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PROVIDING FOR THE SLOWLEARNER WITHIN THE SCHOOL

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by

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INTRODUCTION

My dissertation is concerned with pupils whose performance in school is classed as "weak". I want to study how these pupils cope in school and to examine how the school helps them to cope.

Nobody likes to experience failure. A child who often experiences failure, I believe, will be affected greatly by this failure. I want to gain a better understanding of the affects of failure and also an understanding of the factors that influence ability and achievement. An understanding of these factors will help me to be more effective in my teaching of all ability levels.

In Chapter I, in order to gain a better understanding of pupils who are termed as "slowlearners" I will look at some definitions put forward to define "learning difficulty". I will discuss the characteristics common to pupils with learning difficulties. I will discuss the connection between poor performance in school and a low level of self-esteem and the importance for the teacher of being aware of this connection.

in Chapter 2, I will discuss important influences on ability and performance such as teachers' attitudes towards pupils and the expectations that the teacher communications to the pupil. I will also discuss the system of ability grouping used by schools and the implications and consequences of this system.

In my research, I will try to establish some teachers' views on the streaming system through the informal interviews with some teachers at the school I am teaching in. I hope with the help of my research I can devise a scheme of work through which all pupils can experience some success. I will carry out the scheme of work with two groups, one from the "top" ability bracket in the school, the other from the "bottom" ability bracket. I will observe the differences in levels of ability, motivation, attitude and self-esteem between the two groups. I hope from my research I will have a better understanding of pupils who experience failure in school.



I will offer some recommendations to help pupils with difficulties to cope better in school and see school as a less threatening place for them.



CHAPTER 1

HOW CAN WE DEFINE LEARNING DIFFICULTY?:

It is difficult to define learning difficulties, or to define the term slow learner. The terms learning difficulty, learning disability and slow learner are referred to in very different contexts and are given very different meanings by different writers and researchers.

"Learning Disabled" has been used as an umbrella term for all types of disabilities in school in connection with learning, be it where low achievement is confined to just one area, for example maths or reading, to overall low achievement in all tested areas. This low achievement in all tested areas might be a temporary disability due to absenteeism perhaps, where a child has fallen behind and needs temporary support in addition to the normal curriculum, to a long-term disability where a child may always show a poor level of achievement and needs long-term support, often using a modified curriculum.

My concern is with children who display an overall low ability in all tested areas in school, who are being accommodated in ordinary second level schools. Their failure cannot be explained by any type of handicap, physical or mental.

Bill R. Gearheart identifies the difficulties in defining the term "learning difficulties" and similar terms and he observes

because the term may include a host of related but different conditions, it may never be explained by a single theory(1).

But he offers us a definition to try to put the term into context:

Learning disabilities are severe discrepancies in educational performance between apparent ability to perform and actual level of performance(2).



In other words, an average child with no apparent illness or handicap should perform to the level of his/her age group, a child with a learning difficulty would be performing below this level.

Slow learners are regarded as those pupils who are unable to cope with the school work normal for their age group, but whose failure cannot be explained by the presence of any handicapping condition, but neither will they exhibit above average intellectual ability, combined with their learning failure(3).

Gearheart observes that this group

will relate to others in a normal manner using speech to communicate, though often on a more limited level(4).

He further observes, that they may be more insecure than the average child, due to their experience of failure.

It is estimated that such pupils form 13 percent of the school population, just less than one in seven children. More boys than girls have been diagnosed as having learning difficulties, at a ratio of 2:1. This ratio can be explained by the fact that backwardness in reading is often the criterion used to decide who has a learning difficulty, and reading retardation has been found to be almost three times more common in boys than girls.

Gearheart gives us a list of characteristics found common among those displaying learning difficulties. Such difficulties range from in-attention, to a very short attention span. A child may appear to be constantly day-dreaming, or be unable to focus on any one activity for the normal amount of time that might be expected, the amount of time other children would be able to focus for. They might also display hyperactivity, this hyperactivity might be displayed everyday. They might display a noticeable inability to follow directions, they might need to be given directions several times, or have trouble following class discussions and difficulty understanding the order of the discussion. Very often displayed is

poor memory and delayed spoken language development, for example a limited or immature vocabulary, often using mon-syllables and a lack of descriptive words(5).



