

Critical Review

Investigating Headteachers' Impact on Grouping Practices: Justifying an Analysis on How Headteachers Incorporate Ideas of Equity into Grouping Practices

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Abstract: *Despite research that continues to question the effectiveness of setting and ability-grouping strategies, schools maintain and increase stratifying practices, such as setting, banding and streaming, to raise attainment levels. While past studies in England have investigated various aspects of school-level grouping practices, there remains a gap in the research as researchers have not attempted to understand the ways that headteachers frame problems, consider and pursue equity and affect school-level decisions and practices with regards to grouping strategies. This article presents a literature review which frames the relevance of this issue. The discussion illuminates: how the policy climate has contributed to schools' grouping decisions and headteachers' work; how theories of ability and intelligence implicitly reinforce grouping practices; plausible frameworks for exploring equity in grouping; the importance of considering headteachers' impact on grouping due to documented issues in practice and inconclusive evidence of grouping's effects; and researchers' recommendations for how leaders can counter inequity and inspire structural change.*

Contextualisation

Past studies in England have highlighted inequities in school-level pupil grouping practices (Boaler, 1997; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000), have investigated the effects these practices have on students' achievement and development, and have explored educators' views on grouping practices (Ireson and Hallam, 2001; Venkatakrishnan and Wiliam, 2003). The effect of headteachers' interventions on school-level decisions and practices with regards to grouping strategies, however, is under-researched. Therefore, my research attempts to fill in this gap by answering the following question: how do headteachers in challenging schools contribute to their schools' grouping decisions and practices for pupils in Key Stage 3? In exploring this question, the study will evaluate: how headteachers in challenging schools; impact grouping strategies, practices and decisions; frame or understand problems concerning grouping; and incorporate ideals of equity into their grouping practices. This literature review frames the relevance of my research objectives, and it grounds the study's objectives in past research by highlighting substantive gaps in past empirical studies.

Policy Directives Impact Grouping Strategies

Before investigating headteachers' impact on school-level organisational practices, it is pertinent to understand the broader policy climate that can affect school-level decisions. Although formal policies typically gain traction through their translation into school-level rhetoric, the justifications that drive them can have powerful and persuasive effects on the decisions ultimately made by leaders. This section highlights how England's education policies have influenced ideas and practices concerning ability grouping while also creating tensions due to their paradoxical nature. The reality of such political tensions further illustrates the relevance of exploring how headteachers prioritise certain goals over others when executing and influencing grouping strategies.

Government Directives Act as Steering Mechanisms

The enactment of the Educational Reform Act in 1988 sharpened the obsession on accountability and subsequently encouraged schools to shift back towards setting and streaming (Dunkwu, 2001). This shift towards increased setting has continued in the current market-based educational policy climate which encourages schools to compete for student enrolments and take measures, such as setting or streaming, to attract the most able students (Gray *et al*, 1999; Hill, 2001c). Policymakers have also encouraged schools to further develop setting practices by making suggestive statements in official documents (DfEE, 1997; DfES, 2001) such as: "We will encourage setting so those who are struggling get extra help and the most able are stretched" (Conservative Party, 2010, p 52).

As these messages filter down to schools, practitioners might feel pressured to adopt the directives of policymakers without critically considering the ramifications of embracing these mandates on students' learning. Furthermore, policy rhetoric that suggests schools must adopt certain practices to meet accountability targets acts as a steering mechanism (Ball, 2006; Ozga, 2009).

Paradoxical Policies Create Tensions

New Labour's "inclusive" policies further embedded the ideas of sorting students based on ability into schools' organisational framework (DfES, 2005). As part of social inclusion policies, the government urged schools to make provision for Gifted and Talented (GT) students through programmes like Excellence in Cities (Whitty, 2001). Although promoted as an effort to provide opportunity to disadvantaged students, such directives created further tensions in the processes of selecting certain students for additional opportunities not afforded to all (Radnor, Koshy and Taylor, 2007). As researchers highlight (Whitty, 2008; 2001), policies promoting inclusion and social cohesion, which are based on premises of equity, often conflict with accountability policies, which demand that schools also take extraordinary measures to raise attainment levels. Therefore, it is interesting to consider and investigate how headteachers might incorporate their understandings of broader policy dictats and use accountability mandates to justify and inform their grouping decisions.

