Accommodating for different levels of proficiency in the English classroom

With focus on ability grouping

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Abstract

This study investigated the perceived strategies used to deal with mixed ability classes of four English teachers, two working at a year 4-9 compulsory school, and two at an upper secondary school in Sweden. The same teachers were asked about their attitudes towards and experience of ability grouping and cooperative learning. The findings of the latter part of this investigation were discussed in reference to research concerning the field of ability grouping.

Semi structured interviews were used. Strategies used by teachers included grouping devices, issues of communication, giving individual attention inside and outside the classroom and encouraging self- and peer reviewing. Two teachers in the 4-9 school used ability grouping sparingly but clearly and had experienced an ability grouping of a year nine class which was perceived to have predominantly positive results in academic terms and both positive and negative results in social areas. The teachers of upper secondary school did not use ability grouping – either on democratic grounds or because it was perceived to be unacceptable in the particular school climate. Because the research in ability grouping is diverse, many of the teachers’ attitudes could be supported, and refuted in the research. The teachers using ability grouping felt themselves to be going against research made, but were confident in the decisions they made. Further investigations about maximum numbers of students in heterogeneous classes and time spent with an extra teacher contra own teacher were encouraged.

Keywords

Mixed -ability classrooms, ability grouping, heterogeneous and homogeneous classes, democratic ideals
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1. Introduction

In the discussion heard of and from the school world, words such as "calm", "harmonious", and "with time to spare" are seldom heard. On the contrary, a look at school life seems to bear witness to a fraught reality, harried for students and teachers alike. One of the alleged factors is that teachers are fronting classes of diverse ability and the challenges of meeting every individual’s needs in a “school for all” are grueling. Some students need more help, others need more challenges and finding the balance for everyone within the framework of the school system creates stress for both parties (Lotan, 2006). A Swedish Schools Inspectorate\(^1\) report (2011:7) entitled “English in the compulsory school, years 6-9”\(^2\) states that in 23 of 293 English lessons observed, the accommodating for different levels of proficiency was “mostly strong”. In 13 of 22 schools this adaption showed “more weaknesses than strengths” (p.7). The report acted as a catalyst for this study. I decided to interview a small group of teachers, asking them which strategies they use to meet this challenge in their work. Much of the research made in the area of mixed-ability classes revolves around the issues of ability grouping and cooperative learning; homogenous and heterogeneous classes. A brief synopsis of the research studied about ability grouping will be presented within two categories: “Academic achievement” and “Democratic ideals and social issues”. I was interested to see what opinion and experience the interviewed teachers had of ability grouping within their English tuition and how their opinions and experiences correlated with the research made. In this way I hoped to see if the teachers’ practices were agreeing with studies made on the subject; if the “theory” was found to line up with their “reality”. My investigation thus constitutes a small qualitative study of these phenomena in a year 4-9 compulsory school and upper secondary school in Northern Stockholm.

1.1 Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to describe and analyse the issue of accommodating for different levels of proficiency in English tuition in one year 4-9 compulsory school and one upper secondary school in the Stockholm region and this is approached in the following research questions:

- Which strategies do four teachers of compulsory and upper secondary school perceive themselves to be using to teach different levels of proficiency in the English classroom?
- What are the teachers’ experience and opinions of ability grouping and how do these findings correlate with research made in the same field?

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\(^{1}\) Skolinspektionen

\(^{2}\) Original title: "Engelska i grundskolans årskurser 6-9"
2. Background

The discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of homogenous and heterogeneous classes is one that has followed Swedish school structuring for the last 100 years (Wallby, Carlsson & Nyström, 2001) and in other parts of the world for even longer. It has been used as the basis of discussion involving pedagogical issues such as ease of establishing teaching levels and having time to meet students with greater needs on either end of the ability spectrum, as well as political and cultural “hot potato” issues such as democratic ideals and the sorting of citizens into societal strata. Few issues have been discussed so much within the realm of education, and few have been so frustratingly difficult to assess with any sense of certainty. According to Kulik & Kulik (1982), the reviewers of the practice of ability grouping have shifted their focus throughout the years. In the 1950’s the result was often put forward that ability grouping was advantageous for high achievers. Research that followed in the decades to come has been focusing on the possible negative effects of the grouping, dealing with issues such as self-perception and student motivation.

In Sweden, a move away from the parallel school system in 1962 to a “school for all” mirrored the democratic political attitudes in the middle of the 20th century. The last vestiges of the divided school system; the “special course” and “general course”3 within English and Mathematics disappeared with the new Curriculum in 1994. From the beginning of the 1990s, there has been another shift in attitude, with emphasis moving towards the individual rights of each student, and where it has come to be seen as a student’s prerogative to develop after own interest and in own tempo. After decentralisation, issues such as student grouping have landed in the realm of the school principal (Wallby et al, 2001).

Much of the international research made about dealing with mixed-ability classrooms deals with issues of tracking, ability grouping and cooperative learning. In countries such as the United States and England, the practice of tracking, or placing students in differentiated classes for all subjects depending on their perceived academic ability, has been widely used within school structures as a way to streamline education. There is not a comparable system in Sweden anymore, although the streaming into different programs in upper secondary school can be seen to serve some of the same purposes. This study will not be examining the effects of this, but rather looking at how teachers deal with the challenges of mixed ability classes and how the teachers feel about ability grouping and cooperative learning within the English classroom.

2.1. Theoretical background

The concepts of ability grouping and cooperative learning will be briefly defined before going on to review some of the previous research made in the field of the consequences of ability grouping in education.

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3 “särskild kurs” and “allmän kurs”
2.1.1 Ability Grouping

Ability grouping can be divided into at least two main divisions: “Between-class” grouping, such as tracking and streaming, and “within-class grouping”, where the grouping occurs only for one or two subjects, or simply within the classroom for different projects (Slavin, 1987). When ability groups occur within the heterogeneous classroom, they are most often temporary and are seldom acknowledged in the students’ study records. In some texts, the term ‘flexible grouping’ is given to groups which are made and disbanded in quick succession and can be enforced, for example, when a teacher sees the need to take certain measures with specific students after the results of a test have been made known (Castle, Deniz & Tortora, 2005). However, this practice seems often to come under the broader term of “ability grouping”. Working with extremes, Slavin (1987) writes that there can be an ability group of one student, as that student receives instruction and tuition specifically tailored to his/her needs, or also refer to the grouping of low-achieving students to special classes for all or most of their school week.

2.1.2. Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is students working together on school-related goals. Although often students of different abilities are in the same class, heterogeneous classes do not seem to be a prerequisite of this system. The proponents of cooperative learning seem often to be opponents of ability grouping, sometimes on democratic or philosophical grounds, even if the two methods need not necessarily be mutually exclusive (Mills & Durden, 1992).

2.2. Previous research about ability grouping

This section will be divided into two areas which I have seen to be recurring in the research around ability grouping, those of “Academic achievement” and “Democratic ideals and social issues”.

