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# **‘Modernising the comprehensive principle’: selection, setting and the institutionalisation of educational failure**

Marta Araújo\*

*University of London, UK*

This paper examines issues of selection, merging an analysis of policy with data from a qualitative case study. It focuses on the ‘modernisation of the comprehensive principle’ proposed by New Labour, in which selection within schools (through setting ‘by ability’) is increasingly encouraged. Data collected at an inner-city, multi-ethnic comprehensive school are used to illustrate how discourses on selection are being reworked locally. The school was largely supportive of setting, despite some teachers acknowledging that the practice prioritised high-achieving pupils with perceived ‘good attitudes’. In the form under study, setting involved disadvantaged pupils from ethnic-minority backgrounds, particularly those who received support in English as an Additional Language. It is concluded that setting did not contribute to an inclusive agenda for education, in spite of government claims of increased ‘standards for all’.

## **Introduction**

Selection was at the heart of Conservative policy-making in education. This gave a particular flavour to ensuing Labour Governments’ expression of education ‘standards’ for ‘the many, not the few’ (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997, p. 11), intended as a statement of its commitment to an inclusive education system. While making it harder for schools to be selective, New Labour has defended a comprehensive system that increasingly differentiates pupils by ‘ability’. It called this ‘modernising the comprehensive principle’ (Labour Party, 1997). However, as I attempt to show in this paper, setting pupils by ‘ability’ merely replaced crude processes of selection. Official discourses on different ‘abilities’ are helping

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\*Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Colégio de S Jerónimo, Apartado 3087, 3001-401 Coimbra, Portugal. Email: [marta@ces.uc.pt](mailto:marta@ces.uc.pt)

'modern' comprehensives to enforce subtle processes of selection, maintaining social inequalities in education.

### **Greenfield Comprehensive**

The study on which this paper is based was carried out at a coeducational, multi-ethnic, inner-city comprehensive school, with an intake of over 600 pupils. When fieldwork began in 1999, Greenfield Comprehensive<sup>1</sup> had just been re-launched as a *Fresh Start* school. This was one of New Labour's flagship initiatives to raise 'standards', involving closing a school considered to be 'failing', then re-opening it with improved facilities and a new name, school management and staff.

Millhaven High, the school that Greenfield replaced, had gained a bad reputation in the national press for low academic achievement, high levels of truancy and disruption. The school was also reported to be unpopular within its local community, with just over one-half of the available places filled. In spite of these widespread negative images, there was also public recognition of its success in teaching children who *became refugees*<sup>2</sup> in England, and the staff was said to be committed and caring. This, however, did not translate into easily measurable results so that the local council decided to close the school and give it a *Fresh Start*. In a school with *Fresh Start* status, matters directly related to achievement (such as resources, curriculum innovations or pedagogy) were meant to be of the utmost importance. However, after a violent incident took place on the school premises, discipline and control issues became a priority.

During the period in which data were collected, the *Fresh Start* initiative suffered several blows as three head teachers resigned within one month and one school closed within one year. Confidence in the initiative was further undermined by the announcement that three other *Fresh Start* schools required special measures and that the initiative was failing to boost results (Dickens, 2000). I therefore found an atmosphere of uncertainty at Greenfield Comprehensive (Araújo, forthcoming).

The socio-economic deprivation of the community served by Greenfield was reflected in the number of pupils eligible for free school meals,<sup>3</sup> which was over one-half of its total number. This was almost three times the national average, which, at the time, stood at 18.3% (DfEE, 2000), but a smaller proportion than at Millhaven, where they had represented around three-quarters of the school population. As this was not due to any significant departure of free school meal beneficiaries, it seemed that the new school was attracting more advantaged families and had a more mixed intake in terms of social background than that of the 'failing' school it replaced. The cultural diversity of the school was reflected in more than 30 different languages being spoken and over 40% of pupils receiving support for English as an Additional Language (EAL), the corresponding national average for the latter at this time being eight per cent (DfEE, 2000). Over two-thirds of pupils came from ethnic minority backgrounds and 15 per cent became refugees in England, originating mainly from Somalia, Turkey, Kurdistan and Albania. At Millhaven High, these pupils had represented around 30 per cent of the school population.

## **Methodology**

The study aimed to explore how perceptions of pupils' discipline and attainment, as well as of their ethnicity, gender and social class, were shaping the construction of schooling identities. Some areas of interest emerged throughout the period of field-work, and education policy issues came to feature more prominently than had initially been envisaged.