More specific characteristics, Gearheart identifies are perceptual disorders, perhaps a difficulty in judging relationships between objects, for example determining differences in size and distance can cause difficulty. Some display poor manual dexterity which causes difficulties in manipulating materials or using machinery.

W.K. Brennan discusses the research carried out by Tansley and Gulliford. They found children whose achievement in school was below average displayed

weaknesses in attention, in perception and memory, general emotional immaturity and the effects of failure, insecurity and a low level of self-esteem(6).

Brennan tells us also that the level of motivation and interest of such pupils was found to be low. They are more difficult to motivate, often due to their fear of failure, particularly if motivation is based on rewards for success as they rarely succeed. They need to be praised for their attempt, participation and effort.

Behaviourial problems are more common in children performing poorly academically. It is difficult to know if these problems are a factor in causing learning difficulties, or if they are a reaction to educational failure and caused by failure. Ron Gulliford tells us that "once failure has set in dislike of tasks, poor concentration and reduced confidence makes learning more difficult(7). He discusses the hostility many children with learning difficulties share. Children can be turned off school if they are given reason to feel ashamed or inadequate by their failure, as he explains

we don't put the dunce in the corner anymore, but there are other inadequacies in our practice(8).

He highlights the negative effects of shame, how it can stoke up hostility to school, and how the teacher should not pay such great attention to failure, and treat it as such a disaster. If the teacher is very negative towards the pupil's failure, the pupil is likely to fear such a reaction again and is likely to avoid the situation in which the failure could again result.



Not all children termed as slow learners will have all these characteristics in common, though they will likely display some of them, and they are more widespread among such children.

Self-esteem, its influence on performance:

Brennan identifies one of the characteristics of slow learners as insecurity and low selfesteem, and he also stresses how these can be due to their experience of failure. The self-esteem is a term used to describe how a person feels about the discrepancy between their self-image and their ideal self, that is what the person feels they are, and what the person would like to be. From a very young age, children begin to compare themselves to others and are very aware of the opinions others hold of them and their abilities. They also learn about the "ideal", for example in school the ideal level of ability and can very quickly compare their ability to this. The experience of failure causes low selfesteem, but this is not just the failure itself, but far more so the reaction to the failure of significant people in the child's life, that is parents, teachers and peers.

Denis Lawrence found in his research into levels of self-esteem, that a child with high self-esteem is confident in the school situation, eager for knowledge, for new challenges, whereas a child with low self-esteem may avoid learning situations in fear of failure. He gives the famous quote of William James of 1890 to clarify this

with no attempt there can be no failure, with no failure, no humilation(9).

He points out that other children use "compensation" as a mechanism against the effects of failure.

If a child is extroverted, he/she may appear boastful, so in this way they are fighting back against the source of frustration, they are trying to seem confident to hide their lack of it(10).

Lawrence also points out that an introverted child will most likely show shy and very withdrawn behaviour, a clearer indication of a low level of self-esteem. We as adults can usually avoid situations where we feel inadequate. We might have poor self-esteem in relation to certain areas, but his will not necessarily affect our overall view of ourselves, but as Lawrence points out, unlike us



children cannot escape school subjects where they experience failure, which is why failure in school can easily generalize to global self-esteem(11).

The key for us as teachers is to understand what level the child is at, to be aware of the child's level of self-esteem, so we can make realistic demands on the child. Making realistic demands means devising situations where failure can be safe-guarded against when possible, and not treating it too seriously or too negatively when failure does occur. Real success and genuine praise are needed to enhance student's self-esteem. In second level schooling this applies in particular. Gearheart points out that adolescents are at the stage where they

will quickly recognise contrived success, therefore academic accomplishments must be real(12).

Denis Lawrence shows the connection between low self-esteem and a low level of achievement through discussing the research of Roger et al. In their research on how reading attainment and self-esteem affect each other. The find that if reading ability is poor, so too will self-esteem be, and poor self-esteem can cause reading difficulties. It was found in the case of some students, that their reading could not improve until their self-esteem improved. Thus they engaged in different activities in which failure was not possible. After some time was spent on improving the children's self-esteem, it was found there was also an improvement in their reading ability. Yet Lawrence adds that it is very unusual for teachers to concentrate on trying to improve the pupil's self-esteem, not realising that students are often performing at a lower ability level, an ability they feel they are at rather than their true ability, because they do not see themselves at this higher level. People behave in ways that match how they perceive themselves, as Roy Nash observed

A child who does not think well of his abilities in school will tend not to do well(13).

