sit was only found in the River Close data. To avoid

confusion, '*where*' in this context refers to children being given some flexibility to decide where they work within the classroom and school and the opportunity to make new decisions about where they work on a regular basis. Circumstances relating to choosing to work on a particular table with a particular group of children and having no flexibility of movement after the decision has been made, I have categorised as relating to child decisions about *who* they work with.

This section will explore issues related to when children are allowed to make decisions about grouping before moving on to look at decisions relating to who they sit with. Next, issues relating to where children choose to sit will be explored before finally looking at situations where adult permission is needed in order for children's decisions to become a reality.

5.4.1 When children are given choices about grouping

Children in all three schools talked about the fact that they were initially able to choose where they sat when they first came into the classroom in September. This opportunity seemed to be afforded to enable the teachers to gather information about good working relationships that they could then use to support their own decisions. Normally, these initial decisions made by the children only lasted a few days but this varied from classroom to classroom:

Jake - We entered Year 6 with no real positions to sit. Everyone had a random place and about two weeks later Mrs Smith started to design all the tables (RC FG1).

Iris - Well I think that at the start of the year the teacher……well not the very first day, it was after like a month, because we chose where to sit to begin with…….but after about two weeks the teacher shuffles us around into people that we worked well with (NP FG3).

Catherine - We chose for like the first day (B 6A FG3).

Associated with the notion that there are certain times when children are allowed to make decisions related to grouping arrangements, some children in River Close and Bridgeford put forward the idea that there were particular lessons or activities where this choice was allowed. However, although the choice was essentially the same, the ways in which this choice was made by children in these two schools varied considerably. In Bridgeford, the times when some children had an opportunity to choose their group was in some of the set

groups. So effectively some children had complete choice over their grouping in a particular lesson:

Maisie - Mrs Merry's maths set you got to choose……In Mrs Merry's literacy set you got to choose where we sat (B 6TM FG5).

However, it must be noted that once children had made their decision, they had no opportunity to change or revise it. Therefore the groupings, once decided and agreed by the children, needed to have permanency:

Claire - With Mrs Merry we could sit where we liked. So each day we sit there, we're not allowed to keep moving (B 6A FG3).

In addition to this, there were some occasions where children in Bridgeford and Newton Park were allowed to move on a temporary basis for a lesson. This was often in a more creative lesson such as art or design technology and related to the fact that the child was sitting on their own and had requested a partner to work with. I observed this happen on a few occasions and one child, during an individual interview, spoke about this happening:

Timmy – I think I might take Leo and like Bill….coz sometimes when we like do music coz we're like…..we're really good at sound writing……..I think I might put Leo down and Bill because we normally work real good….coz I like DT and Art we're doing these bird houses with a burglar alarm and then me and Peter was working together and we sat on the same table as Leo and Bill and then Leo asked me what we should put on it coz he said he was going to make like a really grand mansion and I said you could put some like designs and stuff for decoration…. (B II)

Timmy does not sit on the same table as Leo and Bill but has evidently been allowed to work with them for music, art and DT. In Newton Park, one of the Year 5 teachers taught French to both classes. She always gave the children the opportunity to sit with pupils of their choice on the understanding that they had to be sensible.

In River Close, there seemed to be much more flexibility over when children could decide their group for certain lessons or activities:

Kevin - Sometimes when we are doing maths or writing she lets like me John, Nathan and them two and we work together on our work, like when we work….when we did that story work about The Children of Winter (RC FG2).

Mary - Sometimes instead of just working in groups from our table we can work in groups with whoever we want (RC FG5).

My fieldnotes also supported this flexible approach to grouping in River Close

25/09/12 – The children were thinking about a character from Children of Winter. Had to think how they would describe the character and justify their opinions with examples from the book. They worked in groups and were able to talk and discuss. I worked with Stephen, Lizzie and Violet. This was a group chosen by the children. This lesson led into thinking about a playscript but the teacher wanted the children to improvise a scene first so that they had something to reflect back on when writing the playscript. The teacher was very flexible in allowing the children the opportunity to choose who they wanted to work with and where they wanted to work. They were allowed to go outside so they could discuss and practice without disturbing others.

25/06/13 – children are completing some writing for the secondary school – 'That sinking feeling'. They are allowed to work with who they want and also whether they want to work with someone or on their own. They are allowed to work in any area of the school. The teacher said that she trusted them to make the right decisions and work really hard. Some children chose to work inside and some outside.

In both these extracts the children are involved in literacy work. In relation to Bridgeford and Newton Park, the opportunities given to children to make flexible decisions about who they would like to sit with are less frequent and generally related to subject areas that could be considered to have less priority within the timetable.

5.4.2 Who children choose to sit with

Children in all three schools could think of situations when they had been able to choose their groups. However, they also revealed that, when given this choice, they had very particular reasons for choosing certain children to be part of their group. These reasons related to friendship, gender and working relationships. The majority of the data came from Bridgeford and River Close. A possible reason for this could be the fact that the children in Newton Park only had a few days at the beginning of the school year where the decision about who they sat with was available to them. At the time of the focus group interviews they had been sitting in groupings that had been organised by the teachers for a considerable time and therefore it could be argued that these children were less able to reflect back on the reasons for these initial decisions.

Some children in Bridgeford were still in groupings that had been decided by them and children in River Close were able to make very flexible decisions on a very regular basis about who they worked with.

Although not mentioned overtly by children in Newton Park and River Close, some children in Bridgeford stated that one of the factors that influenced their choice of group was friendship:

Timmy - My first literacy lesson and maths lesson we could pick where we sat so we all…

Gina – we sat near our friends (B 6TM FG1).

Interviewer – so you chose in September. So what did you base your decision on then? How did you make your choice?

Nick – friends   (B 6H FG3).

Children in all three schools mentioned gender as an important consideration when making decisions about grouping. The decisions made by the children related to gender seem to be in conflict with the decisions that the children perceive that the teachers make. All the children who raised this as an issue stated that single gender groups were preferable to mixed groups:

Jake - That tends to be the girls who are always like sitting in different places….the boys are always sitting in their places…..the girls are always having a mother's meeting on their table and all the boys are just getting on with their work and doing their jobs (RC FG1).

Delia - I just chose my seat really…I didn't want to be near to anybody that I didn't really like…….(very quietly)…any boys (NP FG2).

Miles - T*here was like girls on these tables and boys on them three tables* (B 6H FG1).

Finally, children in Bridgeford and Newton Park saw working relationships as being a factor that they would consider when making decisions about grouping. They spoke about wanting to choose people to sit with that they felt were helpful and that they could get on well with:

Interviewer – right, how did you choose? What helped you make your decision?

Emma – well basically who I play with and like, because some people I have arguments with in the past and there were spare seats next to them so I wanted to be with someone that would be like helpful and stuff like that (B 6TM FG1).

Children in these two schools also felt that they had opportunities to request a move if working relationships had deteriorated on their particular table.

Iris - When you sit down and someone's really really annoying you for the past couple of weeks, you can ask the teacher if you can move to a different table….a sensible table (NP FG3).

Bill - Because when I was sat next to Billy, he kept on annoying me so I said Miss Peters could I move to….over there….and she said yes so I'm now sat on the table here (B 6TM FG5).

5.2.3 Where children choose to work

As mentioned previously, children making decisions about where they work was only noted in the data from the River Close focus groups. Children in River Close seemed to perceive that they had a degree of flexibility related to where they could work within the school and within the school grounds at different times during the day:

Zoe – you can move all over the place….on maths we have to stay in our seats most of the time, but today we've moved out places…...The decision of whether we work in the cold, outside, outside or inside the classroom, on the mat, on the sofa, in the wet bay or in the library…….we get to choose where we want to read, because if it's too noisy you can just move (RC FG3).

Some children elaborated further and gave reasons as to why they chose to move into different areas:

Sean - Well if it's like a top copy and I really need to concentrate I just go out the way….like outside (RC FG3).

Children in River Close were also aware though that their decisions were often subject to teacher approval and they needed to request permission to exercise the right to choose. The reasons given for having a request to move rejected seemed to revolve around fairness, availability of space and behaviour:

Joe – you just ask and sometimes she says yes and sometimes she says no…

May – if you've already sat on the sofa once on that day then you're not allowed to sit on it again that day people get another chance (RC FG1).

Jake - We're usually allowed to work outside the classroom….actually outside the classroom and sometimes you're allowed to move the table onto the mat if there's not too many people actually in the classroom, say if people are out having Golden Time then you get to move a mat to the carpet (RC FG1).

John – yes….but when we're reading only 2 is allowed to go out…

Stephen – yes but sometimes 3…

John – but if we're working with someone she sometimes lets 4 or sometimes 2 (RC FG3).

Lily - Sometimes if we've been good we get a choice of who we work with (RC FG5).

To summarise, these findings illustrate that children perceive that grouping decisions are mainly made by teachers. However, on some occasions children have opportunities to express preferences about their groups on the basis that they make choices that meet with the approval of the teacher. From these findings three broad analytical statements (AS) will be presented.

AS1 – It seems that the more visible, formal and multi-layered the methods of ability grouping and differentiation, the more importance children attach to these groupings.

AS2 – When children are in set groups, it seems that they are given fewer opportunities to make decisions about their groupings.

AS3 – It seems that children believe that good working relationships are important in their groups and they perceive that teachers also see these as being important.

In relation to analytical statement one (AS1), the children in all three schools thought that teachers organised groups based on an understanding of perceived ability although this was less evident in River Close. The grouping practices in Bridgeford and Newton Park could be considered to be visible, formal and multi-layered because of the fact that children were allocated to set groups and within those set groups they were often allocated to tables based on perceptions of their ability. For the children in Bridgeford and Newton Park, information from tests and assessments that were reported as levels, seemed to be dominant in their understanding of why pupils were allocated to certain sets. The children in these schools also mentioned other supplementary information that teachers might use when placing pupils in set groups. This information related to day to day classroom work, the pace at which pupils were able to work, the amount of work produced and the amount of help that pupils

required to enable them to do the work. Children recognised that the groups were hierarchical in nature and the language that they used reinforced this understanding. Location of the pupil within the classroom was also an indication of perceived ability. Those who were seated closer to the front were seen to require more support and help. The opposite was true for those seated towards the rear of the classroom. The children in these two schools perceived that the set group system was a necessary structure to allow work to be matched to pupils need and grouping pupils of a similar perceived ability together helped with this. Pupils also spoke about the fact that pupils who were perceived to be more able would not be disadvantaged by have to work with pupils that they referred to as being less able and those less able pupils would not be intimidated by the more able. In addition to this, movement between groups and within groups was also perceived to be driven by a change in level or perceived ability.

For the children in River Close, the groupings could be considered to be less visible, formal and multi-layered. The children did have 'homegroups' which were seen as being related to the guided reading groups and to the two differentiated pages in the maths textbook, namely green circle and blue square. Although they referred to the homegroup tables using the numbers 1-5, tests and levels were not mentioned in relation to grouping and children were not required to stay in these groups. Arguably this may transmit the message that children can work with anyone, not just those that are a similar level to them. This seems to be in contrast to the perceptions in Bridgeford and Newton Park.

Analytical statement two (AS2) presents the view that children in set groups have fewer opportunities to make decisions about their groupings. In Bridgeford and Newton Park, many children reported that they had been able to make an initial choice about who they sat with and sometimes this choice was restricted to choosing one person who they wished to sit with. Once this choice was made, they were not generally allowed to change their decision. On some occasions more flexible choices were available for subjects other than literacy and maths but these were often for one lesson only and generally allowed if the child did not have a person sitting next to them. However, in River Close, where

there was no set grouping, children had choice in virtually all lessons in relation to who they chose to work with and where they chose to work.

In relation to analytical statement three (AS3), children also perceived that teachers looked to create groups of children who could work productively together and children also considered positive working relationships as being important if and when they were allowed to choose working partners. This factor was not considered to be part of the information that teachers used to allocate children to set groups but it was important when thinking about the table groups in particular classrooms. Children perceived that teachers considered how well children would be able to communicate with each other, the gender mix on the table and friendship. Some teachers were considered to have specific strategies to promote sensible working relationships and this often involved having a mix of gender on the table, using 'good' children as an example to others.

Chapter 6 – The importance of friendship in relation to grouping arrangements

This chapter will explore the data relating to the second research question

What understanding can we gain from children about the importance of friendship in relation to pupil grouping arrangements?

It became clear through the focus group and individual interviews and the sociometric data that although grouping and particularly ability grouping does have an effect on peer relationships, it does not dictate the friendship groups. In other words, children do not necessarily choose to play together because they work together in a particular set group or sit on the same table in the set group. This was an important discovery, because if teachers could influence who children played with, merely by allocating them to a group and seating them together in the classroom, then these decisions could have far reaching implications certainly in relation to inclusion.

Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to explore the origins of friendship it is useful to briefly outline some important issues, related to friendship, which ultimately impact on the way that children feel about classroom grouping.

The children in all three schools revealed that the majority of their friendships started either in preschool or as they started school and many were influenced by the fact that they also saw these friends outside of school as well: either in out of school activities or by virtue of the fact that they lived in close proximity.

It is clear that school has had influence over the friendship groups because all the children in all three schools listed children from their year group cohort as being their friends. In fact, almost without exception, the majority of children's friendships are drawn from the class group that they are in. It is important to make this distinction between 'class' and 'year cohort' because, for the children in Newton Park and Bridgeford, their year cohort is made up of more than one class. As explained earlier in the methodology chapter, the children in all three schools were given a list of everyone in their year group and then asked to

identify their 'regular' friends and 'sometimes' friends. They were also told that they could add the names of anyone else in (or not in) the school that was part of their friendship group. For the children in River Close, where there was only one class in the year cohort, *all* the children's regular friends were drawn from the class group with the exception of four children who said that they regularly played with someone from a different year group. The majority of these exceptions related to the 'buddy' system whereby children in Year 6 were paired with a child in Reception who they looked out for on the playground and this was to ease the child's transition into school and make the Year 6s seem less intimidating.

Newton Park has two classes in the year cohort yet 33 out of the 49 children said that *all* their regular friends came from their class group. Only nine children stated that they had any regular friends from other year groups and on closer inspection many of these choices outside the year group were brothers and sisters.

In Bridgeford, where there are 4 classes in the year group, 64 out of 112 children stated that *all* their regular friends came from the class group. Only five children stated that none of their regular friends were in the class group. However, the choices of these children did come from the year group cohort.

It can also be seen when looking at the graphs in Appendix F, which show the set group of mutual friends for all the children, that the majority of children have mutual friends in different set groups.

These findings are important, particularly in relation to Newton Park and Bridgeford. In both these schools, children spend half of the day in set groups for literacy and maths which means that they are not in their regular class group. This understanding, together with the fact that the majority of friendships are with the regular class group, will have implications for those children who see friendship as important to their grouping arrangements. The set groups are comprised of a mixture of classes and therefore the opportunities to mix with friends are much reduced. The graphs in Appendix F give a visual representation of the fact that mutual friends find themselves in different teaching groups when sets are in operation.

The children revealed that friendship was an important consideration when thinking about grouping arrangements in the classroom. The analysis of the data fell into four broad categories:

- The positive effects experienced by being in a group with friends.
- The negative effects of working with friends.
- The positive effects of not working with friends.
- The negative effects experienced by not being in a group with friends.

These four broad categories will be examined separately.

6.1 Positive effects of being in a group with friends

Children in all three schools noted positive benefits of being able to work with friends. These benefits related to three key areas: the ways that friends could offer support with work but also emotional support; the ability to interact more effectively with friends and finally the positive feelings that were generated as a result (see examples in Appendix N, Appendix O and Appendix P).

6.1.1 Support

Several children spoke about the emotional support that was afforded by having friends in close proximity on the table. Rachel sees herself as being 'different' in the way that she reacts to certain classroom based activities. She feels that some people might have difficulty coping with these reactions but she feels that the presence of a close friend is beneficial to her because she has a level of understanding that others may not have:

Rachel – I also think it's about who can actually cope with you because me I'm a bit….well you could say that I'm a bit different from everyone else….coz my emotions enlargen sort of….and in maths for example I sit with a girl called Amy in our class and we're really good friends and she really helps me to calm down (BFG5 6H).

This understanding that friends can offer emotional support in difficult circumstances is also seen in the way that positive gestures and body language can be exchanged:

Sarah – and it's quite useful coz if you'd finished your work you could…if you were sat quietly your friend could give you a smile and you could smile back (BFG2 6TM).

Similarly, friends can offer verbal support in the event of a mistake being made or if others on the table are mean:

Iris –if I got a question wrong, they would support me and say "it will be alright, there are other questions" (NP,II).

Tim – yes because friends are the ones who…….the ones which always look out for you. (B,II)

Karen– yes well…..Gemma and Susan kind of stand up for me when someone else has a go at me so I like to keep them close (NP,II).

As well as the benefits of emotional support, children from all three schools also spoke about friends giving practical assistance with work. This help was important because it was given at times when certain children were struggling with aspects of their work and sometimes, as in the case of Annabel, it related to specific aspects of her work that she always struggled with:

Nick – if you're struggling, they help you (B, II).

James– well yes because I can ask all of these people…… If I'm like stuck on something I could turn to one of my friends like here and here….I could also turn to Tim or Owen or someone like that if I needed help or anything. At least I've got someone to turn to if I'm stuck (NP,II).

Joe – well if you get stuck, you can just ask them and they can help you out or something like that (RC II).

Annabel – Chris helps me with reading my work and Linda and Robert, when I get a little bit stuck, help me (B, II).

For Ben, this help also seemed to have the emotional connection of reliability and trustworthiness:

Ben - I can always rely on them and trust them to help me with my work if I get stuck (B, II).

This support, when given by friends, seemed to be viewed differently from general peer support in that it was perceived to be given willingly:

Karen –……..it's better to have some close friends around so that when you get stuck….instead of asking your teacher, you can ask somebody on your table but sometimes when that happens they say 'you should have listened' so they won't help you if they're not your friends (NP II).

Claire – well…in this group…if you get stuck…they like go….they'll say "oh are you stuck?" and you go "yeah" and then they help you, but then if you're not stuck you just say erm……they just say like…if you say you're not stuck they just say "are you stuck?" and you say "no thank you" so they know you're not stuck. So they help you a lot (RC II).

In addition to this, there was seen to be a level of intuition about the way the help was given. This intuition manifested itself in the fact that friends would know not only when to help (often without being asked as revealed by Claire, above) but also the type of help that would be required for the most effective and beneficial end result:

Rachel - I mean if there's something that I'm really struggling with I'm like 'ahhhhhhhh'. But Nina, she knows how to explain it to me (BFG5 6H).

Annabel – coz she can help me with my work coz sometimes…….we're in the same spelling group and she goes 'well just think about it' and it just helps me (B II).

Ruth - ……like they help me a bit….if I get stuck they're……and if they explain it a little bit and I go oh right so it's this this and this…they sometimes go, oh no it's this and I go oh yes it's this (B II).

Iris – if I'm really stuck she really helps me in a way I know instead of just shouting out the answer (NP II).

Some children thought, as in the case of Annabel (above), that being at a similar level to a friend was also important if help was to be given:

Claire – she's in the same level group as me. Sometimes we have like a higher maths group and a lower maths group and she's like in the lower one with me…so like mostly us two work together and we get along and we're nice to each other and we just help each other more (RC II).

The fact that this extra help and support is readily available when working with friends leads to more positive feelings about lessons:

Linda – even in school they're just on my table and just like….they make me enjoy my lessons and help me and do stuff for me…..stuff that I sometimes get stuck on….they help me (B,II).

The fact that children can receive tangible help and support from friends is clearly important to them and allows them to cope much more effectively with tasks that they are faced with in the classroom. However, children also spoke about the fact that they had a deeper level of connection with friends and that friends were much more perceptive and aware of their individual needs when it came to establishing an atmosphere conducive to work. Children revealed a sense of common purpose when working alongside friends. They identified that they work well with some people:

Sam – well I'd sit with my friends and the people that I know that I work well with and get on with…..like Tim and Stuart because I work well with them (NP FG2).

Sean – he is good as a working partner but he's also my friend so it's a bonus because if I'm with someone say who I don't like and I'm working with them I won't particularly be very happy so I would prefer to work with my friends (RC II).

Some children perceived that they worked well with friends because friends had a deeper level of understanding about their particular work requirements. It was felt that friends aided concentration and did not distract through talking unnecessarily:

Callum – I feel that I can concentrate more because these are not really my friends but Mark is and like we work well together and we can concentrate more (B II).

Karen – and it as better that way…….I liked it more and I could concentrate….instead of having him leaning over my shoulder and stuff (NP II).

Ben – I would feel comfortable working in a team with them.. None of them will distract me from doing my work (B II).

Sean – yes…well I think me…..well all of us get on really….we all get on together so I think we would be good as a group. If I was on a concentrating piece of work they're very understanding, ….all of us are very understanding so I'd just say to them oh I'm getting on with this so could you….like ……..you know (RC II).

Linda – like when someone tells them to be quiet….just like, say if I told Kevin to be quiet and like Chris, Annabel or Robert here…..they would be quiet too….because they know that you want to concentrate (B II).

Gina reveals that, in her experience, this level of understanding about work requirements is only apparent in some friendships, not all:

Gina –because like, it makes you feel more uncomfortable being round people that you don't necessarily want to be sat with. Your friends can help you if you get stuck and they don't talk loads….because sometimes when I sit next to Sandra, she's a good friend but she can be really slow with her work and that holds me back so I only do a little bit and I end up not doing much work. I really want to get my work done but she talks to me and I end up talking back and we have this really long conversation about what we're talking about and we don't get our work done. When I sit next to Mandy, we help each other but we're able to get it done (B II).

Some children put forward the idea that some friends had intuition about work requirements because they were either similar, or the same in character:

Gina – she like works similar to me. She won't like talk on about loads of stuff that don't really matter (B II).

Linda – because she's the same as me really….because when she needs to concentrate, she does concentrate (B II).

6.1.2 Interaction

Working with friends allows for discussion related to work but also talking for purely sociable reasons. Being able to talk freely on the table at some points in the lesson holds importance for some children and seems to act to strengthen existing friendships:

Hugh – I think that you would become more friends if you were already friends (BFG2 6B).

Alice– I like being on our table because we have loads of banter don't we? Like we say stuff to each other and we know that we're joking so….   Miss T knows that it's just banter (BFG3 6TM).

Nathaniel – well like I know them all and I can laugh with them (B II).

James – yes I could turn to anybody and like have a chat or something when the teacher's……..when we'd done our work and other people were still finishing off….because if I was on a table where people couldn't do that….. I would feel….I would feel a bit weird……..whereas on this table…..this table…..well on all the tables I can actually do this now so I'm quite lucky….coz I'm sitting with Tim here….I'm sitting opposite Tim there….I'm sitting next to Connor and Tim there so I can normally turn to them (NP II).

This opportunity to talk with friends seems to be valued by the children but there is an underlying feeling that if taken too far then it could be seen as a problem:

Evie – and we find it easy to communicate. We know when to have a laugh, but we also know when to stop it (RC FG3).

Callum – well because these are actually well behaved….yeah they are…..well Andrew is a bit silly but only at the right time…and they're like well behaved in class and stuff….

Interviewer – and that's important to you?

Callum– yes and I'd like to get good levels and do well and stuff at school and like they're also my really good friends and when it's talking time we can talk about stuff (B II).

Some children felt that, far from hindering work, having the opportunity to talk to friends actually improved their work-rate and performance:

Billy – I can talk to my friends and I can talk to Joe because he's next to me…..and me and Leon because he's opposite me….

Interviewer – so do they distract you from your work or stop you from working?

Billy – not really…….when we do teamwork we usually get it done quicker (B II).

An added bonus of being seated next to friends is the fact that any interactions are much more comfortable and easy:

Gina – yes because you can talk better and not be nervous and stuff (NP II).

6.1.3 Positive effect on mood

Many children described the positive feelings that they experienced when being able to sit with friends or the feelings that they would have if allowed to sit with their friends.

It made them feel comfortable:

Ellen – I would sit on a table where I could work with other people like…..and feel comfortable with.

Interviewer – and are the people that you feel comfortable with, the people that you play with out on the playground?

Ellen – yeah……it's mostly the boys (NP FG5).

They thought sitting with friends was fun and enabled them to feel happy:

Gina – well it's really fun and just because Oliver's there…..he is really funny and it is really happy on that table….we don't really have any falling out and it is really successful….I like it more than the class one coz I don't really have any of my friends on that table (NP II).

Phillipa – not really….it doesn't affect me in any way……like make me go slow or anything. It just makes me feel quite happy that I have someone that I play with. I feel happy………I like it (NP II).

They looked forward to working with the people in the group if those people were friends:

Iris – I look forward to it because I have two friends on it and Matthew….he can be a bit fun and a bit annoying……and sometimes I like to talk to him and chat to him and sometimes I like to annoy him as well (NP II).

Mary – I don't really know because we haven't like got best friends in this class we're all like groups of people. There's mainly people who I prefer more…..not in like a mean way….I just prefer more (RC II).

6.2 Negative effects of working with friends

Although there were a number of children who saw very positive benefits to working with their friends there were also children who looked very negatively on the idea of friends working together. These children thought that sitting with friends would disrupt their work because they would be tempted to mess about or talk unnecessarily about things other than the task (see examples in Appendix O and Appendix P).

6.2.1 Messing around

Similarly to Gina, who spoke earlier about how it was possible to work with some friends and not with others, there were some children concurred in part with this view. Their view was that gender played an important part in whether friends were able to work together effectively and not mess about. David and Catherine's opinion is that it would not work:

David – I don't think that would be good because we would all mess around (BFG1 6A).

Catherine – if they were like silly together it would be chaos, because at indoor break, we all go with our friends in the class and it's all complete chaos (BFG1 6A).

However Henry thinks that it would work if it was just girls who were allowed to sit with friends but some groups of boys would not be able to work together. This in turn would have an impact on those boys who were able to cooperate sensibly:

Henry – well as Catherine said about friends being Amy, Rose, Millie and Ruth, they're……well it's ok the girls sitting together because they're sensible…but like Robert, Bradley and the others……...

Eloise – chaos……we just can't stand them

Henry - the boys they'd just sit there talking and never get any work done….me and David would have to miss all our playtimes….

Catherine – it's like an explosion of noise and chaos (BFG1 6A).

Aiden also notes that messing around with friends can lead to trouble:

Aiden – well sometimes they can be a bit silly……they might show off to try and make you laugh or something… and they might do something stupid to get you into trouble (BFG3 6A).

This feeling that groups of boys sitting together would be disruptive to the classroom environment was noted by quite a few children:

Interviewer – so when you came in the classroom in September, you got to choose?

Miles – yes, so we obviously sat with our friends and who we wanted to sit with and that made disruptions (BFG1 6H).

Callum – well when I was on my old table we got to choose and I was sitting here, Ray was there, Chris was there and it was all friends, it was all talking a lot and messing about so Miss moved us around (BFG2 6H).

Lisa – the first time when they just let people sit where they wanted, obviously they would sit with their friends and then they would be silly, especially the boys (BFG5 6H).