2.2.1. Academic achievement

At first glance, it seems that much of the research done on ability grouping claims that ability grouping does not help students in their test achievements, with the possible exception of high achievers (Kerkhoff, 1986). In a large meta-analytic study made by Kulik & Kulik (1982), the results showed that students in an honors class benefited most through a system of ability grouping, something the authors credited to their subsequent access to advanced peers and an accelerated curriculum, while only minor effects were seen in the results from average and below average students.

The findings of ability grouping benefiting high-achieving students but not lower ability students is called a “divergence theory”, and Kerkhoff (1986) isolates some factors to explain the results. One can be called a “teacher factor”, whereby it is claimed that the teachers assigned to these groups are both more able and more motivated to teach the students there - they are quite simply doing a better job of teaching, which naturally benefits those in the class. Slavin (1990) however casts doubt on this theory, stating that there is seldom evidence that less qualified teachers are teaching the lower ability groups, and many other complaints, such as slow development and the choice of teaching methods perhaps differ because of the nature of the student group rather than the teacher’s competence. Goldberg, Passow & Justman (1966) describe a scenario where the high or low expectations placed on the students can have an effect on their academic advancement. They state that the teachers’ expectations
towards different levels of classes (ie. high expectations in a high achieving class and low expectations in a low achieving class) can be instrumental in maintaining these levels.

Another factor, which I choose to call a “peer factor”, points out that students are not only interacting with their teachers but also with the students around them. Surrounded by high or low ability peers will have an effect on their learning, the implication being that being exposed to a level of ability that is higher than the one that the individual possesses themselves is beneficial for development (Kerkhoff 1986, Slavin, 1987). Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development, a cornerstone in pedagogical theories, promotes that a student learns well by interaction with a person working at a development level just above (but not too far above) their own. This theory can, I think, be seen to support this “peer factor”, given that the divergence in ability is evenly spread, or that peers are able to interact at a level that is close to their classmate.

Goldberg et al (1996) state that grouping made on the basis of IQ, and without adjustments made in the syllabus, shows no proof of helping any level of students. In a similar vein, Slavin (1987) notes that some benefits have been found if students are regrouped for only one or two classes, and if the criterion for this regrouping is ability within the subject rather than IQ or general ability. It is also vital that the teaching is adapted to meet the classes’ needs and that the groups are flexible enough to allow reallocation when appropriate. This latter point was also the finding of Kulik (1992); that the effectiveness of ability groups depended on curriculum adjustment. In the cases where there was no adjustment, middle and low performing groups had similar results to their peers that had remained in mixed ability classes, and high performing students had a somewhat accelerated learning rate. In those classes where the study program was adjusted to meet the specific needs and goals of the class, including an accelerated course for gifted students, academic benefits were found across the board, with the most marked results coming from the enriched study program class. The author suggests that the results are so clear that moves to abolish ability grouping in America would injure the educational system.

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4 In the research considered here, the word “curriculum” has the meaning “study program”, which can be quite individual from school to school in The United States. In my study I shall henceforth use the word “Curriculum” to describe the national study program in Sweden, and “study program” for the individual choices made in classroom teaching to reach goals specified there.
2.3.2. Democratic ideals and social issues

With the grouping of students in ability classes comes the necessity of a group of perceived “low-achievers” and Slavin (1987), drawing on research made by Good and Marshall, (1984), and Persell (1977), points out that the self-perception which may accompany such an allocation can result in a self-fulfilling trend towards lesser academic achievement. He quotes a student going from elementary school to junior high, (compulsory school) and the feelings evoked through being assigned to a lower track:

When you first go to junior high school you do feel something inside—it's like a ego (sic). You have been from elementary to junior high, you feel great inside...you get this shirt that says Brown Junior High...and you are proud of that shirt. But then you go up there and the teacher says—"Well, so and so, you're in the basic section, you can't go with the other kids.” The devil with the whole thing—you lose—something in you—like it goes out of you. (p.324)

While this quote deals with a tracking process rather ability grouping between classes or within the class, it can nonetheless be seen to reflect feelings that can be aroused by students being graded and classified, without their being part of the decision. Interestingly, Kulik & Kulik found little evidence to support this theory, seeing a very slight positive trend in student self-concept in their study (p.426).

Kerkhoff (1986) notes that all students, not just high ability students, benefit from working in a high ability class. Eriksson and Lindblad (1987) also advocate the access to students of a higher level for stimulation and inspiration, but warn that a balance must be held if the effects are not to be the opposite. Although they do not specify it, I believe they refer to the possibility of a student losing self-esteem through experiencing an unbridgeable gulf between themselves and their more accomplished peers.

Linked with concepts of self-image and success are those of equality in education and a democratic ideal to support all students equally in their academic endeavours. Ability grouping has been strongly criticised for perpetuating social rifts which could otherwise be neutralised in the school world. In Sweden, after the move away from the parallel school system with the new curriculum in 1962, a division of classes was nonetheless maintained in the form of a Special course and General course within English and Mathematics. Placement in these classes was based on the student’s and student family’s free choice, but it was common that student counselors “guided” the decision and the system clearly lead to different levels of ability, as intended (Eriksson & Lindblad, 1987). When discussions and investigations were made to consider whether these two levels of courses should continue, one of the major arguments against it was its deviation from the ideals of the “school for all”. The premise was put forward that belonging to a group shapes students’ self-image, and while that may have a positive effect in some cases, the risk was evident that it could be detrimental in others. Indications that the grouping could be seen to relate to the students’ home situation, in form of social status and parents’ educational background (seen also in Goldberg et al, 1966) gave even more reason to question the system. Slavin (1990) points out that while the pro-ability grouping voices can use the argument of proposed effectiveness in academic achievement to advocate ability grouping, those against it lean also on an argument of equality and democratic ideals. He infers that in arguing for ability grouping one had better be sure of the academic advantages involved, because democratic ideals and a movement for equality stand strong on the side of the anti-ability grouping movement.
Indeed, using democratic and social equality arguments to strengthen their case, the report by Eriksson and Lindblad on grouping issues from 1987 recommended that the Special course and General course be abolished. Heterogeneous classes were suggested as a basic structure, with temporary departures into more homogenous grouping for no longer than one term. In order for it not to become too arduous for teachers, the heterogeneous classes were recommended to be no larger than 20 students, or at the very most 21-22. Even a group of 20 students was described as belonging to the higher range of numbers; it should be a maximum and not a norm. In schools where the classes exceeded this number, they should be divided so that heterogeneous classes of no more than 20 were formed, the premise being made that with small groups it is easier to individualise and differentiate teaching and both manage the diversity in ability as well as make something positive out of it (Eriksson & Lindblad, 1987).