The study started in 1999 and was conducted for a period of approximately 18 months. It focused mainly on a group of pupils aged 11–12 and their teachers throughout their years seven and eight. The methods of data collection used were semi-structured interviews, direct observation and collection of documents. A total of 23 pupils out of 26 in the form under study were interviewed in friendship groups of two in Year 7, and 17 of these were interviewed individually in Year 8. Seven of their teachers (including the form tutor), two learning mentors and the head teacher were also interviewed, some twice. Direct observation focused particularly on science lessons and personal and social education lessons. The choice of these subjects was not related to their content but to different academic statuses, forms of assessment and classroom atmospheres with which they are associated. This proved useful in understanding both social interaction and the construction of pupil identities in different classroom contexts. In this paper, I will focus on science lessons as this was the subject in which overt academic differentiation occurred. Observation also included school assemblies and meetings with parents. Finally, I collected and analysed school documents, including the prospectus, discipline policy, pupil records, incident reports and tables of attainment. Key government documents, including Education Acts, Green and White Papers, official guidelines on education and political manifestos, were also examined. The data were analysed using a loose version of grounded theory as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), particularly the method of 'open coding' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## **Selection and comprehensive schooling in education policy**

The Education Act 1944 has been pointed out as a key piece of legislation in the creation of the welfare state in Britain (Tomlinson, 2001). Responding to the demands of labour of the post-war period, it extended access to education to social groups traditionally excluded from secondary schooling (Benn & Simon, 1972; Lowe, 1988). This created an expectation of increased social justice that was soon frustrated because the Act also provided a framework in which the continuation of a selective educational system in England was ensured (Lowe, 1992; Simon, 1991).

The Act prefaced the creation of a tripartite system at secondary level, in many areas made up of grammar, secondary modern and technical schools, based on the belief that pupils had one of three types of interests and 'abilities' (Norwood Committee, 1943). The assumption that individual children could, at an early age, be placed as one of three types through 11-plus selection was held to justify a system that catered for their needs in different schools. However, in the mid-1950s there was

controversy over the adequacy of the process whereby pupils were selected and a concern that those from working-class backgrounds were disadvantaged (Ball, 1981; Lowe, 1988; Tomlinson, 2001). Despite the argument that a 'parity of esteem' would operate between the three types of school, grammar schools held highest status, being very popular with the public and media, serving to educate the state-system elite. The vast majority of pupils attended secondary moderns, which research showed had inferior resources and less-qualified staff (Crook *et al.*, 1999; Lowe, 1988; Tomlinson, 2001).

Over the next two decades, it came to be increasingly widely believed that the tripartite system could not accommodate growing demand for educational provision in the suburbs of large English cities and in some rural areas (Lowe, 1988). In such areas, especially where building and staffing different types of school was not viable, comprehensive schools could provide a more resource-efficient solution. So, many comprehensives were set up for economic reasons rather than in pursuit of egalitarian principles in education (Benn & Simon, 1972; Ball, 1981; Lowe, 1988).

Notwithstanding their unpopularity in the media and within some political circles, comprehensives were 'tested out' by a few individual English and Welsh local education authorities (LEAs) from the 1950s, and more markedly from the 1960s, even though there was initially an absence of political or theoretical agreement on their purposes (Ball, 1981). They often coexisted with local grammars, which educated the 'most able' (Lowe, 1988; Crook *et al.*, 1999) and were mainly attended by working-class pupils and those from the middle classes that had not succeeded at 11-plus (Lowe, 1988). Even so, mixing children from different social backgrounds in a single school was only seen as desirable as long as streaming<sup>3</sup> provided some sort of selection (Benn & Simon, 1972; Crook *et al.*, 1999). Thus, relatively naïve expectations that comprehensive schools could contribute towards lessening social differences were frustrated (Ball, 1981).

When Labour took office in 1974 it proposed that LEAs should expand comprehensive schooling. Despite Conservatives winning the 1979 general election within a context of a decline in the British economy, the 1980s saw a steady expansion of comprehensive education (Simon, 1991; Crook *et al.*, 1999). Public support for comprehensive education grew, curtailing Tory attempts to return to selective schooling through the traditional system of grammar and secondary moderns (Simon, 1991). As the comprehensive movement gradually became established, selection *within* school continued to characterise it—this time via the allocation of pupils into different academic routes (Simon, 1991). A crucial return to selection *between* schools also marked the 1980s and early 1990s, although sometimes meeting firm antagonism from the Labour Opposition (Edwards *et al.*, 1999). The 1980, 1988 and 1993 Education Acts introduced measures that supported private education and parental choice, including the Assisted Places Scheme, the creation of new types of self-governed schools (Grant-Maintained schools and City Technology Colleges), an increase in the number of specialist secondary schools and the introduction of grammar streams in comprehensives (Crook *et al.*, 1999). In the mid-1990s, Conservative proposals encouraging the creation of new grammars and increased selection in other

types of school, including those controlled by LEAs, were integrated into the 1996 Education Bill. However, they met strong opposition and were withdrawn from the 1997 Education Act, published just six weeks before the general election (Tomlinson, 2001). When New Labour took office in May 1997, selection *between* and *within* schools was widely prevalent although, in many areas, comprehensive schooling was well established and attended by more high-achieving and middle-class pupils than ever before (Benn & Chitty, 1996).