It is important that we as teachers recognise the importance of self-esteem, and try to enhance self-esteem where possible as it can improve a child's interest and motivation towards school.



CONCLUSION

The difficulty in defining "learning difficulties" stems from the varying degrees of learning difficulties that exist, be it short-term or long-term, moderate or severe. The characteristics associated with learning difficulties also vary for each individual, though all will be performing below the expected ability level for their age group. It is important for teachers to be able to recognise the characteristics associated with learning difficulty, so they can understand and help "slow learners". Perhaps the most important characteristic to be aware of is the insecurity and low level of self-esteem connected with failure in school. These characteristics are not always easily recognisable but they are a fundamental factor in a child's success or failure in school. Children compare themselves to others, and are constantly being compared to others in the school situation. Their selfesteem level develops through this comparison of their ability with the "ideal" ability put forward by teachers, parents and peers. A child who often experiences failure suffers a low level of self-esteem. This can result in the child avoiding learning situations, they would rather face the wrath of the teacher for doing little work than suffer the humilation of failure. Failure in school subjects can cause a child to feel he/she is a total failure because these school subjects cannot be avoided, and the emphasis on success is often so high. For children who rarely succeed it is crucial that they receive plenty of encouragement, that they are rewarded for effort. A teacher can also help improve a child's self-esteem by creating situations where success is guaranteed, this must be genuine success. Understanding self-esteem and its direct effect on success and failure in school is very important as some children will never make progress until their selfesteem level has been improved. However, many teachers still fail to recognise the importance of this.



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CHAPTER 2

INFLUENCES ON ABILITY AND ACHIEVEMENT

In the previous chapter, I discussed how a low level of self-esteem is common among children termed as "slow learners". I discussed how this low level of self-esteem can be a result of their experience of failure, that this failure causes a low level of self-esteem and a lack of belief in their capabilities. A child with low self-esteem may then very often "be turned off" learning, afraid of further failure. Poor self-esteem can be a result of failure and then, in turn, cause continuing failure.

If you consider that the child's own view of him or herself is an important influence on his or her success or failure, an even greater influence on the child must be other people's view of his or her ability. Teachers are significant people in the child's life. Teachers are indeed the judge of who had ability and who has not, particularly in the eyes of the child. Therefore the teacher's attitude towards the child, positive or negative, must be hugely influential in the child's performance in school.

Roy Nash, in his research into teacher expectations and its influence on pupil learning, tells u how Davidson and Long found that

The teacher's feelings of importance and approval are communicated to the child and perceived by him as possible appraisals, it is likely that their appraisals encourage the child to seek further teacher approval by achieving well and behaving in a manner acceptable to the teacher(1).

Therefore positive reinforcement by the teacher will have positive effects on the child's willingness to work. An encouraging attitude is very important if a child is to succeed in the school situation, or firstly to feel they have the ability to accept that a child will never achieve much, whereas a more positive approach by teachers can encourage progress in learning.

Denis Lawrence explains "remedial classes cannot be enough in themselves for most students who need help to increase their self-esteem"(2). But he continues "self-esteem can be increased with positive feedback and encouragement from the teacher.



However unfortunately this does not always happen and children who have difficulties in school seldom receive enough encouragement or positive feedback. Teachers could have a great influence on pupils termed as being "learning disabled", many of whom feel that their efforts are futile because they have little chance of success. Giving praise for effort can give the pupils a sense of self-worth. Denis Lawrence tells us however, that many teachers "ignore self-concept theories and continue to focus on the pure skills approach"(3). He also states that as a result, these teachers will "continue to find some students that do not make progress"(4).