2.3. Curriculum and syllabus

The first three sentences in the entire Curriculum for the compulsory school (2011) and the upper secondary school (2011) are identical and occur under the title of “Fundamental values”:

The national school system is based on democratic foundations. The Education Act (2010:800) stipulates that education in the school system aims at pupils acquiring and developing knowledge and values. It should promote the development and learning of all pupils, and a lifelong desire to learn. (p4)

Given that these are the first words to be written in the arguably most important document for the school system it is interesting to view them in the light of this study. The first sentence could be seen to imply that all students have the right to an equal education and have influence over their studies. The second sentence can be seen to stipulate that schools provide the means to receive “knowledge and values”, that is, both concrete information to learn, and even subtle “messages” directly and indirectly in the form of principals, standards and ideals. The third sentence states that all students are included in this scheme, bar none, and that an optimistic attitude towards learning should be fostered.

As this study deals with issues of teaching individuals in the classroom, the following quote from Curriculum for the upper secondary school can also be considered relevant. An almost identical version is also found in the Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre 2011 (p.10):

Teaching should be adapted to each student’s circumstances and needs. //…// National goals are specified through the norms for equivalence. However, equivalent education does not mean that teaching should be the same everywhere, or that the resources of the school are to be allocated equally. Account should be taken of the varying circumstances, needs and the students’ level of knowledge. There are also different ways of attaining the goals of education. Special attention must be given to those students who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining these goals. For this reason, education can never be the same for all. (p.5)

This paragraph advocates the use of differentiated teaching in order to reach the student as an individual, and that special care should be taken of those who for various reasons have difficulties.
Later on the same page is stated: “The school has the task of passing on values to students, imparting knowledge and preparing them to work and participate actively in society”. This statement touches on the role of the school as instigator of society’s common principles, as well as a preparation ground for adult life within that society, and has bearing on my study which brings up issues of societal segregation and equality.

Furthermore, a chapter entitled “Overall goals and guidelines” in the Curriculum for upper secondary school states:

All who work in the school should:
• provide support and stimulation for all students so that they develop as far as possible,
• be observant of and support students in need of special support, and
• cooperate in order to make the school a good environment for development and learning.

Teachers should:
• take as the starting point each individual student’s needs, circumstances, experiences and thinking,
• reinforce each student’s self-confidence, as well as their willingness and ability to learn. (p.9)

All of these points can also be found, sometimes with slightly varied wording in the Curriculum for the Compulsory school, (p.16). Issues of individual needs, as well as providing an environment where students can develop a healthy self-esteem and develop to their full potential are given focus here – issues which will be given attention in my study.

3. Method

The choice of method was qualitative research as the interest lay in finding the personal opinions and experiences of the teachers, something which could be best collected in interviews and later analysed (McKay, 2006). It was divided into two components: interviews with teachers and critical close reading (Johansson & Svedner, 2010) of research made in the area of dealing with mixed ability classes. The aim of finding how the teachers perceived themselves to be dealing with mixed-ability classrooms was best fulfilled by interviewing the teachers with open questions rather than starting out with a hypothesis which instead characterises quantitative research (McKay, 2006). According to Johansson and Svedner (2010) the interviews could be classified as structured, with identical questions, albeit open ones. Bryman (2001) writes of semi-structured interviews, where an overall theme is observed, but still allows for the possibility of sub-questions, and this definition can also describe the interviews used in this study. This form of interview was chosen because a firm structure around which to gather the findings was desired, at the same time as the teachers could be free to bring up all issues they personally felt relevant within that structure, without being influenced in their choice of focus. The final question was of a more specific nature; that of the teachers’ opinions about ability-grouping. Throughout the interview extra questions were used for clarification and expansion.
The disadvantage with this approach of interviews was that it was time consuming, thus only a small field could be interviewed within the time plan of this essay - a quantitative approach would have given me a wider field of informants. However, the depth of investigation was made a priority and in this way the breadth was sacrificed. Another disadvantage can perhaps be seen in my attempts to remain neutral in the interviews. A decision to not ask leading questions was made, although at times the answers could have helped collect a more homogenous investigation result. For example, when one teacher gave the answer that she believes in giving clear instructions as important in dealing with different levels of proficiency, the next informant was not asked if they do that also. Although they could have answered honestly that they do, and that would have been interesting for this study, instead their own thoughts were allowed to steer the results. This was in order to avoid any feeling that they “should” give a particular answer or to prompt their answers.

### 3.1 Informants

The informants were four teachers of English, two in a compulsory year 4-9 school and two in an upper secondary school. They were both municipal schools. Teachers 1 and 2 teach at the 4-9 compulsory school and teachers 3 and 4 at an upper secondary school. Teachers 1, 3 and 4 are teachers that I have met during teacher placement stints, teacher 2 is a colleague of Teacher 1.

Teacher 1(T1) is female, 38 years old and a qualified teacher of English with 12 years teaching experience. Her first language is Swedish and this is the language she spoke in the interview.

Teacher 2 (T2) is female, 47 years old and a qualified English teacher with 20 years teaching experience. Her first language is Swedish and this is the language she spoke in the interview.

Teacher 3 (T3) is female, 61 years old and a qualified teacher of English with 30 years teaching experience. Her first language is English and she spoke English in the interview.

Teacher 4 (T4) is female, 48 years old and a qualified teacher of English with 13 years teaching experience. Her first language is Swedish and this is the language she spoke in the interview.

### 3.2. Material

The interview questions were as follows:

1) Do you feel a need to accommodate for different levels of proficiency in your classroom?
2) Do you find it problematic? If so, in what way/s?
3) Which strategies do you use to meet the challenge of accommodating for different levels of proficiency in the classroom?
4) What do you feel are the factors determining if a measure is successful or not?
5) What is your opinion about ability grouping/flexible grouping?

Sub-questions were posed in order to further follow a line of thought or for purposes of clarification.
3.3. Procedure

Interviews were made in April 2013 at the schools where the teachers work. Prior to the meeting a letter was sent as an attachment in an email, introducing the topic and purpose of the study and the areas to be broached in the interview (Appendix 1). Although the letter of introduction told that apart from the topic of mixed-ability classes, their opinions about ability grouping and cooperative learning would be sought, in the interviews the topic of ability grouping was given weight (alongside mixed-ability classes) through the line of questioning. In each case I sat in a closed room, alone with one informant, except for in the case of teacher 1, when a teacher student accompanied her. In all cases we sat at a desk and I recorded the interview, as well as taking a few, one word notes as they talked. Although these notes gave no depth to the investigation they can perhaps be seen to have given the informant time to collect their thoughts and experience themselves as listened to, acting as a kind of “mirroring” (Johansson & Svedner, 2010). The interviews were conducted in the native language of the teacher being interviewed; English for teacher 3 and Swedish for teachers 1, 2, and 4. The interviews were transcribed in whole, with the exception of some isolated minutes where the teachers talked of matters irrelevant to the study.