### **‘Modernising the comprehensive principle’**

New Labour in office expressed a commitment to social justice that was absent from Conservative discourses and sought to redefine education policy on selection, subjecting grammar schools to local parental approval and ending the Assisted Places Scheme. This did not mean, however, that selection was off the agenda; rather, that it was replaced by the language of ‘choice’ and ‘diversity’, seen by many as being ‘much harder to argue against than selection’ (Edwards *et al.*, 1999, p. 32). The specialisation of schools in a particular curriculum area was an example of increased variety of educational provision that concealed continuing hierarchy through discourses on difference and diversity (Edwards *et al.*, 1999, p. 32). This move towards specialisation was initiated by the Tories, but was significantly expanded by New Labour. Nowadays, more than two-thirds of all secondary schools in England have specialist status (BBC, 2005) and may select up to 10% of their pupils by ‘ability’ in their area of expertise. Thus, although New Labour came to argue that it ‘will not allow any extension of selection by ability’ (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2004, p. 8), the fact that so many schools have specialised means that selection has increased. Even though specialisation may help the state sector to attract pupils from middle-class families, making schools more *comprehensive*, the possibility exists that, in the quasi-market of education, oversubscribed schools might tend to turn down socially disadvantaged pupils (Edwards *et al.*, 1999).

In relation to selection *within* schools, New Labour came to ‘modernise the comprehensive principle’ (Labour Party, 1997), proposing that streaming should be replaced by setting<sup>4</sup> as a way of maximising academic progress of both ‘high-fliers’ and ‘slower learners’:

In education, we reject both the idea of a return to the 11-plus and the monolithic comprehensive schools that take no account of children’s differing abilities. Instead we favour all—in schooling which identifies the distinct abilities of individual pupils and organises them in classes to maximise their progress in individual subjects. In this way we modernise the comprehensive principle, learning from the experience of its 30 years of application. (Labour Party, 1997, p. 3)

Catering for children of different ‘abilities’ within the same school was part of Labour government strategy to tackle underachievement, embodied in the expression ‘diversity within one campus’:

The challenge for schools is to ensure that all children, whatever their talents, develop their different abilities. We believe in ‘diversity within one campus’, with the method of teaching and the organisation of a school playing to the strengths of every child. Mixed ability grouping has not proved capable of doing this in all schools. It requires excellent teaching and in some schools has worked well. But in too many cases it has failed both to stretch the brightest and to respond to the needs of those who have fallen behind. Setting, particularly in science, maths and languages, is proving effective in many schools. We do not believe that any single model of grouping pupils should be imposed on secondary schools, but 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. (DfEE, 1997, p. 38)

Even though New Labour justified setting on the grounds that it benefited all children, previous research had suggested that this practice may deepen social inequalities in education. There was clear evidence of the over-representation in ‘lower sets’ of pupils from socially disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds, particularly boys (Troyna & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Often, this happened through the use of subjective criteria concerning behaviour and attitudes to allocate pupils into sets (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). In spite of this, the use of setting has been extended. Moreover, Labour only recommended monitoring the impact of grouping practices in relation to boys (DfEE, 1997), excluding ethnic equality from the public agenda.

The Labour Government also argued that setting was a more efficient strategy to raise ‘standards’ than teaching in ‘mixed-ability’ groups, even though academic research did not support this (see Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Boaler, 1997; Ireson & Hallam, 1999, 2001). Ireson and Hallam (1999), reviewing the literature in this area, concluded that research showed a mixed picture in relation to the advantages and shortcomings of grouping pupils by ‘ability’. What emerged as clear was that ‘ability’ grouping did not influence attainment in isolation from other factors, such as the school ethos, learning environment, teacher expectations or monitoring progress. Even when research focused specifically on ‘top set’ students it was suggested that not all pupils in this academic grouping saw their ‘standards’ raised. Boaler (1997) suggested that some high-attaining pupils in the ‘top set’ in mathematics, particularly girls, underachieved because of their placement in that grouping. This was explained by certain features of the ‘top set’ environment; the competitive atmosphere created pressure and anxiety and the rapid pace at which teachers delivered the material, in order to complete the national curriculum, compromised pupils’ understanding of what was being taught.