This move of places was noted during my observations of this class in Bridgeford Primary. Initially in September they had indeed been allowed to sit in places of their choice. As a result, the tables were comprised of all single gender groups. Just after the first Half Term holiday the two teachers who shared the class decided to mix up the tables and create mixed gender groups and separate the children on certain tables who were perceived to be particularly noisy.

However it must also be noted that, contrary to Henry's opinion, girls who are good friends also experience problems when working together and are tempted to mess around:

Eloise – and I'm really good in maths but not literacy for some reason, it's because I'm sitting with Kate in…….well like we mess around sometimes….well we don't always but…

Interviewer – you get on well…..Kate's one of your friends isn't she?

Eloise – yes, she's a really good friend and she's really nice…she's my best friend in the world (BFG1 6A).

Samantha – she sorted us out because some of us were being silly and messing around (BFG4 6TM).

Susan – I would either sit with my friends or the ones that I'm not silly with……..or if with my friends I got a bit too silly I would go to another table (NPFG2).

6.2.2 Talking

Being able to talk to friends, both from a social perspective and also about work, was viewed as being a positive and valued effect of working with friends. However, the children also realised that too much talking was viewed negatively by the teacher and this ultimately lead to some groups of friends being separated. A few children earlier implied that there were hidden rules that related to a 'right time to talk' and 'having fun but knowing when to stop'. It seems that friends who connect with this hidden agenda are much more likely to be allowed to sit together than those children who have not grasped its importance and end up separated. As a result it is possible to see why sitting with friends is viewed negatively by some children.

Some children spoke about actively avoiding some of their playground friends when in the classroom, realising that the relationship that they have may not be conducive to a good working relationship:

Emma – coz like we was doing a news report and I had like three paragraphs and Dianne and Anna they didn't even have one..the first one..they had the first sentence just because of pure like chatting and stuff, so they're people that I might choose to play with but I wouldn't choose to work with because they'll just talk during the lessons as well (BFG1 6TM).

Interviewer – right so you have other friends within your class group, but you wouldn't choose to work with that person.

Beth – no coz she's more like…she's always talking to me and ……she's a bit like fidgety and stuff (BFG2 6TM).

Nena - the people that I play with outside are just real like….sometimes they can go real hyper and that's quite good but when we're in the classroom I don't really like talk to people. If I get stuck, I ask but…..I like someone else to work with in the classroom (BFG2 6TM).

Interviewer – I notice in two of the groupings that you are not actually sitting next to someone on the same desk. Is that ok or do you prefer…

Kevin – it's ok…….if I was sat next to one of my best friends, I could be talking all the time (B II).

Some children expressed the fact that they wanted to sit with their friends and some actively made this choice but then found that the need to talk was almost impossible to resist:

Callum – Mrs H said 'I think now you're all in Year 6 now you can choose'. And so we all got with people that we were going to talk with a lot. And Robert was next to me and I always play with him and we couldn't stop talking (BFG2 6H).

Annabel – well it's literacy and class…..because when I see Linda talking, I join in and the same in Literacy……when Laura wants to talk to me I think 'well should I……shouldn't I' and I end up talking…..and I don't know why (B II).

Molly – I know the people that I want but I don't think that I would concentrate with them so……..Like Jemma and May and ……

Interviewer – so it is a dilemma between who you are going to concentrate well with and …..

Molly – well you know we talk…..and then we whisper …….we get told off for talking….it depends what work we are doing….sometimes we can talk and sometimes even though we are sat with our friends we've still got to do our work (RC II).

In some cases this leads to the teacher intervening to separate the group

Jeremy – it's hard to admit why me, Jamie and Nathaniel got moved but we got moved because we well possibly most of the class time was spent talking (BFG3 6H).

However, there are some occasions when particular teachers have passed the responsibility for this decision to the children involved, allowing them to reflect on the relationship and the impact that it might be having on their work:

Timmy – well it's like both of our choices really….mine and Jacob's choice coz we really don't want to get told off. When I sit on this table I really don't like talk as much….well we still talk but we still get the same amount of work done me and Jack but I don't talk as much but I do the same amount of work (B II).

Molly – Mrs M said it was because on one piece of work, me and Milly worked together and we didn't really get anything done because we was talking and she said "if anybody wants to move and feels like they need to move now", so we all like moved (RC II).

Sometimes, as in the case of Molly, the result of the decision is viewed positively by the child:

Molly – I don't know because I concentrate a lot more on here because me and Claire and Milly used to talk…..me and May don't really like…..we still talk to each other at playtimes and stuff

but we don't talk and talk and talk like we did on that table…..because I'm more closer to them so (RC II).

Problems encountered through working with friends, such as messing about and talking, were recognised to have an impact on work. Billy explains that he is sometimes unsuccessful in literacy because of the friends around him who talk and also involve him in conversation:

Billy –I talk a lot with Joe coz he's next to me and Leon because he's a friend of mine as well and he chats quite a bit and so does Joe so…sometimes in Literacy (B II).

If this pattern was to occur over a number of lessons then this could lead to the overall standard of work going down:

Kevin –if you don't choose someone who's sensible to work with, that could interrupt your work then your work could go down and you'd get a lower level (BFG3 6A).

Sean, at River Close Primary, seems to value the flexibility that his school offers regarding where the children are allowed to sit and who they work with. For certain types of work he has the option of moving away from friends to be able to concentrate more effectively:

Sean – it's better to choose but it depends really because sometimes if you really want to get on with a piece of work and you're sat in your place, then it's good but if you're sat next to your friends and you……you might get disturbed…. if it's like a top copy and I really need to concentrate I just go out the way….like outside….it depends like I said earlier that….with your work and everything…..well now I'm at the SAT papers I prefer to work in the place where I usually am….where I am now.

Interviewer – here in your home base?

Simon– yes so I can concentrate and not get disturbed with my friends (RC II).

6.3 Positive effects of *not* working with friends

Some children are not sitting with people who they consider to be their friends, or who they play with on the playground. However, when reflecting on their ability to work effectively with these other children, they note that they are able to get on well with and maintain positive working relationships with them. The benefits of working with other children who are not part of the friendship group

show remarkable similarity to the positive feelings expressed by children talking about the importance of working with friends (see examples in Appendix O and Appendix P).

These other children are able to offer valuable practical support with work:

Bill –….we all help each other with spellings and stuff (B II).

Iris – well, I feel comfortable because Gina can be kind of…..she can make me laugh as well and in the Big Writing when I'm bored and I'm finished she says do you want to go through the work and stuff (NP II).

Children on these tables also help to create an atmosphere conducive to work and do not display any traits seen as negative and disruptive. As a result everyone can concentrate:

Bill – just like we all get along…….there's no arguments or anything (B II).

Ben – they help me to concentrate more….

Me – what is it about this group that helps you to concentrate more?

Molly – well I think…..well I look forward to both of them and I'm happy and everything and comfortable but I think I concentrate a lot more in my test and it's helped me more to concentrate (RC II).

Ben – because if I get stuck on something they always help me and they don't always talk….they get on with their work (B II).

TImmy – Yes even though I'm on a table with all girls. Anyway I normally get lots of work done coz I normally….I sometimes talk to them but I don't so I normally get a lot of work done. In our table group sometimes we do a group for science and we did one for RE coz we were doing about….do you know Martin Luther King and we did about him on a big piece of sugar paper and we did like a spidergram on there and we all had really good ideas….we all did so we like worked together……it is really helpful because we normally work really good together like as a table and I'm also going to put successful down as well coz we like get our work done but…..we just get our work done really easily (B II).

Iris – I concentrate more because Gina doesn't really annoy me….no-one annoys me on this table (NP II).

Sometimes, similarly to close friends, these other children can offer a level of emotional support and this also leads to positive feelings being expressed about the group:

Brian – I'm happy on all three tables to be honest because I've got Leon and Colin who can make me happy when I'm in a mood sometimes or not in a good situation and then you've got Jack and Leon who like support me and……..on everything and then we've got Charles and Kevin who like try and cheer me up when I'm not in a good situation (B II).

Molly – I like both tables and I'm happy on both tables…….I feel comfortable on both and …..coz I know all of them quite well (RC II).

6.4 Negative effects of *not* working with friends

Many children spoke about the difficulties of not working with friends. Aspects that they spoke about as being the positive effects of working with friends suddenly became negative aspects when working without friends. As such, the emotional and work related support that had been valued was lacking or non-existent when seated on tables without friends. Similarly, the social and work related interaction that was viewed so positively was no longer available. These two factors had a significant impact on the way that children felt about their group. In some cases it was revealed that children also had to cope with verbal and sometimes physical conflict as a result of their classroom grouping (see examples in Appendix O and Appendix P).

6.4.1 Lack of support

As mentioned previously, support from group members was welcomed and valued. Children who found themselves in groups without friends talked about being ignored when they required help:

Claire – the boys just like….they don't help you they just ignore you (RC II).

Nathaniel – like some people don't help out….they just ignore you (B II).

Ryan – well in literacy I'm not sitting next to anyone again…I'm on my own again but it's the people that are on my table, there's only three of us, they don't hardly talk to me they just….when I start to speak to them to say that I need help they just say go away (BFG2 6TM).

Some children, such as Tim, find themselves on tables with people who already have established working partners and consequently end up working on their own because there seems to be no alternative. So although not necessarily deliberately ignored they still do not have access to help with their work:

Tim – yes because on this table I'm normally just working by myself…..George and Sam and Annie and Charlotte work together and me and Amber just work on our own (RC II).

Sometimes a lack of support is seen in the fact that some children are not supportive of the aims of the table and seem to deliberately go against the wishes of the rest of the group:

Louisa – and we try to get table points by keeping the box tidy but he just tips all his things in the box (BFG2 6H).

6.4.2 Lack of interaction

Because of the absence of friends on the table, some children feel that they have no-one to talk to. This is sometimes because of the different personalities or characteristics that some children are perceived to have:

Ben - Miriam and Olivia are really really quiet (B II).

Linda spoke about feeling isolated in literacy:

Linda – yes literacy……nobody really talks to me….it's just the boys talking and like Charlotte's real quiet (B II).

Callum and Jake have got other children on their table but they have got no-one sitting next to them on their part of the desk. This reduces the possibility of interaction significantly:

Callum – there's like none of my friends and I don't really like sitting there……I'm only on a little table on my own there….

Interviewer – you are on your own….

Callum – and I've got no-one to talk to like in talking time (B II).

Jake – if it had another two people it would be perfect. I feel a bit lonely when I'm on this table though because Tim B sits opposite me and it would be a bit better if I had two people there and there (NP II).

Some children accepted that there was interaction on their table but that this interaction did not involve them, even when they tried to become involved:

Georgina – but in this one it's like you're being pushed out……out of the conversation. And today, I was asking Olivia a question and she just wouldn't answer. It was quite……I don't know the word….unhelpful (B II).

Linda – well they're just…they're like ignorant basically…they don't ever concentrate and listen to other people's ideas and they're always quite silly but like…that's just the boys …., they're always silly but like Charlotte she gets on with her work and she's like quite a quiet person…….but I don't have no-one to talk to on my table….that would like help me (B II).

Phillipa – I probably feel this way when Alice and Evie are on my table, and maybe a bit isolated when they've gone because they don't really talk to me….. them people. Molly and Louise talk to Brad ……and they don't talk to me (NP II).

Sometimes this lack of interaction is not seen as the particular fault of the others on the table. Some children revealed that they did not feel like talking to the rest of the group because they are not part of their close friendship group and therefore there seems to be a level of awkwardness and a lack of comfort about the relationship:

Ben –I kind of feel unhelpful to them because when I'm not on a table with my friends, I want to keep myself to myself…..but like they're always asking me questions that I sometimes don't know the answer to (B II).

Interviewer– is there a reason why you are more quiet in maths than you are in the literacy group and the class. Is it to do with the people or…

Billy – I've known Claire since Year 3 but…….I've known Chris and Leon since Year 3 but they haven't been like my surrounding friends….so they're like really kind of new people to me (B II).

6.4.3 Too much interaction

On the other hand, some children complained about too much interaction and noise when working on tables with people who were not part of their friendship group. There seemed to be a lack of understanding about how some children liked to work and how much interaction they were able to cope with in order to be able to work effectively. Many of the problems seemed to revolve around an excessive amount of talking:

Georgina – they were talking, they were really doing my head in. I couldn't get on with my work (BFG1 6TM).

Grace – I maths I wanted to sit next to Molly but I couldn't coz I got moved but in the end I ended up next to Tyler and I never play with Tyler because she's not really one of my friends, she's friends with Kate and Isobel but they get on my nerves and they just keep talking about weird things like Kate will keep going 'come on doggy doggy' and I'm like 'it's maths, it's not dog walking' and she's got this imaginary dog walking round the classroom with her (BFG1 6TM).

Ben – well Lula sometimes distracts me from my work and I don't get much work done (B II).

Linda – sometimes I'm a bit frustrated in literacy because they keep talking and it's like annoying (B II).

Other children spoke about members of their table group being annoying:

Callum – and the thing with Joe is that he messes around and laughs at his own things and we don't find them funny (BFG2 6H).

Sometimes these actions and behaviours that are considered annoying, prevent children from thinking clearly and being able to complete their work:

Iris – Well it's helpful……sometimes I get distracted by Margaret because she talks a lot and says all the answers when I want to work them out for myself (NP II).

Rachel - Aiden….he gets on my nerves…

Interviewer – right and he's actually sat next to you.

Rachel – he does get on my nerves quite a bit because like I'm trying to concentrate and like if me and Ola are trying to work a question out, he says something else that puts us off….so it's quite hard but he's ok sometimes (B II).

Timmy – yeah but he just kept getting really annoying….I don't know why…..I don't think he likes me. I sit next to him in ICT but we can sometimes have a chat and like sometimes we argue but sometimes we don't argue. He's ok but he just gets sort of annoying sometimes (B II).

Jake – these three people….well sitting with Chris and Tim L is really really good but sitting opposite Oliver and Oliver's friend…..well Oliver's quite annoying…….well they're always messing about telling each other silly jokes and that gets me and Chris and Tim frustrated sometimes (NP II).

6.4.4 Negative effect on mood

Just as working with close friends can generate positive feelings, being separated from these friends can lead to negative feelings. Sometimes it is just the absence of friendship that generates these feelings:

Georgina – what I think about my maths group is that….I've been split up from a few of my friends….from my last group and when I sit with who I sit with on the table I kind of feel a bit…..left out because all my friends are like…somewhere else and I'm not with any (BFG1 6TM).

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Phillipa – if it was someone different that I'm not really friends with….I would feel ok but I wouldn't feel as…….I wouldn't really like it…..I wouldn't be very happy or comfortable…..I'd feel the opposite (NP II).

Gina – I feel jealous because at playtime my friends are always outside and they talk about what they've done on the table and I feel left out and jealous (NP II).

Simon – well sometimes I feel left out because most of my friends are just on one table. Like in the old one, I was sat next to Tim which like yeah I do like him but…my other friends were on a different table….all of them…. and they were all sat on that one table (RC II).

On other occasions it is the specific actions of other group members that lead to negative feelings:

Bill –Sometimes a bit left out because like if we do a group activity on the table most of the girls are like….they write all the stuff down (B II).

Gina – sometimes I feel uncomfortable during maths…..because James keeps leaning over my shoulders and looking at my work so it's a bit uncomfortable (NP II).

6.4.5 Negative reaction of others in the group

There are many different factors which act together to alienate pupils and make children think negatively about their experiences of grouping at school. Children related incidents where they felt that children on their table were mean to them, used bad language, or picked on aspects of their voice or character that could not be altered. Eloise draws attention to the fact that if people are openly mean and nasty it impacts on her ability to focus on the work:

Eloise – if you have someone next to you that's horrible and being mean to you all the time you can't get on with your work (B6A FG1).

Eloise seems to be talking hypothetically, but Linda and Karen have had direct experience of this type of behaviour in one of their groups:

Linda – well, they just call people names and they call me names……it's being bullied and I feel insulted (B II).

Karen – it's when the teacher moved me…..Margaret was sitting next to her so I sat here and then the next day she sat there again because sometimes she can be a bit mean sometimes to me…..she shouts in my face (NP II).

Terry's experience of his literacy group reflects a mean reaction to a common problem and a lack of tolerance and empathy. He relates the details of the incident but it is clear that this is not an isolated occurrence for him:

Terry –they're never nice to me. Especially in literacy……..because yesterday she kept on having a go at me….I was trying to speak up as best as I could, but it was because of my voice….I couldn't speak up very well and I didn't really want to hurt my throat as much as it already did (B II).

On some occasions children spoke about verbal confrontations experienced on their table. These confrontations took the form of being argumentative, swearing, name-calling:

Callum – I don't like the table I'm on now because John…….John he's awful. He's moody, he argues and so we just have to block him out…..he's not a very nice person to us….he….he….

Louisa – talks….

Callum – he sometimes swears at us…..

Amy – he swears a lot (BFG2 6H).

Ben - Joe's always calling us names and things and swearing at us (B II).

Andrew –he gets mean and he swears (RC II).

Sometimes differences of opinion arise and disagreements are difficult to settle. There are some children who feel that their opinion is never listened to and valued and this makes them feel as though the people on their table do not like them:

Ben – yes because Lula always wants to do something and I always want to do the opposite thing………we disagree a lot (B II).

Ruth – it's just like……Henry…because I say something and he disagrees with me all the time…so it's like…..I don't think he likes me much coz…well he agrees with Mary and Reece but they…… it's like…I don't really agree with you so you're not part of it so (B II).

Karen – it's like…..when I say…..it's like in maths….today in maths….one of the questions was 3 times 27….or something like that….and they said it was 24….and I said 'no' and I said the answer….and then we had to change it because I was actually right……….(voice tails off) (NP II).

There are other children who feel that people on their table are mean:

Terry –because yesterday she kept on having a go at me….I was trying to speak up as best as I could, but it was because of my voice….I couldn't speak up very well and I didn't really want to hurt my throat as much as it already did (B II).

Interviewer – there's quite a big gap between you and Savannah……..is there a reason for that?

Gemma –sometimes she can be a bit mean sometimes to me…..she shouts in my face (NP II).

Jake –she gets on my nerves….she's a really big tell- tale….she tells about absolutely everything….it gets me frustrated when she does that (NP II).

On one seemingly isolated occasion at Newton Park Primary one group of girls physically separated their desk away from the rest of the group to further underline their wish not to work with the group:

Philippa – Mary's quite…….Mary and Millie and Ellen are quite mean to me.

Interviewer – is this why this desk has been separated off.

Philippa – no they just moved it because they said 'I don't want to be near you' (NP II).

In River Close, children have a great deal of flexibility related to who they choose to work with and this sometimes leaves children feeling isolated and without a work partner. In one observation Luke wanted to work with Kevin:

23/10/12 – In the afternoon it was a history timeline challenge. The children chose their own pairs for this and then decided where in the classroom they would sit. Some children had more difficulty finding a partner than others. Luke worked with Kevin but it was not a swift choice on Kevin's behalf. He tried to get in with other children before eventually agreeing to go with Luke. Stephen also had difficulty. He asked Luke and he refused. I told Stephen to go with Nat and neither looked as though they wanted to be together. All the partnerships were single gender.

In this particular instance a compromise was reached and although some children did not have the partner they initially wanted, they still managed to work together. In the following section of conversation recorded during the individual interview, Joe had been asked who he would like to work with. His response is as follows:

Joe – (quietly and with his head down) by myself really……..I'd like to work by myself……..because normally when I ask people they always say 'no' and then they ask someone else to work with them (RC II)

This statement by Joe was confirmed during participant observation

Joe - Activity where they were allowed to choose where they sat and with whom – the book review. Joe asked many people to work with him (all boys) and they all said no. The teacher noticed that he was walking around looking unsettled and told him to work with Mary's group. He did not look happy about this and neither did the six girls. They talked and interacted with each other but did not include him. Joe worked on his own and sat on the end of the desk.

From these findings, a further three broad analytical statements will be presented.

AS4 – Ability grouping seems to have an influence on peer relationships from an academic and social perspective in the classroom but does not appear to impact on existing friendship groups.

AS5 – Members of the wider peer group, who children come into contact with in ability groups, can display similar positive characteristics with regard to working relationships as friends are perceived to do.

AS6 – Some negative peer relationships, which act to hinder working relationships, are not able to be identified through observation alone.

In relation to analytical statement three (AS4), this is evidenced on pages 180 – 181 and in Appendix F.

With regard to analytical statement five (AS5), It is evident that friendship is an important consideration for children when they talk about their classroom grouping. Some children believed that it was necessary to have friends on the table because these friendships provided emotional and work related support, opportunities for a range of interaction and generally made the children feel very positively about lesson time. However, there was a feeling that not all friendships were conducive to good working relationships and children seemed to be aware of the ones which did not seem as effective as others. It is also evident that, some children, who are not part of the close friendship group, can provide similar levels of support and interaction which are viewed positively. These children are able to provide work related support and also emotional

support, provide an atmosphere conducive to work and make their work partners feel positive about the relationship.

However, in relation to analytical statement six (AS6), there are times when the addition of other children, who are not part of the friendship group, can have more negative consequences. Some of these consequences are quite overt and may be easily picked up by the teacher without talking to the children, but many are much more subtle and difficult to pin point such as feeling left out or lonely. These more subtle manifestations of problematic relationships were discovered through the individual interviews but were not immediately apparent in the participant observations. Examples of these can be found in Appendix K. There are five examples in total. In example one, Bill is being observed. He is working with Leo who is not part of his friendship group and his feelings are wholly positive when he reflects on his working relationship with Leo. This was the impression that I gained as an observer. However, in all the other examples in Appendix K, the children expressed wholly negative feelings about their grouping; yet as a participant observer, that was not the impression that I had at the end of the observation. It was only when the interview transcript was looked at again alongside the observation schedule that connections could be made and tentative explanations found. For instance, in example two, Ben is involved in paired discussion with Mandy because he has been asked to do this by the teacher. However, in the individual interview he elaborates about a rather tense relationship with Mandy and about having to try the best he can to work with her. He actually wants to work with Rebecca and Sarah but they have been told to work as a pair. The observation shows a brief interaction between Ben and Sarah which, in the light of the interview may well have been for reassurance or an attempt to work with Sarah. However, without the combination of the interview alongside the observation, the feelings of Ben would have remained hidden.

Chapter 7 – The impact of pupil grouping on inclusion

This chapter will explore the findings related to the third research question:

What impact does pupil grouping appear to have on inclusion?

The analysis of the data gathered through sociometric testing, focus group interviews, individual interviews and observations suggests that pupil grouping can act in many ways to promote or to hinder the inclusion of individual pupils in school. As mentioned in chapter four, the three schools in this study adopt different grouping structures for their pupils. The pupils at Bridgeford and Newton Park experience three different groupings throughout the school day: the maths set; the literacy set and the class group. The larger year group cohort at Bridgeford allows for five ability set groupings for both maths and literacy, whereas the smaller cohort at Newton Park only allows for two set groupings for each of those subjects. It could be argued that the provision at Bridgeford and Newton Park project a much more distinct and transparent view of perceived ability because children have been allocated to particular groups based on their attainment in maths and literacy. These groups are named using hierarchical labels such as 'top set' and 'bottom set' and children leave their classroom to travel to other classrooms for these lessons. River Close is the smallest of the three schools. It adopts a very different approach to the organisation of the whole curriculum and as such, does not use set groups for maths and literacy. However, as mentioned previously, the children perceive that their places in the classroom (referred to as 'homebase') are linked to notions of ability. A further difference between River Close and the two larger schools is the fact that River Close adopts a much more flexible approach to grouping that is rarely seen in the other two schools. This flexible approach means that children are not restricted to always working in their 'homebase' groups. For all subjects they have opportunities to move to work with a group of their choice, in a location of their choice.

The previous two findings chapters focused on children's perceptions of why they are grouped in particular ways and the importance of friendship in relation

to grouping. This chapter, in exploring how grouping impacts on inclusion, will inevitably touch upon themes that have been raised previously. However, these themes will be explored and presented in a different way, because the purpose which underpins them has a different focus. Rather than just revealing what the children have to say about a particular topic, it is necessary to look at a deeper level to determine what these revelations might say about inclusion. It is important to highlight at this point that, during all interactions with the children, the word 'inclusion' was not mentioned. As such, it is only through close analysis of what the children have said, related to grouping, that evidence begins to come to the surface regarding inclusion.

This chapter will explore the impact that pupil grouping appears to have on inclusion looking particularly at how pupil grouping can give clues as to the perceived ability of children. Where a child sits in the classroom and which set group they are part of, acts to define a particular view of their ability in the eyes of others. Many issues were raised as a result of teachers choosing to group children by their perceived ability. These issues revolved around how children were viewed as a result of certain grouping practices and how this enabled some children to be compared favourably or unfavourably with other children. In Bridgeford and Newton Park, children work in set groupings for maths and literacy and therefore a hierarchy of perceived ability is created through the allocation of children to certain groups. In Newton Park this hierarchy is less complex than in Bridgeford as a result of there only being two set groups: an upper and a lower. Children in Bridgeford are divided into five groups, three of these being middle or target sets. It could be argued that children, in this context, potentially have more opportunities to draw comparisons between each other because of the more distinct and clearly defined hierarchy. However, it was not just the allocation of children to set groups that seemed to give clues as to the perceived ability of children; it was also the particular grouping that teachers used within the classroom. This chapter will begin by looking at how allocation to a particular set group influences children's perceptions of each other and has a resulting impact on inclusion. The chapter will then move on to looking at children's views about grouping structures within the classroom and the impact that this has on inclusion.

7.1 How allocation to set groups influences children's perceptions of each other

As mentioned in chapter five, children perceived that one of the factors that influenced allocation of pupils to set groups in Newton Park and Bridgeford was teachers' views of children's ability. The allocation of children to sets seems to create a notion that children are different and have different qualities and characteristics because they belong to certain set groups. The creation of ability groups by teachers is an outward manifestation of their judgements about children based on an arguably narrow set of criteria. The children then seem to connect with these teacher judgements in order to create views about other pupils based on the set they are assigned to. Therefore, by observing the actions of teachers in creating different groups and then seeing how they respond to children within these groups in different ways, it creates an opportunity for children to develop views that some pupils are intrinsically different. Sometimes these differences are spoken about in a positive way and sometimes in a negative way. Often these particular characteristics seem to be assigned to children as a collective group purely because of the set that they are in. Children in the top set are perceived as being brainy, clever, confident, high ability, more advanced, able to work quickly, have skills similar to teachers or tutors, good at the subject and able to understand things easily. This is in contrast to views of children located in the lower set who are perceived as being bad at the subject, struggling, low ability, only able to work slowly, less confident, having learning difficulties, not smart and having special needs.

The children made reference to:

"The less confident ones in lower sets" (B FG 6H3).

"The top set does it at a really really high speed and then the slightly little bit lower do it at a slightly slower speed" (B FG 6A2).

"They put the other ones a bit higher so that they can do more work" (B FG 6A3).

"The smartest people go in Mrs Bloom's for maths" (B FG 6B4).

When children in the top set spoke about their capabilities and compared themselves to children in lower set groups, they presented the view that they had levels of understanding that were far in advance of these other children:

Rose – say me and Mela…say if I say something what an adult might say, she might be like 'what?' She wouldn't understand it. We would understand it….

Mela– coz she's in top aren't you and I'm in middle and she might understand more stuff than me….