3.4. Validity and reliability

In an attempt to ensure the internal validity, or credibility of the informants’ responses, every minute of the interviews was recorded and all parts that were valid to my investigation carefully transcribed (McKay, 2006). Interventions in the interviews were kept to a minimum so as not to influence the informant; a danger against which Johansson and Svedner (2010) warn. It was an interesting balance to find, by showing interest with an alert, but neutral body language and trying to keep verbal reactions to a minimum.

In order for the reader to determine the external validity, or transferability of this research, as described by McKay (2006), I have included the relevant details of the teachers’ ages, working experience and education. The fact that all my informants are female, as I am myself, may have bearing on the answers given in their interviews, but issues of gender have not been given attention in this study. I present the results of the investigation and the ensuing discussion as a discourse made with four teachers, in two different schools in the north part of Stockholm. No attempts have been made to generalise these findings to apply to a greater context, even if pedagogical discussion is embarked upon concerning the findings.

The reliability, or dependability, in this research has been provided through the inclusion of details of the informants and procedure as well as the inclusion of relevant quotes from the informants. Quotes chosen have been selected to represent the true opinions of the informants and are not taken out of context or adjusted in any way except to remove pauses and some filler sounds not relevant to the content or meaning (McKay, 2006).

The interviewees were asked the same questions in the interview. The time of the interviews varied between 20 and 40 minutes each. Although the interviews were terminated at a point when informants declared themselves content with their contribution, and for no other reason, due to the time

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Footnote:

5 In the original: “Spegling”, in interviews used to check with the informant that the interviewer has understood what has been said.
constraints and small scale of the investigation the findings can in no way be seen to represent a complete picture of their views on the issues.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The Swedish Research Council\(^6\) has four main ethical requirements which need to be met within humanities and social science research: the information requirement, requirement of consent, confidentiality requirement and utilization requirement.\(^7\) They include the requirements that informants are given all relevant information concerning the project and that they are aware of their rights to interrupt their participation at any time (information requirement), that they have given their prior consent to meeting and participating under the conditions provided (requirement of consent), that the informants’ identities are kept confidential (confidentiality requirement) and that it is made clear on which premises the study will be used/published, and that these premises are not departed from (utilization requirement). All of these four main ethical requirements are met in my study. Permission by mail was received from the teacher informants to conduct the interviews. Following their consent, a letter by email was sent describing in detail the intentions of my study and assuring them of their anonymity (Johansson & Svedner, 2010, The Swedish Research Council, n.d.). They were made aware of the size and scope of my study, of it being my Degree project in the final stages of my teaching degree and as they had all undergone a teacher training course I felt secure in the belief that they understood its premises.

3.6. Methods of analysis

The transcribed interviews were read and interview recordings listened to in order to discern patterns and topics under which the data was organised. In this way, a cross-case analysis is used. (McKay, 2006). The results are presented and discussed within a two and three tiered structure. The research questions provide the first tier of structure; these are presented and discussed in turn. Under the first research question the results are grouped in the recurring topics discerned in the interviews. For the second research question the original 2-3 categories set up in the background research provide the basic structure for a discussion, with the patterns found in interviews supplying a series of sub-headings (Johansson & Svedner, 2010).

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\(^6\) Vetenskapsrådet

\(^7\) Original: Informationskravet, samtyckeskravet, konfidentialitetskravet och nyttjandekravet
4. Results and discussion

4.1. Description of material

Four interviews of 20-40 minutes each with four different English teachers provide the basis of my research.

4.2. Data analysis and discussion

Background

T1 and T2 work in a year 4-9 compulsory school, where ability grouping in the form of a special needs teacher taking the weakest students is usual, and where a year 9 class has been divided into four different groups, disbanding the students from their home groups of 9a, 9b and 9c in order to form ability levels in English and Mathematics. In this school, the grouping of Year 9 is a special situation; no other classes are divided in this way.

T3 and T4 work at an upper secondary school where the norm and ideal is cooperative learning. There is a support English class which is voluntary but largely unused by the students due to inconvenient scheduling and it being lead by an unfamiliar teacher. T3 and T4 teach English in long lesson blocks of 2-3 hours, once a week.

Research question 1: Which strategies do four teachers of secondary and upper secondary school perceive themselves to be using to teach different levels of proficiency in the English classroom?

Self-perception

Helping students address issues of self-confidence was given by all teachers as part of what they do to meet different students’ needs. In English tuition this translated often into helping less advanced students to dare to speak and interact in English. Given that participation is one of the important prerequisites of learning (Lotan, 2006), this was an issue that was given weight by the teachers. T1 believed it was important with active encouragement, to help the students realise that they also had a level of English worth working for: "Det handlar mycket om att peppa dem och få de att se att 'det är inte så att jag inte kan någonting, jag kan inte lika mycket som de som sitter här, men jag kan ändå'" (personal communication, April 29, 2013). For T4 the choices of forming small familiar groups for speaking was entirely based on this concept, that the students should feel unthreatened and dare to practice their skills: “De får jobba med någon som de litar på, som de tycker de vill … våga prata, för det är ganska känsligt” (personal communication, April 25, 2013).

Communication

8 “It’s about encouraging them and getting them to see that ’it’s not that I don’t know anything, I don’t know as much as those sitting there, but I am able anyway’” (author’s translation).

9 “They are allowed to work with someone they trust, that they think they want to ... dare to speak, because it is a fairly sensitive issue” (author’s translation).
Both T1 and T3 stressed the importance of communication with the students. In T1’s case, she gave instructions in English, in Swedish and then lastly in English again, and in this way felt that all students were “on board”. T3 stated that the fact that students have such different starting points is one of the greatest challenges of teaching in a heterogeneous classroom. Because the students cannot work if they do not understand what they should do, she takes time to go around the class to check with those she knows can have difficulties and make sure that they know what it is they should be doing. She also said that when one asks a student of they understand “if you are lucky then they will say no” (personal communication, April 24, 2013), indicating that a necessary ingredient is the student being able to realize and admit that they are in need of assistance. T4 also mentioned the vital element of feedback from students. She advocated flexibility in meeting different classes, saying that no class is like the other and if one has a reasonable communication with the students, their feedback can help to guide one’s teaching.

**Independence: Self-regulation and peer regulation**

Both T3 and T4 declared themselves to be working towards helping students gain more independence, so that they can help themselves and help each other. T3 described it as teaching strategies within the different disciplines of English so that their heightened awareness of steps to be taken will help them help themselves. T4 actively taught aspects such how one gives feedback, so that the students could help each other in a constructive way. She did mention, however, that when it came to written English, students would not quite trust each other and anyway want feedback from her, the teacher. Despite often grouping students so that they can feel comfortable and able to develop, sometimes she also found it important to “shake up” the normal group constellations and thought that working with a more unfamiliar peer can lead to the students making a bigger effort. T2 used seating arrangements to ensure that work in pairs (with the student sitting next to them) works well. According to her, the students can help each other, “lift” each other, and she will sometimes move students so they have the opportunity to work with someone else.

