



ATTAINMENT GAP

# Setting ‘puts Scotland’s poor at a disadvantage’

*Pupils much more likely to be grouped by ability here than abroad, research shows*

EMMA SEITH

PUPILS IN Scottish secondaries are more likely to be grouped by ability than those in almost any other western country outside of the UK, new figures show, prompting one leading academic to warn that the practice puts poorer pupils at a “double disadvantage”.

An inclusion expert has also warned that grouping by ability is now increasingly common in Scottish primary schools – just as the government is striving to “close the attainment gap” between the most and least well-off pupils.

Although Scotland has among the least academically selective school admissions systems in the world, last week’s Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) results show that almost 92 per cent of Scottish secondaries grouped students by ability for “some subjects”. This compared with an average of 38 per cent across member nations of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which runs Pisa (see box, right).

Grouping by ability within classes for some subjects is also more likely to take place in Scotland – 85.7 per cent against an OECD average of 50.5 per cent.

Professor Becky Francis, director of University College London’s Institute of Education, said that grouping by ability caused the lowest attainers – who tended to come from disadvantaged backgrounds – to perform significantly worse than if they were placed in mixed-ability classes. She also hit out at the “cultural assumption or myth” that it is harder to teach mixed ability.

Professor Francis told *TESS*: “Given that kids from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be overrepresented in these [lower] sets and streams, the disadvantage is doubled because they come into the system behind their more affluent peers and then are subject to practices

that we know will have a detrimental impact on their progress and educational outcomes.”

## ‘Very detrimental effect’

Professor Sheila Riddell, an inclusion expert at the University of Edinburgh, said that setting was fine for children in top groups, who would largely be from middle-class backgrounds, but had a “very detrimental effect” on lower groups, likely to be from poorer backgrounds.

“Setting has the effect of promoting social class differences rather than eroding them,” she said. “My impression is that primary schools in Scotland do a lot of setting by ability, placing children in different groups for reading and maths, which is going to

depress the expectations of children from poorer backgrounds right from the start.”

Professor Francis, who is leading a major research project into the issue of setting involving 140 secondaries (see box, below right), said that the problem with grouping by ability is not just the impact on the confidence and self-esteem of the pupils who find themselves in the bottom classes.

Lower-ability classes, she said, tend to be assigned worse teachers, expectations tend to be low, courses are less demanding and there is often little movement between classes.

Mixed-ability teaching was common in subjects like geography and history, thus proving it can be done, she said.



Professor Francis added: "If you just assume you are teaching a homogenous group, all the same level, you could end up teaching lazily and poorly to the middle of that group.

"Teachers should always be differentiating their practice because there will be different levels of attainment in the class and the nuance of talents in different areas of a subject. Unless these factors are taken into consideration, the teaching will not be of a high quality."

'Setting has the effect of promoting social class differences'

Andrea Bradley, assistant secretary of the EIS teaching union, said pupils should be taught in mixed-ability groupings as far as possible.

But this practice has not taken off in Scotland because some form of selection has been the norm for generations and no real consensus has been reached about "the justness of teaching mixed ability". Resourcing is also an issue, given that mixed-ability classes work best with fewer pupils, she added.

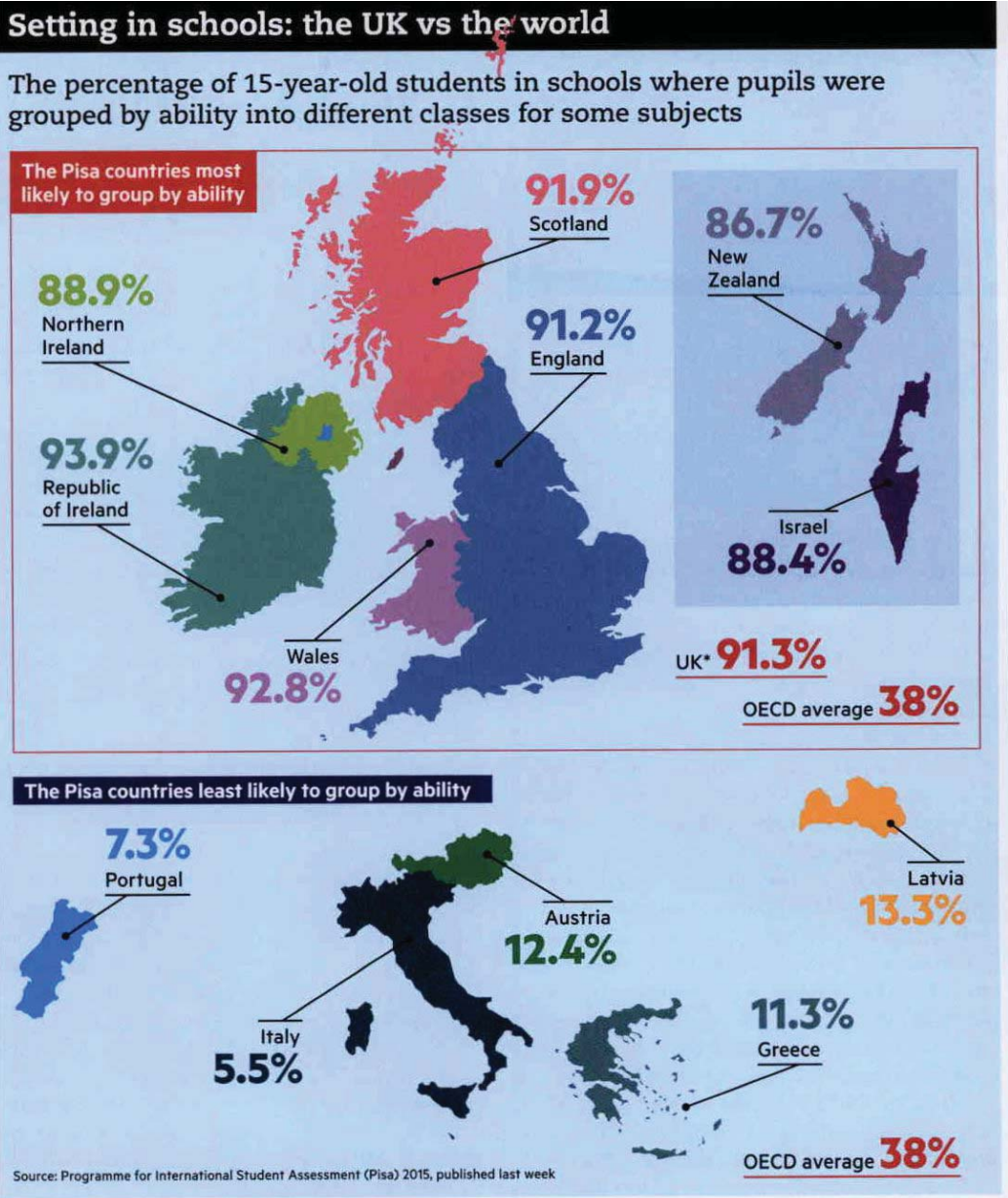
"High-quality mixed-ability learning has to be properly resourced," said Ms Bradley. "Part of the reason Scotland has not embraced this to the same degree as other countries is because there has not been the determination by government to resource it."

