What about the under-achievers?

Teachers’ and under-achieving-ability-grouped pupils’ attitudes towards ability grouping in English at a lower secondary school in Sweden

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Abstract

This paper investigates how to individualize the tuition in English by using ability groupings. The study is primarily focusing on the group of under-achieving ability pupils since teachers have a special responsibility for those pupils who experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set for their education, according to the Curriculum for compulsory school Lpo 94. The main research question was if the groupings were positive or negative for the under-achieving pupils at school X, i.e. the compulsory school under investigation. In addition I also wanted to find out if the ability groupings at school X responded to the steering documents, i.e. the Curriculum in compulsory school and the Education Act. The study is based on primary data in the forms of interviews, with four English teachers, and questionnaires, answered by the under-achieving ability pupils.

Conclusions were drawn that the ability groupings seemed to be mostly negative concerning the under-achieving pupils. The groupings at school X are not supported in any steering documents either since the groupings are not temporary, they do to some extent put the pupils at a certain grade level and on a certain track which violates the Education Act. One of the conclusions in this paper is also that there should be clearer guidelines on how to approach this phenomenon.

Keywords: Ability grouping, setting, streaming, under-achieving pupils, individualisation, differentiation
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APPENDICES 1-2
1 Introduction

In 1946, English replaced German as a first foreign language in school (Johansson 2004[www]). Today, English is a core subject in Swedish secondary schools and upper secondary schools. It is a very important school subject as students must pass their English courses in order to qualify for upper secondary school. But there are those students who for different reasons have difficulties in reaching the goals set in the curriculum in English. In 2007, more than seven and a half thousand pupils in year nine did not reach the goals for a final grade in English (National Agency for Education, [www]).

The Swedish curriculum *Lpo 94* for compulsory school states that: “[…] the school has a special responsibility for those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set for the education” (1994:4). It is also stated in the contemporary curriculum that “education should be adapted to each pupil’s circumstances and needs” (*Lpo 94*:4). This is not a new concept, it is stated already in the Bible that “every child is to be taught in agreement with their ability” (Boström 2002). Today, all pupils are supposed to acquire the same knowledge in the same amount of time. A system like this assumes either everyone to be equal or a pedagogy that can meet the demands of equality when the preconditions are different. Demands and goals are formulated in relation to time: 749 defined goals to reach during 6 665 hours in comprehensive school i.e. the same amount of time and the same goals for everyone (Kroksmark 2001).

Today, Swedish schools of today are permeated by two kinds of goals which complement one another, namely *society’s goals* and *individual goals*. Wallby et al. (2001:34) state that the society’s goals emphasise the development of society in a certain direction. The individual goals give the opportunity to individualise where for example students’ interests and preconditions should be in focus. Öquist (2007 in Lindgren 2007), educational advisor at the Education Administration states that “[o]ne equal school for all might seem a bit contradictory considering the fact that our today’s society is permeated by an individual philosophy that states that all students should be able to choose according to their interests and develop according to their level of ability” [my translation] (Lindgren 2007). To individualise the tuition in mixed ability classrooms is something all teachers have to face since all pupils are different. It is one of the most complex missions for teachers to accomplish. There are different opinions on how to individualise the tuition and how to deal with mixed-ability classes in order to meet the demands of all pupils. This essay investigates one of the most common solutions to this problem i.e. *inner differentiation* in form of *ability grouping*, also
known as setting (British term) and regrouping (American term for ability grouping in a specific subject) (Wallby et al. 2001:80). There are polarised opinions about ability grouping all over the world and it is an often debated topic. Ability grouping is used in an attempt to create homogeneity in the classroom based on the assumption that pupils should be grouped by ability in order to have the best preconditions for learning. It is not simply an epistemological\textsuperscript{1} and pedagogical matter it is also an ideological, political, ethical and social dilemma concerning not only teachers but also politicians, psychologists, school leaders, pupils, parents and scientists (Wallby et al. 2001:11). In 2003, almost fifty percent of the headmasters chose the organizational solution of ability grouping in year nine, according to the data from the Education Administration’s national evaluation NU-03 (Lindgren 2007).

This paper investigates the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping in English at a lower secondary school. The school under investigation is referred to as 'school X' which is a school that has had ability groupings on and off for several years. To ability group or not to ability group has long been the question at this school. There have been lively debates regarding the groupings, particularly in English but even in mathematics. In an attempt to abolish the ability groupings in English there is at the moment only ability grouping in English in year 7. The pupils who study German have recently been ability grouped as well.

Secondary sources are used in this investigation together with my own empirical data, i.e. primary sources in form of qualitative interviews where four English teachers are being interviewed about their opinions on and experiences of ability groupings. A small scale investigation was also conducted among the under-achieving ability grouped pupils in year 7 where questionnaires were used in order to receive their attitudes toward ability grouping as well.

Under-achieving pupils are focused on in this investigation since previous research by Wallby et al. (2001:91, 138) reveals that the most severe objection toward ability groupings is the one concerning the lower levels, i.e. the weaker groups, where improvements need to be made. Gamoran (1993 in Wallby et al. 2001:91) further argues that under-achieving pupils in the lower levels are the losers of the ability groupings. For this reason the choice fell upon to investigate whether this is the case at the school under investigation, i.e. are the ability groupings in English positive or negative for the under-achieving pupils?

\textsuperscript{1} Explanation from Wikipedia: Epistemology; (from the Greek words episteme (knowledge) and logos (word/speech)) The branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, origin and scope of knowledge. Historically, it has been one of the most investigated and most debated of all philosophical subjects. Much of this debate has focused on analyzing the nature and variety of knowledge and how it relates to similar notions such as truth and belief.
In addition, there is little research on pupils who experience difficulties when learning a foreign language according to Estling-Vannestål among others (2002:45 in Jacobson 2002). That is also why the choice fell upon investigating the under-achieving pupils because more research is needed here.

2 Aim and research questions

The aim was to find out more about the teachers’ and the pupils’ attitudes toward ability groupings and ability grouping in general. The main research question was if the groupings were positive or negative for the under-achieving pupils at school X. The purpose of this essay was to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of ability groupings in English by using both primary sources and secondary sources. More specific research questions are:

- What are the attitudes toward ability grouping among the English teachers and the under-achieving ability grouped pupils at this school? Do their opinions differ in any way or do they share the same thoughts on this issue?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping?
- Why does the school have ability groupings?
- Do ability groupings help to individualize the tuition and create homogeneity in the classroom?
- Do ability groupings correspond to the curriculum for compulsory school i.e. secondary school as well as to the Education Act?
- Should the ability groupings at school X be abolished?
- Are ability groupings in English in year 7 positive or negative for the under-achieving pupils at school X?

3 Background

“Theory is a simplified picture of reality, formulated so that it can be a starting-point for empirical investigations” (Roos 2006:16 in Halvorsen 1992:44 [my own translation]). In this section I firstly present a historical background followed by a section about differentiation. Then, there is some general information about ability groupings.

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2 Differentiation is according to Wallby et al. (2001:36) when the tuition is formed differently for different pupils.
3.1 Historical background on differentiation and ability grouping

To understand the complexity of the matter better it is helpful to gain an insight into the historical background. One of the main issues about the uniform compulsory school according to Engström (1996:4) has been the question about differentiation i.e. whether or not pupils should be grouped by ability or not. Before the Uniform School decision in 1950 the school system is described by Holmlund (2006:7-8) like this:

Prior to the schooling reform, compulsory education mounted to seven (or in some cases eight) years of education. Ability tracking took place either starting in 5th grade, with a five year junior-secondary school (realskola) following, or starting in 7th grade, with a three or four year junior-secondary school following. Those pupils who did not select into junior secondary school remained in the basic comprehensive school (folkskola) until the 7th or 8th grade. Importantly, the two parallel school systems were entirely separated; the pupils spent their school days in different establishments and could not interact during school hours […]

The school reforms during the 1900s resulted in a uniform school system where the basic idea was to educate pupils from all parts of society together. By the implementation of these undifferentiated classes, established in the national curricula of 1962, 1969, 1980 and 1994, where tolerance, co-operation and equality were highlighted, pupils were brought up to live in a democratic society (Eriksson 1993:10-11). Since the 1960s all pupils in Sweden are obliged and supposed to go to school for at least 9 years in heterogeneous and undifferentiated classes. In the curriculum of 1980 for lower secondary school however there was an exception where pupils could choose between an easier course\(^3\) and a more advanced course\(^4\) in mathematics and English. The Social Democrats who ran Sweden for several decades wanted to abolish permanent ability grouping in compulsory school. The Conservative party on the other hand has always been in favour of free choices and ability grouping (ibid 1993:11). The right wing claims that it is unacceptable that theoretically gifted children would have to be taught together with practically gifted children (Engström 1996:4).