Wendy – yes we've got to do loads of vocabulary, positive and negative and powerful verbs….

Claire – synonyms and adjectives…..

Mela – I don't even know what them are……(laughs) (B FG 6A2).

In this extract of dialogue, Rose, Wendy and Claire are all in the top set for literacy, while Mela is in the middle set. The three girls in the top set perceive their level of capability as being like that of an adult. They list examples of work that they have no trouble understanding and put forward the idea that Mela would not just have difficulty understanding: she would not understand at all. This extract raises two important issues related to inclusion. Firstly, that children allocated to the top set are viewed by others as being intrinsically able to understand things that others are incapable of comprehending purely because of their placement in this set. This puts them in an academically superior position and gives the impression to other children that they cannot compete on an academic level and consequently would have nothing to offer if they had the opportunity to work together with these children who are in the top set. Secondly, the final comment by Mela seems to indicate that she is not having access to the same type of work in her middle set. When Wendy and Claire list some of the subject content that they are engaged in learning about, Mela doesn't recognise any of it. This would suggest that children who are perceived as being more able also have access to work that is not covered in other sets. Therefore it could be argued that teachers, as well as pupils, develop particular views of children's ability based on the set group that they are in. This might lead teachers to choose to not introduce certain concepts to children in certain sets and thereby act as gatekeepers to knowledge. These two issues work together to create a particular picture of certain children in relation to others and demonstrates that children's viewpoints are influenced by teacher actions.

Other children also raised the issue that children in top sets are given more work, given different harder work and more is expected of them. Kelly speaks about the higher expectations of teachers related to children in the top set:

Kelly - we have special success criteria that we need to tick off and include. If we don't tick then off, we don't get a green stamp (NP FG2).

Milly spoke about her top maths set having special lessons on a Monday morning at the secondary school that they would all transfer to at the end of the academic year. These particular practices reinforce views about children in the top set and their perceived higher levels of capability. An extract from a conversation with Iris reveals that there is an expectation that children will not only be able to demonstrate competence in their work but also meet required expectations regarding quantity of work produced. If the expected amount of work is not completed in the lesson then it has to be taken home:

Iris – well we're the higher group and so if we don't finish our work we have to take it home and do it (NP FG4).

Additionally, some children had the view that not only were the children in top sets treated differently through access to work and increased expectation, but also a better quality teacher was made available for them:

Josie – it's the levels of us because the teachers might have been a level 5a when they were in Year 4 so they have better………a better education in Literacy or Maths so it will be easy for them to teach the harder….the people who have more education in Literacy in the top group. And they can have like bottom in maths because they might have been bottom set in maths when they were a little girl or boy and they were like a 2a or something (NP FG3).

Catherine – Mrs Merry's very good at literacy and she enjoys it so she's top set literacy, then it's Mrs Bloom's and then is it Mrs Andrew's and then Mrs Holme's (B FG 6A1).

Josie and Catherine both speak about the top set teacher and about the fact that this teacher has a higher level of expertise in order to give '*more education'* to this group of children. These teachers also enjoy the subject more. The judgement then follows that children who are not in the top set are taught by teachers with less expertise and those who experience less enjoyment of the subject. As a result of this, it could be argued that children believe that they gain less education from these teachers.

The actions of the teachers in allocating children to set groups and the allocation of particular teachers to those set groups, influence children's opinions of each other. These opinions seem to revolve around capability, entitlement and value. A child's position in the top set would seem to generate a

view that they are highly capable, have a greater level of entitlement and are consequently could be deemed to be valued more. Conversely, this would seem to be the opposite for lower set children. Pupils referred to this group as the lower set or bottom set and the views about children in this group were related to the fact that they lacked confidence, they struggled and they needed extra time to complete tasks even though these tasks were considered to be easier. In a similar way to the fact that top set children were viewed as being innately capable, there was a feeling that some children in the lower set were innately incapable. In some cases, the perceived lack of ability of these children was related to something deficient within them which justified their position in the group:

Jade – *like Letty….but you can't really blame Letty can you? It's not Letty's fault. You can't really blame Letty about being in bottom because she gets bullied a lot.*

Louisa – *it's not her fault that she has like disabilities with learning and her voice ….*

Jade – *she wanted to put 'bobbles' in her work and she put 'doddles'. Nick was sat next to her going 'and what does doddles mean? There's no such thing as doddles'. I told him to shut up by accident* (B FG 6H2).

In this extract Jade and Louisa speak about Letty in such a way that it seems as though her position in the group is inevitable because of her perceived learning disability and particular way of speaking. They are quick to highlight that this is not her fault and in doing so project a feeling that Letty is in some way unfortunate and needs to be viewed with sympathy and given protection from others who say hurtful things. This conversation shows that children might also look for clues about ability to justify their views about characteristics of children in certain set groupings. These judgements might evolve from an initial comparison with their own work. Nick's comment on Letty's work may have been generated as a result of him thinking that he would never make that particular mistake of 'b' 'd' reversal. This in a way justifies that fact that Letty is in the lower set and he is in the middle set. These comparisons can be seen in extracts of conversations with other pupils. It is possible to see how negative judgements are made about children on the basis of these comparisons. One such conversation was about an incident in Newton Park when Iris and Philippa discuss the fact that sometimes work is shared with other set groups and children are encouraged to visit another group and present their good work.

However, a practice that is supposed to celebrate achievement can be seen as an opportunity for comparison and negative judgements to be made:

Iris –If you do very well in literacy you get to go to the other classroom if it's a lower set…..and I had to do this….I had to go round and show my work, and I'd done loads and then I had to read mine out…….and then Jacob came through and he….he's not very good but….at writing…….I'm not saying he's very very bad but the teacher says that he has more work crossed out than actually written….he just doesn't bother really….he doesn't………he came through knocking on the door with a great big smile on his face when he came through and he handed his work over…….

Philippa – one sentence …….not even that….

Iris – and I'd written about 10 paragraphs and we'd started at the same time (NP FG3).

Similarly to the children speaking about Letty, these children also look for reasons to explain the differences between their work, which they perceive as being good, and the work of Jacob. Again, there has to be an explanation for the two girls being in the higher set and Jacob being assigned to the lower group. They use a comparison with their own work and the fact that they have clearly written more and also draw clues from hearing the teacher speak about Jacob. Their final assessment of the reasons for these differences seem to rest on the fact that Jacob can't be bothered and even though he is smiling, there really is no need to celebrate.

There seems to be two very clear opinions about children in the lower set and the reasons for their placement there. The first one seems to be linked to a view that these children have learning difficulties and the second view seems to be that they are lazy and not bothered. The first of these views is reflected in the comment of one girl who put forward a comment that was so categorical and specific about the whole of the lower group:

*Anna – and then there's the specially specially group……that's what we call them (*B6H FG4).

However this particular view is not isolated to one particular school or interview group. In Newton Park the following conversation is about the possible amalgamation of the two set groups and whether this would be feasible:

Carolyn –….there wouldn't be any point in putting all of the…….well half of the really good ones with half of the ……well not really bad ones but…..the ones who need more help…….

Josephine – the ones who have learning difficulties……..

*Ellen – not all have learning difficulties (*NP FG5).

Josephine's view is that all the children in the other set i.e half the year group, have learning difficulties because they are in that particular group and are referred to as the 'lower set'. Although Ellen disagrees with this opinion she still believes that it is the correct view about some children.

While observing in the classroom in Newton Park, I made note of a brief conversation that occurred as children moved from their registration group to their set group. I was working on Owen's table and as some children left the room he felt the need to try and mislead me regarding this particular group of children:

> *05/11/12 – worked with the literacy group (set 2). After registration the teacher asked set 1 to leave and go to the room next door. As half of the class left, Owen turned to me and said that the people who had just left were the bad group. I asked him what he meant by that and he said that the children who had just gone out were not very good at literacy. Stuart, who was sitting next to him, laughed and said "Oh he's being silly. Those ones are the good group, it's us that are the bad ones".*

Perhaps Owen is aware of the views that others hold about his lower set group and wanted to distance himself from those comments by pretending that he was not part of it. Whatever his reasons, it was clear that he would have preferred not to be associated with set two.

The second view about children in the lower set being lazy and having a poor attitude to work was also expressed a number of times and presented as a reason for their placement in that particular set to begin with. Sometimes this opinion was stated explicitly as in the case of Callum when he talks about Zachery:

Callum – Coz I'm good at my work in class but the people who I'm sat with….Louisa is really good at working….she's about as good as me really…..similar……and Muriel's a bit lower down but Zachery's like the lowest….he doesn't concentrate….he doesn't listen and he doesn't concentrate (B FG 6H3).

Callum compares all the children on his table and how he perceives their ability. They are all in the top or middle groups and in Callum's opinion they are good at working. When he gets to Zachery who is in the lower set he attributes this to an inability to listen and concentrate.

Louisa contributes to this discussion and presents her own opinion that hard work leads to being able to move into higher sets:

Louisa – it's a bit like you've got a different IQ to other people. So like for literacy I'm in top set but I'm not as smart as other people in the top set but I've worked my hardest to get to the top, but there's other people who haven't worked as hard as I have and they're in different ones (B FG 6H3).

Terry – Since Year 3 I was always in the bottom maths set group and its because of………the amount of work that I produce in a day…….because I can get about half of a page done…..I try my hardest and that's why I've always been in the bottom maths group (B FG 6TM3).

Louisa seems to reinforce the view that children in lower sets are there because they do not work as hard. However, Terry, who is someone who has experienced many years of working in a lower set, seems frustrated that his hard work does not result in a move to a higher group. It is therefore possible to see how views that other children hold of lower set children are misplaced and incorrect. Views such as this could potentially lead to the marginalisation of children like Terry because they are incorrectly viewed as working against the generally good work ethic of other children.

In exploring the views of some children towards other children placed in certain groups, it is possible also to see why children react in particular ways when teachers decide to move them out of one set and into another. Children seem to be aware that being a member of a particular set leads to particular views being held about them. The higher the set grouping, the more positive and favourable the views tend to be. Therefore, when children discover that they have moved up into the next set group their feelings reflect this positive move:

Gina – I was in Mr M's. I got moved to top, I was so excited. I was moved up to the top one and then we all got assessed (B FG 6TM1).

Mela – I used to be in bottom and I was proud about it because I moved up out of it (B FG 6A2).

These children expressed emotions such as pride and excitement. Gina at the prospect of moving to the top set and Mela after being told that she was no longer in the lower set. In these two extracts a move to the set above can be seen as a promotion. This is in contrast to the views of Callum, Alice and Ruth who have all experienced a move to the set below:

Callum – well it was someone who wasn't very good at something. I'm not very good at literacy, I got moved down and I got put down and everything….(he sighs)…..and I didn't really like it and then I got something….I started getting better and got really good at the end (B FG 6H2).

Alice – Well I got moved down one set because we all got moved for Year 6. What Mr Midgely said to me was…well he could tell that I was confused why….and he said to me that he thought that…they all thought that I was probably good enough but that he didn't really think that I was ready to cope…to keep up or cope with Mrs Merry because she's a really hard literacy teacher.

Interviewer – right, I see, so you had a conversation about it?

Alice – er, yes…well…..I was really confused because I was doing real well, I thought I was doing real well, so my mam was a bit confused as well so she…..he took me out and was like telling me everything (B FG 6TM3).

Ruth – I feel differently about my literacy because I thought I was doing really well and then I got moved down to a lower set so I thought oh…….I'm not as good as I thought I was (B II).

These children were all in top set and are now in the middle group. Their feelings about the move are very different from the views of Gina and Mela and this could be as a result of the fact that they are no longer part of this prestigious top set and as such may feel that they have lost their academic identity. The move may have the result of altering other children's opinions about them. For Callum, his initial negative thoughts about the situation turn to positive when he realises that he is improving. However for the two girls, they seem confused and unaware of the reasons behind the move.

While observing a year group meeting involving the teachers in Bridgeford, I listened to them discuss the possible move of a child from a middle set to the lower set:

19/09/12 – sat in on a year group meeting with the Year 6 teachers. They were discussing one of the girls in a middle maths set and whether there was a possibility of moving her down to bottom set. Her confidence was deteriorating. Bottom set already has 25 children and one more was considered too many. They discussed the possibility of a swap and another child could move up. They discussed the fact that her results did not match with her ability in the lesson and perhaps she had copied from another person during the assessment.

The teachers' initial conversation seems to reinforce the views that are held by the pupils: children who are less confident in a subject are assigned to the lower set. It is this child's level of confidence with maths that initially prompted the teachers to discuss a move down. In this particular situation her test results are

considered to be far less of a reflection of her ability and there is even a suggestion that these results have been achieved through unfair means.

It is clear to see that the practice of allocating children to particular set groups has enabled pupils to make judgements about the different abilities of children in their cohort. These judgements seem to be developed in a range of different ways. The fact that the set groups are given hierarchical names or numbers allows children to benchmark their own perceived ability against others and also see where other children fall within the hierarchy. They then seem to look for clues in teacher practices or in work that other children produce in order to justify their particular opinions. Essentially, and most importantly, the structure of set grouping has developed a perception within the pupil group that children have different abilities and that this seems to make them intrinsically different as people. As a result, children's opinions of who they can work with, who they can go to for help and whether they actually want to help others is affected. Children, particularly in the top set, seem to have developed particular ways of working that are very independent and self-sufficient. When they are then faced with a mixed ability table they seem irritated by the prospect of being asked for help. The following extracts of conversation are taken from two separate focus group interviews and relate to a particular table in one of the classes. There are only three children sitting on this table:

Catherine – I'm going to put down 'asking lots of questions' because that really annoys me. Steve sits near to me and ……

Milly– and he says 'do you do this?'

Catherine – 'How do you do that?' 'How do you spell this?'……look it up in a dictionary.

Interviewer – so is asking questions a good thing?

Catherine – no, a bad thing………..it's really annoying having to explain every single thing to someone (B FG 6A1).

Steve – I would rather….I don't like sitting there because I'm basically on my own really because there's only two other people there and I would rather sit on a table where there is more people (B FG 6A3).

Steve is in both middle sets and Catherine and Milly are in both top sets. Catherine expresses irritation at anyone asking for help and would prefer only to work with children who she perceives to be the same ability as herself. Steve,

as a result feels isolated and alone because it is possible that his requests for help have been ignored or rebuffed.

It seems that the presence of set grouping enables children to clearly recognise who is perceived as being academically similar to them and who is perceived as being more able. When faced with a choice of who to work with, these are the pupils that they would turn to when thinking about productive working partnerships that would benefit them in some way. These are the children that they would view as being capable and able to give help. This in turn would indicate that children working in lower set groupings are not perceived to add academic benefit to a working partnership and have nothing of value to offer:

Delia – if you are going to work with someone it would be better for you to work with someone more advanced than someone that isn't that good.

Claudia – yes because if you were working with people that were not the same ability you might not have the same thoughts because you might…..you might be having better thoughts if you know what I mean and they might be 'oh the cat jumped over the box' but you might say 'Floppy, the excited ginger cat jumped over the old, wet, soggy, battered cardboard box' (NP FG4).

Carolyn – because Mrs R would have to talk to all the ones who didn't understand it as well as the other ones and the other ones would just be whizzing through it and they would need to concentrate on getting high levels but if they were stuck with the ones who had lower levels they would never be able to reach that stage (NP FG5).

Delia and Claudia seem in agreement about the fact that children in lower groups would not be able to add something better to a piece of writing. Carolyn, on the other hand, believes that working with children deemed less able would actually restrict her own ability to make progress.

7.2 How allocation to table groups in the classroom influences children's perceptions of each other.

As mentioned earlier, the structure of set groupings transmits a message to children about comparative ability. However, it also seems that methods of grouping within the classroom can also replicate the same understanding of an ability hierarchy. Children seem to pick up on teacher practices that give clues as to the perceived ability of members of their class group. Similar and very distinct patterns were found in children's perceptions in all three schools. In

Bridgeford and Newton Park, although the children were in set groups for maths and literacy, within many of these groups there were further methods of grouping that were perceived to be based on ability. In River Close, even though there were no set groups and there was a high degree of flexibility in the grouping, there were still certain practices that enabled children to gain information about the perceived ability of their peers. These clues tended to revolve around the location of the desk in the room and the presence of adult support.

In many classes children spoke about a hierarchy of ability that was related to proximity to the teacher's desk. The children who were seated close to the front were deemed to be of lower ability because they required more support from the teacher and that was the reason for locating them near to the teacher's desk. This view seemed to be readily accepted by children who were in this position as well as children who were seated further away. Almost without exception, the overwhelming opinion was that 'brainy' people sit at the back and 'those that need help' sit at the front:

Kevin – yes I think she did it because our group's closest to her and we need more help. Then it's their group, then theirs. Theirs is the furthest away because it's got Edward and Jake and Oscar ….. Luke only sits there so Mrs S can help him do all his work (RC FG2).

Sean – all the smart people are on that table there……on that table they are really really brainy. Like Jake and everything (RC FG3).

James – no there's only one table that's like the high abilities….like this table is for the high abilities like Matthew and Ellen and Rupert…….So like Ellen and Rupert, people with the best abilities…..and the next best people would sit here and then like me and Zane sit here (NP FG1).

Rhia – in my sets I sit here because I need help…….
Josephine - because the teacher sits here and this is like the area where people are……
Rhia – are on the low levels….
Josephine – that have lower levels than a few people (NP FG5).

Delia - well the people on this side are quite fast workers and they get all the answers right, the ones here are not slow but they're medium and if they sit here somebody next to them can help them out (NP FG2).

Henry – the ones closest to the teachers…..they're not as good….they're not as good at their maths…..the good people sit at the back because they don't need as much attention as the one's at the front   (B FG 6A1).

It is clear that children can gain a detailed understanding of their own and others perceived ability based on their location in the room. The vocabulary that is used to describe the children, who were seen to be the most able, is similar to the vocabulary that was used to describe children in the top set. Consequently these children would seem to have a privileged position within the room based on the fact that they are seen to be 'brainy', 'the best at working' and 'high ability'. On the other hand, a very different view emerges about children who are seated close to the teacher's desk. They are seen to be 'struggling', 'in need of help' and 'only achieving low levels'. So, similar to a set group scenario, the perceived abilities of certain children are judged more favourably than others because they are seen to achieve a greater level of success from their classroom experience.

In one focus group interview children's deeply entrenched perceptions lead to an argument about why a particular child sat in a particular location:

Joe – I don't start on blue square……they just said that I sit closer to the whiteboard…..
Jake – no………sometimes you struggle
(I stop them interrupting Joe and encourage him to continue but he doesn't want to speak)
Jake – if he doesn't start on blue square why did she put him there….
May – he doesn't start on blue square, it's just he struggles (RC *FG1*).

This is a very poignant example of how children have misinterpreted a child's location in the room. Even though Joe is in the higher ability group for maths, the children cannot believe that he does not struggle because of where he is seated in the room. In other words, if he were to demonstrate that he did not struggle, he would be seated at the back of the classroom.

Similarly in Newton Park attention is drawn to one child, Jacob, who it is believed has also been incorrectly located:

Josephine – even though I don't really get the idea of Jacob sitting over here when he should probably be sitting over here near the teacher (NP FG5).

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However, there are two further issues that seem to exacerbate issues of inclusion within the classroom context and create further points of comparison. Firstly, children also believe that pupils who do not conform fully to behaviour expectations also sit closer to the front. There are times when the distinction between these two situations becomes blurred and children then apply negative academic and behaviour characteristics to a pupil purely because of the fact that they are seated at the front of the classroom. Secondly, children believe that teacher time is dominated by the children at the front and therefore those at the back of the room receive no time or their time is greatly reduced.

Evidence would also suggest that the location of the TA support allows some children to question the ability of other children in the classroom. Children have a view that wherever the TA is located, that is where the children who require the most help are. Susan refers to the 'special table':

Susan –you know in maths, there's a special table over here….pretend this is next door…there's a special table over here and over here…

Interviewer – what do you mean by a special table?

Susan – well those that work with Mrs K or Mrs S and they work on these tables and they help the ones that need help. So Mrs K works with this table ……she helps them because they're not really good at maths (NP FG2).

Several other children notice that certain areas of the classroom are the domain of the TA and the class teacher rarely ventures there:

Joel – yes they're all like the people who don't need help and work fine and then Mrs S and Mrs K just hover around these two tables to help because Mrs P is usually teaching over here or helping over here on that desk.
Oliver – Mrs P walks round to see how you're doing and she never walks here because that's where Mrs K and Mrs S sit (NP FG5).

The presence of a TA is therefore a very clear and overt indication that help is required. Children are then able to make value judgements about other children based on who the TA is working with. While observing in Newton Park, I recorded an incident involving Jonathan who was required to go to another room with a TA in order to complete some work:

15/10/12 – The lesson was based on the History WW2 theme. The children were looking at cyphers and code breaking. I sat with Jonathan who is now sitting at the front on a spare desk attached to the teacher's desk. It often has quite a lot of the teacher's things on it as well. Jonathan seemed to enjoy this activity and he could do it. A TA came to take him out of the classroom for an intervention group. He didn't want to go and refused. The TA tried unsuccessfully to persuade him. Eventually the class teacher became annoyed and told him that he had to go. He pushed his work on the floor and stormed out.

It is difficult to make a judgement about why Jonathan reacted to the presence of the TA in the way that he did. However, it is possible that having embarked on an activity that he enjoyed and was able to do, he did not want the stigma of having to cross the classroom with a TA in the possible knowledge that other children in the class might see this as an indication of him not being able to do the work that they were all involved in. In addition to this, the actions of teachers related to the ways that they group children, also seems to influence how the teaching assistants view the particular capabilities of certain children:

07/12/12 – children are doing Christmas activities and making decorations for the Year 4 production to decorate the hall. The children are working in groups to portray the Christmas story in large hoops. The Year Group TA has prepared the resources for this lesson. She explained to me what the children would be doing and said that all children would be colouring or painting and would choose the medium that they wanted to work in. This was with the exception of the SEN children in each class who would roll up balls of tissue paper and stick them on to a photocopied picture.

In the extract above, the Year Group TA had made assumptions about the capabilities of the whole group of children defined as having special educational needs. These children may have been receiving additional support for literacy and/or maths but even in an art activity it was considered that these children would not be able to contribute in the same way as others. This led to an alternative and very simplistic activity being organised for them.

From these findings a further two broad analytical statements will be presented.

AS7 – Stereotypical views about other children seem to be generated and perpetuated when children are placed in structured and relatively inflexible ability groups.

AS8 – Overt and visible methods of differentiation seem to impact on the way children's perceived abilities are viewed by their peers.

To summarise, is clear that methods used to group children within classes and between classes impact on how children view other members of their cohort. The structure of set grouping highlights the particular characteristic of perceived ability. With regard to analytical statement seven (AS7) children develop certain perceptions of the ability of others based on the set group that they are in. These perceptions are not based on any particular knowledge of these pupils but on their allocation to a particular group. The language that is used to describe pupils is therefore generic and all-encompassing and only really related to the position of the group in the overall hierarchy.

Analytical statement eight (AS8), teacher practices with regard to differentiation and support can impact on how children view each other. Where a child sits in the classroom can set in motion many assumptions about their perceived academic capabilities and whether or not they are perceived as being poorly behaved. Those children who are located at the front of the room tend to have much more negative assumptions made about them, by other pupils, with regard to ability and behaviour. In addition to this, the location of adult support is another clue related to perceived academic ability and therefore the presence of this support can lead to further negative assumptions being applied to the child.

In organising children in a hierarchy of perceived ability there will inevitably be those who hold the prestigious title of being in a top set or the top table group. However, there will also be those who do not meet these high expectations. For those children who are allocated to a bottom set or a bottom table group, they fall considerably below this prestigious benchmark. Consequently, a division is created in the way children view each other. There are the children who are demonstrating certain key skills and performing above or within the expectations of the school context because of their patterns of attainment. These children may be perceived to have more of a particular characteristic that is valued, such as academic ability, and as a consequence might be viewed by other children as being more valued by the school. There are also children who, as a result of these narrow comparisons being made, are perceived to have less of the valued characteristic. These children could perceive themselves as

being less valued by the school and therefore marginalised within an environment in which they are unable to compete.

Chapter 8 - Discussion

This research aimed to gain an understanding related to the impact of grouping on peer relationships within three primary schools in the North East of England. It also hoped to identify possible implications for inclusion. Issues related to inclusion and marginalisation have the potential to affect all children. These issues are embedded in the interactions between teachers and pupils, between the pupils themselves and between the pupils and the school environment. It is therefore important that these interactions are scrutinised closely in order to reveal concerns that may have an impact on inclusion. In addition to this, it is also important to involve children in this evaluative process as they have first-hand experience of many aspects of school life. Messiou (2012a:1311) argues that "children can facilitate the process of identifying aspects within a given context that could hinder or promote inclusion". If children are not a key part of the process then many issues at the root of marginalisation may never be revealed (Ibid.). As a consequence of adopting this stance, children's views were central to this research study.

It became apparent through interviews with the children and through observations made within the three schools, that there were similarities in the way children perceived that decisions were made regarding classroom grouping. Broadly, these similarities related to the fact that in all three settings teachers were dominant in the decision making process and their decisions seemed to focus on ability and working relationships. However, within these broad similarities there were differences in approach which meant that the children's experiences of classroom grouping, and the impact that it had on inclusion, differed in each of the three schools.

After careful analysis of the data it emerged that when grouping children in particular ways teachers can influence how children view each other. This realisation was central to the discussions with children and showed that children attached meaning and degrees of importance to these grouping decisions. They perceived that there were reasons for teachers choosing to group them in particular ways and they were able to articulate that these reasons in the first instance related to notions of differences in ability. A key finding, outlined in analytical statement one (see Appendix R), stated that the more visible, formal,

and multi-layered the methods of ability grouping and differentiation, the more importance children attach to these groupings.

Children in all three schools perceived that teachers used certain understandings of ability as a reason for grouping them in particular ways. However, the evidence and criteria that teachers made use of differed, particularly between River Close and the other two schools because of differences in school policy. Bridgeford and Newton Park both used set groups within key stage two (children aged seven to eleven) in order to teach literacy and maths, whereas River Close had no set grouping structures. As such, the grouping arrangements in the first two schools could be seen as being more complex because there are more layers in the decision making process. Firstly decisions needed to be made related to children's allocation to a set group for both literacy and maths. Then, teachers need to make further decisions about where children would sit when they entered the set group classroom. Campbell (2013) discusses these different levels of grouping that children experience within school and states that pupils may experience a number of levels of ability grouping between classes and within classes. Informal conversations with teachers revealed that in the two larger schools set groups were seen as a way to raise standards and this concurs with the views of Marks (2014) who states that schools use ability grouping as a response to outside pressures and a wish to meet expected targets. Teachers believed that they could cater more effectively for pupils' individual needs through narrowing the perceived range of ability in each classroom when teaching the core subjects of literacy and maths. In contrast, River Close adopted a very different view and sought to provide flexible cross curricular experiences that would not have been achievable if literacy and maths were timetabled as discrete subjects and taught at particular times. As a result, similarities were seen in the opinions of the children from Bridgeford and Newton Park.

Therefore, the next section of this chapter will firstly discuss the impact of set grouping on inclusion before moving on to discussing grouping within the classroom and the impact that this had on inclusion. As such, attention will be focused solely on Bridgeford and Newton Park initially as these were the two schools in the study that adopted the structure of set groups.