Teachers may give more attention to pupils who are termed "low" in ability, to try to improve their performance, but often this extra attention given is not beneficial to these pupils. Roy Nash tells us how Good and Brophy studied six children from the top of the class, termed as the "highs" and six children from the bottom termed as the "lows". In their research, they observed that although the teacher, in the classroom situation, initiated more contact with the "lows" most of that extra contact was criticism, which gave little means of encouragement to these pupils. They found also that the teacher communicated that she expected better answers from the "highs", those she considered to have higher ability. If a "high" gave an incorrect answer, he was less likely to be criticised, and the teacher would probably rephrase the question, or repeat it. When the "lows" gave an incorrect response the teacher typically gave the answer or chose another chid, most frequently a "high" to answer. They also observed that those the teacher felt possessed a high level of ability, were praised twice as much as those who were viewed as having a low level of ability

specifically for correct answers "highs" were praised more often than "lows" at a ratio of 2:7 and criticised less often for a wrong answer at a ratio of 3:7(5).

Therefore, teachers constantly communicate their own view of which pupils are the high achievers and which are the low achievers, of those who they feel possess the most ability and of those who possess the least. The teachers view then has a great influence on how the pupil will perform. We perform according to how we are expected to perform, this is the self-fulfilling prophecy(6). The teacher communicates his view to the child and the



child then lives up to this image, which becomes the child's own image of himself or herself. The child cannot perform to a level which he or she feels is not capable of.

Sheelagh Drudy and Kathleen Lynch observe

that those who are labelled weak and unintelligent are generally placed in lower streams or bands in school. This may have an adverse effect on their performance(7).

In my opinion pupils being clearly labelled as having a definite level of ability are highly unlikely to question this label, to feel it is unfair. I believe it is far more likely they will accept that this is their level of ability and then perform at this level. Drudy and Lynch have also criticised our very narrow view of intelligence. That is, we view those who shine in academic areas as the most capable group and we treat them differently because of their ability in these few areas. They discuss the work of Howard Gardner, who observed that "only two types of intelligence have been formally recognised in any complete sense, logical, mathematical and linguistic"(8). Drudy and Lynch add "we doubt if anyone has ever heard of a child being labelled 'backward' or 'remedial because of their poor performance in art of music"(9). In other words these forms of intelligence are not seen as important in comparison with mathematical ability and verbal ability. If a child does not have a high ability in these two areas we presume that the child is low in intelligence and then label the child as being so. The emphasis put on these two types of intelligence is so strong that a child with a difficulty in one of these areas can feel worthless, that they have little to offer. While we must realise that "a child is no better or worse a person because he can read well or fails to learn to read"(10).

Drudy and Lynch found in the work of Fontes and Kellaghan, "that Irish teachers tend to hold the view that intelligence is innate, much more than our American counterparts"(11). In other words we feel that a person is born either intelligent or not, and also we believe that it is something fixed, not subject to substantial change. Therefore, those seen as having ability will always be seen in a favourable light, while those pupils regarded as having poor ability, which might be termed "poor in intelligence" would always be seen as such. This narrow view of what intelligence is, is very destructive to those with a poor school record. It seems pupils whose mathematical and



verbal ability is weak will experience constant failure in school because in the eyes of their teachers they do not possess the ingredients that constitute intelligence.

Drudy and Lynch point out

The implications this has for their self-esteem and sense of identify are likely to be profound(12).

Hannan and Shorthall agree with this

Those who are labelled as being low in intelligence will display a lack of self-esteem, a sense of failure and indifference to education(13).

Pupils generally blame themselves for their failure, feeling they are slow, they are stupid. The educational system does little to help this situation, we blame the victim, and soon the pupil believes as the teacher does, that they have a low level of intelligence and that this level is set, it is not going to change. The school refuses to admit responsibility for how the teacher's view of the child's ability is so influential on the child's performance. In my opinion it seems easier for the school to label the child as slow, as weak, because

To inform parents of the effects of teacher expectations would be to encourage teacher and school accountability which has long been resisted by teachers themselves(14).

Drudy and Lynch put forward the view, that it is the schools who fail, in that they do not identify a range of abilities and talents, and give them due status

The school must set about identifying the unique and diverse talents of all children. In the final analysis there is no such thing as a stupid child(15).

It is because of our assumptions, our ideology of "fixed" intelligence that ability becomes "natural" and inevitable.

In my study of children who achieve poorly in school, I want to discover how school aids their progress. If so many educators believe that intelligence is something fixed, something whose measure will not fluctuate substantially, then many must feel that



streaming is an obvious way to organise the school situation. Streaming involves dividing pupils into different ability groupings usually decided on the basis of an entry exam, which may be a standardised I.Q. test, and also taking account of the child's primary school record.