**Grouping**

Taking the issue of grouping to another level, the Year 9s in the school where T1 and T2 work is grouped in classes of abilities. T1 teaches the advanced English class of Year 9s, which in itself could be called a strategy to deal with different proficiencies in that she, together with her colleagues, have made the decision to group and therefore lessen the range of proficiencies within any one class at that year level. T1’s advanced class is larger than the remaining 3 classes of lower ability, but according to her it works well because the students need less support from her in basic skills and can work more self-sufficiently.

**Class activities**

For T2, choosing appropriate tasks for the students which could be fulfilled at different levels was an important part of her teaching strategies in a mixed ability class. She did not like the idea of giving gifted students extra work, but rather encouraged them to work at their own high level within the given task. T1, on the other hand, gave students extra work within the subject they were working on, or within a topic of own interest and sometimes then working in pairs with someone who had also finished “early”. T4 worked along similar lines and mentioned that when the faster students were finished a certain block of work, she would give them a deal of independence to work on something else, so that they could have an extra challenge. She also made use of a computer site which the students could work on at their own level.
Finally, giving individual attention both inside and outside of class times was offered as an important strategy by three of the teachers; T1, T3 and T4. Both T3 and T4 felt they needed to sit beside those that needed extra help, and T4 said that within the new lesson block times of 2-3 hours there was time to do this. However, even these measures did not quite fill the needs of the lower ability students, and they were encouraged to come outside of class time. T1 also encouraged students to come outside of school time, and said she used the time to help bolster the students’ aural confidence, by letting them see that they actually could speak more than they thought, if only they would dare.

**Research question 2: What are the teachers’ experience and opinions of ability-grouping and how do these findings correlate with research made in the same field?**

**Academic achievement**

The school in which T1 and T2 work have ability groups in English and mathematics in year 9, where T1 takes care of the advanced group in English. That particular class had many students with weak English abilities, and that, combined with issues involving the special needs teacher lead to a decision being made to group the class in levels of ability. Four groups were formed of 32, 22-23, 17-18 and 6 students respectively. The group of 32 is an advanced class, and the group of 6 go to a special needs teacher. The two other classes hold an intermediate standard, with the group of 17-18 having more students at a lower level of ability. The grouping was determined after the results of a diagnostic test were analysed. T1 stated they largely use the same material, but her group needs less basic instruction and work more quickly, giving time for extra and other work. According to Kulik (1992), the effects of ability grouping in this context, that is, without adjusting the study program, should be quite slight compared with if they had kept the students in the heterogeneous classes. Despite this, and although processes involved in the grouping of the students (discussed further in the section “Democratic ideals and social issues”) had resulted in a grouping which was not entirely satisfactory in terms of ability levels, the general impression was that T1 and her teacher team were satisfied with the results. T1 gave an example of a student in one of the lower ability levels who had developed more than they could have believed possible. At the same time she was aware that it was impossible to fully judge the effect of the grouping as it was not possible to see how the students would have developed if left in their normal classes: “Och som sagt det är ju svårt, jag tänker på den här killen som skrev denna uppsatsen, det är svårt att veta egentligen, hade han gjort så här bra…i den gamla konstellationen? Vi tror ju inte det, vi tror att vi har gjort någotinting rätt, men vi kan inte veta.”\(^{10}\) (personal communication, April 29, 2013). According to Slavin (1987), other factors that determine whether an ability grouping process will have positive results are: i) If the group is divided according to abilities within the field, and not, for example, after an IQ test, ii) if the grouping occurs in only one or two classes, and iii) if they are flexible enough to allow reallocation. This was the case here, as the students were divided after an analysis of a diagnostic test in English, only left their home class constellations for English and Mathematics, and movement between classes was allowed. With the exception of Kulik’s (1992) findings, T1’s experience of a successful ability grouping process can thus be seen to line up with research in the field.

\(^{10}\) “It’s difficult to know, I’m thinking of the fellow who wrote that essay, it’s hard to know, actually, had he done as well, in the old constellation? We don’t think so, we think we have done something right, but we can’t know” (author’s translation).
**Class size and time constraints**

As already stated, given that a similar study program was used between the different groups, according to Kulik (1992) the effects of ability grouping in this context should be quite slight compared with if they had kept the students in the heterogeneous classes. Nonetheless, T3 and her colleagues have a clear feeling that they have “done something right”. On closer examination, it can be seen that another element has shifted: the number of students in each class is different to if the class had been divided heterogeneously and thus numerically evenly. The group of 6 “weakest” students would have been sent to a special teacher in any case, as is praxis in that school. T1 has the largest group, an advanced level group of 32 students which she defines as largely self-sufficient and working well. The extra students she could take in her class due to the level and homogeneity of the group reduced the numbers in the lower ability classes, providing more time per student for the teachers there. Thus, if one accepts a premise where small class is a class where greater academic steps can be taken due to teacher attention ratios, then the actual numerical equation of restructuring the year 9 class could have had a beneficial effect.

Being able to have time to meet the students’ needs was a recurring theme in the interviews, particularly in the upper secondary school. Three of the four teachers interviewed said that they work outside of the hours allocated for their position, in order to give extra attention to students in need. Despite the positive effect of longer lesson blocks in terms of having time to sit beside a student for a length of time, T4 expressed that it was still not enough for all students:


(personal communication, April 25, 2013)

In order to give extra support and possibly to build up study habits, the upper secondary school offers support classes and if they were regularly used they would serve the function of ability grouping. The classes are, however, completely voluntary, and while the teachers can recommend that the students go, they cannot force them. Both T3 and T4 thought the support classes of English in their school worked badly, and felt that what the students needed was not extra time with someone else, but rather with them; their own teacher. From this, and the fact they were meeting with students outside of class time, it can be alleged that more time is needed for their classes in order to fully manage the diversity found there. Prior to the move from the homogeneous classes of the Special course and General course, the recommendation of Eriksson and Lindblad (1987) was that the ensuing heterogeneous classes should be no larger than a maximum of 22 students. T3 and T4 were fronting heterogeneous classes of 32 students; something the report equated with an excess teacher workload and reduced possibilities to meet the diversity in the classroom.