8.1 The impact of set grouping on inclusion

Children in Bridgeford and Newton Park were allocated to set groups for literacy and maths meaning that, for the majority of children, they would move to a different classroom with a different teacher for these lessons. The reason that this applies to the majority of children and not all children is because some children happened to have their class teacher for one or both of these subjects. However, in adopting set grouping structures as part of whole school policy, teachers in both these schools were restricted in when these subjects could be timetabled and taught. Every teacher within the year group had to teach literacy and maths at the same time and therefore in both Bridgeford and Newton Park, these subjects were taught in the morning. It could be argued that this fact, together with the understanding that these are the only subjects where teachers chose to separate the year group into sets, transmits a message to the children related to the perceived importance of these two subjects over others. In fact one child in Bridgeford even referred to literacy and maths as being the most important subjects (see page 148).

The decisions surrounding which children would be allocated to which set were not left to individual class teachers and their potentially broader knowledge and understanding of the children in their class. These decisions were based on very specific and arguably narrow criteria. As discussed in a chapter five, in Bridgeford and Newton Park the children identified that certain completed pieces of work were assessed and tests were taken which allowed teachers to determine their perceived ability. Ability in both these school contexts was seen as being related to National Curriculum levels. As such, the children would complete tests, usually at the end of the school year and then the results of these tests would be used by the teachers to allocate them to a particular set group. Children believed that these levels were a key factor in deciding which set group they would be a part of and also whether they were moved from one set to another (see page 147). This understanding that test information is a dominant factor in the decisions behind allocating children to set groups is evident in the literature. Davies et al., (2003), Ireson et al., (2002a) and Hallam and Deathe, (2002) all draw attention to the fact that a variety of test information is used to allocate children to groups. These studies also highlight that other

information is also used, such as teacher knowledge of the child (Ireson et al. 2002a) and classwork (Hallam and Deathe, 2002). This was also evident when talking to the children in Newton Park and Bridgeford. However, the dominant factor seems to be the test information and the understanding from other sources seems to be used in quite a sporadic way, if at all, as supplementary evidence.

Therefore it is possible to see how this levelled test information, that is perceived to be used to sort children into set groups for these two high profile subjects, would also gain importance in the eyes of the children. Conversations with the children in Bridgeford and Newton Park showed that they have developed the language of National Curriculum levels and sublevels in a way that was simply not seen in River Close. The conversation on page 148 is lengthy but it aptly demonstrates the importance that has been developed in the minds of the children related to levels.

This conversation was by no means an isolated occurrence in either Bridgeford or Newton Park. There were numerous references to levels by all groups of children and it seemed to dominate their understanding of ability and progress. Children spoke with a seemingly clear understanding of their own levels in literacy and maths and the levels of others. They seemed to draw this information from many sources such as: teachers awarding levels to pieces of work that had been completed; target cards in work books, levelled success criteria that children needed to include in their work and levelled progress records such as the 'Driven to Achieve' books. In contrast, children in River Close rarely, if ever, mentioned levels. That is not to say that they did not speak about ability in other contexts, as will be explained later. Although the literature does not draw attention to children's use of language related to levels, it does focus on the fact that schools use set groups because they are perceived to raise standards and have a positive impact on attainment (Hallam and Parsons, 2013a; MacQueen, 2013). My research study was conducted with children who were either in Year 6 and would be subject to testing during that year or who were in Year 5 and would be tested the following year. This could explain why the emphasis in Bridgeford and Newton Park was on levels and progress. The children were used to hearing their teachers reinforce expectations relating to levels and as a consequence levels had importance for them.

The points made so far are central to my argument regarding the link between grouping and inclusion and led to the development of analytical statement one (see Appendix R). Firstly, in Bridgeford and Newton Park the subjects of literacy and maths seem to have a raised importance when compared with other curriculum subjects. Evidence of their importance is transmitted through their dominant position within the timetable and the fact that they are the only subjects where set groups are used. Further to this, the key mechanism perceived to be used to allocate children to these groups is levelled information from tests. Therefore it could be argued that this test information is of high importance and is perceived to accurately reveal and describe ability in the view of the teachers. Acting on this information in order to create set groups transmits an understanding that children perceived to be working at different levels need responding to in different ways because they are perceived to have different academic characteristics. This would explain the reasons behind needing to teach them in separate groups. Children are also aware of the hierarchical nature of the groups and, as described in chapter 5, they use hierarchical vocabulary in order to differentiate between the groups.

The literature on the reasons for using set groups focuses on the fact that this structure enables individual needs to be met. In the research study conducted by Hallam et al. (2000), primary school teachers saw benefits to grouping by ability for a number of reasons. They thought that it narrowed the perceived range of ability within the classroom, helped class teaching become more focused, enabled them to meet the needs of the children by matching work more effectively and finally it allowed them to cater for all strengths and weaknesses. This would suggest that there is an understanding that teachers would need to recognise individual need. However, when consulting other studies such as Boaler et al. (2000), it was argued that the structure of ability groups sent a message to teachers about particular children and their perceived capabilities. Boaler's research draws attention to the fact that teachers are influenced by the label assigned to the group and as a consequence encourages them to alter their views about children and their potential. As a consequence it is not the children within the group that encourage teachers to use particular approaches; it is the position of that group in the hierarchy that influences teachers and their subsequent approaches (Blatchford et al., 1989;

Rist, 1970; Weinstein, 2002). The findings of Ireson and Hallam (2005), also reveal that the label given to the group leads teachers to make assumptions about the particular academic characteristics of the pupils within it. As a result the children in the top set are viewed in a very positive way and are seen as pupils that work hard, are interested in their work and as a consequence are successful. In contrast, children placed in the lower set are viewed in a much more negative way and seen as 'lacking in understanding', 'lazy' and having the potential to 'demonstrate poor behaviour'. MacQueen (2013), states that teachers view children allocated to the top set as being children who can 'work independently' and 'cope with challenging work'. However, the children who have been allocated to the lower set need 'repetition' and a 'slower pace of working'. My research study demonstrates that, in grouping children by ability in sets, these stereotypical views are not just developed in the minds of the teachers, they are also developed in the minds of the pupils. To be absolutely clear, it seems to be the structure of the set groups, their hierarchical nature and the names that they are given that triggers these stereotypical views and this led to the development of analytical statement seven (see Appendix R). Children, in this research study, adopted very specific vocabulary to describe the characteristics of members of each particular group. Therefore, similar to the response of teachers in the literature, children allocated to the top set were perceived by their peers as being 'smart', 'bright', 'brainy', 'advanced', 'confident' and 'strong'. The perception is that these characteristics enable them to 'work quickly', 'understand more', 'not need help' and be 'very similar to adults'. In contrast those children allocated to the bottom set are seen by their peers in other groups as having 'learning difficulties', 'struggling', 'not clever' and 'not confident'. This in turn means that they 'work slowly', 'need easier work', 'need help' and 'require extra time' to complete work (see page 203 as an example). This vocabulary, on many occasions seems not to be directed at particular children or based on any personal understanding or knowledge of the capabilities of specific children. It is vocabulary that is applied to the group as a whole, based on assumption and with no grounding in actual experience. The children who offer these opinions have not had the opportunity to work in literacy and maths with the children who their opinions relate to: this is because they are taught in separate groups. They can only presume what these perceived abilities and inabilities might be based on where these children are

located within the hierarchy. So, there seems to be a strong feeling that children in the top set are successful in literacy and maths, and children in the bottom set are unsuccessful. For children in the bottom set, this lack of success is compounded by the points made above related to the perceived importance of these two subjects when compared with other curriculum areas. In other words, teachers at Bridgeford and Newton Park project the importance of literacy and maths by placing them in a priority position in the timetable; by teaching these subjects every day; by organising the children into set groups in order to teach them more effectively and finally by describing ability in both these subjects as a single level which is then used to rank and compare children against others.

Therefore it can be seen how importance can be attached to teacher decisions that were perceived to be made in the creation of the set groups. For the most part, because these decisions had been made by teachers, there seemed to be a consensus that these decisions must be right. This feeling was apparent in the way that children seemed to look for evidence to justify why children were in a particular group. In a previous chapter I spoke about Lettie from Bridgeford (page 206) and Jacob from Newton Park (page 207) who were both examples of children allocated to the bottom set. Examples of their work were referred to by children in a higher group and mistakes and shortcomings were identified and used to justify why those two children were in the lower group. Wentzel and Wigfield (1998) state that students' views of their own academic competence is reinforced by their interactions with teachers and peers. In this study it seems that students' views of the academic competence of others is also reinforced by *watching* or *listening to* these interactions. In the case of Jacob from Newton Park (p197), the two girls who speak about him actually refer to specific actions of the teacher to justify in part their own opinions of Jacob. They state that "the teacher says that he has more work crossed out than he has actually written" when referring to the perceived shortcomings of Jacob's work. Although these points, related to how pupils seek justification for their views, are not evident in the literature there is evidence to suggest that teachers seek to reinforce decisions that they have made with regard to perceptions of ability. When looking at the research conducted by Campbell (2014) she noted that placement in a particular stream influenced how teachers viewed certain pupils. However, further to this, the placement of a particular pupil in a particular

stream influenced how the teacher assessed that pupil. The work level of those in the top stream was elevated and marked more generously than the work of those children in the bottom stream, where work was marked more harshly. This seems to create a parallel situation with the findings from my research. Just as teachers look to reinforce their decisions about the placement of certain children in certain groups; it could also be argued that children also seek to justify their particular opinions as well.

However, although children perceive that allocation to set groups is strongly related to their level in literacy and maths, there were also some issues that were raised by children and through field notes taken during the course of the research. All of these issues were seen only in Bridgeford. The first of these issues relates to the tension between the uses of test information to provide an understanding of ability. Both teachers and pupils were seen on a limited number of occasions to raise issues here. Davies et al. (2003) argues that test data alone can be unreliable when allocating children to sets. These authors believe that a range of supplementary data is needed to provide a broader picture. This suggests that ability can be measured accurately if there is enough evidence gathered from a range of sources. Ireson et al. (2002a) seem to recognise that this is much more of a complex issue and that it is difficult to equate achievement, attainment and potential. As previously mentioned, when teachers are given a set group, they respond to the label that has been assigned to the set group (Rubie-Davies et al. 2006; Weinstein, 2002). Many studies show that teachers view this set group as being homogenous and consequently they do not differentiate with tasks or resources (MacQueen, 2009; Coe et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2004). It is almost as though the response to differing needs has been achieved purely by the creation of the sets themselves. As such, the aim seems to be to maintain the perceived homogeneity of the group. Boaler et al. (2000) state that pupils in set groups are required to work at the same pace. Hall et al. (2004) seem to concur with view in arguing that when children are positioned in sets, they are given the same work and the same timeframe for completion. However, this sometimes causes problems. As Boaler (1997a) points out, the pace at which pupils work is not necessarily the same across all activities and on all days. She also highlights that teachers verbally reinforce the expectations of the set and this is often

related to pace of work. If differences appear in this seemingly homogenous group then this creates worries for teachers (Boaler, 1997a). In a previous chapter I described a conversation between teachers at a year group meeting relating to a child who was believed to have been incorrectly placed in a particular group (page 210). Her level indicated that she was correctly placed, however, she was struggling and teachers believed that she needed moving down. Interestingly, the conversation seemed to reveal the feeling from the teachers' perspective that the level awarded to the child could not give an incorrect representation of her ability. The level itself was evidence that she could cope within the group. The fact that she struggled meant that the child must have obtained the level in a dishonest manner: through cheating. There was obviously an expectation of what children in that set should be capable of achieving and this particular child was not meeting those expectations and therefore needed to move to another group where the expectations were different. Pelligrini and Blatchford (2000), state that teacher expectations are powerful in creating a self-fulfilling prophecy with regard to student outcomes. In the context of this research, it seems that these expectations related to the capabilities children in certain sets even causes them to disbelieve test data if the child does not demonstrate the expected traits. In addition to this, when speaking to some children about being moved to a different set group, some children seemed bemused about why. Ruth, when moved out of top set literacy, seemed to project the opinion that the teacher must have made the right decision but she was not sure what this decision was based on. Ruth may have thought that she was progressing well but the teacher had an alternative understanding that was not apparent to Ruth (page 210).

Children, perceive that levels scored in tests are a dominant influence on allocation to a particular set group. Through conversations between themselves it emerges that some children in lower sets have scored more highly than those in higher sets (see the example of Patsy on page 153). This seems to indicate a number of important points related to the link between sets and levels. Firstly that there seems to be an overlap in the performance of children in different sets suggesting that there could be little or no difference in the skills of some children allocated to different set groups. This is also the view of Ireson et al. (2002). Also, it could be argued that different tests covering different subject

matter could reveal different results, therefore enabling some children located in a lower set to achieve more highly than expected. Ireson and Hallam (1999) question the use of test information and its reliability. However, the point that I am making here is not that teachers should adopt a more accurate method of allocating children to sets or, incidentally, that the boundaries between set groups should be broadened to accommodate these anomalies. Rather, I am highlighting the issue that many children perceive that there are marked differences in ability between the set groups. In their opinion, set groups exist to accommodate these differences. In the conversation above it becomes apparent that there are not clear boundaries and differences to warrant the separation of children into these groups. In addition to this, two children discuss the fact that there is obviously some specific aptitude or skill related to doing well in tests (see page 153). This is not necessarily related to ability and not necessarily related to the skills needed to achieve within normal day to day lessons. This further highlights the questionable use of tests and levels to indicate or describe ability.

Therefore central to my argument is the understanding that Bridgeford and Newton Park have set grouping structures and the allocation of children to these groups is based on teachers perceptions of ability based on very narrow criteria. The decisions, as perceived by the children, essentially relate to levels and sub-levels. As a result of their allocation to these sets, children have no opportunity to work with certain children for literacy and maths and therefore, as explained earlier, they seem to categorise, label and judge the capabilities of other children based on the set group that they are in. This in turn seems to influence who they believe that they could work with, or would want to work with but these opinions are not based on their actual experiences. This understanding demonstrates the impact that set grouping has on inclusion within these two settings as children seem to be valued less as potential work partners if they are in lower set groups. In some instances, the opinion is that they could actually hinder the progress of others in literacy and maths if these subjects were taught in mixed groups.

To illustrate how children have been influenced by teacher practices related to ability grouping I am going to present two views of Mela from Bridgeford: one where the perception is that she is academically competent and one where the

perception is of academic incompetence. These views are both put forward by the same members of her class group: arguably children who know her well because they have been in the same class group for four years. However, the children who present these views are not in the same literacy and maths set as Mela. Therefore their view of Mela's ability in these subjects is based on supposition related to the set group that she is in. They have no direct experience to underpin these views. In the first example, which was described on page 204 and based on notions of academic incompetence, two top set girls discuss how their ability in literacy far exceeds Mela's. Not only would she have limited understanding of the work that they complete with relative ease: she would have no understanding. Mela is quite happy to accept this view and the reason for this could be related to the fact that she also has no direct experience of what it is like to be in top set literacy. She is possibly relying on the generic view of the type of pupil that would be allocated to this set. However in a later conversation with this same focus group a totally different view of Mela emerges from one of the girls who had been part of the previous conversation. This view is rooted in her direct experience of a science lesson where she has struggled and Mela has been successful.

Mela – and then I came up with an idea and everyone said oh no that won't work and then we did another idea and then we tried the idea and it worked…..it worked (B FG2 6A).

It is important to mention at this point that during the afternoons for all the other curriculum subjects, the children sit in mixed ability table groups. That is to say that there are representatives from two if not three of the ability groups on each table. It is important also to note that it was revealed through conversations with the children that they are aware of who is which group. So it can be seen from the extract during the science lesson that everybody struggled. Mela, and everyone else on the table (including the children in the top set) admit this. Mela's suggestion was initially ignored on the basis that nobody thought that it would work. The reason for this possibly rests in the children's perceptions of Mela because she is located in a lower set group for literacy and maths. Possibly their reaction is similar to the reactions to Lettie and Jacob above, where children look for opportunities to reinforce their opinions of other children who they perceive as being different because they are in a different set group. However, they now have a new and alternative experience of Mela just as she

has an alternative experience of them. Mela has seen that children who were initially assumed to have higher level skills, never struggle and always get things right, do struggle at certain points and do not always get things right. Similarly, she has demonstrated that she does not always struggle and that she has skills and opinions that are of value to the group.

8.2 The context of River Close

This chapter will now explore how the particular context of River Close presents a different perspective related to inclusion even though children perceived their 'Homebase' to be linked to notions of ability (namely their guided reading group and their ability in maths). Children at River Close discussed ability using similar terminology to that used at Bridgeford and Newton Park. They talked about children who were considered 'smart and brainy' and identified children who they thought struggled. They underpinned this with an understanding that the location of a child's desk in the classroom was a significant indicator of ability. However, although this understanding seemed to mirror the opinions gained from children in the other two schools, there was actually a marked difference in the way that the children in River Close viewed each other as a result. The key arguments related to set grouping were: the narrow National Curriculum level criteria that are used to allocate children to groups; the generic and often inaccurate view of ability that children developed as a result of being separated into different classes for literacy and maths and the development of an understanding that some children would not be suitable work partners because of their perceived ability. In addition to this, I argued that the priority position of literacy and maths in the timetable transmitted a message that these two subjects might be viewed as being more important and therefore success in these areas might be considered more important.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, River Close had a very different philosophy which influenced the way that they organised the curriculum. A marked difference was the fact that there was no timetable and it was very rare to see discrete subjects being taught. As a consequence, the issue of prioritising the importance of some subjects over others did not arise because

the majority of activities had strong cross curricular links. In addition to this, a variety of activities were going on in the classroom, or in other areas around the school, at any one time.

Children were given an overview of tasks that they needed to engage in but they had freedom to choose when they approached these different activities. Very often these tasks were ongoing over a number of days and weeks. It was not even the case that literacy or maths took place each day. These points are very important considering my previous arguments relating to teacher decisions about grouping. When literacy and maths dominate the timetable it could be argued that they develop a level of perceived importance which can marginalise children who are seen as being less successful in these areas. Hall et al. (2004) also state that in their study related to Year 6 pupils, they found that the curriculum was narrowed to prioritise literacy and maths because those are the subjects that are setted and tested. They believed that this had the resulting impact of marginalising the other subjects because of their inferior position in the timetable. In the context of River Close and its integrated and connected curriculum, the precise boundaries between subject areas become blurred. As a consequence, it could be argued that success or lack of success becomes linked to the activity rather than the subject area. This has a very different impact on inclusion because if a child experiences lack of success on one particular activity, competence can arguably be restored in a subsequent activity. This is a very different circumstance from lack of competence being viewed across a whole subject area and related to something deficient in the child. In addition to this, because a variety of activities take place at all points in the day, no particular subject dominates the curriculum or seems to have a greater level of importance. In this context, a broader range of talents and capabilities across a range of subjects are recognised as being important. This is in contrast to Bridgeford and Newton Park, where it was argued that proficiency in literacy and maths appeared to be valued above proficiency in other subjects. This seems closely aligned with the argument of Fraser (2012) who discusses affirmative and transformative strategies to correct inequitable outcomes. In the context of Bridgeford and Newton Park, affirmative strategies are used to respond to perceived differences in ability. Literacy and maths are taught as discrete subjects in ability groups and the groups exist to

accommodate and respond to variations in perceived ability. The strategies used in River Close, however, seem to mirror transformative strategies which reduce perceptions of difference. Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) discuss unidimensional classrooms as ones which draw attention to a hierarchy of perceived ability. They state that the more this hierarchy is reinforced through grouping patterns and performance evaluations, the higher the consensus of opinion about ability (ibid.). Boaler and Staples (2008) also talk about uni-dimensional classrooms and state that these narrow success in very narrow ways and as a consequence a hierarchy of competence is established. This seems to be the situation in Bridgeford and Newton Park. In allocating children to ability groups using an arguably narrow set of criteria, and by implicitly and explicitly drawing attention to level related expectations, children have very little opportunity to demonstrate wider competencies.

A second impact on inclusion was the fact that although children spoke about their perceptions of ability, this seemed to be based much more realistically on what they had observed in the classroom or experienced directly by working with a range of other children through collaborative activities. As argued earlier, the children at Bridgeford and Newton Park did not have opportunities to work with a range of other children for literacy and maths. Therefore for these subjects they attached characteristics to children working in other sets that were based purely on assumption and linked to their understanding of what the labels assigned to the set groups might mean. Therefore at River Close just because someone was considered 'brainy' or 'smart' it didn't mean that they always got everything right.

In Bridgeford and Newton Park, children also perceive that behaviour and working relationships are important factors in the decision making process when allocating them to groups. In River Close, they seem less dominant from a group allocation perspective, but they are certainly factors that children perceive that the teacher looks for when they had opportunities to work with others of their choice. Good behaviour and positive working relationships were factors which many authors state are important when allocating children to groups (Hallam et al., 2004; Kutnick et al., 2006). These factors seem to be generic to all grouping practices regardless of whether the emphasis is on ability or mixed ability grouping. However, teachers who use mixed ability grouping seem to

have very different reasons for focusing on these factors than teachers who use ability grouping. The literature on ability grouping seems to infer that teachers use the structure of the separate groups in order to split up pupils who have the potential to cause problems if placed in a group together (Blatchford et al. 2008; Ireson et al.2002a; MacQueen, 2013). However, teachers who use mixed ability groups seem to want to develop the capacity of the children in the class to develop good working relationships and good behaviour (Davies et al., 2003; Hallam et al., 2000). The following section will focus on Bridgeford and Newton Park because of the fact that children perceive that behaviour and working relationships are integral to the grouping decisions that teachers make. This section will begin by looking at grouping decisions based on working relationships and the impact that this has on inclusion, before moving on to looking at grouping decisions based on behaviour and the impact that this has on inclusion.

It is important to note that decisions related to ability in literacy and maths seem to have a greater dominance in Bridgeford and Newton Park. This is evident in the fact that perceptions of ability is the first layer in the decision making process. Children are allocated to set groups before any decisions are made regarding seating within those groups. However, for other curriculum areas, which are taught within the registration groups, decisions related to behaviour and working relationships are dominant.

8.3 Grouping decisions based on working relationships

In both Bridgeford and Newton Park children perceived that teachers made decisions based on a need to create groups that would be able to concentrate and work well together. Many strategies were used by teachers to help achieve good working relationships and these have been described in detail in a previous chapter (see pages 158 - 163) and also were integral in the development of analytical statement three (see Appendix R). However, as mentioned previously, there are decisions that are made in the set group and decisions that are made in the class group. Interestingly, when children spoke about their experiences of being allocated to table groups in maths, literacy and class there was no particular pattern to suggest that one of these groupings was always more successful than another (see Appendix O). The evidence collected

from individual interviews suggested that children experienced a range of feelings related to their groupings: sometimes positive, sometimes negative and sometimes a mixture of both. However, there was a strong feeling in all conversations with children that teachers aimed to create groups that worked well together. This message seemed to be transmitted through the recognition that when relationships on a table visibly or audibly deteriorated the teacher made changes or reorganised the group to re-establish good working relationships. In addition to this, many children spoke about being able to choose one friend to sit with on the table even though the rest of the table occupants were based on teacher choice. Also, some children said that teachers listened to their views and made alterations to groups if children expressed that they were experiencing problems. There are many examples of these occurrences happening in both Bridgeford and Newton Park. This would indicate that teachers want pupils to have positive experiences within their groups and so they make adjustments to some table groups in order to achieve this.

As mentioned in the previous section, teachers aim to create groups which will be able to work positively together and also demonstrate good behaviour. When looking at the literature regarding peer relationships and ability grouping most of the evidence relates to negative issues and the problems experienced by different groups of pupils. Some authors found evidence to suggest that the children in the lower groups were stigmatised (Hallam et al., 2004a; Boaler, 1997a). Some authors found that children in top sets and lower sets were teased (Hallam et al., 2004a; Hallam and Ireson, 2003). Some pupils felt that when they were in sets they no longer had the opportunity to work with friends (Hallam et al., 2004a) and because of the fact that friendship groups were split up, they no longer had opportunities to benefit from peer support (Hallam and Ireson, 2006). However, the findings from this research present a much more positive view of peer relationships when children are placed in ability groups. In fact, some of the benefits seem to mirror the literature on relationships in mixed ability groups and this realisation led to the development of analytical statement five (see Appendix R). Hallam et al. (2004a) state that pupils like mixed ability groups because they can help each other and also because they can work with pupils that they would not normally have the opportunity to work with. Pupils felt

that they could extend their social circle and also had the opportunity to work with friends (Hallam and Ireson, 2006). Boaler and Staples (2008) state that children working in mixed ability groups show concern, not only for their own learning, but for the learning of others. The benefits that children received in my research study, when good working relationships were established related to high levels of practical and emotional support. Children felt that they could ask members of their group for help if they were struggling or lacked understanding. This help was given willingly and there was a certain level of intuition which meant that the 'right kind of help' was given. Rather than another child just telling them the answer, they received a deeper level of support which involved explanation and questioning and allowed the child to find their own way to an effective solution. Sometimes members of the group would be able to anticipate when help was needed and proactively give advice and guidance. This generally resulted in children feeling much more positive about the subject as well as about the grouping itself. This finding concurs with the views of Wentzel and Watkins (2002); Wentzel (2009) and Wentzel et al. (2010). Finally, the children who worked effectively together seemed to be able to create an atmosphere conducive to work but also one where talk and other forms of interaction were valued. Sometimes children attributed the success of groups to the fact that they happened to be working with friends but on many occasions the other members of the group were not part of the friendship group but provided similar support structures. Zajac and Hartup (1997) discuss the fact that friends often work well together due to the closer relationship which engenders a deeper level of understanding and this concurs with the views of many children in this study. In addition to this, they also note that looser positive relationships are better than neutral or negative relationships. In saying this, they seem to infer that these other positive relationships do not lead to the same outcomes as a friends working together. This study seems to reveal that these looser positive relationships can have the same outcomes as friends working together.

The structures of ability groups have the propensity to divide friendships. As mentioned in chapter 6, children's friendships tend to be drawn from the class group and have been established early on in their school life. Set groups draw children from a mixture of classes and therefore some children are in groups

where they have no opportunity to work with friends or, due to teacher decisions, they are seated on tables where they have no friends. However, this does not always mean that children find themselves having to cope with poor working relationships in their set group and this realisation has important implications for inclusion.

There were children, however, who did record exclusively negative feelings about one or more of their groupings. Hallam et al. (2004a) note that some groups are dysfunctional and children in these groups cannot work together. With this in mind, together with the understanding that teachers make adjustments to groups when they are aware of problems, it becomes apparent that on these occasions teachers might be unaware of issues that children are experiencing. When children elaborated on reasons for their negative feelings it became clear that some of these circumstances would not easily be identified by the teacher. Children spoke of there being a lack of support manifested in peers being unwilling to help or actively refusing or ignoring requests for help. These situations sometimes arose because certain children found themselves on tables with established work partners or perhaps they were the only one from their class on the table and were therefore seen as being unfamiliar. The allocation to a particular set group saw children trying to gravitate towards children from their own class but sitting with them was not always possible due to the particular intentions of the teacher. Some children had no partner sitting next to them therefore lack of interaction created a problem. Conversely, some children felt that there was too much interaction on some tables and this hindered their concentration and ability to work. However, the most complex and difficult situations arose when children experienced situations of rejection, meanness and aggression which was subtle enough for teachers to be unaware and therefore these situations continued on a daily basis (see Appendix K) and this realisation was important in the development of analytical statement six (see Appendix R).