There are two political educational policies regarding special tuition according to Haug (1998:22), namely the innovative and the restored. The innovative philosophy originates in progressivism and is found in the Social-Democratic, left-wing arena where slogans such as: one school for all and equality are emphasised. This philosophy is considered to be oriented towards citizen-competence and fellowship where pupils have no or little options to choose from since it is seen as preferable to be taught together to be able to cooperate and

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\(^3\) So called allmän kurs or ak.

\(^4\) So called särskild kurs or sk.
communicate, for example. The communicative skill is emphasized in language teaching for instance, together with the importance of cooperating in group work where pupils work together, communicate and learn from each other. In addition, teachers strive to relate the already known to the tuition where students’ interests are taken into consideration. Hence, it is of importance to include both theoretical and practical subjects in school to provide society with practical, as well as theoretical citizens.

The other educational philosophy is said to originate in the right-wing parties and emphasizes school subjects and theoretical studies. This theory is connected with traditional teaching, the teacher-centred approach that originates in essentialism. Differentiation falls within this philosophy as a natural feature in education. All pupils go to school but the school does not have to be equal in all senses. There should be several possible options within as well as between different schools. We find the advocates of private schools in this arena (Haug 1998:22-23). This philosophy emphasises competition rather than cooperation and the focus is on extrinsic motivation.

According to Gustavsson (2002:27), the difference between the right wing and the left wing appears as a difference between science and discipline on one hand and social factors and motivation on the other. However, this is only one of the explanations to why there are polarised opinions about ability grouping. Haug (1998) further suggests that these two theories are based on two different views on social justice varying from one time to another. The left wing parties believe that all pupils should attend one school for all, while the right wing parties believe that pupils have to be able to choose between schools, classes etc.

During the 1990s Swedish schools experienced an economic crisis which resulted in large classes and radical changes concerning the teaching profession. The results were a heavy working load for the teachers which included new work tasks, such as more administrative assignments, deputy responsibility, buying material, developing working plans, carrying out personal development dialogues in a new way, establishing action plans, etc. Teachers also received a new employment contract on working hours that resulted in more lessons to teach. These changes happened simultaneously with the 1992 government bill about the new curriculum. One way to solve the problem of large heterogeneous classes was to ability-group the pupils.

All through the 1980s and 1990s there were critical opinions concerning ability groupings; they were looked upon as discriminating towards minority groups and socially weak pupils. Other negative opinions were that the under-achieving ability-grouped pupils and slower groups acquired worse tuition (Engström 1991:6). Engström also points out that these pupils
more often have an inexperienced or uneducated teacher. In addition, low expectations on these pupils and no role models to look up to contribute to the fact that these pupils turn these expectations into self-fulfilling prophecies. Thus, the new government bill suggested that the easier group (\(ak\)) and the harder group (\(sk\)) in maths and English should be abolished.

Today, ability groupings are not supported in the contemporary curriculum \(Lpo\ 94\). Nowadays it is up to every school to decide how they want to handle this matter. There is, however, a certain guideline when it comes to ability grouping at secondary school. For example, as mentioned earlier, schools are allowed to create groupings in order to meet the pupils at their level of ability and to give them the opportunity to get more help etc. The groupings have to be temporary, and they cannot put the pupils on a certain track or a certain grade level (Lindgren 2007 b).

### 3.2 Differentiation

It is crucial to be aware of the different ways of looking at differentiation; there are polarised opinions between different countries as well as within one country. The issue about differentiation has been and still is one of the main and everlasting debate topics in Swedish school history. The Swedish curriculum \(Lpo\ 94\) for compulsory school state that:

> Account should also be taken of the varying circumstances and needs of pupils as well as the fact that there are a variety of ways of attaining these goals. Furthermore the school has a special responsibility for those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set for the education. For this reason education can never be the same for all. \((Lpo\ 94)\)

The quotation above indicates that education can never be the same for all, this is because the only thing all pupils do have in common is that they are unique individuals and learn differently. Meeting the demands of every single pupil in the classroom is a real challenge. One way to meet the individuals at their level of ability is by differentiation. Wallby et al. (2001:36) state that the term ‘differentiation’ is used when the tuition is formed differently depending on the individual. This can be accomplished by formulating different educational aims, varying classroom activities, etc, in order to tailor the education for each pupil. This is possible by creating temporary groupings or by individualizing within the classroom. What is individualisation then? Eriksson (1993:3) states that teaching should be individualized which means that: “[…] teaching should be adapted to each pupil’s various abilities and interests and provide opportunities for pupils at all ability levels to progress at their own optimum rate, as far as this is practically possible”. Wallby et al. (2001:162) indicate that individualization
takes pupils’ differences into consideration. Individualization can be, for example, teaching based on individual learning styles, giving pupils individual homework, students’ own choice of subjects, student’s own planning and individual study plans, when they are allowed to work at their own pace or where teachers supply different pupils with different materials, mixed-age groups etc. The disadvantages of individualization might be that pupils work with different tasks all the time and will therefore lack the communicative aspect of learning. In addition, some pupils will not be able to reach the goals because they do not have the time to finish all the elements (Wallby et al. 2001:53). Another alternative is to create more homogeneous groups outside of the classroom. These two solutions mentioned above are often referred to as pedagogical and organizational differentiation. In addition, there is ‘extrinsic differentiation’ and ‘intrinsic differentiations’ (ibid 36). Extrinsic differentiation is in Wallby et al.’s opinion (2001:36) a grouping regulated by the national steering documents concerning school or other organizational divisions. The structure of upper secondary school is one example of extrinsic differentiation and the so-called ak/sk courses in English (general and special course in English) that existed in the previous curriculum for compulsory school Lgr 80 is another. Wallby et al. further state that intrinsic differentiation is locally decided groupings determined by the headmaster in an attempt to try to create a more homogenous environment for learning. They are not supported in any regulations in the Education Act or in any curricula. These intrinsic groups are based on different grounds, for example, learning style, interest, gender, level of ambition or level of achievement and so on (Wallby et al. 2001). Examples of intrinsic differentiation are: courses of students’ own choice, for example, some pupils choose textile craft and other pupils choose woodwork, or ability groupings that will be described next.

3.3 Ability grouping

In Sweden, children begin school at the age of seven and attend school for nine years in mixed ability classes. Ability grouping is sometimes used in an attempt to create homogeneity in the classroom. The assumption is that pupils should be grouped by ability and divided into different classes or groups in order to have the best preconditions for learning (Wallby et al. 2001).

It happens occasionally that the inspectors of The National Agency for Education interfere with ability groupings, if they think that there is no pedagogic thought behind the groupings. This happened recently when a school divided Spanish into two groupings, an easier group and a harder group. This was made in an attempt to create homogeneity in the classroom and
to give the weaker pupils the help that they needed. The groupings were called the ‘red’ and the ‘yellow’ group after the Spanish flag but the students called the groupings the ‘turtles’ and the ‘cheetahs’. The National Agency for Education criticized the municipality and the school concerning these groupings and put an end to them after complaints from parents. According to the Education Act the groupings offended the law because pupils in compulsory school are supposed to have a collective school attendance if there are no prescriptions from the government or other authorities in charge. However, Westerholm (2007 in Lindgren 2007a), branch head at the National Agency for Education, states in an interview that schools are allowed to create groupings in order to meet the pupils at their level of ability and to give them the opportunity to get more help etc. The groupings have to be temporary though and they cannot put the pupils in a certain track or a certain grade level (Lindgren 2007b).