Kathleen Lynch found in her research of Irish second-level schooling that some "83.5% of all schools use some form of ability grouping"(16) while Hannan and Boyle "found it to exist in some form in four fifths of all Irish second-level schools"(17). There seems from these findings that there is a great deal of support for streaming. Drudy and Lynch tell us that in the research of Hannan and Boyle the supporters of streaming argued that

Streaming leads to better outcomes for most students particularly those at the extremes(18).

There is a feeling among the supporters of streaming that classes are more easily and better taught if all children within each class possess the same level of ability. Yet, other research has shown that while teachers themselves believe streaming to be accurate, this is often just not so.

Barker-Lunn found that 15% of children in her sample were in the wrong stream, on the basis of standardised attainment tests. While Hannan and Boyle in their research into the origins and consequences of streaming, found that "working-class pupils are over represented in the lower streams"(19) as are minority pupils. This finding seriously questions the accuracy of streaming.

Hallinan's research found that "once assigned to ability groups, children tended to remain in them" (20). Kathleen Lynch's research supports this, she found "when principles were asked if pupils tended to stay in one class group throughout their school career, 62% of them claimed that they did"(21) and Lynch concludes:

There is little movement between streams, thus the pupil who is labelled as being of low ability in the first year is very likely to be in a low stream for the rest of his/her second-level schooling(22).


Similarly, O'Kelly in his research in Irish community schools found that there is little mobility between streams, and it seems that children have little chance of progressing into another stream(23).

If supporters of the streaming system argue that streaming is best for extremes of high or low achievers, then they are ignoring much research on the "self-fulfilling prophecy" which indicates that pupils tend to perform to the level of the group. Drudy and Lynch observe that in the research of Kerckhoff, it was found that pupils in high ability groups increase their average performance level beyond that exhibited by comparable pupils in un-grouped settings, while pupils in low ability groupings performance deteriorates in comparison to comparable pupils in mixed ability groupings. Therefore schools must use grouping very carefully if it is to be effective. Hannan and Boyle did find that where streaming was used to maximise achievement of the lower ability group, it was successful with certain provisions made:

The group was divided into smaller groups, given what were considered to be the most effective teachers, they received extra remedial attention. Appropriate pedagogues were developed, as were fresh approaches to the home-school relationship(24).

The result was that dropout and failure rates diminished and the whole ethos and effectiveness of the school improved. Yet rarely does the streaming system give this much attention to the lowest stream.

Kathleen Lynch observed that

Allocating poorer teachers to the low streams was clearly not perceived as damaging in the way allocating them to top streams or honours classes was(25).

and also observes that

27% of principals interviewed admitted allocating what they perceived to be the best teachers to the top ability groups or streams(26).



This is a clear example of the streaming system working against the weaker ability groups. As well as the questionable effects that streaming may have on a child with a learning disability ever progressing beyond the lowest stream, streaming pupils to different ability groups must have a negative effect on the pupils themselves. Lacey and Hargreaves in their studies of grammar and secondary modern schools in Britain, argue that those pupils who are allocated to the low streams suffer a "degradation of self, their sense of self-worth is undermined"(27). O'Kelly's research on Irish Community Schools reports similar findings. Those in the lowest stream had very low self-images both educationally and personally(28).

Streaming also prevents students from mixing. Indeed O'Kelly found students from different streams held very negative stereotypes about each other(29). The feelings of failure, shame and embarrassment felt by many students in the low streams can cause them to resent school as Reid found

The lower streams showed a lesser commitment to school and held antischool attitudes(30).

These anti-school attitudes can lead to disruptive behaviour and can cause the students to look for alternative ways to enhance their self-esteem. The easiest way they have of doing this, in my opinion, is the inversion of the values of the school. Through feeling that teachers do not value their ability, pupils often become, I feel, opposed to the values the teachers regard is important.

Research shows that the majority of teachers favour streaming and feel it is far more effective than mixed ability grouping. Barker Lunn in her study named those who favoured streaming as the "streamers" and those who did not she named the "non-streamers" (31). The majority group the "streamers", were found to have very different views of methodology to the "non-streamers" minority. "Streamers" tended to have a low tolerance of noise, favoured physical punishment, favour traditional methods of teaching and displayed little interest in children with learning difficulties. The "non-streamers" whether teaching in a streamed school or a school where mixed ability grouping was used, were found to have better relationships with their pupils and the pupils had higher academic self-images. They were generally more positive about their abilities.