8.4 Grouping decisions based on behaviour

A further consideration that children perceived was important when teachers made decisions about grouping, was behaviour. In Bridgeford and Newton Park, children revealed that teachers moved poorly behaved children to the front of

the classroom so that they could be monitored more effectively. This concurs with the views of Irson et al., (2002a) and Kutnick et al. (2006) who state that teachers intervene in group choices and move pupils if misbehaviour occurs. However, in my research study, this movement of children created conflict in the minds of some children because it was also the feeling that children who struggled and needed support also sat close to the front of the classroom. There was, however, one classroom in Bridgeford where teacher practices related to grouping and behaviour which seemed to strongly influence children's feelings about each other and who they would and would not want to work with given the choice. This particular classroom was distinctive because it was the only one where every table group was ordered alternate girl/boy. Hallam et al. (2004a) note that this is a strategy that teachers use to moderate behaviour because boys were considered silly and girls were sensible. Many children from this class during focus group interviews elaborated on the reasons behind the grouping structure and it became apparent that it was based on perceptions of behaviour. A picture emerged where very negative views were attached to boys and their behaviour. The negative perceptions tend to generated by the class teacher in the way that she dealt with a small number of boys – namely Ray, Robert and Alistair (see page 160)

Children at River Close did not perceive that their teacher used notions of good working relationships or behaviour in order to allocate them to groups. This could be explained through the understanding that the grouping structure at River Close was flexible as opposed to static. In Bridgeford and Newton Park, the grouping structures were relatively static and it certainly seemed that the intention was that they should have longevity. When changes were made, it was because circumstances had altered in order to force change. These circumstances could relate to a change in a child's perceived ability causing a move to a different set group or it could be a move in the classroom because of poor working relationships or poor behaviour. However, children at River Close frequently left their 'Homebase' seats and worked in groups of their choice, even though these choices had to be approved by the teacher. The criteria that they used to make these choices seemed to be based on: the sort of activity they were engaged in; who they wanted to work with and who they thought they could work with. In a previous chapter, I gave the example of Sean who

sometimes chose to work with friends, sometimes chose to work with his 'homebase' group and sometimes chose to work on his own (see page 174 and page 190). These decisions were available for him to make and he demonstrated that he was using his knowledge of the attributes of the class to arrive at his decision. Sometimes he needed support, sometimes he needed quiet to work on his own, and sometimes he needed a lively talkative environment. In other words, he had different requirements for different activities. This is an important consideration when considering children's feelings towards their table groups in Bridgeford and Newton Park. Regardless of the activity, the group remains static. It could be argued that increasing group flexibility could minimise some of the negative comments that children made. These issues began to be explored when children spoke about their 'ideal group'. It was evident in this context that children were using experiences of working with children previously in order to inform their decisions for the ideal group (page 173).

This is not to say that I am suggesting that the flexible grouping strategies used at River Close should be seen in preference to the strategies used at the other two schools. Rather that there are elements of these practices which might provide alternative solutions. When observing these flexible grouping situations it was possible to see how some children were marginalised in this context also. In a previous chapter I spoke about Joe who was frequently on the periphery with children refusing to work with him (page 199). There were also occasions when children reacted in a negative way when the teacher insisted he work with a particular group. At these times other children made it very clear through their body language that they did not want to work with him. So, it can be seen that issues to do with grouping are complex as are the implications that are then presented related to inclusion.

I started this chapter by discussing the impact of set grouping on inclusion. There are several key points here. Firstly, children seem to attach importance to the National Curriculum level criteria that is perceived to be used to create the groups. It seems that its significance rests in the fact that it highlights who can and cannot be taught together. Ultimately it is the information that is used to separate children into hierarchical teaching groups. Children have no way of knowing what goes on in any other group but their own. As a consequence they

seem to focus on the fact that there must be significant differences between the capabilities of children in these groups otherwise there would be no need to have them. Generic views are then developed to describe the possible abilities or inabilities of children in each of the groups. Depending which set they are in, children develop particular views about themselves and these views act as a comparator which assists them in forming views about members of their peer group.

Secondly, because of the logistics of running the set group system, literacy and maths inevitably end up being taught in the morning. However, this is arguably a priority timetable slot so the profiles of literacy and maths are raised when compared with other curriculum subjects. This fact, together with the recognition that they are the only subjects to be tested and the only ones that are taught as set groups, seems to raise their importance considerably. It could be argued that their importance means that they are more highly valued by the school. Children who are successful and achieve highly in these areas could also feel that they are more valued by the school as a whole. The opposite would be true of the children who were less successful.

Finally in River Close, the curriculum is flexible and no particular subject dominates the timetable or seems to have a greater level of importance. Because of the cross-curricular approach, the precise boundaries between subjects are blurred and therefore success or failure is linked to the activity rather than the subject. Grouping is also flexible and children have the opportunity to work with different people, in different places based on their particular requirements for the task.

In chapter two, I described the findings of Hargreaves (1967) and his longitudinal study of an inner city school and the effects of streaming. Bigler et al. (1997) also looked at teacher effect in forming and sustaining intergroup attitudes in children. These researchers found that when more attention is drawn to differences between groups in overt ways, the more it affects children's attitudes to their own group and the group perceived as being different. Just as in the case of Hargreaves' study, Hallinan and Sorensen (1985) found that ability grouping lead to stratified relationship patterns and their explanation for this was the fact that academic achievement is a personal

characteristic. In assigning pupils to groups, teachers are highlighting similarities which could lead to potential friendships. Hallinan and Smith (1989) found that changes in friendship pattern mirror changes in grouping structure that occurred as a result of changes in test score. This study reveals new and different understanding. The evidence from this research suggests that the more visible and formal the method of differentiation, the more meaning children attach to it and the greater the negative impact it seems to have on inclusion. In this context differentiation can be seen as ability grouping in sets, ability based classroom grouping and the use of strategies such as children being allocated different work or being seen to require the support of a Teaching Assistant. These are all differentiating behaviours that teachers use and my central argument is that the extent to which they are used, impacts on the level of importance that children attach to them.

In the context of Bridgeford and Newton Park, all these methods of differentiation are used in a formal and structured way and are overt and visible to the children. The fact that teachers seem to attach importance and meaning to these methods has the consequence that children also attach importance and meaning to them. This in turn has an impact on peer relationships from an academic perspective because, for some children, it influences who they feel they can and cannot work with. Unlike the study conducted by Hughs and Zhang (2007) these thoughts and feelings are not connected with any actual experience of working with these children. This is because the set grouping structure separates children based on perceived ability and children can only presume what the abilities or inabilities of certain children are based on the set group to which they are allocated. However, even though set grouping seems to influence peer relationships from an academic perspective this study does not indicate that it has any impact on the friendship groups and this key finding was central to analytical statement four (see Appendix R). Children still have friends from different ability groups.

River Close also adopts all except one of the methods of differentiation mentioned earlier. The only difference is seemingly the absence of sets. However, although there are ability based 'homebase' groups and two levels of differentiation in maths – green circle and blue square – these structures are less visible on a day to day basis. As a consequence, although children are

aware of them, they do not seem to influence who they believe they can and cannot work with. They have other experiences of working with a range of children which seem to balance and challenge these opinions. Corcoran and Silander (2009) argue that this flexible approach to team learning generates an ability within children to be much more accepting of difference. This view seems also to concur with McGrath and Noble (2007) who state that children's reliance on a stereotypical view of difference is diminished or lost altogether if children have the opportunity to get to know each other more. This in turn makes them more accepting and accommodating of difference. In the context of this study, it seems that these stereotypical views about other children are generated and perpetuated by the way teachers choose to group children and how they respond to children in those groups. The difference between River Close and the other two schools is the fact that children at River Close have more opportunities away from the confines of ability based groupings in order to gain a much more balanced understanding of the capabilities of others.

Chapter 9 – Conclusion

This study sought to understand the impact of pupil grouping on peer relationships and the possible implications for inclusion. Through the year spent in the three primary schools and the use of sociometric measures, interviews with and observations of the children, I was able to gain insight related to my three research questions:

- What are children's perceptions of the decisions behind certain grouping arrangements?
- What understanding can we gain from children about the importance of friendship in relation to pupil grouping arrangements?
- What impact does pupil grouping appear to have on inclusion?

Previous studies on ability grouping and its impact on children have raised a number of issues. Some authors focus on teacher perception and state that the practice of ability grouping originates from the belief that children have relatively fixed levels of ability and need to be taught accordingly (Boaler et al., 2000; Hart, 1998; Hart et al. 2004). They also state that, once created, ability groups are relatively inflexible (Davies et al., 2003; Ireson et al. 2002). This is to say that there is very little movement of children from one group to another based on present performance. As such, children, once they have been allocated to a group seem to reflect the characteristics of the group label because the teachers react differently depending on the label assigned to the group (Ireson and Hallam, 1999; Slavin, 1987; Boaler et al. 2000). The different responses engendered by the group label demonstrate that pupils are stereotyped by teachers based on typical characteristics (Ireson and Hallam, 1999; Macqueen, 2013). Children in top sets have access to more complex material, delivered by better qualified teachers who have high expectations (Wiliams and Bartholomew, 2004). Conversely, children in lower sets are taught by less well qualified teachers who have low expectations and deliver material in a slow and repetitive manner (Clark and Clark, 2008; Slavin, 1987). As a result of these responses by teachers, placement in a particular set group becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as success and failure within the groups are based on teacher expectation. Children in different sets have different educational experiences because teachers act as 'gatekeepers'. Different work at different

levels is covered in different sets and as a consequence a ceiling is placed on children's potential, perpetuating their position in the group (Bartlett and Burton, 2007; Dupriez, 2010; Ireson et al., 2002). Ultimately, teacher expectation is reinforced in pupil expectation which results in many children allocated to the lower set developing negative attitudes towards school (Ireson and Hallam, 2005) and feeling less valued by teachers (Hall et al., 2004). Both of these consequences have a detrimental effect on lifelong learning (Ireson and Hallam, 1999). So, it can be seen that ability grouping has an effect on the way teachers respond to pupils, the way pupils view themselves and the extent to which pupils feel valued by the school. Ability grouping draws attention to perceived differences between children (Meijnen and Guldermond, 2002) and children are aware of the hierarchy of ability and their place in that hierarchy (Hall et al., 2004; Messiou, 2012).

9.1 – The factors that make this research distinctive

This research study is distinctive both in its design and also its findings. Firstly the research design will be explored before moving on to looking at the findings and what they add to the existing body of literature.

When consulting the literature on ability grouping it was seen to have many negative academic and social outcomes for children but, although there are studies which look into how children, particularly in the lower groups, are viewed by their peers, there are no studies which track its influence on friendship groups and children's peer relationships.

In many of the research designs which access the views of pupils to gain an understanding of ability grouping the approaches are quantitative. Questionnaires are used to gain information from a large number of sources and the focus is on secondary school pupils (Hallam and Deathe, 2002; Hallam et al., 2008; Ireson and Hallam, 2009). However, some studies, which also focus on secondary aged pupils, use a qualitative design (Boaler et al., 2000; Boaler, 1997b). In these studies it is possible to identify the 'voice' of the child through the use of quotations. There are also a smaller number of studies focused on primary aged pupils (Davies et al., 2003; Marks, 2014; Hall et al., 2004). The studies which seem to have the most resonance with my own work

are Marks (2014) and Hall et al. (2004). Both of these studies have made use of a range of methods in their research design. Hall et al. (2004) used interviews, observations and documentary data in two primary schools and the research design was qualitative. The focus was on Year 6 and how an emphasis on SATs could create tensions in relation to inclusion. Marks (2014) used a case study methodology to explore the experiences of the pupils and teachers in Year six maths groups in one school. Her focus though was on the lower set and she used a mixed methods approach to gather and analyse data. My study is similar to Marks (2014) because of the use of a case study methodology and the range of tools for data collection. It is also similar to Hall et al. (2004) who use the findings from the study to make links with inclusion. However, it differs from Marks (2014) because the focus is on all ability groups rather than just the lower set. It also investigates the practice of grouping in three schools who adopt different approaches and it has a particular focus on participative methods to elicit the views of the children.

The findings from this research study are distinctive because they provide a new understanding related to how children interpret teacher decisions related to grouping and consequently how grouping impacts on inclusion. This study reveals how children's perceptions of the practices adopted by teachers when allocating them to groups can also influence how children view each other. In the context of Bridgeford and Newton Park where the ability grouping structures were very formal, structured, overt and visible, children attached greater importance to them. This resulted in children developing very stereotypical views about other children in their year group and the perceived ability of those children. These views seemed to be based on the allocation of those children to a particular set group and also seemed to impact on who children believed did not have value as a work partner. However, in the context of River Close, where the grouping structures were much less formal and overt, the children seemed to develop much more realistic views about the perceived abilities of their classmates and did not seem to make decisions about who they could and couldn't work with based on perceived ability.

I mentioned in chapter three that it is possible to make some tentative generalisations based on case study research, which could be applied to other contexts. Bassey (1999) refers to these as 'fuzzy' generalisations. "A fuzzy

generalisation carries an element of uncertainty. It reports that something has happened in one place and that it may also happen elsewhere" (Bassey, 1999:52). Fuzzy generalisations are typified by phrases such as 'maybe', 'may', 'is likely that' 'could' or 'seems'.

Based on the findings from this research, eight 'fuzzy' generalisations are proposed which are aligned with the eight key analytical statements in Appendix R:

1. It seems likely that when schools choose to adopt more visible, formal and multi-layered methods of ability grouping and differentiation, the more importance children seem to attach to these groupings.
2. It seems likely that when schools choose to allocate children to set groups, these children may be given fewer opportunities to make decisions about their groupings.
3. Regardless of whether or not schools choose to group by ability, it seems likely that children believe that good working relationships are important in their groups and they perceive that teachers also see good working relationships as being important.
4. If schools choose to group children based on perceptions of their ability, this may have an influence on peer relationships from an academic and social perspective in the classroom but does not seem to impact on existing friendship groups.
5. When schools allocate children to set groups, the members of the wider peer group, who children come into contact with in these groups, may display similar positive characteristics with regard to working relationships as friends are perceived to do.
6. It seems likely that teachers need to be aware that some negative peer relationships, which act to hinder working relationships, may not be able to be identified through observation alone.
7. When schools choose to group children based on perceptions of their ability, stereotypical views that children hold about other children may be generated and perpetuated.
8. It seems likely that if schools choose to use overt and visible methods of differentiation, this may impact on the way children's perceived abilities are viewed by their peers.

These tentative generalisations indicate where a contribution has been made to the existing body of literature but also they provide opportunities to consider some implications for classroom practice.

9.2 Implications for practice

The findings from this research study highlight the importance of engaging with children in a meaningful way in order to evaluate the impact of school policy and organisational structures such as grouping. It was evident that the children had developed very clear ideas about why they were grouped in particular ways and realised that decisions made on their behalf were intended to provide them with work-partners who they could work effectively with. They realised that teachers would act quickly if they were aware of problematic groupings and they drew attention to evidence that the teacher might look for such as excessive talking. However, there were occasions when children expressed negative feelings for their group but the ways in they exhibited their negative feelings would not have been evident to the teacher (see Appendix K). As such, opportunities need to be made available for pupils to feel comfortable revealing these hidden feelings. The Manchester Inclusion Standard Pupil Voice Toolkit (Moore et al., 2004), which I referred to in chapter three in relation to the sociometric measures, also suggests activities which would enable teachers to discover opinions of the class related to grouping or other matters. One such activity is called 'Message in a Bottle' and this enables children to make the teacher aware of their worries and concerns on a message which is only read by the teacher and is not available for all the class to see.

However, there are two other important considerations that need exploring in relation to working relationships within group situations.

Firstly, the ways in which the children are expected to work in Bridgeford and in Newton Park is very different to the ways in which children are expected to work in River Close. The table groups in Bridgeford and Newton Park, to a very large extent, are expected to have longevity. As such, once children have chosen a

seat, or have been allocated a seat, the grouping remains static until other factors cause it to change. The factors that cause the groupings to change seem to be related to the teacher identifying a breakdown in relationships or identifying that the child needs to be moved up or down in the perceived ability hierarchy. Therefore when turbulence occurs, the response is to alter the arrangement. Delia talks about the many moves that Jacob has had:

Delia - but because Jacob is silly, he has moved from there to there to here and then back to here (NP FG2).

In chapter five, several children spoke about talking as being something that might lead to a change of group. The groups that stayed together seemed to know how to moderate their levels of talking so that the teacher did not believe it to be excessive. It seems as though talking is seen to be disruptive and therefore action needs to be taken. There did not seem to be a recognition that talking could be seen as a necessary part of group work and therefore certain opportunities to talk were important. Baines et al. (2015:15) noted that "within the majority of primary classrooms, children sit *in* groups, but rarely work together *as* groups". As part of the SPRinG project (Social Pedagogic Research into Group Work) these authors developed specific and practical guidance to assist teachers to embed productive group work within real classroom contexts. This would suggest that group work needs teaching; it isn't a process that would evolve naturally. Therefore teachers need guidance to initiate it and children need support in developing their skills in working in this way. Some of the worries expressed by teachers related to the fact that there was a period of turbulence before children settled into this new way of working. These points of turbulence seem to be triggers for 'giving up' on group work or, as demonstrated in Bridgeford and Newton Park, changing the groups. Perhaps children need guidance and a period of adjustment to align themselves with the new expectations. Baines et al. (2015:25) noted that

> Teachers reported that if they held firm and continued to
> support children to resolve their differences themselves,
> through reflection, then such squabbles would quickly ease
> and productive group interactions would quickly follow.

Secondly, but related to the points made above, River Close adopted a very flexible grouping system. Children explained how they were able to choose who to work with, where to work in the classroom or where to work outside the classroom. River Close seems to have a commitment to collaborative working and tasks are frequently presented in such a way that encourages children to work together. The children seem to have developed many skills related to working together but that doesn't necessarily mean that conflict does not occur. The short extract below demonstrates that children to not always work well as a group

Joe – basically Millicent's the annoying one who doesn't really do any work and when she gets fed up she just says 'no I'm not doing it.

Baines et al. (2009), draw attention to a process known as 'group blocking' whereby a pupil might hinder the progress of others on the table by being disruptive in a verbal or physical way. It is at this point that children begin to develop skills of negotiation to hopefully restore positive group relations. However, it is important to note that the teacher in River Close sees the benefit in group work and does not use these confrontations as a reason for stopping. The flexible grouping system allows pupils to make their own decisions as to whether they wish to work alone or with others. In fact some children move during a particular task. The opportunity to make decisions about where best to learn and who best to learn with, seems to develop skills of independence and responsibility and releases the teacher from organising and controlling every aspect of the learning space. Children in Newton Park provided a suggestion to incorporate some flexibility into the grouping system and allow some input from the children as well:

Susan – well I was thinking that it would be a sensible idea, that in the classroom you could have a seat request, like who you would like to sit next to and then in each month the teacher could check the box and then they could try out the places that they would like to sit near.

Kelly – on the wall you could have a diagram like this and you could have spaces and boxes and you could put your name where you wanted to put it (NP FG2).

This very simple idea would provide the children with some opportunity to work with other children on a more flexible basis. However, as seen in River Close, it could not be seen as a strategy for eradicating all conflict. The role of the

teacher in providing guidance for working relationships and the understanding on behalf of the children that they all have a responsibility to establish and reinforce positive ways of working together seems to be the most effective option.

A further consideration for practice is related to the structures of ability grouping and the implications for peer relationships and inclusion that have been detailed in this thesis. These structures seem to highlight difference in a negative way and lead some children to believe that other children have nothing of value to offer in a working relationship. The literature reveals some information related to the positive effects of ability grouping. Some authors state that it has a small positive impact on attainment for some children, particularly those in the higher ability groups (Hallam and Ireson, 2003; Wiliam and Bartholomew, 2004). In addition to this, ability grouping is seen as helpful when responding to the individual learning requirements of all children and allows adult support to be targeted more effectively (Hallam and Ireson, 2003; Hallam et al., 2000). However, the disadvantages seem to dominate the literature and some of these arguments contradict what are perceived to be advantages. This research study has revealed new understanding related to the damaging effects of ability grouping on how certain groups of children are regarded by their peer group. The layers and complexity of differentiation when children are allocated to ability groups can be seen very clearly and this in turn has an influence in the way that some children view others. The ability group is one layer, but in addition to this is the way that children are grouped within classrooms, where they are positioned in the classroom and the location and proximity of teaching assistants to them: these factors all provide clues about perceived ability. Hargreaves (1967:171) states that

> The barriers existing between the upper and lower halves
>
> reinforce the perceived differences and elevate them into
>
> irreconcilable and totally opposed stereotypes.

This statement is actually related to the structure of streaming but the essence of it is apparent in the reactions of children in my research study. These barriers that Hargreaves (1967) speaks about seem to be communication and interaction barriers. If children do not have the opportunity to work with each other then they cannot hope to understand what strengths other children may

have. As a result of the findings in the literature and the findings of this research, I would suggest that the equitable benefits of mixed ability teaching could be considered in preference to ability groups.

Teaching Assistants also act to highlight difference and perceived lack of ability. Children in Bridgeford and Newton Park commented on the location of TAs and put forward interpretations related to the reasons for needing to sit with a TA. Many commented that the TA works with certain pupils and the teacher does not venture in this area. This concurs with the findings of Blatchford et al. (2012:31), who states that the benefits from the perspective of the teacher seems to be the availability of TAs for

> taking on particular pupils, and therefore allowing
>
> individualisation and differentiation, while the teacher
>
> can then spend more time with the rest of the class
>
> and devote more time to teaching.

The TAs were clearly allocated to the bottom set and this seemed to be a strategic move on behalf of the school to target support more effectively. In a conversation with the SENCo at Bridgeford she revealed this same understanding:

3/12/12 – there are tensions between the SENCo and the maths coordinator. The maths coordinator is in Year 3 but taught in Year 4 last year. During her time in Year 4 she decided that the bottom set was not needed so decided to have a top set and mixed ability middles. This change was discovered as the sets moved to Year 5. Teachers in Year 5 complained that there was not a distinct lower set and the range of levels in the middle sets was too wide. There was also the presence of children on the SEN register in more than one class. This triggered the intervention of the SENCo because she said that children on the SEN register need to be adequately supported to fulfil their targets. She did not want the TAs dispersed over several sets. The sets in Year 5 were rearranged to include a lower set.

Blatchord et al. (2012:91), also notes that "teachers deliberately spend less time with these pupils, handing over responsibility to the TA". This can be seen in Appendix K, example 5, where the TA is responsible for the group and virtually all the interactions are between the TA and the children rather than between the children themselves.

In contrast, the TAs at River Close are used very differently. They are not allocated to particular groups or tables. Neither do they withdraw children to separate areas or work specifically with certain children. Their role is to support all children and all children are free to access this support whenever they wish. This approach seems to acknowledge that all children need support at some point; not just the ones who are perceived as being 'lower ability' or 'struggling'. As such there doesn't seem to be a stigma attached to working with a TA. This could be considered to be a much more equitable use of support staff.

9.3 Limitations

Firstly, as a limitation, it is important to acknowledge my own role in the research process and the fact that for over 20 years I was a primary school teacher. In addition to this, I was actually a teacher in Bridgeford. However, the issues that I experienced related more to the fact of 'being a teacher' rather than having been a teacher in one of the schools. This fact became problematic on a number of occasions and caused me inner conflict. On the one hand, I was trying to distance myself from the role of 'teacher' and instead take on the role of 'researcher', but this was not as simple as I anticipated it would be. It was actually more of a complex issue in Newton Park and River Close than it was in Bridgeford. In Bridgeford, I knew the staff well enough to be able to stipulate very clearly that I wanted to be in role as a researcher and did not want to be drawn in to teaching or supervisory responsibilities because of the confusion that this may cause with the children. However, in Newton Park and River Close, I had to be much more careful because I wanted to develop and retain good working relationships with the staff. I found this to be very difficult in the first six weeks when I was familiarising myself with these new settings. I wanted to work alongside the children on an informal basis rather than stand apart as an observer in the classroom. I wanted the teachers and children to feel at ease with me. Working on an informal basis, inevitably led to being asked to work more formally with the children in a support role initially. They knew I was a teacher and obviously though this was an excellent opportunity to have additional support. On two school trips, I also found myself being allocated a small group of children. The fact that I spent such a long time in each school

and engaged in many informal conversations with the children made me feel that I had retained balance with regard to being a researcher and not being a teacher. However, it was a fairly difficult transition to make particularly in instances when I found myself reacting in a 'teacher-like' manner almost without thinking. An example of this can be found in Appendix G, conversation two, where I remind Jake about why he mustn't interrupt others.

Another limitation was that fact that the selection process was carefully designed so as to include one case study school which did not group by ability. I believed that River Close would be able to fulfil this requirement after speaking at length with the headteacher. However, River Close did use notions of ability for the 'homegroup' tables and children were aware of specific criteria related to notions of ability that had been used to group them. As an observer, in the initial few weeks, I would not have been able to determine which children belonged to which group, with the exception of one boy who was seated close to the teacher's desk. After careful thought about how River Close could be seen as a school which adopted very different grouping structures to Bridgeford and Newton Park (see chapter 4), it was decided to continue to gather data there.

A final limitation could also be considered to be the amount of time and commitment needed to conduct a study of this type. This could be considered both from the point of view that the study took place over a full year and the fact that I spent three whole days in school each week.

9.4 Recommendations for future research

I have two ideas that I would like to pursue in future research. I feel that both of these suggestions would extend understanding and contribute new elements to the existing literature.

1. It would be interesting to conduct further studies on schools which do not use ability grouping and are more flexible in the way they group pupils to supplement the information gained from this study. I began to develop a 'set group model' and a 'mixed ability model' based on what the literature revealed about the teaching approaches and the ideals that underpinned these. I would like to gather more information from mixed ability and

ability grouped classes to supplement my initial ideas. The literature enabled me to do this with teacher actions and perspectives but I would like to extend my own understanding by gaining child perspectives related to what it means to be a member of a particular set group and what it means to be a member of a mixed ability group.

2. I would also like to explore teacher impact in relation to set grouping. What messages are being implicitly and explicitly transmitted to the children about expectations in different groups? Can teacher effect be separated from the structure of the group itself? How does teaching vary between sets and are there consistently different practices which affect children's chances of progress? Teacher impact needs to be considered but I realise that it is difficult to separate the grouping structure from the influence that each particular teacher has on their group. Other influences could be teaching methods, teacher attitudes and the ethos of the school

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E j.lison@hull.ac.uk

ETHICAL PROCEDURES FOR RESEARCH AND TEACHING IN THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION

PERMISSION TO PROCEED WITH RESEARCH: ETHICAL APPROVAL

Reference Number:	12/001
Name:	Rebecca Adderley
Student No:	201013187
Programme of Study:	PhD
Research Area/Title:	An exploration of the impact of pupil grouping on friendship formation in the primary school
Image Permission Form	N/A
Name of Supervisor:	Dr Kiki Messiou/Dr Max Hope
Date Approved by Supervisor:	10 September 2012
Date Approved by Ethics Committee:	12 September 2012

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
UNIV OF HULL

Appendix B – letter of consent for Headteachers

Dear

I am a full time PhD research student at Hull University. I have previously worked for 22 years as a classroom teacher and senior manager within the primary setting and as a leading literacy teacher for the East Riding Education Authority. I left teaching in 2010 to embark upon a full time Masters Degree in Inclusive Education and on completion was extremely lucky to be granted a scholarship to begin a PhD.