Although all headteachers must navigate and mediate the constraints placed on them by paradoxical policies, headteachers in challenging circumstances have to contend with additional pressures (MacBeath *et al*, 2006). Headteachers in diverse schools with high percentages of low socio-economic status (low-SES), special educational needs (SEN), English as an Additional Language (EAL) or looked-after students must mitigate the tensions inherent in striving for higher GCSE scores while creating inclusive environments and advocating for vulnerable pupils. Therefore, government-created policies, rhetoric and quasi-markets arguably place a number of constraints on how headteachers might make decisions, conceptualise their practices and operationalise ideals of equity for their diverse pupil intakes.

Theories of Ability and Assessment Embedded in Grouping Practices

Some scholars (Riehl, 2000; Barker, 2008) have appealed for a reconsideration of current market-based policies, curriculum frameworks, assessment policies and competitive schooling policies as they believe that these inhibit inclusive practices and manifest rhetoric which is bound to particular theories of ability and assessment. As pupil grouping decisions often stem from the decision-makers' conceptions of ability and viable forms of assessment (Gillborn, 2008), the following discussion problematises the theories embedded in grouping practices and dialogical processes. Furthermore, it is pertinent to examine the theories that

headteachers might contemplate when deliberating about their grouping practices and asserting their impact.

Fixed versus Malleable Intelligence

Intelligence and ability theories explain why policymakers and practitioners continue to develop setting and streaming practices and also why educators use standardised tests as measures of ability and identification tools. Although theorists suggest that notions of ability can be placed on a continuum, educators' adherence to beliefs that ability is predetermined can dictate the learning experiences they offer students (Dweck, 2000; Hart, Dixon, Drummond and McIntyre, 2004). Scholars postulate that notions of intelligence and ability are problematic if educators interpret scores on Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and Cognitive Ability Tests (CATs) as indicators of future performance rather than mere measures of current attainment (Drummond, 2008; Stobart, 2008). In light of such postulations, my research seeks to assess whether headteachers perceive limitations in certain measures and how they use their understandings to impact grouping practices.

Ability Constructs and Measures Bias Minorities

Additionally, researchers suggest that IQ and CAT measures may be inherently biased as tests are often normed using unrepresentative samples; they caution against using such scores to group students without an awareness of their potential bias against minority and non-white student populations (Gillborn, 2008; Stobart, 2008). Furthermore, scholars have acknowledged that grouping and sorting pupils based on ability defined by IQ and CAT scores raises issues of equity for minority students (Deary and Smith, 2004), especially as such tests have developed as part of western traditions that bias a certain cultural milieu (Bourdieu, 1973). Despite the numerous scholarly criticisms and scepticism over the measurability of ability, schools continue to perpetuate practices, such as ability grouping, based on beliefs that ability is easily quantifiable (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000).

As suggested, notions of ability can influence schools' grouping practices and potentially constrain students' educational opportunities. Issues of ability labelling and grouping are important regardless of a school's particular context; however, ignoring such issues can have even graver consequences when working in schools with large populations of minority or low-SES students who might not have had the same opportunities to develop their abilities as white, middle-class students. As Gillborn (2008) argues, leaders in challenging school contexts must be attuned to how assumptions about ability intertwine with issues of equity. Therefore, this study will assess whether and how headteachers use their conceptions of ability to impact and consider grouping practices.

Frameworks for Approaching Equity

When discussing issues of equity in relation to grouping strategies, it is important to analyse how researchers frame concepts of equality, social justice, discrimination and racism (Foster, Gomm and Hammersley, 1996). However, it has become increasingly important to understand not only how educators might define equity but how they might work towards achieving the goals embedded in their definition (Rikowski, 2000), especially as practitioners' perceptions of equity might include different conceptions of equality and social justice. In education, the idea of equity in relation to grouping can arguably be considered from various angles: equal opportunities for students to access quality learning experiences; fair methods for identifying ability; parental involvement in grouping decisions; students' equal distribution amongst sets; differentials in attainment of subgroups; etc. The following discussion elucidates how such issues have been investigated and the theoretical perspectives applied

by researchers in order to proffer possible lenses with which researchers and headteachers might evaluate and consider grouping issues.