### 3.4 Previous research

Hundreds of research projects have studied the effect of ability groupings but there are several opinions concerning the results, the interpretations of these and the conclusions (Wallby et al. 2001:111). The results of these investigations cannot give any specific guidelines on how to work at schools in general, teachers have to decide by themselves if and how these results can be related to the school in particular (ibid).

The evaluation of National Agency for Education of five upper secondary school programs present two different points of views on how to deal with pupils’ difficulties in school and their need of support. One perspective is to assume that the problem is the pupil’s and caused by individual and social circumstances within the pupil or in the pupil’s environment. The other assumption is that the pupil’s success and failure in school is a result of the organisation of the school and their way of working. According to the latter perspective, it is not the pupil who has learning disabilities but the school who has teaching disabilities (Wallby et al. 2001:143).

Oakes (1995 in Wallby et al. 2001:111) claims that pupils’ should be in heterogeneous groups until they start upper secondary school. This way the pupils may have time to think about their future and may learn the whole syllabus. Thus, the expectations may also be the same for all pupils. In order for this to work it is crucial that the tuition is varied.

Wallby et al. (2001:113) state that ability grouping implies certain risks as well as some opportunities. Wallby et al. have summarized these risks and opportunities from several investigations. One risk is that pupils’ social and cultural backgrounds can determine group placement. Pupils with bad motivation or less appropriate school behaviour are generally
placed in a group on a low level while well behaved pupils with developed verbal abilities are placed on a higher level. Hence there is a risk that unmotivated pupils and pupils with concentration difficulties are mixed with pupils that have learning disabilities which is not desirable, since pupils with learning disabilities often need some peace and quiet. Another risk is that some pupils are placed in the wrong group because of the difficulties to place pupils in the right group. Oakes (1985 in Wallby et. al. 2001:99) argues that “finding an instrument that in a reliable way divides the pupils is very hard”. Those pupils who are in between groups will most likely achieve better if placed in the higher group. A third risk is that it might be difficult to change groups if the groups work differently with different material etc. In addition some groups put the pupil in a certain track where the pupils’ future opportunities sometimes are limited. As in the case of lower secondary school’s alternative courses in maths, ak and sk, that existed in the curriculum Lgr 80. For example, if pupils chose the easier course in math they would not have had the opportunity to qualify for upper secondary school.

Yet another risk concerning ability groupings is the low expectations towards the weaker pupils resulting in pupils not developing in a positive way. There are also risks regarding the pupils’ emotions where, for example, the pupils’ self-esteem and self-image can be damaged. Pupils often identify themselves with the group they are in. This means that if they are in a slow group with under-achieving pupils in it they do not think very high of themselves. The stronger pupils can often feel stressed because much is expected from them. Moreover, another risk is that the tuition is based on the assumption that the group is homogenous, but even a group that is put together to be homogenous is, in fact, heterogeneous. The risk is though that the teachers expect the group to be homogeneous and therefore teaches them as if they were all to learn the same way at the same pace. Wallby et al. (2001:115) argue however that the groupings can give good results if the groupings consist of qualified tuition based on the pupils’ knowledge and experiences aiming at achieving high goals. The groupings can also be positive for the stronger pupils in particular if they have the opportunity to learn about different areas that they otherwise would be unfamiliar with, i.e. another course, for example.

3.5 The Advantages and disadvantages of ability groupings

Many of the trackings’ or ability-groupings’ supporters refer to Slavin’s research while the opposition refers to Kulik’s research (Wallby et al. 2001:105). Slavin (1990 in Engström, 12

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5 Robert Slavin is a Professor at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore in the USA.
1996:5) did some research on all scientific studies that had been done about ability grouping in secondary schools, year 9-12. He found that the arguments for and against ability grouping have stayed the same since the beginning of the 1920s.

Arguments for ability grouping [own translation]:
- it enables the pupil to make progress according to his/her level of ability,
- it enables an accommodation of the tuition according to the needs of the pupils
- it reduces failure,
- it helps to maintain the strong pupils’ interest and mainspring, they do not have to be bored by weak pupils,
- weak pupils become more active when there is no risk of getting in the shadow of the stronger pupils,
- it facilitates the tuition for the teacher,
- it enables individual tuition for smaller groups.

Arguments against ability grouping [own translation]:
- weak pupils need the stimulus and encouraging that the presence of the stronger pupils can give,
- the under-achieving pupils are labelled as stupid,
- teachers cannot, or do not have the time to differentiate the work for different levels of abilities,
- Teachers do not like the slower groups.

Kulik’s and Slavin’s research results are similar but they draw different conclusions, except for the common result showing that ability groupings favour the strong pupils. Kulik and Slavin both come to different conclusions, although their analyses give pretty much the same result. However, an important difference between Kulik and Slavin is whether or not to take research into consideration, where some pupils have had the opportunity to an extended course or specially adapted material and therefore achieved better results (ibid:105). Kulik claims that these studies should be part of the investigation where it is proved that ability grouping benefits the stronger pupils. Slavin on the other hand claims that these studies should not be taken into consideration as the tuition has been formed differently for these pupils. This explains why their results diverge. Kulik argues that since the strong pupils profit
from ability grouping without harming anyone, it would be a big mistake not to use them. Slavin, on the other hand, believes that if the school cannot prove the ability groupings to be successful they should be avoided due to their disadvantages (Wallby et al. 2001:105).

Other statements against ability grouping are: social discrimination, diminishing possibilities, worse tuition and the pupils’ deficient self-esteem which is the most used argument in the discussion. The advocates of ability grouping refer to the results showing that strong pupils would have better possibilities when using ability groupings. A third part is in favour of flexible groupings that take the risk factors into consideration but still give stronger pupils more possibilities.

Winner (1996:205) also discusses the advantages and disadvantages concerning ability groupings. She claims that grouping by ability where the gifted pupils are placed in one group often results in arrogance and elitism. She also argues that talented children are capable of finding their own ways to stimulate their needs as well as working in their own rate in the ordinary classroom and help other pupils at the same time; hence ability grouping is totally unnecessary. Winner further emphasises an important fact i.e. that the talented and skilled pupils are good role models in the classroom. The fact that they are able to help the other pupils is very benefitting for all the parties concerned, i.e. the more skilled pupils, the average pupils as well as the under-achieving pupils. To help other pupils carries both academic and social value. By teaching someone else one strengthens what have been learned and the gifted pupils learn how to communicate with pupils with all sorts of abilities. An alternative to ability grouping according to Winner (1996:222) is to accelerate i.e. where gifted and strong pupils can be given the opportunity to start school earlier or skip a class.

Furthermore, another disadvantage is that remedial teachers who are usually involved in the weak ability groupings do not necessary have the specific competence within the area of language learning. The remedial teacher education in Sweden does not seem to offer any specific knowledge about language learning (ibid). The only mandatory entrance qualification that is needed in order to become a remedial teacher is that the applicant has some kind of teaching qualification and three years of work experience as a teacher. Hence remedial teachers often teach pupils in subjects that are unfamiliar to them. Those who do remedial pedagogic research do not necessarily have specific competence within the area of language learning, nor do the scientists on language learning automatically have remedial pedagogic knowledge. This might also be one of the explanations according to Estling-Vannestål (2002:45) for why there is little research about pupils with difficulties in language learning.
4 Material, scope and method

Secondary sources were used in this deductive investigation together with my own empirical data, i.e. primary sources in form of qualitative interviews where four English teachers were interviewed about their experiences and opinions on ability groupings. A small scale investigation was also conducted among the ability grouped pupils in year 7 where questionnaires were used in order to map their attitudes toward ability grouping. The under-achieving pupils are focused on in this investigation since previous research on ability groupings reveals the fact that ability groupings generally favour the over-achieving pupils. In addition, teachers have a special responsibility towards those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set for their education. There is also little research on pupils who experience difficulties when learning a foreign language, according to Estling-Vannstål (2002:45 in Jacobson 2002). For this reason it is interesting to see if this is the case at school X. Are ability groupings positive or negative for the under-achieving pupils who are experiencing difficulties in learning the English language?