Finally, even though New Labour seems committed to developing the ‘abilities’ of all children, pupils perceived as ‘high-fliers’ are significantly targeted by their educational initiatives. Measures designed for ‘gifted’ pupils have included fast-tracking and accelerated learning (DfEE, 1997; DfES, 2002, 2005), encouraging the setting up of specialist schools and partnerships with independent schools (DfEE, 1997), the creation of an Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth<sup>5</sup> (DfEE, 2001) and expanding the City Academies<sup>6</sup> (Labour Party, 2001). Measures to improve educational



opportunities for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) seem rather small in comparison and are not packaged with the same sort of flashy innovation that characterises initiatives designed for the ‘most able’.

To sum up, in its drive to ‘raise standards’, the first of the most recent Labour Governments sought to ‘modernise the comprehensive principle’ so as to raise the achievement of ‘the many, not the few’ (DfEE, 1997, p. 11). In order to do so, it proposed ‘diversity within one campus’ (DfEE, 1997), offering differentiated pathways within a single school to pupils of different ‘abilities’. Although previous research does not confirm that the use of setting improves overall ‘standards’, this practice is being encouraged to sustain a comprehensive system that attracts more middle-class families than ever before (Benn & Chitty, 1996). In fact, in extending the use of setting and offering plenty of opportunities for the ‘more able’, the Labour Governments seem eager to attract middle-class voters (see Reay & Ball, 1997; Reay, 1998; Whitty, 2001).

### Setting at Greenfield Comprehensive

I will now illustrate how selection within a comprehensive school affected the daily lives and educational careers of pupils. I will look at setting in science in Year 8, as this was the academic subject on which classroom observation focused (see Methodology).

#### *Setting in science*

At Greenfield setting in science was initially used for Years 9, 10 and 11. One year later, as the school became increasingly supportive of this practice, it was also introduced for pupils in Year 8. In this year group, there were seven mixed or randomised ‘ability’ forms (known as registration forms). When these pupils attended science, they were redistributed into seven different groupings, according to their perceived ‘ability’ in that subject. Three forms had science at one time, another two at a different time and the remaining two forms at yet another time. In teachers’ words this meant that in science there were three ‘top sets’ (A, D, F), three ‘middle sets’ (B, E, G) and one ‘bottom set’ (C) (Figure 1). According to the head of science, Ms Babbra, sets E and G were more mixed than sets B or C alone, comprising a greater variety of students.

Top	A	D	F
Middle	B	E	G
Bottom	C		

Figure 1. Set groups in science in Year 8 at Greenfield Comprehensive

Similar ways of organising pupils into sets were used in other year groups, according to the number of teaching groups that existed.

The allocation of pupils to sets was decided jointly by all teachers in the Science Department. The criteria used included assessment grades from modular tests, assessment of practical work, Standard Assessment Task (SAT) results, the quantity and quality of homework, attendance and punctuality. More subjective criteria were also used to select pupils for sets; namely, behaviour, motivation and attitude.

[...] we use those (SAT exams and modular tests) as well, to help us decide which set they are going to go into. And also, in this school, it's things like *behaviour* ... which children shouldn't be together, so we split them ... A student may not be as bright but ends up in the higher set because of his behaviour ... but we have to do that. (Ms Babbra, Head of Science; emphasis added)

In other departments, criteria used seemed to be similar: 'They look at the exam results, and that sort of thing. Look at the homework and all the rest of it, and *look at their attitude*' (Ms Miller, mathematics teacher; emphasis added). Thus examination results seem to be one of several criteria used to select pupils, in addition to views of pupils' behaviour, motivation and attitudes, which are highly dependent on teachers' interpretations (see Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).

At Greenfield, I was told that the school had a 'broad' setting system, rather than a formal one. According to the Head of Science, Ms Babbra, this meant that pupils could be placed in different set groups for different subjects, as well as being moved between them throughout the school year. Nonetheless, she told me that in practice they kept movement between sets 'as small as possible', which suggests that the system was rather inflexible. Unless pupils were identified as being in the 'wrong' set within the first two or three weeks, they would only be moved at the end of each term. Ms Babbra argued that this was because pupils in different sets did curriculum modules in a different order, so that moving them in the middle of the term would prevent them from completing work on parts of the module. Thus, as one teacher put it, there was not 'a fantastic amount of movement' between sets (see Hallam & Toutounji, 1996). This meant that decisions about allocation of pupils into sets were of great importance to their future educational careers. If pupils were moved, they were informed of the reasons that had led to the decision, which could be:

Not being able to cope with the classwork. Not doing any homework because of lack of understanding. We do consider behaviour sometimes. When behaviour is an issue, then the student will be warned, 'You might be moved down to the lower set, because you're causing distractions to others within the group as well and it's not fair'. And that normally it scares them to think, 'Oh, I don't want to be moved down', and then their behaviour *improves*. Sometimes. But behaviour is considered as well as ability. (Ms Babbra, Head of Science; original emphasis)

Even though during her interview I gave no indication of what kind of movement I was referring to, she perceived movement between groups as being mostly downward. Arguably, this was because in practice only very seldom would the pupils allocated to a lower set be moved into a higher set. This was explained in the following way:



It usually is more successful when you get students moving from a higher group to a lower group. Because they get complacent. They go into the higher group and think, 'Oh, I'm brainy, I'm doing OK, I'm gonna stay here and I can coast, I don't have to work very hard'. And then when they're put down to the lower group, suddenly they start working because they want to move up to the higher group with their friends. So we get that ... That works very well within the groupings. (Ms Babbra, Head of Science)

Greenfield Comprehensive was consciously trying to build a culture of high expectations for all pupils. However, in practice this contrasted sharply with low expectations that teachers seemed to have of the pupils in lower groups. Also, it is clear that setting was seen as a disciplinary and motivational device.

### *Teachers' attitudes to setting*

At Greenfield, I was told that 'the school doesn't agree with setting in general'. However, this perceived ethos was not evident in practice: the staff I interviewed was all quite supportive of setting. For example, the head teacher endorsed government proposals to extend setting to Year 7:

The movement towards setting is very established now both through the numeracy strategy and through the literacy strategy. And it is certainly a feature of the way in which our local primary schools are working ... that they all are now grouping children by attainment, for their reading and writing, for their Mathematics, and also for their Science. And this is something which parents are now expecting secondary schools to continue. And so, as we have come to terms with the literacy strategy and the numeracy strategy we've almost inevitably had to follow the pathway of grouping children by attainment. Parents *expect* the secondary school to have these groupings by attainment. So that is something which ... er .... we have had to follow closely, and we have just moved in terms of Mathematics to that approach with our Year 7s and we will be introducing that ... hmmm ... from September for our new entry. (Mr Jones, head teacher)

Mr Jones pointed out that parents expected schools to use setting. Reviewing studies in this area, Reay (1998) argues that setting has been particularly attractive to middle-class parents, as they tend to benefit most from it. As Greenfield Comprehensive was becoming more attractive to more advantaged families than the school it replaced, some being seen by teachers as 'too posh' to be in a comprehensive school, it might be that opportunities given to advantaged pupils were being prioritised by Mr Jones. Furthermore, as the extract also suggests, the more schools (including primaries) used setting, the greater the 'need' was seen to differentiate between pupils' perceived 'abilities'. The use of setting in secondary school was, according to Mr Jones, inevitable in order to deal with the range of 'abilities' produced by primary schools. Thus, the more setting was used, the more it was perceived as a necessary practice by schools and the more it added to academic differentiation of pupils. As argued in relation to streaming, this system is 'self-validating in that it to some extent manufactures the differences on which it is justified by teachers' (Blishen, 1963, quoted by Hargreaves, 1967, p. 190). Thus, in having to respond to parents' expectations (arguably those that the school wished to retain) and the differentiated 'abilities' that were being reinforced in primary schools, Mr Jones had little possibility to contest the use of setting.

Teachers at Greenfield Comprehensive also supported setting, considered particularly helpful in highly structured ‘academic’ subjects such as mathematics and science (see Ball, 1981; Hallam & Toutounji, 1996). Teachers thought that there was a wide ‘range of students in each (registration) group’, and setting allowed them to teach a group with ‘a smaller range of ability’. Therefore, it was mainly teachers of these subjects who supported this practice. There was a strong belief among staff that it was easier to teach homogeneous groups, a preference documented long ago by Jackson (1964). Rather than spending more time with some pupils who took longer to do class work and trying to keep those students who had finished their exercises engaged, many teachers thought that a smaller mix of pupils each time ‘makes your job so much easier’ (Ms Coleman, science teacher). Moreover, the pressure that they felt in delivering the curriculum and preparing pupils for GCSE examinations was the reason given by some teachers as to why setting worked better:

Well, I teach set 1 and set 2. And I’m able to do GCSE work with *all* but one student in set 1, who can’t really cope with it. I’m able to take set 1 students off down tangents from the work. I don’t have to follow the syllabus to the exact level. I can take it higher, I can take it to the side ... And if I had complete mixed ability, you can’t do that to that kind of degree. [...] Unless you’re very skilled, and you’ve got lots of time, which we don’t have. We have 50 minutes and we have to change. Unless you have those things, it’s very difficult to teach mixed ability in Science. Especially when it comes to GCSEs. It’s nearly impossible for GCSEs. (Ms Akintola, science teacher)

Performance-related tables placed additional pressure on schools to do well at GCSE level. At Greenfield, the wide range of ‘abilities’ meant that teachers felt they had to use setting to improve their school’s position by achieving the current A\*–C benchmark (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). This was particularly important as the school was under close surveillance given its *Fresh Start* status.