Sociological Frameworks

Ideas of educational equality and arguments by Critical Race Theorists (CRT) (Gillborn, 2008) apply theoretical frameworks that provide lenses for how headteachers in racially diverse schools might approach the issue of constructing equitable grouping practices. Internationally, researchers have explored how educational policies and practices reconstruct and reinforce unequal power relations in society at large (Freire, 1972; Foucault, 1980; Cummings, Dyson and Millward, 2003; Radnor *et al*, 2007). These researchers ground their approach in sociological post-modern and post-structuralist positions, such as CRT, which suggests mainstream agencies “maintain and extend the grip that white people have on the major sources of power” (Gillborn, 2005, p 491). Educational sociologists (Gaine, 2000; Hill, 2001a) further posit that some schools inadvertently discriminate against minority and economically disadvantaged pupils by reinstating policies and curriculums that bias a type of learning and purpose for learning. Diniz (2003) and Landsman (2004) also argue that despite policymakers’ increased attention to issues of equity, racial equality still has to fight for legitimacy as a worthwhile topic. As researchers claim that practitioners neglect to think critically about how commonplace policies and practices can disadvantage racial groups, my study will evaluate how headteachers examine their grouping practices and impact them based on concerns for racial equality or equity.

Equity as Meritocracy

Sociologists (Hill, 2001c; Gillborn, 2005; Radnor *et al*, 2007) also suggest that policymakers and schools have pursued limited conceptions of equity by reinforcing meritocracy without fundamentally questioning how traditional structures, such as streaming and setting, reproduce social stratifications. Gillborn (2005) and Radnor *et al* (2007) have both revealed schools’ latent reconstructions of social divisions by exposing how few minority students of low-SES status attain spots on GT registers or positions in high sets. While policymakers espouse equal opportunity goals, policy technologies, such as GT and Urban Scholars’ programmes, allow them to create a façade that suggests their primary focus is equity, while they “maintain practices that hide class-structured economic inequalities under a meritocratic veneer” (Radnor *et al*, 2007, p 297). Researchers and scholars (Bernstein, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Radnor *et al*, 2007) also suggest that there is an inherent elitism in meritocratic selection and grouping practices since students from minority and low-income households often lack the resources, the reinforcement of certain values and the cultural capital to compete with middle-class children. Although policymakers justify the use of meritocratic practices to achieve equity, researchers (Gillborn, 2005; Radnor *et al*, 2007) have shown that adhering to a belief in meritocracy can have detrimental consequences for minority and low-SES students. In light of such findings, there is a strong motivation to understand the ways that headteachers can prevent traditional school structures and processes from privileging certain students over others and realise more complex ideals of equity.

As the above discussion demonstrates, equity is a complex construct to research and possibly an even harder ideal to achieve in schools. In addition, educators, policymakers and researchers may not necessarily agree on ways to reach goals of equal attainment amongst pupil subgroups, equal opportunities, equality of condition, distributional / relational justice or other equity goals (Foster *et al*, 1996; Gewirtz, 1998; Hill, 2001b; Lynch and Baker, 2005). Despite the obvious need for sensitivity in addressing and researching such issues, scholars agree on the necessity to engage in dialogue about how to infuse them (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Hill, 2001c). Furthermore, these scholars appeal for sincere evaluations into

how processes of selection and grouping reinstate power structures and marginalise minority or low-SES students. Scholars researching social justice (Gaine, 2000; Riehl, 2000) posit that headteachers must be the ones to confront institutional inequities. They suggest that headteachers have an immense responsibility to consider and critically analyse how they enact policies and create practices that could perpetuate current social patterns and discriminate against students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In light of these appeals, my work explores which frameworks headteachers apply when conceptualising grouping practices and working towards equity and which frameworks lead them to take action.

Previous Research Investigating the Effects of Grouping Strategies and Issues in Practices

My study is not the first to consider headteachers' understandings of and reflections on their schools' grouping practices (Hallam and Ireson, 2003). Previous ethnographies and case studies in England and the US have investigated how schools construct grouping strategies, the challenges encountered in creating organisational structures and problems in grouping practices (Oakes and Guiton, 1995; Ireson, Clark and Hallam, 2002). Such research has uncovered pertinent issues in grouping practices, such as teacher and pupil allocation, which might feature in headteachers' cognitive processes when implementing grouping strategies, influencing practices or initiating new ideas. However, these case studies, as well as other large-scale empirical research (Kulik and Kulik, 1982; Slavin, 1990), present inconclusive and often conflicting findings on grouping practices' effects. The conflicting evidence from previous research, discussed below, further justifies a study on how headteachers evaluate their schools' practices and impact grouping.