The investigation is limited to only one lower secondary school where ability grouping is to be abolished to see why they have reached this decision. The research area is limited to inner differentiation only, i.e. groupings for learning that are decided locally that one cannot find in any curriculum or school law, as ability grouping for example. Outer differentiation is regulated by the national curricula; upper secondary school is an example of this phenomenon where there differentiation of the pupils is natural since they choose different programs. The choice to focus on a secondary school and inner differentiation though was because of the fact that the pupils choose different programs in upper secondary school resulting in a natural differentiation of the pupils anyway (Wallby et al. 2001).

The following section presents the choice of methods more closely followed by a presentation of ‘school X’ and the informants, i.e. the teachers and the pupils.

4.1 Choice of methods

After some methodological consideration the choice of method fell upon Layder’s multi-strategy (1993 in Bryman 2001:408), i.e. a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in order to uncover teachers’ attitudes toward ability grouping as well as the pupils’ attitudes toward ability grouping. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were used in

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6 Deductive: ‘reasoning from the general to the particular (or from cause to effect)’. Explanation from: www.answers.com
order to collect the empirical data. The difference between the two methods is that qualitative research is directed more towards content than statistics (Bryman 2001). However, since the questionnaires both contained closed and open questions and I asked the pupils to motivate their answers, the questionnaires were both directed towards content and statistics. The advantage of open questions in this case was that the pupils’ answers could be compared to the teachers’ answers more easily. Moreover, the pupils had the chance to express their attitudes and feelings as well.

One drawback is that this survey only covers a small number of informants; therefore it is difficult to draw any general conclusions or make any major scientific advances. Another drawback is that the informants were quite young. Hence, many of them have low metacognitive awareness\(^7\). Another problem is also that the under-achieving pupils were divided into ability groupings at an early stage in year seven. Thus, they do not have anything to compare with since they have not been in a mainstream English group since their transfer from the intermediate level. At their current age, most of the pupils assume that the teachers know their best which might also have affected their answers.

The semi-structured interviews with the teachers were held face-to-face in Swedish so that the informants would feel as comfortable as possible since it is important to get a good relation with the informants. The teachers’ and pupils’ responses were subsequently translated into English. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

> […] an interview is seldom about getting facts but rather about getting access to a person’s mind – his or her attitudes, ideas and experiences as he/she wishes to present them to the interviewer. (Estling-Vannestål 2008:3)

I used the semi-structured method because then I had the opportunity to ask follow up questions. I also chose the qualitative semi-structured interview to facilitate a comparison of the answers; I wanted all teachers to answer the same questions in order to compare their attitudes toward ability grouping. The questions were formulated with relevance to the research questions.

Estling-Vannestål (2008:4) states that if one wants to get access to several people’s attitudes to a phenomenon or their experiences of something, it may be a good idea to use a questionnaire. Thus, a questionnaire with both closed and open questions were handed out to 22 pupils in the ‘G group\(^8\)\) with the purpose of finding out their attitudes toward ability grouping. I had the opportunity to be alone in the classroom with the pupils so they could ask

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\(^7\) Metacognitive Knowledge (also called metacognitive awareness) refers to what individuals know about themselves and others as cognitive processors (www.wikipedia.org).

\(^8\) The G group consists of the under-achieving pupils.
questions if something seemed unclear. The pupils received a treat as gratitude after answering the questions. The questions in the questionnaire and the interviews are based on another examination paper (Dahlberg 2006). Dahlberg’s study differs, however, from the present study in several ways. First of all, this study focuses on the under-achievers. The present study is aimed at a secondary school and Dahlberg’s is aimed at vocational education at an upper secondary school. Both papers investigate pupils’ and teachers’ attitudes towards ability groupings in English but the research questions diverge significantly.

4.2 Presentation of school X

‘School X’ is situated in a minor municipality in the province of Småland in Sweden and has at the moment about 400 pupils divided into 11 classes with around 25-30 teachers. The school uses ability grouping in English in year seven at the moment, but might abolish these groupings as a result of long disputes concerning them. The results of this investigation might therefore contribute with some information on both pupils’ and teachers’ attitudes toward these ability groupings, especially since there has never been a formal evaluation of the groupings. The results can be used and taken into consideration when deciding on whether to abolish or keep the groupings in English at this school. Ability groupings are currently used in mathematics, English in year seven and recently also introduced in German at school X.

4.3 Presentation of the pupils

The pupils in year 7 were divided into four groups according to two different test results at the beginning of the first term. There were 22 pupils in the under-achieving ability group but three pupils were missing the day they filled out the questionnaires. There are thirteen boys and six girls in the under-achieving group who answered the questionnaires. They answered most of the questions thoroughly. There were more than twice as many boys in the group. Börjesson (2005{www}) states that the picture of gender differences concerning how successful boys and girls are in school has changed during the last decade. From having been more miscellaneous, it is now a fact that girls show a much better school performance than boys in Sweden in general. Since the answers can be used for other purposes I chose to divide the boys’ and the girls’ answers.

4.4 Presentation of the teachers

The informants of the qualitative interviews are the four female teachers who teach English in year 7.
• Teacher ‘A’ is a young newly graduated upper secondary school teacher who has taught the subjects Spanish and English since January 2008. She teaches the low ability group (the G group) that consisted of 28 pupils; at the time of the investigation there were about 22 pupils since some pupils have transferred to other groups. Teacher A started working after the decision to ability group. She received the weak pupils, the ‘G group’ when she began her employment at school X. The teacher who taught the pupils from the beginning lacked a teacher’s degree and was therefore replaced by teacher A.

• Teacher ‘B’ has worked for 2.5 years and is also an upper secondary school teacher in psychology and Swedish but she now teaches Swedish and English (the VG group) in this lower secondary school.

• Teacher ‘C’ has only been working for one and a half term and is a lower secondary school Religion and English teacher. Today, she is teaching French and English (the MVG group).

• Teacher ‘D’ has been working as a teacher for 35 years and is an educated lower secondary school teacher with specialisations in Social Science and Geography. She has also studied special needs education and works a lot with remedial tuition. She teaches a group with 5-6 under-achieving pupils in English (the IG group).

5 Presentation and discussion of results

5.1 What are the teachers’ and pupils’ attitudes toward the groupings at school X?

If a comparison is made between the teachers’ attitudes toward the groupings it is obvious that their opinions concerning the groupings differed. The teachers with the proficient pupils thought that the groupings were working well while the teacher with the under-achieving pupils thought that the situation was more or less untenable. The opinions between the weaker ability grouped pupils also differed; some thought that it is a good solution, whereas others would rather be taught together in a mixed ability class with their classmates. About half of the ability grouped pupils expressed that the groupings were good. Teacher B and C would like to have the groupings while teacher A thought that they should be abolished and teacher D’s opinion has changed a bit during the journey. This change is described by Kvale (1997:35) as a common phenomenon where an interview sometimes leads to new insights and
a change of opinion. Teacher D was pretty satisfied with the groupings at first and is still satisfied with her own smaller group since they probably would be in her hands either way. Concerning the other groups, however, there are tendencies showing that teacher D had a more positive attitude towards the groupings at first than she had at the end of the interview.

My attitudes toward ability groupings have changed during the years; sometimes one has believed that it is good; from time to time it has been very popular, sometimes it has been totally forbidden and at times you haven’t even dared to speak about it…that is just the way the teacher profession is, everything changes […] (Teacher D)

Teacher D has worked for some years and has experienced the debate that has been going on about the ability groupings. The quotation describes this change of opinion. From time to time it was very popular to ability group and for a while it was forbidden to use them.