I would like to ask permission to undertake research for my PhD in ……………School. The title of my study is 'Exploring the impact of pupil grouping on children's social relationships and inclusion in the primary school'.

Participation would be voluntary and the school would be free to withdraw from the study at any time. Before a decision is made to take part in this study, it is important that the purpose of the research and what it will involve is made clear.

The aim of the study is to understand how decisions made when grouping pupils in the classroom may impact (if at all) on their social relationships on the playground and consequently on inclusion. A further aim is to ascertain whether pupils are aware of each other's academic ability and whether this impacts on their choice of friends. I have chosen to focus on pupils in Year 5 and wish to consult with the views of teachers and pupils.

In order to gather the data to fulfil this aim I would like to be able to spend up to 1 day per week in school for the majority of the academic year starting in September 2012, although I will be able to be flexible and work around the requirements of the school. My work will mainly focus on the children in Year 5 and I would like the opportunity to gather data in a variety of ways through observation in the classroom and on the playground, interviewing teachers and pupils in Year 5 and photography of playground interactions. Although only wishing to use photography to stimulate discussion during interviews with pupils, I realise that the use of photography raises ethical issues of consent. I would definitely obtain explicit consent from the school, from parents and from children before using any of the pictures with a wider audience where children can be identified. In addition to this I would hope to use broad social and academic data related to the children in the Year 5 cohort.

The research will involve no risk to the participants' physical and emotional wellbeing and will not threaten their privacy. The participants may decline to answer any or all of the interview questions and may withdraw from the study at any time with no adverse consequences. Any information gathered up to this point will be destroyed.

Data gathered through interview and observation both in audio and written form will be stored safely my possession and confidentiality will be maintained. When no longer needed for research, all materials will be destroyed. Information gained during the

research process will be used solely for the purpose of the study and the school and the participants will remain anonymous unless permission has been gained otherwise. I will also be happy to feed back at intervals to the Headteacher and also the teaching staff regarding the study.

Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information about the study and related matters.

I can be contacted through email at R.J.Adderley@2010.hull.ac.uk or on mobile number 07898940252.

I have 2 University supervisors who can also be contacted through email and by telephone:

Dr Kiki Messiou – K.Messiou@hull.ac.uk (01482) 466791

Dr Max Hope   - Max.Hope@hull.ac.uk   (01482) 466878

Should you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, please contact the Secretary, Faculty of Education Ethics Committee, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX; Telephone number (01482) 465988; Fax (01482) 466137

Thank you in anticipation of your support

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Adderley

Appendix C – Letter of consent for parents

Dear Parent or Carer

I am a full time PhD research student at Hull University. I have previously worked for 22 years as a classroom teacher and senior manager within the primary setting and as a leading literacy teacher for the East Riding Education Authority. I left teaching in 2010 to embark upon a full time Masters Degree in Inclusive Education and on completion was extremely lucky to be granted a scholarship to begin a PhD.

I have gained permission from the school to be able to gather data for my research study which is entitled 'Exploring the impact of pupil grouping on children's social relationships and inclusion in the primary school' and your child will already be familiar with me as I have visited the school on a few occasions already. I would like to ask permission for your child to be interviewed as part of the study to gain their views about how or if classroom grouping influences their friendships on the playground. These interviews will be conducted in groups although during the course of the year I may ask to interview your child on an individual basis. Their participation would be voluntary and they would be free to withdraw from the study at any time. I will always ask for their individual permission before conducting the interviews to make sure that they are willing to be spoken to. Before you decide whether to give your permission for your child to take part in this study, it is important that the purpose of the research and what it will involve is made clear.

The aim of the study is to understand how decisions made when grouping pupils in the classroom may impact (if at all) on their social relationships on the playground and consequently on inclusion. I have chosen to focus on pupils in Year 5 and wish to consult with the views of teachers and pupils.

The research will involve no risk to your child's physical and emotional wellbeing and will not threaten their privacy. Your child may decline to answer any or all of the interview questions and may withdraw from the study at any time with no adverse consequences. Any information gathered up to this point will be destroyed.

Data gathered through interview and observation both in audio and written form will be stored safely my possession and confidentiality will be maintained. When no longer needed for research, all materials will be destroyed. Information gained during the research process will be used solely for the purpose of the study and the school and the children will remain anonymous unless permission has been gained otherwise.

If you consent to your child being interviewed as part of the study, please could you fill in the slip at the bottom of this letter and return to school as soon as possible.

Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information about the study and related matters.

I can be contacted through email at R.J.Adderley@2010.hull.ac.uk or on mobile number 07898940252.

I have 2 University supervisors who can also be contacted through email and by telephone:

Dr Kiki Messiou – K.Messiou@hull.ac.uk (01482) 466791

Dr Max Hope   - Max.Hope@hull.ac.uk   (01482) 466878

Should you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, please contact the Secretary, Faculty of Education Ethics Committee, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX; Telephone number (01482) 465988; Fax (01482) 466137

Thank you in anticipation of your support

Yours sincerely

R Adderley

Rebecca Adderley

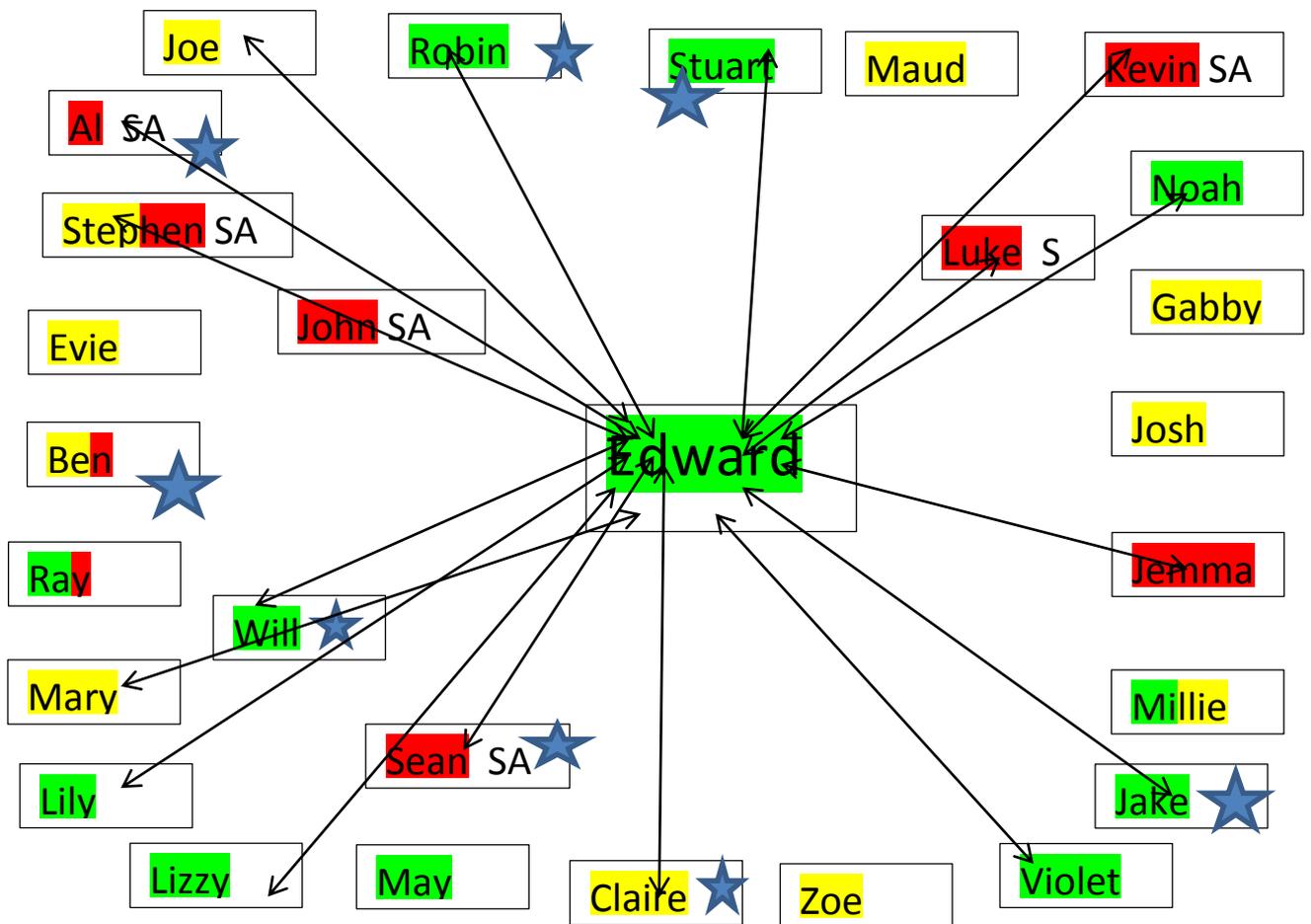………
………

I do/do not give my permission for my child …………………………………………………………………….…to be interviewed by Mrs Rebecca Adderley as part of the research study.

Signed

……………………………………………………………………………..

(parent/guardian)

Appendix D – sociometric roster for Bridgeford School

6A CLASS LIST	REGULAR FRIENDS	SOMETIMES FRIENDS	6B CLASS LIST	REGULAR FRIENDS	SOMETIMES FRIENDS

6H CLASS LIST	REGULAR FRIENDS	SOMETIMES FRIENDS	6TM CLASS LIST	REGULAR FRIENDS	SOMETIMES FRIENDS

Appendix E – social atom diagram and analysis

Edward's regular friends are shown by ⭐

Top group

Middle group

Low group

Reciprocated friendships - arrow

Unreciprocated friendships – no arrow

SA –School Action on the SEN register

S – Statement on the SEN register

This social atom diagram shows the actual playground friendship choices for Edward from River Close and the other pupils within his class. He has 8 regular friends and 7 of these are mutual choices. 1 of the regular friends was unreciprocated. He has 19 sometimes friends and 11 of these were mutual choices. 8 of the sometimes friends were unreciprocated.

Of his regular friends 7/8 are boys and 1/8 are girls.

Of his sometimes friends 8/19 are boys and 11/19 are girls.

Therefore he has 12/27 friends that are girls and 15/27 friends that are girls.

Edward is considered to be in the higher ability band.

Of his regular friends, 4/8 are also considered to be in the higher ability band; 1/8 in the middle ability band; 1/8 in the middle/lower ability band and 2/8 in the lower ability band.

Of his sometimes friends 5/19 are in the higher ability band; 1/19 in the middle/upper band; 7/19 in the middle band; 2/19 in the middle/lower band and 4/19 in the lower.

Of his regular friends, 2/8 are on the SEN register at School Action.
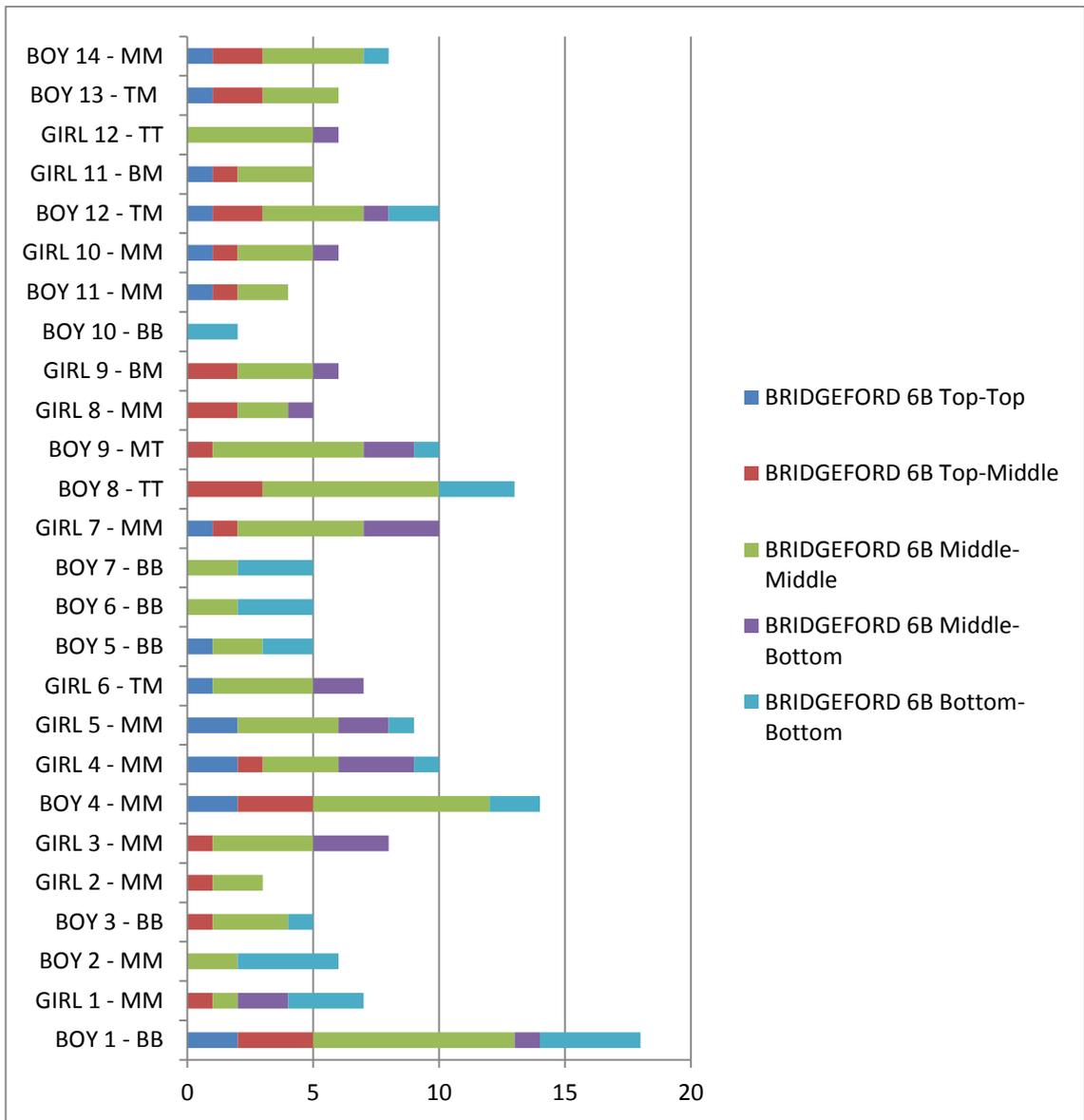
Of his sometimes friends 4/19 are on the SEN register – 3 at School Action and 1 with a Statement.

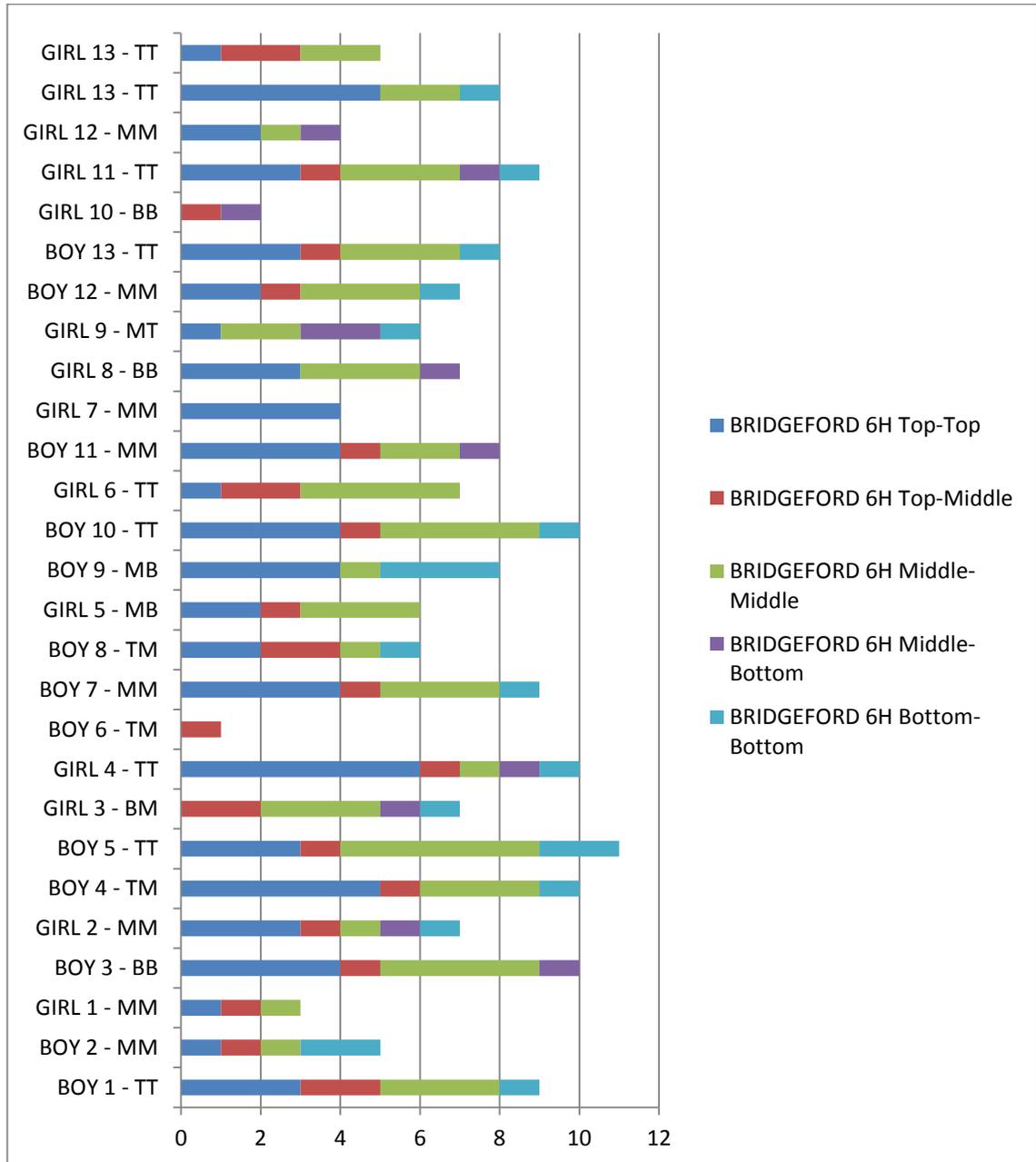# Appendix F – graphs to show the set group of mutual friends
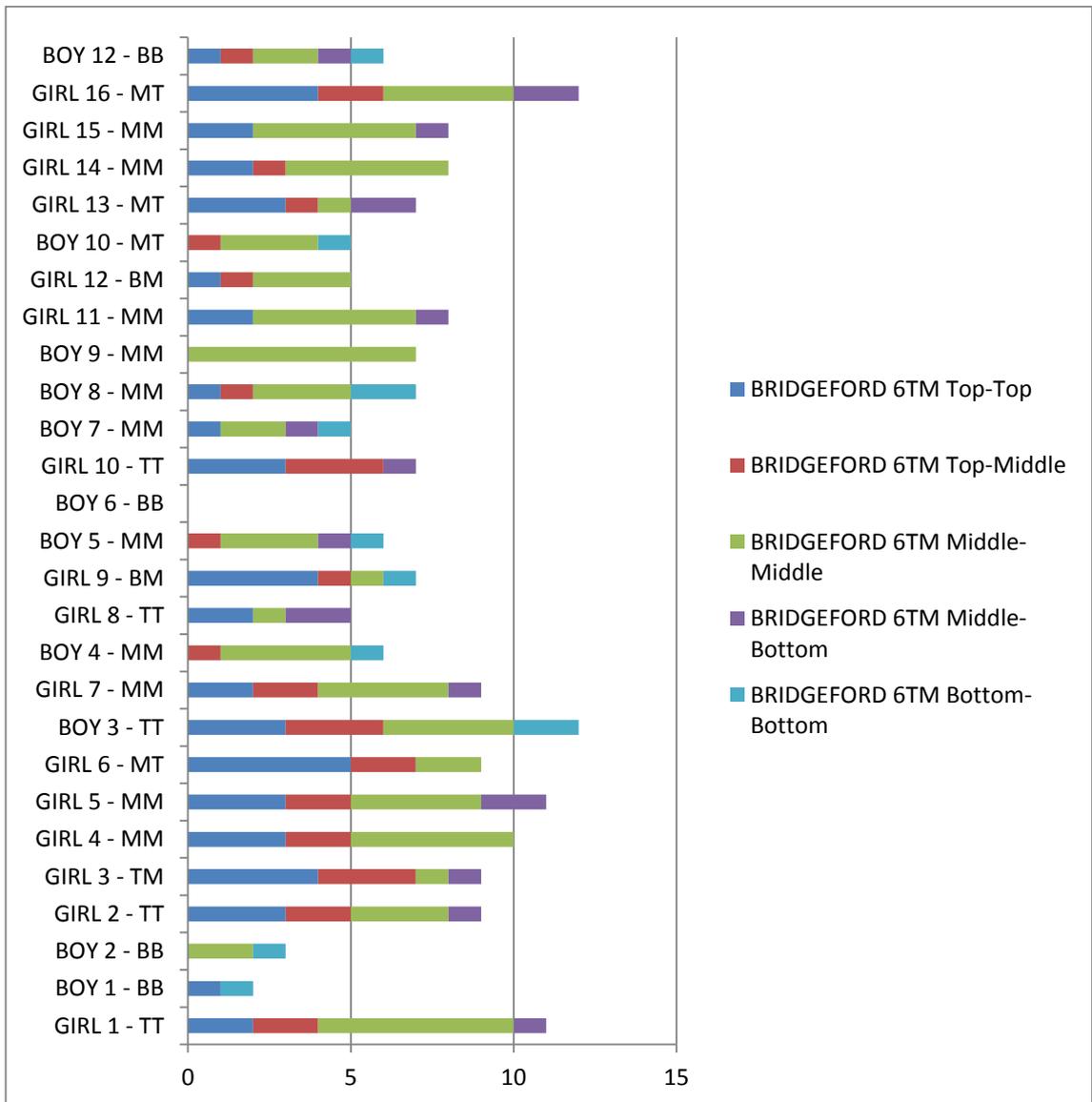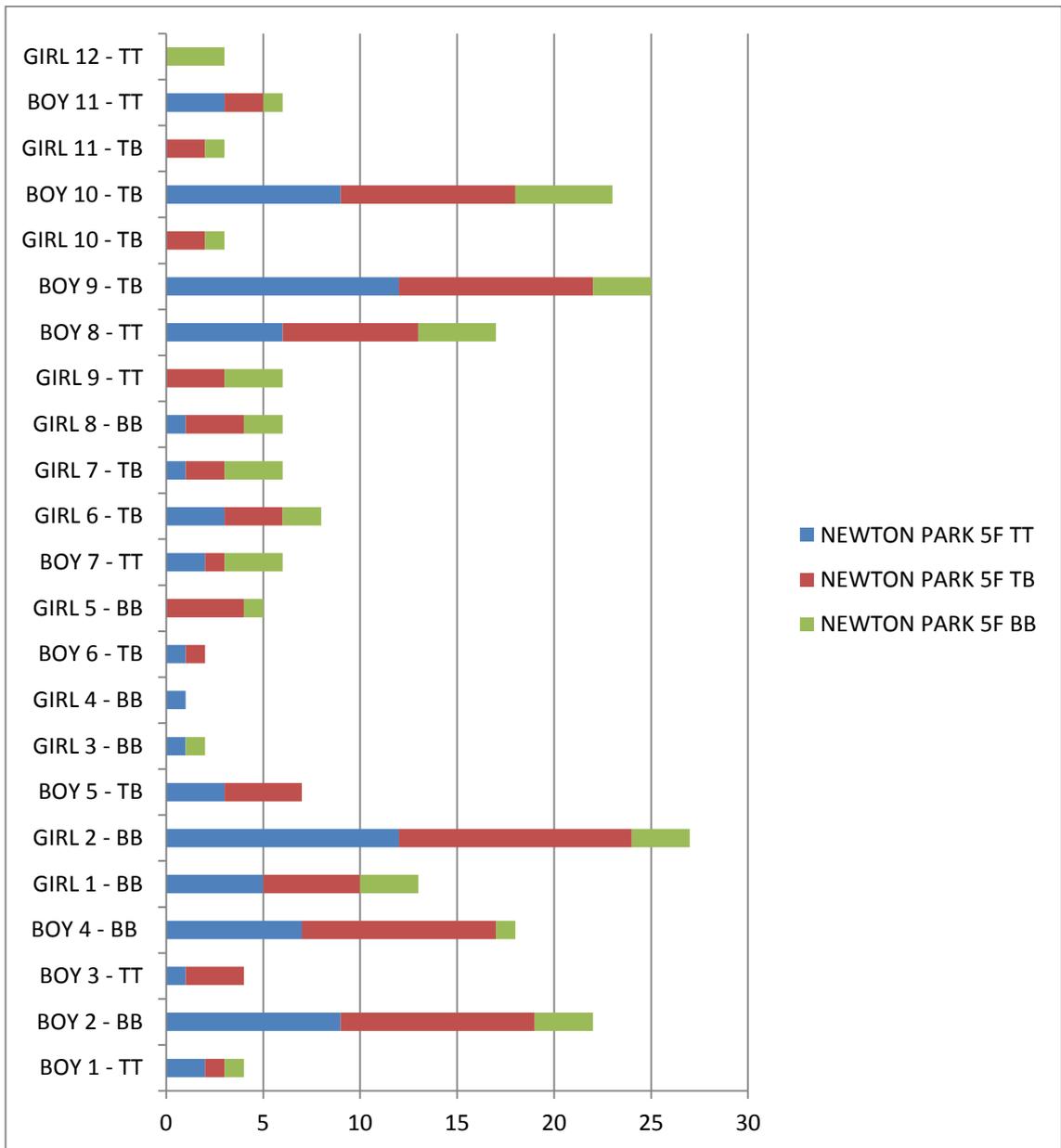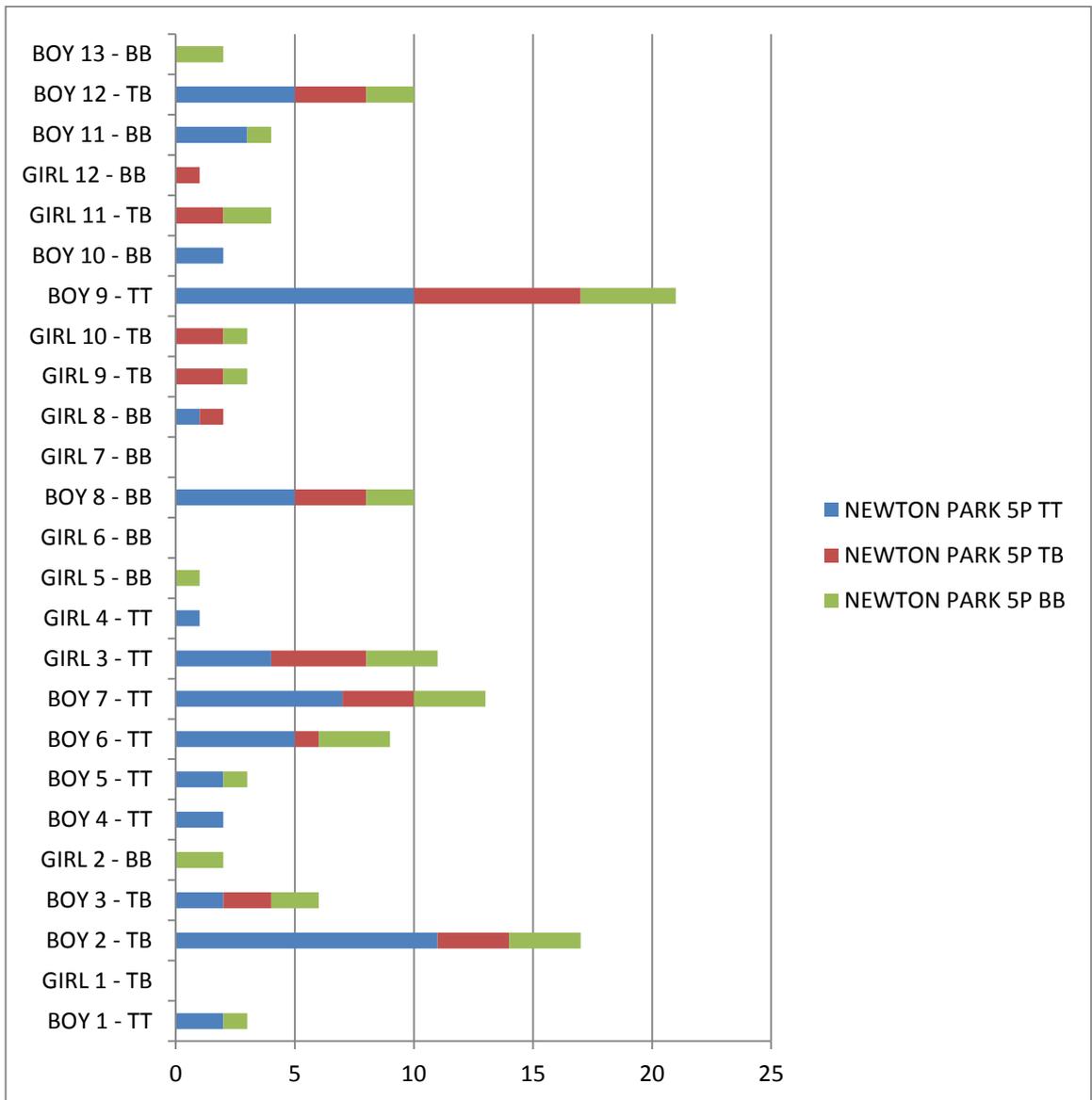
Bridgeford 6A
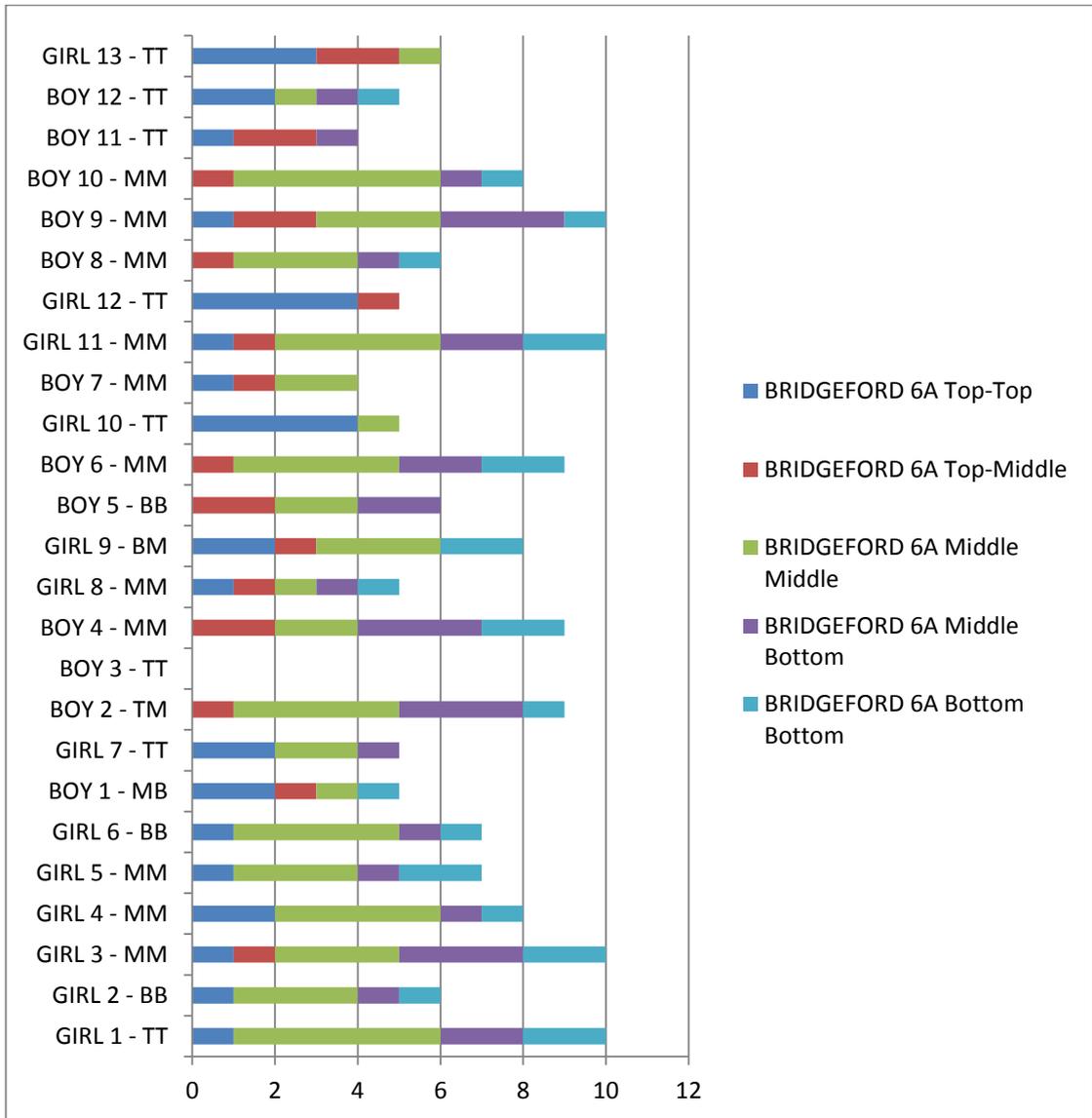
Bridgeford 6B