It was the teachers who taught subjects that were not set (such as music or physical education) who disagreed with it most. Some were critical about issues of social justice, as one teacher told me:

[...] although in principle I’m not really in favour of ... setting, I’m not sure that the ... I think we have to look at what is the best *for the students*. Not what the teachers prefer! As a teacher I have a strong moral idea that ... equality of access and equality of opportunity, and I don’t ... I’ve worked in systems where students who were in the lower groups have not had the same quality of teaching, or the same access, or the same materials they had... they’ve been second classed. So, whenever anybody says setting, it reminds me, it sort of touches that nerve inside of me that thinks of inequality. And it shouldn’t have to. (Ms Clarke, personal and social education teacher)

This teacher pointed out that schools tended to offer different provisions to pupils in different sets, which research has confirmed (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).

Most teachers at Greenfield thought that setting was ‘best for the students’. However, this was because many of those interviewed thought that a ‘mixed-ability’ context disadvantaged ‘the more able’, acknowledging that they prioritised the needs of the ‘brightest pupils’:

I think by Year 8 the ability range is too wide. We've got people who really can handle quite hard work, that can handle quite complex work. And we've got people who can barely read. And it's not fair on either of them. I mean I think it's better if they are split up for ... Maths, for example [...] It's ... the top people on either side (each half of the timetable) are taken out. And then it's mixed ability underneath. So it's not very rigidly set. But it's certainly meant that the more able ones have been able to get on a lot faster. They're much easier to steer in the right direction all the time, so I think it's better. (Ms Miller, science and mathematics teacher)

In Year 8, they've got three sets, so it's top, middle, bottom. I think the top set will probably benefit from it the most, because sort of they're with the peers that have roughly the same... sort of intellect. So they can travel along quite fast. They haven't got to wait for like half a class to catch up, or have to wait for extension work to be handed out, because the teacher is dealing with someone who needs help. (Ms Coleman, science teacher; emphasis added)

The notion of 'ability' was central to their rationale. What is particularly striking in this quote is the certainty that some teachers have not only about the different 'abilities' of their students, but their relative stability.

Discourses on 'ability' were intertwined with those on discipline. For teachers, setting worked by concentrating disruptive pupils in the 'lower sets', so that those they perceived as having 'higher ability' would not be held back:

... because of the disruption that every form group experiences, maybe it's good for ... *all* the different abilities [...] If you can make it work, it's better to have mixed ability groupings. But if it's *holding the brightest ones back* all the time, then it's not fair, is it? (Ms Ojy, English teacher; second emphasis added).

... there are a certain core of Year 8 students who, it's not through lack of ability, it's through their lack of discipline, self-control ... that disrupt lessons. So if you have the ... if you set them, *the ones with higher ability* will probably be more focused in lessons, so they're not messing up ... (Mr McGuinness, physical education teacher; my emphasis)

What these teachers suggested is that some pupils' disruptive behaviour disturbed the success of 'brightest' pupils. The assumption was that behaviour is coincident with academic achievement: if 'more able' pupils were moved to the 'top set', they would not be disrupted by the undisciplined. This was despite the fact that some pupils perceived as 'not so able' were allocated to 'top set' *because* of their behaviour, as were others considered disruptive (*in spite of* their behaviour).

### *Setting pupils for failure?*

Setting is not only about academic achievement. Pupils' previous attainment at Key Stage 2 (KS2) in science did not entirely determine their allocation to groups, suggesting that the school did not merely reproduce academic differentiation made in its feeder primary schools, but added to it. Teachers thought of the 'top set' as a position occupied by those whom they considered 'ideal' pupils (Becker, 1952). They were not only 'able', but generally complied with school rules and had what was perceived as a positive *attitude* towards education. This was particularly important, as

pupils from some ethnic minorities, particularly boys, are more often perceived as having the ‘wrong attitude’ (see Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Araújo, 2005).

Nevertheless, setting depended on other factors besides ‘ability’, attitude and behaviour. At Greenfield there seemed to be some association between set groups and pupils categorised as having SEN. In Year 8, among those in the form under study, 14 pupils were in lower sets in science, eight of whom had SEN. Of the 12 pupils in the ‘top set’, only four had SEN.