5.2 Do the groupings benefit the pupils’ language learning?

Teacher D argued that her small group is good for their language learning since they feel secure there. Teacher D quoted one of the pupils in her group who said: “D, are you sure that no other pupils will come into this group?” When she asked why he wondered he said that: “Well, now we are here, we are a good gang and I dare speak” Teacher D hence emphasised that this group benefits in their language learning since the security the pupils feel when they are in a small group is crucial. Teacher C also thought that ability grouping benefited her pupils’ language learning since they acquire a wider range of knowledge now and that the pupils in the weaker group receive more of the basic skills that they lack. Teacher B saw both positive and negative sides of the pupils’ language learning in ability groupes; the weaker pupils could develop more if they were in a mixed ability class but the stronger pupils would not benefit the same way by being in a mixed ability group. She also argued that the pupils would feel more secure knowing that all pupils were on the same level.

5.3 What are the advantages of ability groupings in the teachers’ view?

The only advantage of ability groupings was according to teacher A that they enable the stronger pupils not to get dragged down by the weaker pupils but could not come up with any further advantages of the ability groupings. Teacher B and C both thought that the groupings favoured the stronger pupils and created homogeneity in the classroom. From teacher B’s point of view it was easier to work with the same material, the stronger pupils were challenged, there was more time available for group works where the pupils got the
opportunity to take more responsibility of their own and to become more autonomous. Teacher C’s opinions were similar with those of teacher B but she also said that it was easier to build up knowledge when the pupils were at the same level. Teacher D also mentioned that when teaching a weaker group it was easier to go through the basics if the pupils were at the same level but could not find any further advantages with ability groupings.

5.4 What are the advantages of ability groupings in the pupils’ view?
On question fourteen the pupils mentioned advantages with the ability-groupings. Some pupils thought that it was an advantage that all pupils were at the same level. Another frequent answer was that there was a slower pace than in the other groups and therefore it is easier to keep up with the rest of the class. Two pupils thought that it was good with the ability-groupings because they could be in the same group as their friends even though they were not in the same class in all the other subjects.

5.5 What are the disadvantages of the ability groupings in the teachers’ view?
All the teachers mentioned problems in the lower ability group such as the mixture of unmotivated pupils together with pupils who have learning disabilities and concentration disabilities. There is a risk according to previous research that unmotivated and unruly pupils are placed with pupils who are having difficulties with learning the language (Wallby et al. 2001:113). This is also seen in the present study where many pupils stated that it was too loud and noisy in the classroom. There was a mixture of pupils with concentration disabilities, unmotivated pupils, pupils with learning disabilities etc. Teacher A brought up the problem of poor peer effect. Another disadvantage according to teacher A was the negative atmosphere in the classroom as well as pupils’ lack of motivation. The most striking disadvantage according to teacher A was that there was not enough of time to help all the pupils.

From what I have seen it is idiotically to take all the under-achieving pupils in year seven and throw them into one group and think that they will do well with only one teacher [...] (Teacher A)

This quote describes teacher A’s frustration over the whole situation in her group. She also mentioned that the grouping affected the pupils’ self-esteem which can be found in the pupils’ statements: “The bad ones in one group”, “Our English teacher came to me and told me that I was not good at English so I had to go to the mediocre group”; further more, when answering the question about why they thought that the school had chosen to ability-group: “Because
some pupils are just too bad at English” and “[…] some pupils are having a hard time understanding and they are sent to an easier group”. This is also supported in the literature: according to Wallby et al. (2001:114) there is a great risk that pupils’ self esteem and self-image can be affected negatively as a result of the ability groupings. The pupils’ expectations can be affected negatively when they are labelled and then identify themselves with ‘the ones who don’t know anything’ or ‘the stupid ones’ and will therefore sometimes give up the ambition of trying to learn. To the question: ‘How to avoid the weaker pupils from feeling labelled by the group they belong to’, teacher A did not have any good answer since the pupils were labelled from the day they got divided into different groups and that stamp is hard to get rid of. She also argued that the groupings were based on the pupils’ level of knowledge where they then identified themselves with the group they belonged to. Teachers B and C thought that by having an open dialogue with the pupils, by talking to them and explaining the thought behind the groupings one could prevent the pupils from feeling labelled. There were also disadvantages in the other groups where one teacher pointed out the disadvantages in her group where some pupils feel great pressure. Some pupils also compete with each other resulting in them doing things too quickly and are therefore not learning as much.

5.6 What are the disadvantages of the ability groupings in the pupils’ view?

Three pupils complained about the fact that they were separated from their friends. Seven of the pupils mentioned more than one time that it was noisy in the classroom and hard to concentrate. An additional disadvantage was according to the pupils that it was hard to change groups because the other groups were full. One of the pupils expressed that he thought that he would learn more English in a more advanced group. Five pupils answered that the teacher did not have the time to help all pupils. One of the ability-grouped pupils stated that he would have wanted to choose groups by himself instead of being divided according to the test results. The pupil described how he/she was transferred to the under-achieving group: “[…] our English teacher came to me and told me that I was no good at English so I had to go in the mediocre group”.

5.6.1 Do the groupings put the ability-grouped pupils on a certain track and at a certain grade level according to the teachers and the ability-grouped pupils?

The majority of the pupils i.e. sixteen of the pupils, felt as if they were placed in the groups according to the test results and that they could not choose groups themselves. Half of the
group has considered changing groups but many stated that they were not allowed to switch
groups. There were also thoughts behind their decisions to stay in the groups such as the
feeling that they would never keep up with the ‘better’ classes. However, teacher B
announced that she had received three pupils from the ‘G’ group recently since they were
such troublemakers and therefore pointed out that there actually had been transfers between
the groups. Concerning the grades, the teachers all agreed that the thought behind the
groupings was not to divide them on certain tracks. All teachers stated, however, that it can be
problematic to reach a VG in the ‘G group’ for example. The teachers claimed, however, that
the pupils had the opportunity to choose groups and also change groups if they wanted to.
This however is not easily done according to the pupils themselves. Teacher A agrees with the
pupils on this and claims that it is impossible to change groups because all the other groups
are full. This is also evident in previous research; Wallby et al. (2001:114) point out the
difficulties of group change, where it is very difficult to change to a ‘better’ group.
Experiences also show that if there is a change of groups, it is preferable to move the weakest
pupils to another group (ibid

Question thirteen\(^9\) asked the pupils if they thought that they had the same opportunities to
reach higher grades as the other groups. The answers are shown in figure 1 below:

![Figure 1, “Equal opportunities in reaching higher grades?”](image)

37% of the pupils did not think that they could get a better grade than a G and 17% did not
know if they could get a better grade than a G. According to teacher B, it was more a question
of a group switch if they were aiming at a better grade but then again a group switch is not
uncomplicated as it seems. Teacher A did not think that the chances looked too good for the

\(^9\)Questionnaire is to be found in the appendix.
pupils in her group who wanted to achieve better grades than a G which all teachers agreed could be a bit problematic. In teacher D’s opinion, it is also difficult not to get too involved in the pupils in the smallest group and give them grades that they do not deserve. If, for example, one pupil shows progress and you compare him/her to the rest of the group it is easy to give him/her the wrong grade.

Teacher B and C thought that the possibility to reach the learning goals increased with the help of groupings. Teacher A on the other hand argued that it was harder for the pupils to reach the goals in ability groups. Teacher D stated that the pupils’ chances of reaching the goals were very low. On the other hand their chances would not have increased in a mixed ability group either.