A Scottish government spokesperson said that ministers were "fully focused" on closing the attainment gap but setting arrangements were "up to individual schools" depending on "young people's learning needs".

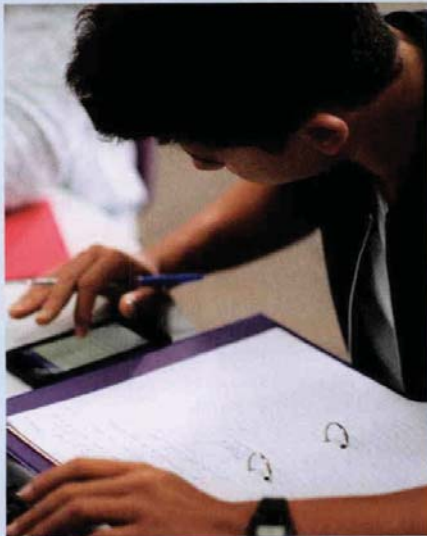
They added: "Inspections show that neither setting nor mixed ability is an indicator of whether young people will have good learning experiences. What matters is whether they are receiving the right level of support and challenge to attain as highly as possible." ●

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**UCL research into setting**



Grouping pupils into classes by ability is bad for the lowest attainers, who often are the most disadvantaged children in school, research suggests.

However, academics at University College London's Institute of Education (IoE) are investigating whether setting can work if it is done well. They want to see if all pupils can prosper if a school strips out bad practice like giving the bottom classes the worst teachers, and tackles problems like having low expectations of these classes and less demanding courses.

IoE director Becky Francis said: "What we don't know is which of these different factors make the biggest difference

and we don't know what would happen if we tried to remediate these bad practices, and that's what this current study is looking at."

The other aspect of the study, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation, is examining whether it is possible to overcome the common barriers to mixed-ability teaching.

However, grouping by ability in maths has become so entrenched that the research team struggled to find schools willing to have mixed-ability groups for the first two years of secondary. The researchers wanted to find 20 but in the end they had to settle for 13.

The researchers have also found that there are practical reasons why bad practices exist in setting. For instance, the lack of fluidity between classes was sometimes down to the higher sets moving at a faster pace, making it difficult for their peers from lower sets to join them seamlessly, academics found.

Meanwhile, movement downwards for pupils struggling in higher sets was stymied because of concerns about pupil morale and also because of pressure from parents. Professor Francis added: "Both these scenarios beg questions about our level of dedication to this notion of attainment grouping."

**Don't panic, says Pisa expert**

Scotland is not failing in comparison with other countries and there is no need for "people to run around like their heads are cut off", an expert at the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa) has told *TESS*.

Jeffrey Mo also warned the Scottish government against using the country's results in the Pisa 2015 study to serve a political purpose.

In the wake of the publication of Pisa by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) last week,

education secretary John Swinney said that the results underlined "the case for radical reform of Scotland's education system". However, Mr Mo urged the education

secretary to be more cautious in the way that he interpreted Scotland's results.

"One thing we see is that Scotland is basically at the OECD average, so it's hardly failing in comparison to other countries. It's actually on a par with them. So there is no need for

people to run around like their heads are cut off," said Mr Mo. "There could be improvement, but that applies to any education system. There is nothing to say that Scotland is failing; that is a complete overreaction."

He also disputed claims by Ofsted chief Sir Michael Wilshaw that Scotland and Wales were dragging the UK down.

The UK average was weighted by the number of students in each individual home nation.

Scotland was so much smaller than England that the extent to which it influenced the overall score was almost insignificant, he said.