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11 “I try to sit down next to them. We work now in a block lesson, so there is time, 20 minutes, which I think works well. So there are possibilities in that way. But those that are weaker need to do more outside (the classroom), it’s not enough with the little help they get. Perhaps they need more time with a teacher, but then to develop…in the subject I think they need more. So it’s not quite enough…They don’t have the ability to manage themselves. They haven’t built up the study capability” (author’s translation).
“Teacher factor” and “peer factor”

As already seen, the “teacher factor” states that ability grouping can be influenced by the skill of the teachers assigned to each group and this issue was directly referred to by T1. While she believed that their school had had good effect of their ability grouping, she also thought that in some groups perhaps it can be disastrous. She referred directly to research by John Hattie which shows that the “lower ability” classes tend to receive “lower ability” teaching, resulting in a lesser education with weaker results for those assigned to the groups; a stance that has also been taken by Kerkhoff (1986) and Slavin (1987). She was clear that that was not the case in their school: “… så är det ju inte här, tänker jag.”12 (personal communication, April 29, 2013) and in that way addressed that particular criticism of ability grouping. She also broached the subject of a “peer factor”, by commenting on the fact that students can need stimulation from other, more accomplished students, a position which both Kerkhoff (1986), Slavin (1987) and Eriksson and Lindblad (1982) have been seen to support. She stated: “De behöver någon som ligger snäppet framför för att … för stimulansen och för att faktiskt se … det är dit jag ska, det är inte den här gruppen som är normen”13 (personal communication, April 29, 2013).

In a similar vein, T2 had a feeling that the lowest group of the ability split perhaps had a disadvantage in that they had no role models to look to, and she had heard that the development in that group had been stagnant. Despite this, she had a generally positive attitude to ability grouping, but declared it dependent on so many factors. She seemed to differentiate from those who were “reachable” and those below a certain level that needed their own space and the security of a closed group:


In general T2 felt that research had shown that one should not group in abilities, but she could see that different students could have different needs. Some could be helped in a group with stronger students because they would be able to take advantage of the stimulation offered, but perhaps there were others that were not in a position to be helped in that way and then she felt it was better that they were feeling comfortable and could learn in a non-threatening environment. Referring to a group of 5 students in her year 5 classroom who leave the English class to go to a special needs teacher, she said: “…det underlättar för mig och det är skönt för dem också, eleverna, för de känner ju av att de kan så lite, så de känner sig lite trygga med varann”15 (personal communication, April 29, 2013), giving the impression that she felt it was a good solution given the circumstances. With the five “weakest” students taken care of by someone else, she felt freer to take care of the rest of the class, which naturally had differences of proficiency in any case.

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12 “… that’s not how it is here, I’m thinking…” (author’s translation).
13 “They need someone who is just a little step ahead to… stimulate and to actually see – ‘That’s where I am going, it’s not this group that is the norm ‘” (author’s translation).
14 “There are so many considerations…what type of problem do you have? What kind of person are you…as a student? Self-confidence…why do you have low abilities and can you quickly catch up if you were to be placed in a strong group? Or do you have a really, really hard time all time, even if you were placed in a strong group? There are so many considerations…” (author’s translation).
15 “It makes it easier for me and it is comfortable for them as well, the students, because they can feel that they know so little, so they feel a bit more safe with each other’” (author’s translation).
Democratic ideals and social issues

At one point in her interview, T3 stated that ability grouping was “just not done anymore” (personal communication, April 24, 2013), displaying an awareness of a trend in schooling away from ability groups to the point where it is perceived as not being a viable option anymore in certain schools. She wondered, however, what the students would choose if they were given the choice, signaling that the negative effects of ability grouping perhaps had not deterred students in choosing a group at their level. Although only touched upon lightly in her interview, it nonetheless raises an important issue: If one of the major arguments against ability grouping is the detrimental effects on student self-image with accompanying social implications, who are we to force a heterogeneous classroom on those that would rather receive instruction in a more homogeneous one?

T4 was against ability grouping in the meaning of dividing students into different levels of ability, for example in different classrooms, on the basis of principle. She expressed a strong unwillingness to define students by their proposed abilities; one of the main reasons for abolishing the last vestiges of national ability groups in Sweden. She stressed that teachers should work in a compensatory way:

Vi brukar saga att vi ska jobba kompensatoriskt och jag tycker inte att skolan ska göra det, (ability group - author’s comment) det är liksom en del av uppdraget, vi ska kompensera för brister hemma, vi får inte behandla med etiketter, ’ingen labels’ (drar fingrarna över pannan). Därför tänker jag att jag är i grunden emot det, redan i grunden … i min värdegrund, att inte sortera studenterna på något sätt.16 (personal communication, April 25, 2013)

She also stated that the students will need eventually to function in a workplace where they will be meeting diversity and it is not appropriate to divide them in the school either. This is in accordance with the sentiments stated in Curriculum (2011), although there is not actually stated what kind of democratic society the students should be schooled into. The statement already seen, but here for ease of reference: “The school has the task of passing on values to students, imparting knowledge and preparing them to work and participate actively in society” (p.5) can apply to societies of many different levels of hierarchical structure. However, T4 seems to embrace the values of equality that lay behind moves away from the parallel school system and structured grouping levels as seen in Eriksson and Lindblad (1982). She had nothing against that students group themselves in what could be seen to be ability groups within the classroom, but did not want to have it as a starting point for her classes. She had observed that when students are to be assessed, for example in speaking, they will group themselves with a partner of a similar level to their own, even deserting their friends to do so. She stated: “Starka elever är oerhört målmedvetna”17 (personal communication, April 25, 2013), pointing out that in these cases the students seem aware that they will be able to perform more strongly with a partner that can match their own level. While T4 does not stop them in those situations, it is nothing that she wishes to directly encourage, nor use as a basis for the group work in her classes.

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16 “We usually say that we should work in a compensatory way, and I don’t think that schools should do it (ability group), it’s part of our job, we should compensate for short-comings in the home, we shouldn’t label people; ‘no labels’(demonstrates a label on her forehead). That’s why I think I am against it, deep down, already from the start, in my fundamental values, to not sort the students in any way” (author’s translation).

17 “Strong students are incredibly goal-oriented” (author’s translation).
Non-threatening learning environment and issues of self esteem

All the teachers interviewed gave importance to the issue of the students feeling secure and unthreatened in their interaction in the English classroom. In the upper secondary school, this sense of security was found in group constellations within the class, either formed by the students themselves or by the teachers, and was given as being the most important factor in building groups. The groups formed correlate with the definition of flexible groups in the sense that they were made and disbanded quickly and dealing perhaps with just one project, but they were not used in either of the schools in the sense that Castle et al (2005) refer to them; as a kind of reaction to test results in order to “fix” certain element of the language studies. In the compulsory school, this feeling of interacting in a non-threatening environment was instead referred to as a benefit of the ability groups.