5.6.2 Which teacher should teach what group?

Oakes (1985 in Wallby et al. 2001:97) has also shown in previous research that teachers ideologically prefer heterogenic groups but would rather teach homogenous groups. This is also the case in this study where one teacher stated that: “We teachers did not agree on which teacher who would teach what class, we argued a lot about that!” It is worth noticing, however, that the teacher who taught the weaker ability group had the highest education of the teachers. Previous research namely shows that the teacher with the least education most often gets to teach the under-achieving children when it should be the other way around. However, this is not the case at this school. Yet, before teacher A started working in January 2008 at school X, the under-achieving children in the ‘G’ group were already grouped and taught by another teacher who lacked the teacher degree which corresponds to previous research. The teachers’ opinions differed when answering the question if they preferred to teach whole classes, i.e. mixed ability classes or to ability group. Teacher A absolutely favoured to teach a mixed ability class because she stated that her ability group is not homogeneous anyway and that they are still individuals with different needs. Teacher B favoured the ability groupings if they functioned and stated that it depended on the resources and pupils as well. Teacher C answered in accordance with teacher B, that it is an economical question and a question of resources and teachers. Teacher D claimed that her pupils would be with her either way but said that she sometimes let the pupils stay in their ordinary classes where her task would be more of a resource in the classroom.
5.7 What about the under-achievers?

The groupings were created in order to challenge the talented and over-achieving pupils but also to create homogeneity in the classroom. However, even a group that is put together to be homogenous will be heterogeneous. This is also brought up in previous literature (Wallby 2001:115) where there is a risk that the teacher expects the group to perform equally in relation to each other, time and their performance. The pupils’ had different attitudes toward the groupings. In general the pupils did not think they were very good at English and this table i.e. figure 2, shows the results from question five i.e. what the pupils actually thought that they were good at, they could choose two alternatives, note that the numbers are in percent.

**Figure 2**, shows what the pupils thought they were good at.

![Graph showing the skills the pupils thought they were good at](image)

**Figure 3**, shows what the pupils thought they were bad at.

![Graph showing the skills the pupils thought they were bad at](image)
Figure 3 showed what the pupils thought they were bad at; the scale is here up to 35 percent because there were more than 30 percent of the pupils who choose listening here. Even though the pupils are ability grouped in order to create homogeneity these tables show that the pupils are very heterogeneous; they experience different difficulties, have different needs and think they are good at different things.

The teachers seemed to agree on the fact that the groupings favoured the over-achieving pupils and teacher D’s little group but they would have been in a little group either way. This is consistent with previous research showing that there are certain advantages for the over-achieving pupils to be placed in ability groups (Wallby et. al. 2001:115). However, this is only if the groupings involve the opportunity to get in contact with areas that they normally would not come in contact with i.e. where they get another course for example. Teacher B agreed with teacher A that there are problems in the ‘G group’ and that more resources are needed in order for this group to work optimally.

5.8 Does the instruction vary between the groups?

Slavin (1990 in Wallby et al. 2001:88) states that “unless teaching methods are systematically changed, school organisation has little impact on student achievement”. Slavin suggests that teachers generally use a limited amount of teaching methods, like, for example, the traditional teaching method, where the teacher mostly uses the course books or uses the teacher-centred approach. Hence, it really does not matter who the pupils sit next to if the tuition is the same. One of the pupils actually stated that “I do not see any difference from before the ability groupings” which is a warning signal. Teacher B thought that some thinking outside the box might be the solution to this problem. In teacher B’s opinion, the teacher who teaches this weaker ability group has to use different strategies by for example let go of the course books and find new, other exciting ways to inspire the pupils and to emphasise reciprocal respect and explicit rules in the classroom. It would have been interesting to observe the different groups in order to see in what way the tuition actually differed between the groups. The study did show though that the four teachers used the same books and tests.

5.9 Are there any other ways to individualize the tuition besides the ability groupings?

Teacher A thought that by teaching a multi-ability group it would be much easier to focus on the individual and the weaker pupils because then they would not be as many as in her group right now where she thinks that there are too many to focus on. She also thought that the
proficient pupils could choose a more advanced course as there is, for example, upper secondary school mathematics as an extra-curricular activity there could be advanced English as well. Teacher B claimed that it is an economic question and a question of where one work, the school’s resources, the teachers and the competence among the teachers as well. Teacher C has tried the individual lesson plan in the course book Wings in order to individualise but thought that the pupils had too many alternatives to choose from which they were not able to handle. She argued that the pupils completed the tasks too fast because they felt that they were competing, this resulted in pupils not having the time to absorb all the knowledge. Teacher D referred to the intermediate level where the pupils followed their own plan and worked in their own pace whereas in seventh grade all of a sudden they had to do everything together and aim for the same goals and claimed that it is the whole system that is the problem. She also advocated the alternative to let the teachers rotate between the classes.

6 Summary and Conclusions

To individualise the tuition in mixed ability classrooms is something all teachers have to face. There are different opinions on how to individualise the tuition and how to deal with mixed-ability classes in order to meet the demands of all pupils. This paper has investigated one of the most common solutions to this problem in English i.e. inner differentiation in form of ability grouping as utilized at school X. There are polarised opinions not just in society and world wide but also in previous research as well as at school X. The secondary school under investigation is a school that has had ability groupings off and on for several years and are now facing the question whether to abolish these groupings. Hence, it was of great interest to find out why the school has the ability groupings and why they might be about to abolish them. In addition, it was interesting to investigate if the teachers or literature provided any other more preferable alternatives in order to individualize the English tuition without ability groupings. Additionally, it is of interest to know more about the teachers’ and pupils’ attitudes toward ability groupings at school X and ability grouping in general. The under-achieving pupils were emphasized in this investigation since previous research points to the fact that the ability groupings generally benefit the high-achieving pupils. The choice to focus on the under-achievers was also because of the “special responsibility’ teachers have for those pupils who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining the goals that have been set for the education” (Lpo 94 1994:4). Thus, the main research question was if the groupings

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10 Natur och Kulturs Wings, consists of Base Book and Activity Book for years 7-9.
were positive or negative for the under-achieving pupils at school X. In addition, teachers have to follow the syllabus and the curriculum; therefore it was also necessary to find out if the ability groupings at school X responded to the curriculum for compulsory school i.e. Lpo 94, as well as the Education Act.

Both primary sources and secondary sources have been used. The empirical investigation was conducted with questionnaires answered by the under-achieving pupils in the ‘G’ group and semi-structured interviews with the four teachers who teach ability grouped pupils at this lower secondary school in Sweden was made. This way a comparison between the teachers’ and the ability grouped pupils’ attitudes toward the ability groupings could be made. Previous research could also be compared with my empirical data.

Conclusion could be drawn that the previous research agreed very well with the empirical investigation. The fact that the groupings were negative for the under-achieving pupils was confirmed. However, it would have been of main interest to observe the other groupings as well because it seemed as if the tuition did not differ significantly between the G group, the VG group and the MVG group. Previous research by Slavin (1990 in Wallby et al. 2001:88) showed that unless the teaching methods were systematically changed, school organisation had little impact on student achievement. If this is the case at school X, then there are no winners in the ability groupings at all, not even the high achieving pupils.

The first research question asked what the attitudes toward ability grouping among the English teachers and the under-achieving ability grouped pupils at this school were. I also wanted to see if their opinions differed in any way or if they shared the same thoughts on this issue? The teachers’ attitudes toward ability groupings differed as well as the pupils’ attitudes toward the groupings. Teacher A definitely knew that most of her pupils did not like the groupings at all while teacher B, C and D believed that their pupils were satisfied with the groupings. The pupils showed different attitudes toward the groupings as well.

The next research question asked about the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping. The advantages with the ability groupings according to previous research are, for example, that they enable the pupils to make progress according to his/her level of ability. Another advantage is that the tuition can be accommodated to the needs of the pupils, it also reduces failure and it helps to maintain the strong pupils’ interest and mainspring i.e. they do not have to be bored by weak pupils. In addition, weak pupils become more active when there is no risk of getting in the shadow of the stronger pupils. It also facilitates the tuition for the teacher and it enables individual tuition for smaller groups (Slavin 1990 in Engström, 1996:5).
The advantages according to the teachers and the pupils in the study were similar to those from previous research.