Researchers investigating the effects of ability grouping on students' development and learning have approached the topic from different philosophical standpoints, depending on their disciplinary backgrounds and priorities. Educationalists and psychologists (Kulik and Kulik, 1982; Slavin, 1990; Ireson and Hallam, 2001) who prioritised gaining representative results conducted experimental studies as well as comparative, correlational analyses on how ability grouping affects student achievement and self-esteem. Meanwhile, sociologists (Oakes, 1985; Abraham, 1989; Boaler, 1997) who have focused on explaining effects with more specificity and exploring everyday practices have conducted ethnographies or case studies. The scholarly debates and contradictory findings highlight the necessity for practitioners and researchers to continue to critically assess the findings from previous research.

Unequal Socio-Economic and Racial Distributions Amongst Sets

Numerous studies in England and the US have documented unequal distributions of minority and economically disadvantaged students in lower ability groups and sets (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Ireson and Hallam, 2001; Hallinan, 2004). Although researchers have documented the positive influence of social mix, socially mediated learning experiences and peer effects (Thrupp, 1999; MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001), practitioners continue to defend the unequal distributions. As ethnic minority and low-SES students are often placed together in low ability sets they fail to benefit from the high aspirations held by students from middle-class backgrounds (Hallinan and Williams, 1990). Therefore, researchers have recommended that leaders monitor the composition of classes as unequal distribution impedes vulnerable students' access to curriculum opportunities, high-calibre instruction and the positive influence of goal-oriented students (Ireson *et al*, 2002). However, such suggestions assume that leaders find unequal distributions in ability groups problematic. Therefore, it is interesting to glean whether headteachers express these concerns for pupil distributions in their practices and if so, how they work to address them.

Problems with Identifying ‘Ability’ and Misallocation of Students

Beyond investigating the stratification and distribution of pupils amongst sets and streams, researchers (Hallam, 2002; Lohman, 2005; 2006) have also studied closely the practice of identifying students for ability groups (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). Therefore, my study will seek to determine whether headteachers impact these identification and allocation processes. Although generally reliant on standardised tests and ability measures, schools also use subjective indicators—information from students’ prior institutions, teacher opinions, behavioural reports and parent / pupil feedback—to determine students’ appropriate group placements (Hallam, 2002). As schools’ identification strategies stem from practitioners’ views about intelligence and the merits of measuring pupils’ potential (Ford, 1998), it is relevant to assess headteachers’ different approaches to pupil identification practices.

Scholars who advocate equity on behalf of marginalised students point to the inadequacy of schools’ current identification procedures. They support abolishing the use of what they claim are biased tests and propose using nonverbal indicators, innovative strategies and informal assessments to better assess minority students’ potential and aptitude (Donovan and Cross, 2002; Lohman, 2005; 2006). Others argue that talent should be measured by potential and that processes of “reverse discrimination” should be incorporated to allow vulnerable students to access higher sets (Shields, 2004). Despite the provision of alternative and more progressive ideas about intelligence and learning (Gardner, 1983; 1993; Sternberg, 1985), many identification procedures still rely on ability tests, standardised test scores and CATs (Brown *et al*, 2005; Swanson, 2006). As the identification of students for groups, GT registers and honours classes have historically been a well-researched, contentious and debated area of practice, my work evaluates whether headteachers assert influence on their schools’ identification strategies and incorporate scholarly recommendations in doing so.

Movement Amongst Sets

Although less studied than the misallocation of students to sets, researchers have investigated the frequency with which students move amongst sets (Commission for Racial Equality, 1992; Troyna, 1992; Boaler, Wiliam and Brown, 2000; Ireson *et al*, 2002) and have found re-allocation often varies considerably amongst schools and does not often occur frequently. While some of the evidence is nearly two decades old, it corroborates the notion that ability grouping strategies can have compounding effects on students’ progress when schools initially misallocate students and these students subsequently miss opportunities to move or advance to higher sets. As empirical evidence suggests that rigid grouping strategies can have damaging consequences, my study aims to discover whether headteachers are concerned with the flexibility of their systems and consequently influence reassessment practices, which researchers recommend that schools incorporate to facilitate set movement (Ireson *et al*, 2002).