Teachers who favour streaming tend to favour children with high ability, showing more interest in their needs. This is distressing for children of lower ability. Are they not going to receive the same amount of attention and concern from these teachers? These teachers seem to believe that little can be done for lower ability pupils to improve their level of achievement by any great amount.

Charles Bailey and David Bridges in their support of mixed ability grouping state:

Mixed ability grouping would prevent the rejection of the less able implied in streaming, setting or banding. The equal value of all individuals would thereby be demonstrated(32).

Reid et al found the supporters of mixed ability grouping held:

The desire to give children a fresh start and to avoid labelling at the outset of a child's secondary career(33).

Bailey and Bridges also put forward the view that "pupils difficult to handle would be dispersed instead of being kept together to form anti-social groups" (34). The majority of teachers only see mixed ability groupings as having "social advantages" and that they can aid control (35). They would feel the disadvantages would outweigh the advantages. They feel also there would be reduced motivation and achievement for more able pupils (36).

Drudy and Lynch conclude that the streaming system has had negative effects for Ireland causing a greater divide between high ability and lower ability groups. They also feel that increased attainment of higher streams has been achieved at the expense of the lower streams(37).



CONCLUSION

How a child performs in school is very much influenced by what the teacher expects of that child, what ability the teacher perceives the child to have. The teacher's opinion is communicated to the child, who adopts this as his/her own opinion of his/her ability. Teachers often give more attention to the weaker pupil, however this is not often beneficial. The weaker pupil receives more criticism and less praise than the more successful pupil. This situation causes pupils to remain in the same position in the class. Those who the teacher considers to be of high ability remain "top of the class", those considered to be of low ability remain at the bottom. Pupils perform according to how they are expected to perform.

Our narrow view of intelligence for many students means they feel little significant achievement in school because they do not shine in traditional academic subjects. We also hold the view that intelligence is something we are born with a fixed measure of. We also believe this is something which is not subject to great change. These views do little to encourage the improvement of those whose performance in school is poor. We tend to believe they will always perform in this way, at this level.

Streaming, dividing pupils into ability groupings is common practice in the majority of Irish second-level schools. The supporters of streaming, feel it will help the very high and the very low achiever. Yet is has often been found not to be accurate, and sometimes biased in labelling children. Pupils have little opportunity to advance from the stream they are in and pupils tend to perform to the level of the group they are in.

Many schools are biased in favour of the high streams, allocating the best teachers to them. Less emphasis is put on the success of the lower streams, and these pupils can develop poor self-images and often negative attitudes towards school. Mixed ability grouping, I feel give children a more equal chance of success in school and avoids the shame experienced by many pupils in the low streams. Mixed ability grouping also prevents divisions from arising between higher and lower ability groups.

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CHAPTER 3

THE SCHOOL

In order to do my own research into children with learning difficulties and how they cope with the school environment, I firstly had to find out about the school I am teaching and doing my research in. I wanted to find out how the school caters for the slow-learner, if "learning difficulty" is seen as an important issue within the school.

The Donaghies Community School, Donaghmede, was founded in 1977. The approximate number of pupils attending is 750 boys and girls. The school is non-selective as is the policy of community schools which are wholly state-run and funded, and therefore cannot select students on the basis of merit.

The school caters for 12-18 year olds from the immediate area, very few students travel to the school from areas outside the locality. Pupils come from the local areas of Donaghmede, Kilbarrack, Edenmore, Ayrfield and Darndale which are predominately working-class areas. Generally, all pupils are from similar socio-economic backgrounds.

Ability grouping within the school:

The Donaghies Community School, being a non-selective, second-level school must cater for a full range of ability levels among pupils. The school organises its pupils into different ability levels by using a system which is a banding/streaming system. Three general ability levels are identified, decided on the basis of an entrance exam. The three ability levels are termed "top", "middle" and "bottom". The entrance exam tests numeracy and literacy ability only. Usually there are six first year classes enroled each year.

The top ability level are termed by school management and staff as the "higher level" group. There are two classes of "higher level" pupils. Each class has thirty pupils. These sixty pupils are banded rather than rigidly streamed, that is they are all considered to be "higher level" pupils, neither class is considered to be of greater ability than the other.