The disadvantages with the ability groupings in this study and according to previous research were, for example, that weak pupils need the stimulus and encouraging that the presence of the stronger pupils can give. Another disadvantage was that the under-achieving pupils are labelled as stupid which affects their self-esteem. In addition, teachers cannot, or do not have the time to differentiate the work for different levels of abilities i.e. the group is not homogenous. Additionally, teachers do not like to teach the slower groups (Slavin 1990 in Engström, 1996:5). Other disadvantages, according to teacher A, were that it was such a bad atmosphere in the classroom and the fact that she could not handle one group consisting of 28 under-achieving pupils on her own. A further disadvantage in teacher A’s opinion was that there were no good role models in the classroom. Teacher D also pointed out that the under-achieving pupils did not get to hear any good English from their classmates. Besides the disadvantages mentioned, another major disadvantage with the ability groupings is, according to Öquist (2007 in Lindgren 2007 a) that the ability groupings lead to a reinforcement of existing social classes and differences that arise from socioeconomic backgrounds which is considered one of the most important factor affecting how well a pupil succeeds in school. Even though I did not ask the under-achieving pupils directly what their parents did for a living, teacher A stated that many of her pupils had problems at home, which in my opinion somewhat confirms Öquist’s hypothesis.

The third research question asked why the school had the groupings. It seems as it was because of the over-achieving pupils that these groupings were created in first place, so that they would get more stimulation. Unfortunately, this seems to have been achieved at the expense of the under-achieving ability-grouped pupils. Another important factor in why these groupings were created is also according to Brown’s explanation (2000 in Wallby et al. 2001:140) where he claims that the decision to ability-group is based on economic reasons and discontent with the contemporary situation. School X chose three large classes in year 7 instead of dividing the pupils into four minor classes for economic reasons. The large classes resulted in the teachers were facing too many multi-levelled pupils, where they decided to ability group. Teacher B and C also claimed that the groupings were created in order to create homogeneity in the classroom. However, figure 2 and 3 in this study show that the pupils are very heterogeneous. They have different needs, experience different difficulties and believe that they are good at different things. According to teacher A, it is even harder to individualize the tuition in the under-achieving group since there are so many pupils that need
the teacher’s help and the fact that they are so weak. Thus, this gives an answer to the next research question; ability groupings do not help to individualize and create heterogeneity in the classroom. The fifth research question was whether or not the ability groupings corresponded to the curriculum for lower secondary school as well as to the Education Act. It is hard to say if school X’s decision to ability group is supported in the steering documents though because of the ambiguity where “one school for all” is emphasized but also that “education can never be the same for all”. There should be more specific guidelines on how to face this question. Westerholm (2007 in Lindgren 2007a) stated that schools are [my emphasis] allowed to create groupings in order to meet the pupils at their level of ability and to give them the opportunity to get more help etc. The groupings have to be temporary though and they cannot put the pupils on a certain track or a certain grade level. The most crucial disadvantage with the groupings at school X in this investigation, it seems, is that the pupils are put on a certain track since it seems impossible to change groups. The majority of the teachers stated that the pupils could switch groups if they wanted but this is not easily done according to the pupils themselves and also to teacher A. Teacher B stated that in order to get a higher grade one needs to switch groups. How would this be possible if all the other groups are full? Therefore, the groupings do put the pupils at a certain grade level. The pupils who had been able to change groups were troublemakers: should they really be privileged to change groups as a reward for their bad behaviour? The groupings do not offer the under-achieving pupils any extra help either (except in teacher D’s group). The situation is rather the opposite according to teacher A who felt that she could not handle the situation alone with so many under-achieving pupils in the same classroom.

The sixth research questions asked if the ability groupings at school X should be abolished. The groupings at school X are in my opinion similar to the groupings in Spanish\textsuperscript{11} that The Education Administration put an end to. According to the Education Act the groupings in Spanish offended the law because pupils in compulsory school are supposed to have a collective school attendance if there are no prescriptions from the government or other authorities in charge. Hence I draw the conclusions that the groupings at school X should be abolished as well. Furthermore, it is not a desirable solution to bring together under-achieving pupils together with pupils who suffer from concentration disabilities and social problems in one group with as many as 28 pupils and only one teacher.

\textsuperscript{11} Referred to on page 12.
Besides, it is not very democratic to divide the pupils based on their level of ability into different groupings if they are not allowed to choose groups and are not able to transfer from one group to another when they improve. Furthermore, in accordance with the EU-Commission, it is best to wait when it comes to differentiating the pupils until upper secondary school. After all, the steering documents state that pupils in compulsory school are supposed to have a collective [my emphasis] school attendance.

The alternatives to ability grouping might be to let the teachers rotate between the classes. Another alternative could be to create a more advanced course of pupils’ own choice in English to stimulate the over-achieving pupils. It is also important to try as far as possible to keep the classes small which facilitates meeting the pupils at their level of ability. In addition, there is teaching based on individual learning styles, PBL, (Problem Based Learning), student’s own planning and individual study plans where they are allowed to work in their own pace or where teachers supply different pupils with different materials. One more alternative is to let the pupils work in mixed-age groups. However, this is not always easily achieved because of schedules etc. Additionally, it might be difficult since the pupils need to have a certain cognitive maturity which is not necessarily related to talent.

I am sure that ability groupings might work at some schools under different circumstances. One alternative could be to see what the pupils think that they are good and bad at, as they did in the questionnaires. Then they could be divided into different groups sometimes to get the opportunity to practise those skills that they are less good at, for example.

The most crucial part in order to reach all pupils and become a successful teacher in a heterogeneous classroom is getting to know the pupils and knowing the subject one teaches but also to think outside the box, create a good atmosphere in the classroom as well as vary the tuition and make it interesting. In addition, there should be more remedial teachers out in the classrooms i.e. integrate the remedial tuition instead of segregating the pupils. Additionally, there should be more research on pupils who experience difficulties when learning a language. It is unfortunate that remedial teachers do not necessarily have the specific competence within the area of language learning or other subjects they may teach at different times. Hence, remedial teachers often teach pupils in subjects that are unfamiliar to them. If there would be more research on and competence about the under-achieving pupils maybe there would be an easy solution in order to meet the demands of all pupils including the under-achieving pupils.

Last but not least, are the ability groupings in English in year 7 positive or negative for the under-achieving pupils at school X? My conclusion is that pupils are generally held
responsible for not doing well in school. The present study implies that it might be the other way around; it is not merely the pupils who have learning disabilities but the school that has teaching disabilities (Wallby et al. 2001:143). The ability groupings at school X are not only negative for the under-achieving pupils but they do also violate the Education Act. The groupings at school X do not appear to be a very good pedagogical solution but merely an organisational solution. The ability groupings could have been avoided if the pupils in year 7 would have been divided into four minor classes instead of into three larger classes in first place.

6.1 Further research

It would have been interesting to do some further research in the form of observation and see how the tuition differed between the different groups in this study but also at other schools who use ability groupings. More research on the under-achieving pupils is needed. Since there is very little research on under-achieving language learners, more research is needed in the area of special pedagogy, e.g. to see how many remedial teachers there are who have the specific competence within the area of language learning. In addition, there should be some research on how to individualize the teaching in multi-levelled classes without dividing the pupils into different groups i.e. alternatives to ability groupings.
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Elevenkät

Enkätundersökning om nivågruppering

Jag studerar till gymnasielärare i engelska och svenska på Växjö universitet. Mitt examensarbete handlar om nivågruppering där jag undersöker nivågrupperingars för och nackdelar. Jag är tacksam om Ni vill hjälpa mig genom att fylla i denna enkät.

Sätt en ring runt det svar som passar bäst. Tänk på att det inte finns ett rätt eller fel svar, utan det är vad Du själv tycker som är det viktiga!