Effects of Grouping on Self-Concept, Self-Esteem and Attitudes

As mentioned earlier, the findings from different studies provide contrasting evidence which makes it difficult for practitioners to decide on and for scholars to defend certain grouping approaches. Whereas the findings from experimental studies (Kulik and Kulik, 1982; Reuman, Mac Iver, Eccles and Wigfield, 1987) suggest that students’ self-esteem and self-concepts may be enhanced in stratified settings, ethnographic and case study research (Oakes, 1985; Boaler, Wiliam and Brown, 2000) suggest that students in the early secondary years become disaffected when placed in low sets or tracks. However, additional research has argued that rigid grouping can have negative effects on students’ self-perceptions, developmental growth and academic self-concepts, especially for lower achieving students (Fuligni, Eccles and Barber, 1995; Ireson and Hallam, 2009). Furthermore, grouping can

result in students constructing a particular *habitus* or perception of themselves as successes or failures, which ultimately affects their attainment and effort in school (Zevenbergen, 2005).

Empirical research (Ireson and Hallam, 2001; Abraham, 2008) has also presented contradicting findings with regard to pupils' views on and preferences for certain grouping structures. However, researchers have found evidence of pupil dissatisfaction when students believe they have been misallocated to lower groups or resent their required entry into low-level examinations (Gamoran and Berends, 1987; Boaler *et al*, 2000). As the findings of research on students' views and emotional development demonstrate further detrimental effects, I aim to explore headteachers' awareness of such effects and their attempts to ameliorate the negative consequences of grouping on students' development.

Effects of Grouping on Teacher Practices and Expectations

A plethora of past research has documented the existence of differences in instructional approaches, curriculum, questioning techniques and pacing between high and low-track classes (Oakes, 1985; Boaler *et al*, 2000). As Ireson and Hallam (2001) explain, "lower ability classes have less access to the curriculum and are taught in more structured ways, with more repetition, less discussion and greater use of practical activities" (p 37). Teachers have been found to alter their pedagogy depending on which group they teach and often apply preconceived notions about the capacity of students to engage with certain techniques based on their labelled ability (Oakes, 1985; Gamoran, 1986; 2004). Interestingly, although teachers claim that ability grouping enables them to tailor their instruction to students' needs, researchers have found more differentiation and individualised instruction in mixed-ability groups (Boaler, 1997). As teachers have been found to treat ability groups as homogenous, researchers have suggested that leaders should monitor instructional differences amongst groups (Ireson and Hallam, 2001). These findings justify exploring whether headteachers actually do monitor teachers' pedagogical practices by comparing the pedagogy employed in different groups and also how they might counteract potential inequities in instructional practices.

Effects on Academic Achievement

Possibly one of the most important considerations for policymakers and school leaders is whether implementing ability grouping, particularly in the early secondary years, benefits students' academic achievement. The evidence is inconclusive about whether the practice of setting and ability grouping actually facilitates academic achievement. Even when relying on the measures of standardised tests, which capture just one indicator of students' academic progress, well-cited, large-scale studies reflect mixed outcomes.

Several experimental studies (Kulik and Kulik, 1982; Hoffer, 1992; Askew and Wiliam, 1995; Venkatakrishnan and Wiliam, 2003) which analyse the effects of class assignment on students' achievement have determined that setting has positive impacts on high-achievers' academic progress while negatively impacting low-achievers' progress. Larger meta-analyses and best-evidence syntheses confirm that there is no significant difference between the achievements of students in sets versus those in mixed-ability groups (Kulik and Kulik, 1987; Slavin, 1990). When considered together the findings defend the legitimacy of honours or GT programmes to ensure that high-achievers can make significant progress; however, they do not defend the worth of setting, banding or streaming an entire cohort of students. Although one might feel compelled to rely on the findings of rigorous meta-analyses it is important to contextualise the issues by considering individual studies.

A few studies compared students' achievement in schools adopting homogenous grouping with the achievement of students in control groups, or schools implementing heterogeneous

classes. Fuligni *et al* (1995), Boaler (1997) and Ireson and Hallam (2001) found that for mathematics low-achievers made more progress in mixed-ability classes than in sets, but that high-achievers made more progress in settled environments. Furthermore, the lack of evidence of significant effects for subjects other than mathematics calls into question the use of setting for English, science, etc. Fuligni *et al*'s (1995) findings also support the notion that placing students in sets during their early secondary years might have cumulative effects on low-achieving students throughout their educational careers.