More apparent, however, was the disproportionate allocation to the lower sets of pupils who received support for EAL. A teacher who noted this thought it was a practice that benefited these pupils:

I think the bottom set has mainly got more of the language difficulties in there. Kids that have difficulties with English. So they’ll benefit, because *they’re going nice and slowly, and do really easy stuff. Just to sort of warm them up into it.* (Ms Coleman, Science teacher, my emphasis)

In the form under study, 10 of the 14 pupils in lower sets received support for EAL, while in the ‘top set’ only one of 12 pupils had EAL support (Figure 2). This confirms previous research that suggests that pupils from ethnic minorities who receive support for EAL are disproportionately allocated to less prestigious academic routes (Wright, 1992; Troyna & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). These studies also suggested that when allocating pupils with EAL to lower sets, teachers are associating language acquisition with learning difficulties. Thus, EAL acts as a ‘screening device’ (Troyna & Siraj-Blatchford, 1993, p. 4) to establish which pupils have the ‘ability’ to be allocated to different sets, differentiating pupils’ educational careers.

This was apparent at Greenfield Comprehensive. Teachers seemed to see it as ‘natural’ that such pupils were in lower sets because they had missed out on their learning due to difficulties in English, which was not their mother tongue. However, this did not always seem to be the case. Some of the pupils in the form who had EAL support complied fully with teachers’ expectations of pupils in ‘top sets’. The case of Cetin, a Turkish pupil, was illustrative. The Head of Science in Year 7, Mr Roberts, thought that Cetin had been allocated to the ‘top set’ in science in his Year 8, because

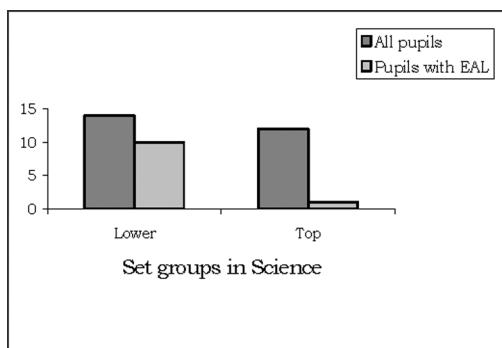


Figure 2. Pupils with EAL support and set groups in science in the form under study

he was a 'very good scientist' and a 'very nice kid'. Many of his teachers described him as 'very bright' and 'quite quiet', participating well and putting effort into his academic work:

He's a very well motivated student, actually. I can see him going on and progressing on, going off to University. Very motivated. He's really pushing himself, and for someone that young, 'cause he's only 12, I think, he's actually doing very well. (Ms Akintola, science teacher in Year 8)

Teachers, including the Head of Science, had very high expectations of his work. Nonetheless, he had, in fact, been allocated to a lower set in science. When confronted with this, Mr Roberts later came to suggest that Cetin's problem was his English.

It might be the case that pupils like Cetin did not receive adequate language support. However, pressure put on schools by governments' 'standards' rhetoric, rather than raising the achievement of the many, may place a disproportionate emphasis on the pupils fitting 'the logic of an A-C economy' (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). That is to say, schools are being pressed to invest more resources on pupils seen as 'able' to get at least C grades in GCSE examination results, improving its position in performance tables. At Greenfield, there seemed to be low expectations that pupils who had EAL support could improve the school's position. Thus, for many teachers, the over-representation of pupils with EAL support in the lower settings seemed only 'natural' and advantageous to pupils themselves. At an institutional level, however, this practice is failing pupils from some ethnic minorities by not allowing them to progress at the same rate as their peers. With over 40% of pupils having EAL support at Greenfield Comprehensive, setting may, thus, be benefiting the few, not the many. It seemed that the real concern at Greenfield was for 'bright' pupils being held back and those moving to other schools. In the form studied, seven pupils left the school during the period of my fieldwork. All of them were in the 'top set' in science.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

New Labour had been insisting that 'setting should be the norm' (DfEE, 1997, p. 38). Data collected at Greenfield suggested that, in this respect, policy-making and teaching were not two worlds apart. However, this does not mean that policy-makers and teachers agreed on the motives for expanding setting.