1. Jag är...
   Tjej                           Kille                                     Ålder: _____________

2. Vad tycker du om engelska?
   Det är...
   Mycket roligt        Roligt         Varken roligt/tråkigt     Tråkigt      Mycket tråkigt

3. Tycker du att det är viktigt att lära sig engelska?
   Det är...
   Mycket viktigt     Viktigt     Varken viktigt/oviktigt    Oviktigt    Mycket oviktigt

4. Hur bra tycker du själv att du är på engelska?
   Mycket duktig      Duktig      Ganska duktig       Mindre duktig      Dålig

5. Ringa in två alternativ som du tycker att du är bättre på och två alternativ som du tycker att du är sämre på.
   Dessa två alternativ tycker jag att jag är bättre på i engelskundervisningen
   Skriva     Prata     Läsa     Hörförståelse     Grammatik     Ordkunskap
   Dessa två alternativ tycker jag att jag är sämre på i engelskundervisningen
   Skriva     Prata     Läsa     Hörförståelse     Grammatik     Ordkunskap

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

7. a Vilka engelskböcker använder ni?

___________________________________________________________________________

b. Vad är din åsikt om engelskböckerna ni använder i undervisningen?

Mycket bra        Bra         Varken bra/dåliga    Dåliga     Mycket dåliga

Motivera ditt svar:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

8. Tycker du att undervisningen i den grupp du går i motsvarar dina kunskaper i engelska?

Ja                     Nej

9. a Har du själv valt grupp?

Ja                     Nej

b. Hur gick indelningen till?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
10. Har du bytt grupp någon gång?

Ja          Nej
Om du svarade Ja:

**Varför bytte du grupp?**
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________


**Har du funderat på möjligheten att byta grupp någon gång?**

Ja          Nej

Om du svarade Ja på fråga 11:

**Varför har du inte bytt grupp?**
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

12. Tror du att du lär dig engelska bättre när undervisningen är nivågrupperad?

Ja          Nej          Vet inte

Motivera det svarsalternativ du valde:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

13. Tror du att elever har lika stor möjlighet att få de högre betygen oavsett i vilken grupp de är placerade?

Ja          Nej          Vet inte

Motivera det svarsalternativ du valde:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
14. Vad tycker du om nivågruppering?

Bra             Dåligt        Vet inte

Vad tycker du är bra respektive dåligt med nivågruppering?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

15. Vill du ha nivågruppering även i andra ämnen?

Ja                   Nej           Vet inte

Motivera det svarsalternativ du valde.
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

16. Varför tror du att skolan har nivågruppering?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Tack för din medverkan! /Tina

(Based on Dahlberg, 2006)
Appendix 2

**Lärarenkät**

1. Hur länge har du arbetat som lärare?

2. Vad är orsaken till att undervisningen i engelska nivågrupperas?

3. Vad har du för inställning till nivågrupperingar?

4. Vilka fördelar anser du att det finns med nivågrupperad undervisning?

   Vilka är fördelarna?

   Vilka är nackdelarna?

5. På vilket sätt tror du att nivågruppering påverkar elevernas språkinlärning?

6. a Vad anser du om möjligheten för eleverna i de olika nivågrupperna att nå läroplanens och kursplanens mål?

   b. Tror du eleverna är medvetna om mål och betygsriter, vad som förväntas av dem för att de ska nå målen i engelska?

   c. Vad görs för att öka medvetenheten om vad som förväntas av dem för att de ska nå målen i engelska?

7. Vad anser du om elevernas lika möjlighet att få de högre betygen? Har grupptillhörighet betydelse för vilket betyg eleven får?

8. Vad anser du om elevernas möjlighet till byte av nivågrupp?

9. a Vad tror du att eleverna anser om nivågruppering?

   b. Görs det någon utvärdering av elevernas inställning till nivågruppering?

10. Har eleverna gett uttryck för att elever i olika grupper värderas olika?

11. Hur undviker man att svaga elever känner sig stämplade av den grupp de tillhör?

12. Hur tror du att man som engelsklärare kan anpassa undervisningen för elever som har svårigheter att nå målen i Engelska utöver nivågruppering?

13. Hur gick indelningen till?

14. Vad föredrar du personligen som engelsklärare, nivågruppering eller undervisning i helklass? Motivera ditt svar!

15. Vilka reaktioner har du mött från föräldrar rörande nivågruppering?

(Based on Dahlberg, 2006)
Appendix 1

**Questionnaire**

I am studying at Växjö University to become an upper secondary school teacher in English and Swedish. My degree project is about ability groupings where I investigate the advantages and disadvantages of the ability groupings. I am grateful if you want to help me by filling out this questionnaire.

Put a ring around the alternative that suits you the best. Think about that there is no right or wrong answers, it is what you think that matters.

1. I am…
   Girl                          Boy                                 Age: _____________

2. What do you think about English?
   It is...                        
   Very fun        Fun         Neither fun/Nor boring     Boring      Very boring

3. Do you think that it is important to learn English?
   It is...                        
   Very important     Important     Neither important /nor unimportant    Very unimportant

4. How good do you think that you are at English?
   Very good      Good      Rather good       Not very good      Bad

5. Choose two alternatives that you think you are good at and two alternatives that you are less good at.

   I think I am good at these two alternatives in English:
   Writing   Talking   Reading   Listening and understanding   Grammar   Vocabulary

   I think I am less good at these two alternatives in English:
   Writing   Talking   Reading   Listening and understanding   Grammar   Vocabulary
6. Why do you think that English is hard? Is it because you have reading and writing disabilities, concentration disabilities, is it because of the teacher, is the pace too fast, or because you don’t put so much effort into your homework, you don’t get enough of help from the teacher etc. Try to formulate why English is hard:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

7. a What course books do you use??
___________________________________________________________________________

b. What do you think about the course books??
Very good        Good         Neither good/ nor bad    Bad     Very bad
Motivate your answer:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

8. Do you think that the tuition in English correspond with your English skills?
Yes                     No

9. a Did you choose this group?
Yes                     No

b. How did you get divided into the different groups?
10. Have you ever changed groups?

Yes  No

If your answer was yes:

**Why did you change groups?**

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

11. Only answer this question if you answered No on question 9.

**Have you ever thought about the opportunity to change groups?**

Yes  No

If your answer was yes on question 11:

**Why have you not changed groups?**

___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

12. Do you think that it is easier to learn English being ability grouped?

Yes  No  Don’t know

Motivate your answer:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

13. Do you think that the pupils have the same opportunities to receive the higher grades no matter what group they are in?

Yes  No  Don’t know

Motivate your answer:
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
14. What do you think about ability grouping?

Good               Bad      Don’t know

What is good and bad about ability grouping?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

15. Would you like ability groupings in other subjects as well?

Yes                 No       Don’t know

Motivate your answer.
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

16.Why do you think that the school has ability groupings?
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________

Thanks for your cooperation! /Tina

(Based on Dahlberg, 2006)
Appendix 2

**Teacher questionnaire**

1. For how long have you been working as a teacher?

2. What is the reason to why you choose to ability group?

3. What do you think about ability groupings?

4. What advantages and disadvantages are there with ability groupings?

5. In what way do you think that the ability groupings affect the pupils language learning?

6. a What do you think about the pupils’ opportunities of reaching the goals that have been set for the education in the syllabus and curriculum?

   b. Do you think that the pupils are aware of the goals and the grading criteria i.e. what is expected from them in order to reach the goals in English?

   c. What is being done to increase the pupils’ consciousness concerning what is expected from them in order to reach the goals?

7. What do you think about the pupils’ equal opportunities of reaching the higher grades? Concerning the grades, does it matter which group the pupils belong to?

8. Is it possible to change groups?

9. a What do you believe that the pupils’ think about the ability groupings?

   b. Has there been an evaluation concerning the ability groupings?

10. Have the pupils expressed that they pupils from different groups are treated differently?

11. How do you avoid the pupils from getting labeled by the group they belong to?

12. How do you think that the tuition could be adapted to the under-achieving pupils beyond the ability groupings?

13. How did you divide the pupils into different groups?

14. What do you prefer personally, ability grouping or mainstream classes? Motivate your answer!

15. Are there any reactions from parents concerning the groupings?

(Based on Dahlberg, 2006)