As stated, when T3 and T4 create working groups within their classes, the foremost issue is that of an unthreatening environment for the student, followed by which combinations of students can best help each other. As already seen, T4 lets them choose entirely with whom they wish to work in speaking assignments. On the other hand, she likes to try different combinations in some projects because she says if the students only work with their friends in the end they cannot see the faults: “Det jag märker, jobbar man bara med sin kompis, ser man till slut inte något nytt. Det behövs också ibland det här lite läskigare … det blir viktigare att anstränga sig” (personal communication, April 25, 2013). This is, however, a delicate balance and T1 also mentions that students cannot work if they feel the distance between levels is too large: “Ibland ser jag att en svagare elev inte vill jobba med en som är för duktig, den kan inte utvecklas då.” (personal communication, April 29, 2013). Interestingly, the decision to divide the year 9 class into ability levels group was triggered by the fact the class had 20-25 students with lower levels of English, who, according to T1, gave up when they felt it became too difficult; when they could see that they could not manage what the others could. Even T2 mentions the same concern when she plans seating arrangements and pair work: ”De ska lyfta varann, men lite lagom så, så man inte känner sig nedtryckt av… utan lite lagom.” (personal communication, April 29, 2013) These comments bring us back to the “peer factor” and correlate well with the warnings of Eriksson and Lindblad (1982); to make use of peer stimulation but to be careful that the difference does not become so large as to have the opposite effect to that desired. In terms of learning factors these thoughts are also well aligned with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of proximal development.

The way in which T1 and her English teaching team dealt with the grouping in year 9 can be seen to be counteracting at least some of the social stigma associated with being assigned to ability groups. Prior to forming the groups (when the class was in year 8), the students sat a diagnostic test and then analysed the results themselves to determine where they felt they belonged. The groups were not intended to be permanent and the students had a say (in dialogue with the teacher) as to where they should be placed. The English teacher team decided from the beginning that it should be that way, and so T1 felt the grouping had not worked entirely from an ability level point of view:

Jag tycker att man måste ha gjort klart, för både sig själv och liksom inom gruppen, ämnesgruppen … vad syftet är med att nivågruppera. Och vi enades om att ju, nej, men

18 “What I notice is that if you only work with your mate, in the end you cannot see anything new. Sometimes it is necessary with something a little bit scarier…it becomes more important to make an effort” (author’s translation).
19 “Sometimes I see that a weaker student doesn’t want to work with one that is too strong, s/he can’t develop then” (author’s translation).
20 “They should lift each other, but a reasonable amount, so they don’t feel repressed by … but rather a reasonable amount” (author’s translation).
The diagnostic test that the students took gave them a basis from which to make an estimation of which group they may belong to. In conference with the teachers, they then decided which group it would be. According to her, only three students of eighty wished to be grouped according to friendship ties, and another couple to follow a specific teacher. Students were free to then change groups if they felt they were misplaced. The decision to include the students in the class allocation process was a conscious one, and one which she declared was fundamental in their planning. However, to some extent, she found it to undermine the ability levels in the grouping. If one allows that a level group will have advantages to gain on the academic front, it suggests that students’ possibilities to influence their placement can have a negative effect on the academic plusses of ability grouping. In T1’s case, the interests of democracy and allowing students to have power over their learning situation was given a higher priority than the ostensible educational advantages. This measure was in line with Eriksson’s and Lindblad’s (1987) assertions that social implications should be given precedence over academic ones, if indeed there is a choice needed to be made. The way in which the ability grouping was enforced in the year 9 class could be seen to be partially protecting the students from the sense of feeling inferior, as in seeing why they are placed in a class, and accepting the measure, they have hopefully on some level agreed that it is an appropriate placement for them. However, no guarantees can be made that students will nonetheless feel their placement keenly and be negatively influenced in their self-perception as a result.

The issue of negative self-esteem effects is not an undisputed one. Researchers such as Slavin (1987), Kerkhoff (1986) and Eriksson and Lindblad (1987) propose that grouping can have a negative effect on weaker students’ self-esteem, and this was indeed largely the impression that T1, T2, and T4 bore with them as representing the results of modern research. Other reviewers however, (Kulik & Kulik, 1982, Kulik, 1992) claim the opposite effect; that talented students feel a little less gifted in a group of strong students, indicating a lessening in their self-confidence in the field, while the lower ability students feel “smarter” in a group of similar level. While they felt it to go against the results of research, T1 & T2 clearly expressed that it could be a relief for the weaker students to be in a group of a similar level. T2 said: “Jag kan ändå tycka att det är skönt för de eleverna att få, de som har det som svårast att de får jobba utifrån sitt ... gruppnivå.”22 (personal communication, April 29, 2013) and T1 pointed out that one of the deciding factors in grouping a whole year class was that students had reacted negatively to being together with their more capable peers.

Despite working consistently in heterogeneous groups, both T3 and T4 created forms of ability groups through individual attention to students, either within or without the classroom, going by Slavin’s (1987) definition of ability groups being able to consist of a single student. This form of ability

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21 "... I think one has to have decided, both for yourself and within the subject team...what the aim is with ability grouping. And we agreed that, no, the students must be involved themselves in the decision, and it didn’t become 100% right, because not everyone can judge their own level. But we decided from the beginning as well, we are not always going to have this group. There are some that have changed to a higher group and some that have changed to a lower group” (author’s translation).

22 “I think anyway that it is nice for the students to be able to, those that have the hardest time, to be able to work at their own … group level” (author’s translation).
grouping, would presumably be free from social stigmas and “labels” as it could occur relatively anonymously and be entirely on the students’ terms. Interestingly, while ability grouping has been avoided in order to not define students’ capabilities and foster low self-esteem, the same issues of low self-confidence seem to be cropping up even in heterogeneous classes.

Other social factors

Regarding issues of regrouping involving social elements, T1 could see both positive and negative effects. Firstly, a positive effect was that of students forming new social constellations through being tossed out of their normal class grouping. In some cases, group dynamics were changed and individuals could show another side of their personalities which was positive in their interaction with other students. On the other hand, a negative effect was that she could discern that her students in the advanced group had lost some perspective about the abilities of other “normal” students and were less prone to adapt their level to accommodate them:

Jag kan nästan se på de här duktiga, de här jätte-duktiga, att de förväntas att alla ska vara så här. Det är väl det jag kan se. De satt i lite olika konstellationer när de gjorde sin muntliga, nationella prov här om dagen, //…// och då … de är så pass duktiga att det bara flyter på, och då glömmer de bort att anpassa sig till den som sitter bredvid. Och det kan ju vara nackdelen.23 (personal communication, April 29, 2013)

Here, according to T3, the students seem to have become less aware of the divergence of abilities in their school world. In extension, one could argue that they were receiving an inaccurate picture of their micro-society, at least in terms of English ability, and one that did not prepare them well for meeting diversity in the extra-mural society. Taken to an extreme, the argument could be made that this effect on students’ understanding of each other is the beginning of that which ability grouping has been accused; creating and perpetuating divisions in society.