Bridgeford 6H

Bridgeford 6TM

Legend:
- BRIDGEFORD 6TM Top-Top
- BRIDGEFORD 6TM Top-Middle
- BRIDGEFORD 6TM Middle-Middle
- BRIDGEFORD 6TM Middle-Bottom
- BRIDGEFORD 6TM Bottom-Bottom

Categories (top to bottom):
BOY 12 - BB, GIRL 16 - MT, GIRL 15 - MM, GIRL 14 - MM, GIRL 13 - MT, BOY 10 - MT, GIRL 12 - BM, GIRL 11 - MM, BOY 9 - MM, BOY 8 - MM, BOY 7 - MM, GIRL 10 - TT, BOY 6 - BB, BOY 5 - MM, GIRL 9 - BM, GIRL 8 - TT, BOY 4 - MM, GIRL 7 - MM, BOY 3 - TT, GIRL 6 - MT, GIRL 5 - MM, GIRL 4 - MM, GIRL 3 - TM, GIRL 2 - TT, BOY 2 - BB, BOY 1 - BB, GIRL 1 - TT
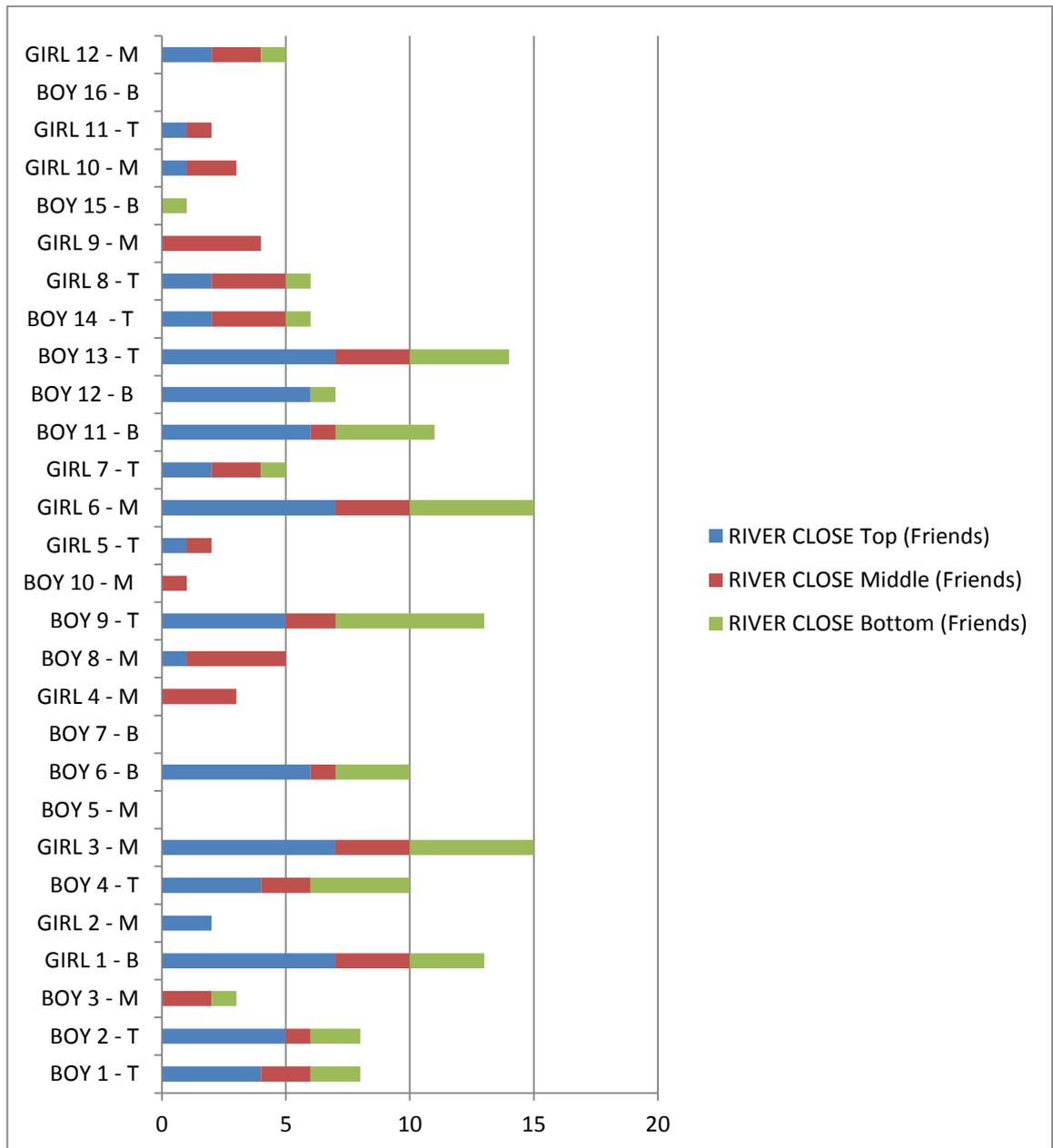
Newton Park 5F

Newton Park 5P

River Close

Appendix G – examples of 2 focus group conversations where a child dominates the group.

Conversation 1

Lizzy – I think on those tables, people start on blue square because…

Joe – nooooo

Jake – Joe shut up

Lizzy – so that they're closer to the whiteboard so that Mrs Smith can spot them if they're stuck…..

Jake – I'm on this table because I'm like further back…..and we're like……

May – we start on green circle….

Joe – I don't start on blue square……they just said that I sit closer to the whiteboard…..

Jake – no………sometimes you struggle

(I stop them interrupting Justin and encourage him to continue but he doesn't want to speak)

Conversation 2

Interviewer – so do you always sit in these groups then or do you get to move around. I'm going to start with you Justin (George sighs loudly). Do you ever get to move away from these groups?

Joe – well sometimes…..well mostly when we do things like …..not maths or reading or something…….normal work… English…..

(Jake makes a noise into the recorder)

Interviewer – what do you mean by normal work?

Joe – work on English….just that……English…

(Jake makes frustrated noises)

Interviewer – so you get to move places to where you want to sit

Joe – sometimes…..not all the time

(Jake makes more frustrated noises and this distracts Joe. He is watching Jake)

Interviewer – Just wait Jake. I know that it's a little bit frustrating when you've all got something to say but if you have anything to say related to my question (Jake sighs loudly) you will all get to speak but we can't all talk at once. That's the only rule really. We can all have an opinion about any of the questions that I ask and if you've got an opinion, please put your hand up because if we all talk at once all we get is a crowd noise on the recorder and I just can't figure out who said what and it's really interesting what you're saying and if I listen to this and just hear a crowd noise I will be very disappointed because I'm really interested to hear what you have to say.

Appendix H – an example of a child who meets the individual interview criteria.

Below is an example of one child who meets the individual interview criteria:

Evidence from the focus group interview

Georgia wrote on her post-it note "I like to sit next to my friends" when thinking about factors that would make a good working partnership in the classroom. This meets with criteria a)

The following extracts are not sequential but serve to illustrate that friendship is important to Gina when thinking about working partnerships. Mandy is her best friend, but she refers to other friends as well – Emma and Sarah

Gina – for literacy me and Mandy work really good together and I wanted to work with Mandy but Ben kept saying 'oh look, I'll work with Mandy' so it ended up Rebecca, Sarah, Mandy, Ben, Hattie and Penny and I ended up sitting there.

Gina – Mandy and I got told that we work really well together but we still don't sit next to each other in literacy and maths.

Gina – I think that if I could have my very own table, I'd sit there, me and Mandy, then Emma, then Sarah,

Evidence from the sociometric tests

Gina states that on the playground she plays with – Emma, Sarah, Beth, Sandra, Alice, Mandy, Ben, Sally, Hattie, Nina, Rebecca, Penny, Samantha, Annie, Rhia and Anastasia.

The above children are a mix of perceived ability.

Emma, Mandy, Sally and Ben are pupils who she already works with.

However, given the choice, she would also choose to work with – Sarah, Beth, Sandra, Rebecca, Rhia and Anastasia.

All of the names highlighted in green also appear in the playground friendship list, reinforcing the statement that Gina would like to work with children that are part of her friendship group.

<u>Evidence from observations and field notes together with sociometric data</u>

- In the class group, 4 out of the 5 other people on her table are part of Gina's friendship group – Emma, Mandy, Sally and Ben.

- In the Literacy set group, 1 out of the other 5 people on her table is part of her friendship group – Emma. Emma is not sitting next to Gina.

- In the maths group, 0 out of the 3 other people on her table are in Gina's friendship group.

This data shows that criteria b) and c) apply to Gina because sometimes she does sit with other children in her friendship group and sometimes she does not.

Gina therefore would be important to conduct an individual interview with because she states that friendship is an important factor in a working partnership yet when she is part of the literacy and maths set she gets very little if any contact with her friends. It would be interesting to see whether she perceives her experience of the class group as being different from her experience of the set groups because of this fact.
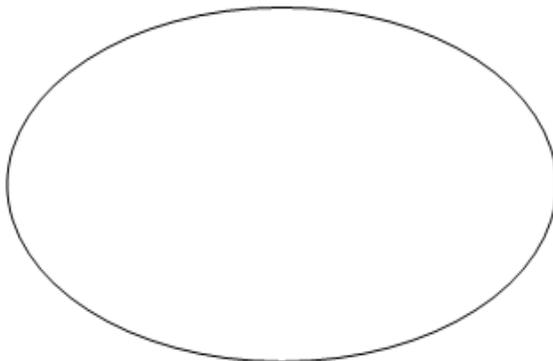
Appendix I – individual interview Activity B

Maths group feelings
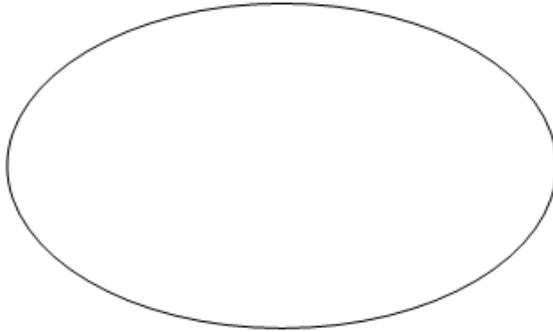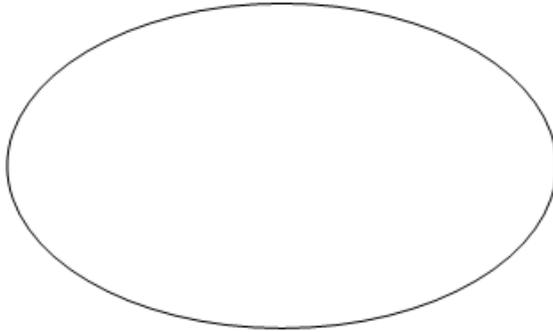
Literacy group feelings
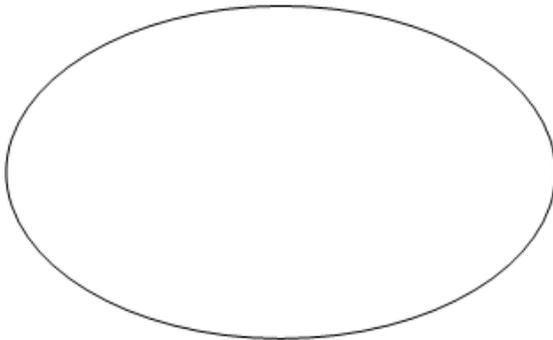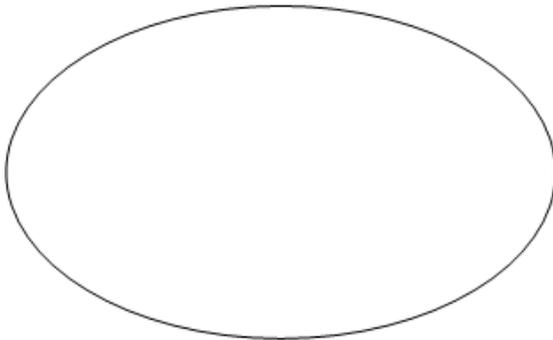
Class group feelings
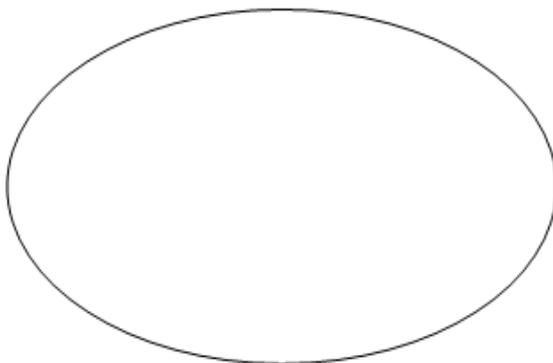
Appendix J – participant observation sheet

Observations

Observations

Observations

292

Appendix K - Examples of observations of pupils from Bridgeford and their feelings about the group

Example 1 - Bill – Class group

Interview

Interviewer – what about your class group then? How do you feel about…..

Bill – most of the time really happy…….I like it……..we like help each other like when we're doing work together and things……I'm mostly successful as well…if we have a time for our work, we always do it.

Bill – I concentrate more because there's only like the two of us…

Bill – because we both get along and we help each other and we're all like different levels so we know more….there's more like education there…..

Bill uses these words and phrases to describe his feelings about the class group – concentrate more, I look forward to it, successful, happy, like. Leo is not part of Bill's friendship group but he is part of his class group.

Observation - In the class lesson Bill is sitting with Leo. They are writing a prayer and are allowed to work together. They talk and discuss and help each other and then write. They take breaks from writing to continue to discuss. When they move to the carpet, Bill still sits next to Leo. The observation seems to support what was said during the interview.
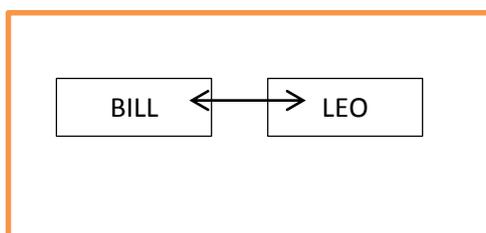
<u>Example 2 - Ben – Literacy group</u>

Interview

Ben – I don't know because sometimes I feel a little left out because the only people that really help me are Rebecca and Sarah.

Ben – they don't really help but Rebecca and Sarah …………. they're really quiet and they never talk, whereas Mandy….she always tries to pick arguments….

Ben – I try to get on as best we can but sometimes it doesn't really work out that well.

Ben – when we're doing like team work ….coz them two always work together coz they're sat next to each other and feel a bit…..I don't know….I feel like I want to work with them but I can't coz I'm sat next to Mandy.

Ben uses these words and phrases to describe his feelings about the literacy group – uncomfortable and lonely. All the girls are part of Ben's class group. He has two regular friends on the table who are Sarah and Rebecca.

Observation

In the literacy lesson Ben is actively involved in paired discussion with Mandy. There doesn't seem to be any problem. He says negative things about this group but this is not the impression from the observation.

The arrows on the diagram show verbal interaction. PD is paired discussion which the children have been asked to engage in, related to the content of the lesson. The children are preparing their presentations for a good day or a bad day at the seaside. The other arrow between Ben and Sarah is a conversation which took place and could have been related to work but the researcher cannot be sure.
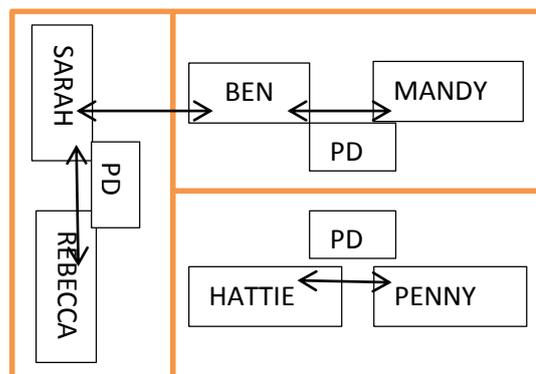
Example 3 - Gina – maths group

Interview

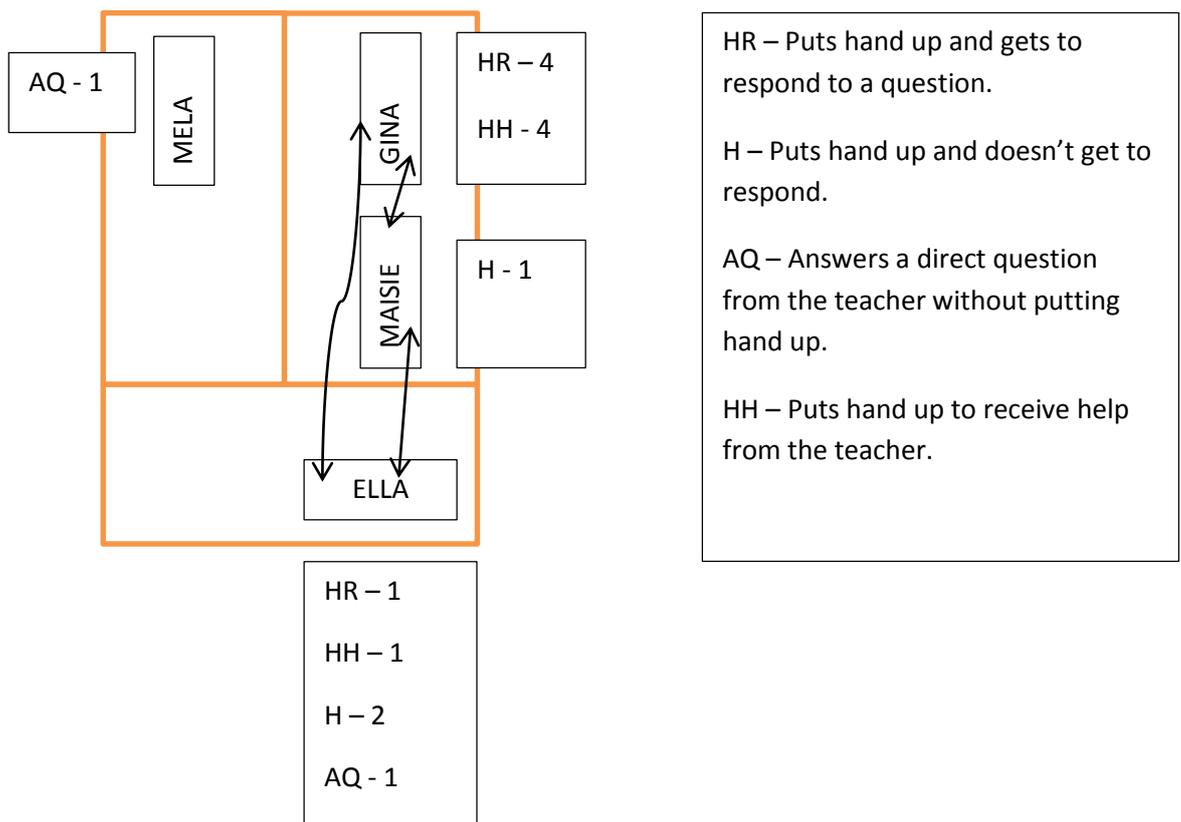Gina – but in this one it's like you're being pushed out……out of the conversation. And today, I was asking Maisie a question and she just wouldn't answer. It was quite……I don't know the word….unhelpful….
Gina –because like, it makes you feel more uncomfortable being round people that you don't necessarily want to be sat with.

Gina uses these words and phrases to describe her feelings about the maths group – unhelpful and 'I feel left out'. Gina has no friends on this table and there are no people from her class.

Observation

There were a total of three interactions between Gina and Maisie. They are very brief and only one involves words, the other two involve nodding and pointing. The interaction with Ella is to ask for a pen. There are six verbal interactions between Maisie and Ella. Mela does not speak and is not spoken to.

AQ - 1	
MELA	GINA — HR – 4, HH - 4
MAISIE	H - 1
ELLA	

HR – 1
HH – 1
H – 2
AQ - 1

HR – Puts hand up and gets to respond to a question.

H – Puts hand up and doesn't get to respond.

AQ – Answers a direct question from the teacher without putting hand up.

HH – Puts hand up to receive help from the teacher.

<u>Example 4 - Terry – maths group</u>

Interview

Terry – two at the moment. One is………oh I've forgotten their name now. The two people that sit on my table now are Lulu and Milly but they're never nice to me. Especially in maths…..especially Milly….because yesterday she kept on having a go at me….I was trying to speak up as best as I could, but it was because of my voice….I couldn't speak up very well and I didn't really want to hurt my throat as much as it already did….