The interest of policy-makers in this matter may be to attract middle-class parents to, and restore their confidence in, the state sector. Although, according to New Labour, encouraging setting aims to increase 'standards for all', research tends not to support this. Thus, we should question this choice of strategy in the light of whose interests are being served. Several authors have suggested that New Labour continued many Conservative education policies in order to maximise votes (Thrupp, 2001; Whitty, 2001). Although, as Thrupp (2001) argued, it is difficult to carry out insider research on middle-class impact on policy processes, we should not ignore this

concern to please middle-class voters. New Labour's rhetoric of raising 'standards' through setting in fact echoes the introduction of streaming when the first comprehensives were set up, from the 1940s onward. If initially heterogeneous 'ability' grouping was virtually 'unthinkable', by the 1960s it could be seen in many schools as an attempt to raise their profile and make them more attractive to middle-class families. Research has suggested that many advantaged families make use of their cultural and economic resources to move their children away from inner-city deprived schools (Whitty, 2001). The strategies employed to achieve this can include moving to the private sector, moving house to a better catchment area, or "colonizing" particular parts of public education in ways that make it 'safe' for their own children' (Whitty, 2001, p. 291). In order to counteract such trends, deprived schools can become more appealing if they provide these families with 'safe' spaces *within* the school, away from children seen as 'educational failures'. Indeed, many middle-class parents' support for comprehensive schooling depends on the use of setting (Ball *et al.*, 1996). Its encouragement can then be seen as a strategy to raise the profile of state schools and make them more attractive to middle-class families. Thus, I would agree with Brown *et al.*'s (2000) suggestion that Labour's encouragement of setting is 'presumably aimed at retaining middle-class parents in inner-city schools' (p. 464).

Turning to the local level, it is up to schools to decide in which year groups and subjects setting will be implemented. At Greenfield, setting was being used increasingly. The head teacher suggested that this resulted from parents' expectations and its increasing use in primary schools, differentiating pupils' 'abilities'. This suggested that the freedom that schools have in contesting this practice may be constrained by the wider policy context and interests of more advantaged families. Teachers considered that it made their job easier in terms of delivering the National Curriculum and preparing pupils for GCSE examinations. Working on the assumption that attainment and behaviour go hand-in-hand, many of them thought that setting would automatically allocate disruptive pupils to the lower sets, making it easier for them to enforce classroom discipline and allow 'brighter' pupils to learn undisturbed. Data collected suggested that it was mostly such practical issues related to classroom management that led them to support setting, combined with the need to respond to the imperative that the school performed well in GCSE examinations. Thus, even though the motives of policy-makers and teachers might be diverse, setting was seen as an appealing teaching strategy in these particular policy circumstances, resulting in teachers' willingness to implement it in their classrooms.

Significantly, teachers' discourses revealed they were not aware of research that raised critical questions about the success of setting in raising 'standards' and its consequences for equality, even though many admitted that the practice favoured pupils seen as 'more able'. In the form studied, academic selection through setting resulted in some pupils being given fewer opportunities for academic success, sometimes independently of their previous attainment at KS2. The school added to pupils' academic differentiation through articulation of discourses on setting, 'ability', and discipline and those on ethnicity. As I have argued, it was the formally and informally expressed criteria used to decide on allocation of pupils to sets that



resulted in practices that disadvantaged pupils from certain ethnic backgrounds, who were mainly disadvantaged by some teachers' poor expectations and the use of EAL as an allocative criterion. With little movement between sets, they were striving for limited academic success. The school was thus 'cooling out' (Ball, 1981, p. 135, after Clark, 1960) their expectations, privileging those who were traditionally more advantaged.

Although Greenfield was a *Fresh Start* school, the idea that it educated some outstanding pupils seemed more satisfactory than being successful in raising the aspirations of a deprived local community. This was related, in my view, to a wider rhetoric of 'standards' and the pressure it placed on schools (particularly those seen as 'failing') to do well in performance-related tables. In a context in which this was the dominant criterion of success, allowing schools to retain funding and to continue to do well, many preferred to allocate more resources to those seen as fitting 'the logic of an A-C economy' (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000) at the expense of improved 'standards' for *all*. Setting pupils from an early age is not likely to reduce achievement gaps between different groups of pupils but rather to limit some pupils' opportunities at a later age. Thus, while Labour Governments have been encouraging a supposedly softer approach towards selection issues, they have not truly addressed inequalities in education.

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## Notes

1. All names were changed to preserve the anonymity of participants.
2. I borrowed this expression from Ball *et al.* (2000), as it stresses the intrinsic contextuality of the concept.
3. I use free-meal eligibility here as a proxy for poverty as I could not collect any other data that would allow me to make inferences on social background.
4. Through streaming (or tracking), 'pupils are placed in classes on the basis of a test of their general ability. They remain in their streamed class for most subjects' (Ireson & Hallam, 2001, p. 10).
5. Through setting, 'Pupils are grouped according to their attainment in a particular subject. Setting may be imposed across a whole year group, across timetable halves, within a band or across mixed age classes. Sets may be serially ordered or there may be parallel sets' (Ireson & Hallam, 2001, p. 10).
6. Inspired by the model created by John Hopkins University in Baltimore, in the United States (Gillborn, 2002).
7. Based on the City Technology Colleges of previous Conservative Governments.

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