Although the above studies cast doubt on the merits of ability grouping, some are limited in their designs as they used small samples, did not observe achievement over long periods of time, or did not control adequately for prior attainment. Furthermore, their designs make it difficult to attribute the effects to schools' grouping structures versus teachers' instructional approaches or the resources used in certain classes. Even some of the more sophisticated statistical models cannot generate evidence of a causal relationship between a type of grouping and student achievement as they often did not control for instructional differences amongst classes. Therefore, the detected achievement differences may not necessarily have occurred because of the structures but because of pedagogical practices, teachers' attitudes or other factors. However, as argued by researchers, pedagogy and classroom organisation are not necessarily independent phenomena and are often intertwined (Gamoran, 1986; Hallam, 2002).

The contrasting evidence illuminates the complexities entailed in understanding grouping practices' effects on students' learning experiences as well as issues in constructing school-level practices. The lack of unequivocal evidence in favour of ability-grouping, especially in the early secondary years (Slavin, 1993), provides further justification for investigating whether and how headteachers might implement different grouping approaches or critically re-assess their schools' practices in Years 7-9.

Considering Research on Leadership and School Improvement

Taking into consideration the complexities discussed, researchers suggest that leaders can make positive, school-level impacts by working towards equity, inclusion and structural changes. The following discussion examines these suggestions and consequently legitimises investigating how headteachers might contend with the pressures mentioned in order to impact grouping practices.

Headteachers Can Counter Inequities and Inspire Dialogue

As described above, schools undoubtedly have complicated decisions to make with regard to grouping practices and strategies. The difficulties inherent in these decisions are magnified in schools with large numbers of EAL, SEN, minority or low-SES students. However, in such schools which have to mitigate policy pressures while dealing with challenges beyond the school gates, leaders can propel positive change forward (MacBeath *et al*, 2006). The empirical evidence (Shields, 2004; Stevenson, 2007) suggests that schools and leaders can promote more inclusive and equitable practices by incorporating democratic school-level policies and processes. These suggestions parallel theories, developed from distributed leadership (Harris, 2008) and leadership for learning frameworks (Swaffield and Dempster, 2009), which encourage shared dialogue.

Research on inclusive and democratic education has also demonstrated that school communities can build inclusive practices by collaborating and addressing practitioners' underlying mindsets to expose barriers which might prevent inclusion (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Ainscow *et al*, 2006). It is often recognised that a principled interruption that creates cognitive dissonance amongst staff members must occur in order for practitioners to

recognise the benefits of and necessity for change (Gaine, 2001; Fullan, 2003; 2007). However, even if space and time were created for educators to make decisions collaboratively, the process may not always inspire change unless leaders or external agents initiate a new way of thinking and disrupt tendencies of group think (Gronn, 2003). Despite recognising the difficulty in addressing ill-defined problems such as ability-grouping in school discussions, Riehl (2000) and Shields (2004) indicate that headteachers can steer conversations on grouping or initiate organisational changes to strive for social justice. For these reasons, my research will attempt to ascertain whether and how proposals for democratic dialogue and decision-making are implemented, and how headteachers make inclusive organisational changes. Furthermore, the research will assess: whether headteachers consult stakeholders about grouping strategies and practices; which stakeholders headteachers consult; and the schools' process for consultation.

Beyond simply enabling inclusion, the literature suggests that leaders can also stifle inequitable practices. Leadership research (Larson and Murtadha, 2002; Shoho, Merchant and Lugg, 2005; Marshall and Oliva, 2006) has illuminated the need for school leaders to reflect upon and address social justice, democracy, inclusion and equity issues. The referenced scholars have based their empirical work and theorising on the belief that school leaders can eradicate the inequities which students experience when they are oppressed by the social order perpetuated in schools (Riehl, 2000). However, overt concern for equity requires headteachers to have the training and expertise to deal with discrimination, racial issues and ethical decision-making. Unfortunately, in some instances principals feel ill-equipped to mediate multi-faceted, complicated decisions (Dempster and Berry, 2003).

Headteachers Can Impact Decision-Making

Just as leaders can have varying degrees of impact on student learning and teaching (Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2005), leaders can have varying degrees of impact on school-level decisions. Often their impact depends on their backgrounds and the degrees to which they have understanding of certain issues (Stein and Nelson, 2003; Goldring, Huff, Spillane and Barnes, 2009). This expertise and content knowledge might determine whether they leave certain decisions to those whom they have hired, whether they provide feedback and input on other decisions or whether they try to directly impact on decisions.