Terry – yes just the three of us and it's really annoying coz I'm the only boy on that table and they're always saying 'oh he's the only boy on our table, we can boss him about as much as we want'. In literacy, there's two girls and two boys….

Terry uses these words and phrases to describe his feelings about the maths group – left out, isolated. He has no friends on the table and there is no-one from his class.

Observation

The observation does not seem to reflect what is said during the individual interview. Terry doesn't appear left out and he does interact with people on the table. They are designing a park and thinking about area and perimeter. The teacher tells them that they can work together. They do talk but for the majority of the time they work independently. There are four verbal interactions between Lulu and Terry which seem to be about the work. There are four verbal interactions between Lulu and Sebastian and five verbal interactions between Lulu and Millie. The teacher visits the table once during the lesson to help Terry.
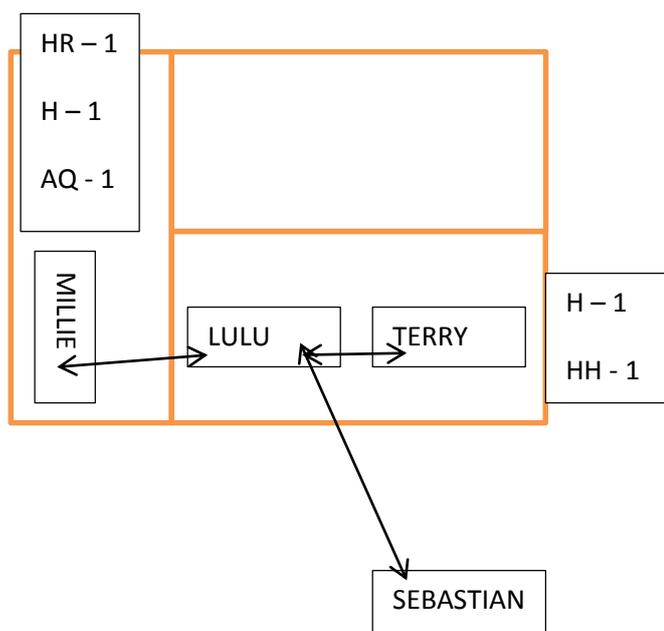
Example 5 – Terry – literacy group

Terry states that he feels lonely and isolated in his literacy group. He has no friends on the table and there is 1 person from his class.

HR – 1	TERRY	SIMON	H – 3
AQ – 1			HR - 2
H - 1	MURIEL	Mrs T - TA	
H – 4			
HR - 1			
HR - 1	ZANE	MELA	

HR – Puts hand up and gets to respond to a question.

H – Puts hand up and doesn't get to respond.

AQ – Answers a direct question from the teacher without putting hand up.
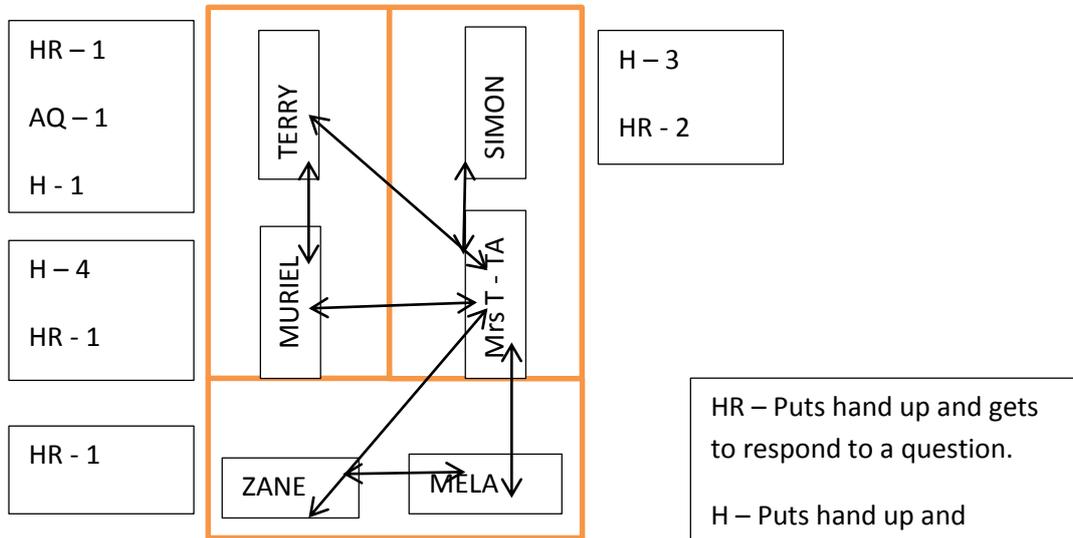
Interactions

Interactions of Mrs T, the TA, with the children

Simon – 12

Terry – 4

Muriel – 2

Zane – 2

Mela - 6

Interactions between the children

Terry and Muriel – 5

Mela and Zane - 1

Appendix M – example of an evidence sheet for Newton Park relating to research question 1

ABILITY OF THE CHILDREN

WHERE THE KNOWLEDGE OF ABILITY IS DERIVED

- Sam – we have like levels……people who are like a 3a, 3b and 3c would probably go in the lower set but people who were a 4 would probably go in a higher set (FG1)
- James – we've got our Driven to Achieve books (FG1)
- Sam – well every term we do a test and we get our marks………
  Susan – we also have our Driven to Achieve books which we checked from last year to this year. (FG2)
- Philippa – no some are high and some are low…….Mrs F is high and low and Mrs P is high and low. Mrs P's the high in literacy and the low in maths and Mrs F is the high in maths and the low in literacy. (FG3)

HOW TEACHERS RESPOND TO THIS KNOWLEDGE OF ABILITY

- Karen – is it the abilities of say…..some go in one classroom and some go in another and these tables….(FG1)
- James – no there's only one table that's like the high abilities….like this table is for the high abilities like Matthew and Ellen and Rupert…….So like Ellen and Rupert, people with the best abilities…..and the next best people would sit here and then like me and Noah sit here….(FG1)
- James – no, in literacy we got all mixed up so we're working with high ability and not so high ability so we're working well together. The high ability is like teaching….(FG1)
- James – because there's high ability and low ability. There's Mrs F's literacy is the low ability and Mrs P's is high and Mrs F's for maths is the high ability and low ability Mrs P   (FG1)
- Sam – we swap into different groups because maybe some people are more advanced than other people because some people have higher grades than other people…. (FG2)
- Susan – well that work with Mrs K or Mrs S and they work on these tables and they help the ones that need help. So Mrs K works with this table – Tommy, Otis, and some others and she helps them because they're not really good at maths…(FG2)

- Delia – well when we say……when we say it…..like Cath she's actually quite good at maths so in the next class she would sit on this table with me but now she's moved to a more….to this table…because when we get together….well what we do is that some people have sheets and they work with sheets and other people like this side maybe would have really hard questions and like this side including this table would have quite easy questions because they're not quite ready to take on really hard things. (FG2)
- Delia – yes so…….well the people on this side are quite fast workers and they get all the answers right, the ones here are not slow but they're medium and if they sit here somebody next to them can help them out because they've obviously finished or something like that. (FG2)
- Josie – in the groups like if…….in maths if you're in the lower group and like other people are in the lower group it's not that you're bad, it's like you all…..you've all like got the same level and you might not be like all the same but you might be close together in the level. (FG3)
- Josie – because like whoever is on your table you're near or around the same level…..you might be just one little level higher than them….so you've got the same ability. (FG3)
- Philippa – it's the people's level like 5a…….Kelly is a 4c…..oh no a 4a so she would be on the table next to the…..the table next to the door in literacy or maths is the table that is very good at literacy….. (FG3)
- Iris – yes….so say this is Mrs P's classroom….I'm sitting on this table and I just need to go like this…..(she points to the desks going towards the door in an order)

  Philippa – no coz it goes like this (she points to the tables in order again)……..so that's the highest table…….so she was like "I've moved up" and I was like "no you've moved down"…..and Noah and Cath…they were in the bottom literacy group and they moved up and they're now on my table…..so instead of going to this table…they went here because they were so good……..yes, well like what Isabelle just said….she said that in our literacy….in that one…in Mrs F's, Noah and Cath were on the high table and Sue and Susan were…..no Susan was over here and then she moved onto there……..and they moved into the higher set so instead of going to the lower table they went to the highest one didn't they? The highest table….. (FG3)
- Interviewer – right so why do you change to different classes first of all. Why do you move to different classrooms?

  Jacob – who knows more and obviously I know everything. (FG4)
- Matthew – Mrs F is top maths and Mrs P is top literacy…. (FG4)
- Iris – I think me and Delia are the same level because we're on the same table…….we go through a pattern…….we go there, there, there…… (FG4)

- Matthew - In our maths, Mrs F does it randomly but I don't know what……about theirs. I don't know about literacy actually……I think she does it randomly. (FG4)
- Iris – onto the top table…….these two are the main top tables but this one is the top top table…. (FG4)
- Carolyn – reading, writing and maths probably because we do these morning maths things…..because she tries to mix us up a bit so if we need to have a partner, one with lower scores and then one with higher scores to help with them then we can do that   (FG5)
- Carolyn – I know why she puts them there because if someone needs lots of help or they're silly they go……they tend to go further towards the teacher….. (FG5)
- Ellen – Mrs F does some maths with people who have got higher levels and Mrs P does literacy with some people who have got higher levels. (FG5)
- Carolyn – because Mrs P would have to talk to all the ones who didn't understand it as well as the others ones and the other ones would just be whizzing through it and they would need to concentrate on getting high levels but if they were stuck with the ones who had lower levels they would never be able to reach that stage. (FG5)
- Rhia – in my sets I sit here because I need help…….
  Josphine - …because the teacher sits here and this is like the area where people are……
  Rhianne – are on the low levels…. (FG5)
- Josephine - so the people who need a tiny bit more help than other people, sit round here near the teacher…..and well this area's like the medium but all the levels are changed round here really…..
  Ellen – they put similar levels on the ……
  Josephine – yeah…….
  Ellen – on tables…… (FG5)
- Rhianne – the ones who sit on this table that is near the teacher's desk it's not because they're naughty it's because they probably need more help. So it like goes in order……
  Matt – it's Mrs S…….it's people who need help there and people who need help there and then it's just a mixture of anybody sitting…..
  Marc – yes they're all like the people who don't need help and work fine and then Mrs S and Miss K just hover around these two tables to help because Mrs P is usually teaching over here or helping over here on that desk. (FG5)
- Josephine – in Literacy it is levels though…….
  Carolyn – in Mrs P's you've got high there and then lower there…..well….not…….
  Josephine – it's high there….lower there and really low there (FG5)

PRODUCTIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

FACTORS THAT ARE CONSIDERED THAT INFLUENCE PRODUCTIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

- Interviewer – so how do you think she made the decision about which pairs should sit together?
  James – sensibility
  Eva – well she put people who are not as good with the more sensible people. (FG1)
- James – Well I think that at the start of the year the teacher……well not the very first day, it was after like a month, because we chose where to sit to begin with. Me, Owen,………me, Sam, Owen and Phinn sat on the same table but after about two weeks the teacher shuffles us around into people that we worked well with. (FG1)
- Sam – yes, but Mrs F changed it around if someone didn't work well with someone else. (FG2)
- Claudia - it depended on how much work we got done with the people who we were sitting with.
  Delia – and it was about chatting too, if you were chatting to some people.. (FG2)
- Delia – it means you can't be silly and the teacher keeps an eye on you…..and also like Claudia's sat here and Margaret's sat there so there's a space here so that's for……Hugh sits there so Claudia and Margaret can't mess around with each other. (FG2)
- Iris – because ….erm….she moved some people because either they weren't getting on or…..they weren't working well together.
  Interviewer – so the groupings are based on decisions that you made……
  Josie – friendliness….. (FG3)
- Iris – Mrs P said me Cath and them people are put together because we're really good…..we're erm….. we will set a good example…..me, Cath and everyone were put on that table because Mrs P said that we were the best people and we are showing Jacob a good example….. (FG4)
- Carolyn – and the more sensible ones go away because she doesn't really need to talk to them as much and as for the ones that need a little bit more help or that are silly….. (FG5)

KNOWLEDGE TO ASSIST THESE DECISIONS IS GAINED FROM…..

- Sam – yes but then the teacher changed it.
  Claudia – we chose where we wanted to sit but then the teacher would check to see if we were sitting next to the people that we could be sensible with.

Josie – so we could decide….she just organised us a little bit…….she checked if we like worked with them well….because she let us like stick with them for a couple…..three or four days and then checked if we worked well with them (FG3)

MOVEMENT BETWEEN GROUPS

MOVEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

- Susan - so if James sat next to me or Delia and he was really mean to them then he would….they would just move places but they would still stay on the same table….for example over here if James was here and Delia was here.. (FG2)
- Delia – well it's because sometimes if you're a bit silly sometimes and you get sat at the back so the teacher can't see you, she'll put you in the front so the teacher can see if you're messing about or not. (FG2)
- Claudia – I was just going to say that sometimes the teacher….if Delia sits….coz James was sitting there and Jonathan was sitting there for the first days and James was messing with Karen and he was being really mean to her so the teacher moved him here for a couple of weeks so that she could watch him and…(FG2)
- Delia – now this table is Jonathan's place until he gets sensible (FG2)
- Delia – no for literacy, you would just sit there because like maybe…like I used to sit here and Iris used to sit next to me but then I got quite silly with her so I moved over here with Oliver but then I got quite silly there so I moved here with Connor and Matt which I'm quite sensible there so I'm staying there now (FG2)
- Matthew – I was sat there and then I talked too much so I had to move there…. (FG4)
- Matthew– he didn't move tables…..Andrew sits here and Oliver sat there and they talked too much…..
  Iris – they were talking too much……so
  Matthew – so him and Beth swapped and he got sat next to Elizabeth and Josephine. (FG4)
- Iris – Lucy, Cath, Delia and …………Jacob got moved there and Cath got moved here because she was moving up a level…..Lucy stayed there…..but Delia moved because Delia got…….like well is really good at maths and Lucy's fairly good. (FG4)
- Matthew – me, Rupert, Andrew, Olly and Oliver are sat there because we were all 4a's and the we kept on talking so she moved us all around so……since then whoever talks has been moved around so like it's not top table any more. (FG4)
- Marc – sometimes the teacher swaps us around so…..coz we keep talking on different tables…..

303

Carolyn – if someone's talking to someone….

Rhianne – you get moved…..

Ellen – you get switched round…..   (FG5)

- Carolyn – be quiet, I'm talking. Right….right…..so Oliver was sat over here and he moved to here and then (Rhianne interrupts much more quietly this time) ………and then…….and then he got moved again because Olly………

  Ellen – he carried on talking…….

  Carolyn – yes he carried on talking…..so he had to get closer and closer to the teacher…. (FG5)

MOVEMENT BETWEEN CLASSROOMS

- Interviewer – right you think that children can move from one set grouping to another, but why do they move?

  Sam – because they've got higher ability

  James – they get better

  Karen – if they get better….the level

  James – or they get really bad at what they're doing or get better at what they're doing (FG1)

- Kelly – the teachers, we get split up into literacy groups. There's like a higher group and a smaller group…. we're taught things and then they mark it and put our levels down and sometimes if you don't do as well as you should be doing and you're in the top group you move down…

  Interviewer – oh, so you can move your set groupings.

  Sam – yes coz some people came to ours a few weeks ago….

  Delia – yes it was Noah and Cath because they were……it's not about how sensible you are it's about your adjectives and your levels….because if you say 'meanwhile' and 'furthermore' you move up to the next set because they're level 4 words. (FG2)

-

CHILD CHARACTERISTICS

- James – Me and Sam were chosen to sit next to one another because it had to go two boys and two girls on each table but over the past couple of weeks we've mixed it around a bit, so me and Sam have ended up with Karen and Eva. Me and Sam are like partners and Karen and Eva are like partners. We got all shuffled round to see how we went and now we're all getting on and we're staying like this. (FG1)

- Josie – yes but there won't be a table with all boys or all girls……they wouldn't be allowed that otherwise they would all chat and talk about football. (FG3)

CHILD DECISIONS

- Delia– when you sit down and someone's really really annoying you for the past couple of weeks, you can ask the teacher if you can move to a different table….a sensible table……..yes and then she puts you on a table that you will be comfortable on…(FG2)

WHAT DO CHILDREN MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT RELATED TO GROUPING?

- Delia – yes, what we did…the teacher said to sit wherever you want and then….for the first two weeks or one week and we were just sat where we wanted to be sat and then at the beginning of the next week she told us we were all right there or whether we had to swap. (FG2)
- Iris – we did……..as soon as we came in we got to choose and then the teacher said "here's your topic tables" which are our normal places and we got moved into them….. (FG3)

WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE THEIR DECISIONS ABOUT WHO THEY CHOOSE TO SIT WITH?

- Delia – I just chose my seat really…I didn't want to be near to anybody that I didn't really like…….(very quietly)…any boys. (FG2)

Appendix N – analysis of the post it note activity for River Close

<u>Themes</u>

- Ability – yellow

- Support – green

- Positive character traits – red

- Gender issues – purple

- Friendships and peer relationships – light blue

- Sporting ability

- Communication

- Good work habits

- Location/proximity – printed in bold

- Similarity

- Member of school organisations – printed in italics

Qualities that make a good working partnership	Qualities for both classroom and playground relationships	Qualities for playground friendship
Is in my literacy group – 1, 2, 3, 4 Is in my maths group – 1, 2, 3, 4 Is helpful – 1, 2, 4 **Sits next to me – 1, 2, 3, 4** **Is in my class group – 1, 3** Tries their best – 1, 2, 4 Likes to talk – 1 Is the same ability as me – 1, 3, 4 Like me – 1 Is a boy – 1 Is the same work speed as me – 2 Someone who is the same ability as me – 2 Has a sense of humour – 2 Is well behaved – 2, 3, 4 You can work with a boy or a girl so long as you are in the same maths group – 3 Abilities – 3 Same ability - 3 I would like to work with my friends and the people who are the same level at maths as me – 4 I would like to work with Sarah because we are in the same maths group and we are the same level – 4 I get on well with them – 4 I can work well with them and they are the same ability as me – 4 A friend, kind, brainy, helpful – 4 Funny - 4	Is kind – 1, 2,3, 4 Is a boy – 1, 2, 3, 4 Is a girl – 1, 2, 4 Is similar to me – 1, 2, 3 Is the same ability as me – 1, 2 **Is in my class group – 1, 2** Is well behaved – 1 Has similar interests to me – 1, 2, 4 Has a sense of humour – 1, 4 Tries their best – 1, 2, 3 Is in my Literacy group – 1, 2 Good at football – 1 Funny – 1 People who have a laugh – 1 Is well behaved – 2 Is helpful – 2,3, 4 **Sits next to me – 2** My friend – 2 Is my expertise – 2 **Sits next to me - 3** Likes to talk – 3,4 Getting on with each other – 3 Can work and get on with people – 3 Is friendly – 3 Get on well with each other – 3 Get on with a friend – 3 Making friends – 3 We have the same personality and all girly girls – 3	Good at sport – 1, 2, 4 Likes to talk – 1, 2 Is a girl – 1 Is similar to me – 1, 4 **Who I play with out of school – 2** Has a sense of humour – 2, 3, 4 Has similar interests to me – 3 Good at sport – 3 Has similar personality and same interests – 3 Has a sense of humour and knows when to stop – 3 *School Council – 3* Likes football – 3 If you like to talk about the same things – 3 Likes rugby and football – 3 Is a boy – 4 Is well behaved – 4 I would like to play with boys because I like football and I would like to play with girls as well when I am not playing football – 4 I like playing with boys because they have more time playing football because they have no time to argue – 4 I would play with people in my year because I have got to know them and we can talk about stuff I wouldn't be able to talk about with a Year 4 – 4 I would play with people who are kind and caring - 4

	Someone who doesn't get you or themselves at lessons – 3 Working together – 3 Likes cricket – 3 Good friend – 3 **Is in my class group - 4** I like to play and work with girls and boys - 4	

Appendix O – summary of findings from individual interview Activity B

In River Close 8 pupils took part in individual interviews. These children only recorded feelings for their class 'homegroups'. All the children were sitting with at least one friend.

In Newton Park, 7 children took part in individual interviews and in Bridgeford, 12 pupils. These children recorded feelings for literacy, maths and class groups. Sometimes they were sitting on a table group with friends and sometimes friends were not present on the table.

Sitting with friends	Children who experienced positive feelings	Children who experienced mixed feelings	Children who experienced negative feelings
River Close –	6 children	1 child	1 child
Newton Park	Literacy – 4 children Maths – 3 children Class – 2 children	Literacy – 1 child Maths – 3 children Class – 1 child	Literacy – 0 children Maths – 0 children Class – 0 children
Bridgeford	Literacy – 2 children Maths – 3 children Class – 1 child	Literacy – 1 child Maths – 0 children Class – 3 children	Literacy – 1 child Maths – 0 children Class – 0 children
Not sitting with friends			
River Close	0 children	0 children	0 children
Newton Park	Literacy – 1 children Maths – 1 child Class – 1 child	Literacy – 1 child Maths – 0 children Class – 2 children	Literacy – 0 children Maths – 0 children Class – 1 child
Bridgeford	Literacy – 3 children Maths – 6 children Class – 3 children	Literacy – 3 children Maths – 1 child Class – 2 children	Literacy – 2 children Maths – 2 children Class – 3 children

Appendix P – feelings related to their groups for children who took part in individual interviews in Bridgeford

Sitting with friends and positive feelings

Callum – 6H	**Maths** - Concentrate more, happy **Literacy** - eager, I look forward to it, concentrate more,
Gina – 6TM	**Literacy** - helpful, like, I look forward to it.
Ruth – 6H	**Maths** - Happy, comfortable, helpful

Not sitting with friends and positive feelings

Bill – 6TM	**Maths** - like, I look forward to it, successful, comfortable, helpful, happy **Class** - concentrate more, I look forward to it, successful, helpful, happy, like
Ben – 6TM	**Maths** - Concentrate more, comfortable, helpful
Robert – 6A	**Maths** - happy, I look forward to it, like, eager, quiet, content, fun **Class** - comfortable, concentrate more, helpful, happy, like, content, fun
Kevin – 6A	**Maths** - like, look forward to it, successful, happy, helpful, concentrate, comfortable, fun, jubilant
Linda – 6A	**Maths** - successful, I look forward to it, helpful
Nick – 6H	**Maths** - happy, comfortable, like and content **Literacy** - helpful.
Ruth – 6H	**Literacy** - Happy, comfortable, I look forward to it
Timmy – 6TM	**Maths** - look forward to it, happy, helpful, concentrate more, happy **Literacy** - successful, helpful, I look forward to it. **Class** - helpful, successful

Sitting with friends and mixed feelings

Robert – 6A	**Literacy** - happy, successful, like, content, fun, sometimes unsuccessful, I don't look forward to it.
Annabelle – 6A	**Maths** - concentrate more, lonely, frustrated, bullied, unsuccessful, nervous, I don't look forward to it, helpful **Class** - happy, comfortable, like, concentrate more, distracted, helpful

| Kevin – 6A | **Class** - like, I look forward to it, successful, happy, helpful, comfortable, fun, jubilant, distracted (there are friends on his table and they talk about things other than work) |

Not sitting with friends and mixed feelings

Bill – 6TM	**Literacy** - happy, eager, like, helpful, left out
Annabelle – 6A	**Literacy** - unhelpful, I look forward to it, successful, concentrate more, distracted, helpful, content, eager, jealous, fun, jubilant.
Kevin – 6A	**Literacy** - successful, happy, helpful, distracted (because they all start talking about other things), fun.
Nick – 6H	**Class** - helpful, frustrated.
Ruth – 6H	**Class** - frustrated, happy

Sitting with friends and negative feelings

| Ben – 6TM | **Literacy** - uncomfortable, lonely (see Appendix M) |

Not sitting with friends and negative feelings

Ben – 6TM	**Class** - distracted, unhelpful, left out
	• Ben – well Lori sometimes distracts me from my work and I don't get much work done. Gus' always calling us names and things and swearing at us…..and we've told Mr Peters loads and loads of times but he won't take any notice. Hattie and Penny are really really quiet.
	• Ben – yes because Lori always wants to do something and I always want to do the opposite thing………we disagree a lot.
	• Ben – I feel distracted………….I kind of feel unhelpful to them because when I'm not on a table with my friends, I want to keep myself to myself…..but like they're always asking me questions that I sometimes don't know the answer to.
Callum – 6H	**Class** - dislike, distracted, frustrated
	• Callum – I don't like the table I'm on now because Zachery…….Zachery he's awful. He's moody, he argues and so we just have to block him out…..he's not a very nice person to us….he….he….he sometimes swears at us..
	• Callum – and the thing with Zachery is that he messes around and laughs at his own things and we don't find them funny…
Gina – 6TM	**Maths** - unhelpful, I feel left out (see Appendix M)

Linda – 6A	**Literacy -** isolated, bullied, left out, unsuccessful, insulted, lonely, ignore, frustrated, unliked, distracted, uncomfortable. • Linda – yes literacy……nobody really talks to me….it's just the boys talking and like Sandra's real quiet….. • Linda – well, they just call people names and they call me names……it's being bullied and I feel insulted. • Linda – well they're just…they're like ignorant basically…they don't ever concentrate and listen to other people's ideas and they're always quite silly but like…that's just the boys ….like Carl and Jacob and Kirk, they're always silly but like Sandra she gets on with her work and she's like quite a quiet person…….but I don't have no-one to talk to on my table….that would like help me….
Terry – 6TM	**Maths -** left out, isolated (see Appendix M) **Literacy -** isolated, lonely (see Appendix M) **Class -** uncomfortable, I don't look forward to it, ignored, sad dislike, unhelpful, distracted Terry – ….because Jacob and Jake are always making fun of me

Appendix Q – Findings from individual interview Activity C

The ideal group

27 children took part in individual interviews.

1 child did not want to do this activity.

1 child did their own version of the activity and wrote down who they liked and disliked in the groups that they were already in.

25 children chose an ideal group

Ideal group choices	Number of children
1a)Children chosen from the same class	17
1b)Children chosen from different classes	8
2a) Single gender group	17
2b) Mixed gender group	8
3a) Same perceived ability	2 (both children just chose higher ability)
3b) Mixed perceived ability	23

Appendix R – Analytical Statements

AS1 – It seems that the more visible, formal and multi-layered the methods of ability grouping and differentiation, the more importance children attach to these groupings.

AS2 – When children are in set groups, it seems that they are given fewer opportunities to make decisions about their groupings.

AS3 – It seems that children believe that good working relationships are important in their groups and they perceive that teachers also see these as being important.

AS4 – Ability grouping seems to have an influence on peer relationships from an academic and social perspective in the classroom but does not appear to impact on existing friendship groups.

AS5 – Members of the wider peer group, who children come into contact with in ability groups, can display similar positive characteristics with regard to working relationships as friends are perceived to do.

AS6 – Some negative peer relationships, which act to hinder working relationships, are not able to be identified through observation alone.

AS7 – Stereotypical views about other children seem to be generated and perpetuated when children are placed in structured and relatively inflexible ability groups.

AS8 – Overt and visible methods of differentiation seem to impact on the way children's perceived abilities are viewed by their peers