4.3. Concluding remarks

My first research question was least well served by the interview structure used. While it had the desired effect of leaving the teachers feeling free to tell about which strategies they perceived themselves to be using, the data collected, while interesting, was diverse. This, together with the fact that there was a narrow field of informants meant that the information base with which I could work to find bearing points of reference was limited. Despite this, it can be seen that all four teachers declared themselves to be working in situations where they needed to accommodate for different levels of proficiency in the classroom. Many of the challenges that seemed to arise were those of being able to “reach” each student, so that all understood what they should do, and could receive the support they needed during the working process. Time was taken outside of class and outside the teachers’ working hours to help students on a one-to-one basis and in small groups. Issues of self-esteem and the potential blockage of learning that low self-confidence can create were also raised, and it was through grouping strategies and individual attention that these challenges were combated. Within the upper

23 “I can almost see that these good students, the really good ones, that they expect that everyone is like that. That’s what I can see. They sat in different constellations when they did their speaking, national test the other day, //…// and then … they are so good at it that it [their speech] just flows and they forget to accommodate for the person sitting next to them. And that can be the disadvantage.” (author’s translation).
secondary school, feedback from students was used to guide lesson structuring and it was considered important to teach independence so that students could help themselves and each other. In both school levels grouping strategies enabled students to “lift” each other.

One strategy used in the compulsory year 4-9 school was that of ability grouping in year 9, reducing the range of ability levels in any one class of that year. Whether or not students should be given extra work was an issue which varied between teachers, one preferring to have all students doing the same tasks; tasks which could accommodate different standards of completion. The issue of dealing with advanced students seemed not to be a large concern for the teachers, but instead the associations that arose with my questions on the challenges of teaching in a mixed-ability classroom primarily revolved around students who needed extra help in order to be able to meet the demands of their English tuition.

The information to answer my second research question was primarily harvested from the answers given to the final interview question. If teacher attitudes can be seen to reflect school policy, then there are some interesting differences to note between the 4-9 compulsory school and the upper secondary school. In the compulsory school, the teachers had primarily positive reactions to ability grouping, but gave nuance to the argument by seeing individual cases. They were, however, aware of negative reviews of ability grouping but felt they had reason to make their own decisions, based on what they considered to be the interests of the students. Here they could be seen to be going “against” research, but the way in which it was done, in terms of grouping policies and awareness of having strong teachers at all levels can be seen to address some specific criticism made against grouping in the research made. In the ability grouped year 9, the restructuring was perceived to have almost only positive results academically and both positive and negative results socially. All of those results could be supported by research made. The teachers felt themselves to be working against the better judgment of the known research within ability grouping, but had their own priorities, such as student security and possibility to streamline teaching levels well in focus.

In the upper secondary school the attitude was that ability grouping in any fixed groups was not an option, either based on ideological arguments, or because it was simply not accepted in the school climate. The former can be supported by attitudes in Swedish politics and schooling which lead to the formation of a “school for all” in 1962 and, later, the abolishment of structured ability grouping in the form of special and general courses. The latter perhaps evolves from the same argument, but rather than the teacher subscribing personally to that line of thought, the school was ascribed the position. Small measures of ability grouping could anyway be seen to be used, through meeting students individually. One can only speculate as to whether this trend of differences extends to other upper secondary schools and compulsory schools; that question is outside the range of this small study, but could be a matter for further investigation.

As Slavin (1990) points out, no matter what one can propound as academic advantages for ability grouping, the stance still remains that ability grouping can be detrimental for students, by damaging their self image and ultimately helping to divide society into groups of “special” and “general”. Interestingly, in the heterogeneous classes the informants taught, issues of self-esteem were still afoot and something that was in fact tackled by within-class grouping strategies, and through individual attention outside of class, which can also be seen as a form of ability grouping (Slavin, 1987). In terms of creating divisions in society, the one clear-cut example of ability grouping seen in year 9 of the compulsory school could be seen to be widening a gap of understanding between the levels. At the
same time, the social “shake up” that the regrouping entailed had positive social effects in the forming of new student constellations.

In the upper secondary school the sense of fundamental values and reigning school climate was strong enough to rule out any tendency to group classes. However, within their heterogeneous classes they felt it necessary to work outside of their allocated time in order to fully reach students in need of extra help. Whether this could be amended by more teacher time, smaller groups or different teaching strategies is not within the scope of this study to determine. It could, however, be a matter of further investigation, and it is indeed notable that one of the recommendations linked with the abolishment of special and general grouping in the beginning of the 1990’s in Sweden – that of keeping student numbers down to a maximum of 22 students per class – seems today to be largely ignored.

The research made about the effects of ability grouping are so aplenty that and so divergent that this study can only hope to give a brief overview. Due to the divergence, at one stage I felt that whatever the teachers felt about ability grouping and dealing with heterogeneous classes, it should be possible to find arguments both for and against their stances within the research made. Instead, what became interesting were the issues that emerged; that teachers were often dealing with challenges to do with student self-perception and the ensuing learning blockages, as well as limitations placed on them due to time constraints. It is within these fields that I think future research could be made: Is it reasonable to expect teachers to be able to fully manage groups of over 30 students of mixed abilities? If it is reasonable, what are the ingredients that are needed? Is it more effective to let a student have more time with their own teacher than to go to extra support classes with someone different? Is the avoidance of ability grouping for democratic reasons valid when “weaker” students – the ones that may be disadvantaged by the system - are denied the chance to choose ability grouping? Is it possible that the move towards the development of the individual student in the latest Curriculum (2011) will open up for a revival of ability grouping in Sweden?

Returning to the national Curriculum for compulsory school and upper secondary school in Sweden, one can see that it states clearly that schooling should be based upon democratic grounds, that students should have an influence over their schooling, that schooling must meet the individual needs of each student while encouraging a lifelong desire to learn and providing the environment in which to fully develop their own qualities. Nowhere to be found are specific instructions to provide or to avoid ability grouping as a means to these ends. Thus, in interpreting the curriculum, each teacher seeks to find the best way to reach each student, to encourage democratic reflexes and give the students a context in which they can develop to their full potential. How these teachers will solve the puzzle is individual, within the realms of the school climate in which they work.
References


Appendix 1

April 20, 2013
Åkersberga

Hi!

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by me for my Degree Project essay which at this point is titled: “Accommodating for different levels of proficiency in the foreign language classroom”. I am very interested in the challenge of mixed ability classes and with this essay wanted to give myself the time to read research on the subject as well as talk to teachers such as yourself, in order to gather information and compare findings.

In my reading it has become obvious that ability grouping/flexible grouping and cooperative learning have been observed to determine their effectiveness in dealing with mixed-ability classes, as well as to which effects they have on the students’ well-being in general. I would like to talk to you about your attitudes to these methods, as well as anything else you would like to bring up on the subject of reaching students of different levels in the classroom.

The interview will be in Swedish unless you prefer to speak English. I would like to be able to record the interview, in order to be able to go back and listen again and so that I can concentrate in the interview without having to make a lot of notes at the same time. Naturally your answers will be anonymous and only used in my 15hp essay. All recordings will be deleted after the essay has been graded.

I look forward to talking to you and, once again, thank you for agreeing to help me with my project.

Yours sincerely,

Keren Bruce Westerlund