When investigating school-level decisions, it is appropriate to consider not only the ways in which leaders impact decisions but also how they conceptualise them. Research has posed a myriad of theories on how leaders approach dilemmas in schools, and has attempted to evaluate leaders' cognitive processes and behaviours using cognitive frameworks (Bolman and Deal, 1991; Leithwood and Steinbach, 1991). Understanding headteachers' cognition and espoused beliefs can help researchers to explain headteachers' actions, priorities and rationales thereby also construct a theory of practice (Quinn, 1988; Devos and Bouckenooghe, 2009). However, recently scholars have debated the limitations of cognitive approaches compared to situated approaches that recognise leadership as the interaction between various parties (Sleegers and Spillane, 2009). Although I subscribe to the merits of understanding school-level practices as distributed or hybrid forms of leadership (Gronn, 2009), it is still relevant to identify how headteachers may influence leadership practices. Furthermore, applying a cognitive theoretical standpoint during the research process will allow me to disentangle which understandings and frames headteachers access when they impact grouping strategies and how they consider equity.

Headteachers Can Impact on Schools' Structure

Researchers emphasise the role of headteachers in shaping culture and point specifically to their capacities to affect student achievement by focusing on schools' core practices – teaching and learning (Peterson, McCarthey and Elmore, 1996; Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Robinson, Lloyd and Rowe, 2008). At the same time, research also identifies the need for headteachers to be aware of structural issues, ways to organise curriculum and allocate resources (Hallinger and Heck, 2003; Leithwood and Riehl, 2005). As organisational structures vary in the instructional tradeoffs they create, leaders have to understand these tradeoffs if they are “to build effective models of classroom organisation” (Slavin, 1987, p 93). Researchers have also found that school leaders enact their visions partly by initiating structural changes and supporting certain systems (Peterson *et al*, 1996). Although an investigation which explores structural issues may seem to ignore the relevance of headteachers' affects on pedagogy and learning, researchers have acknowledged that organisation and instruction are intimately connected (Peterson *et al*, 1996; Ireson *et al*, 2002).

The above researchers argue that school leaders can develop ethical decision-making, inclusive structural changes and equitable practices. Despite numerous assertions about how dialogue and democratic decision-making can inspire shared understandings and progress inclusive practices, few studies have investigated whether these ideals and recommendations are enacted and how they are enacted with regard to grouping. Previous research speaks directly to a need for leaders to approach their decision-making with a concern for equity, inclusion and ethics; however, the research is less specific about how principals might already do so or how they can begin to do so. Furthermore, researchers claim that leaders can facilitate inclusion and operationalise their visions through structural as well as cultural and pedagogical changes. Therefore, my study attempts to uncover headteachers' expertise with regard to grouping decisions and practices.

Gaps in Research Findings

Given the theoretical consensus on headteachers' ability to impact structural changes and counter inequitable practices, it is relevant to investigate how leaders bring together conceptualisations of equity, understandings of ability, knowledge of research and efforts to meet policy directives in their decisions on pupil grouping strategies. However, as the discussion has shown, no study found has sought to investigate how headteachers combine their understandings of these areas to impact grouping practices. The following section reiterates the specific substantive gaps that inspired my research aims:

Substantive Gaps Lead to Research Aims

Although researchers contend that leaders can develop their schools' grouping and organisational practices, past research (Oakes and Guiton, 1995; Hallam and Ireson, 2003) has focused on investigating headteachers' views or schools' collaborative construction of grouping practices. As research has not prioritised understanding specifically headteachers' impact on grouping practices and decisions, my study fills a substantive gap. Furthermore, researchers have explicitly referenced the need for educators to incorporate research recommendations and findings into their grouping practices (Boaler, 1997; Ireson *et al*, 2002). However, as no study found has explored how headteachers translate their understandings of grouping research and issues into action, I aim to reveal how headteachers conceptualise grouping problems. Lastly, as mentioned, Riehl (2000) points to a specific gap in understanding how leaders strive for and facilitate equity in regard to grouping practices. Therefore, my study seeks to identify how headteachers consider and realise equity with respect to their schools' grouping practices and decisions.

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