The middle ability bracket are termed as "ordinary level" pupils. They are considered to be more likely to take ordinary level papers in exams. There are two or three ordinary level classes. They are streamed rather than banded, that is the top class of the three ordinary level classes, is seen as having greater ability than the second class and the second class is considered to be of higher ability than the third. The top stream of the "ordinary level" ability group might take some "higher level" papers in exams. Usually the bottom stream of the middle ability bracket takes all "ordinary level" papers. These classes would have a maximum of thirty, although the bottom stream of the middle ability group will usually have less.

The bottom ability bracket is termed as the "remedial" group. The pupils in this group would have learning difficulties, usually a severe reading disability, which generates difficulty in other subject areas. The classes would be small, usually a class of eighteen pupils and another of twelve pupils.

The entrance exam is the sole decider of placement in a particular stream. The primary teacher might be consulted if particular problems are identified from the entrance exam, the teacher might provide additional information about the pupil.

All pupils have a choice of subjects, the time-table being the limiting factor. The teacher of a particular subject may be able to select the most able pupils for her class, if numbers are greater than places available. The remedial groups are usually offered a subject as a class due to the small number within the group. Therefore weaker ability groups are more limited in choice than higher ability groups. Last year the remedial first year group took science. This year the first years are taking music. Remedial groups are not offered a language.

Special provision for pupils of weaker ability:

Pupils in the bottom streams get remedial attention. There is a resource teacher who identifies the specific problems a pupil might have and also gives them 1-1 attention or works with groups no bigger than three. This is called withdrawal teaching. Pupils in the bottom stream of the middle ability bracket may also receive remedial help, in the form



of withdrawal teaching for individual pupils, for maths and reading. Pupils are given extra tuition in an effort to keep them in them in stream they have been placed in. If a pupil requires extra tuition for maths, when possible the pupil will receive this help during his or her time-tabled time for maths.

All pupils are working towards taking their Junior Certificate exam and the great majority will then go on to take the Leaving Certificate. The differences being among high, middle and bottom ability levels is the difference between amount of higher or lower level papers being taken for exams.



CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

In the introduction to this dissertation, I outlined my aims of studying children who perform poorly in school. I wanted to acquire a better understanding of what factors can influence success or failure, and how the school can facilitate children who display learning difficulties in school.

The aims of my methodology are as follows:

- 1. To establish teachers views on the streaming system
- 2. To evaluate the effects of ability grouping on pupils self-esteem and attitude towards school
- 3. To evaluate changes, I made to my teaching to facilitate pupils who display learning difficulties

McCall suggests ways of providing for the low achiever in the secondary school. One of the main provisions by McCall is that "all staff should be involved" in providing for pupils displaying learning difficulties(1). I held an informal interview with teachers in the staff room to evaluate their involvement in the provision made for low achievers in the school. I wanted to evaluate their attitudes to the streaming system. I will discuss this interview and its results in Chapter 5.

Scheme of Work:

As part of my teaching practice, I decided to carry out a scheme of work with a second year group, who were considered to be of low ability. I had carried out the same scheme with a group of second years the previous year in this school. The second year group of the previous year belonged to the "top" ability band.



I wanted to try to evaluate the differences in attitude to education, if any, between pupils who were succeeding in school and pupils whose performance was quite poor. I wanted to see if the level of self-esteem, self-motivation and interest differed greatly. Through carrying out the scheme with these two groups, I would gain a better understanding of how to provide for differing levels of ability. I hoped I could provide situations where pupils who might often experience failure in school might experience real success.

The scheme of work was designed to create an awareness of the art element texture, and also an understanding of balance and composition. My intention was also to give the pupils the skills necessary to make a lino print. For both groups the scheme involved working with materials that they had no previous experience with.

The first week of the scheme involved research drawings which would be then used in designing the print. I wanted the drawing stage to have a direct relationship with the printed image, therefore the pupils drew with white pastels, pencils and paint on black paper. When you cut from a lino block the areas you cut away will print white. Working with white materials on a black background ensures a design very similar to the look of the finished print. The emphasis was on using line to describe visual texture. Figures 4-1, 4-2, show drawings by the "top" stream group. Figures 4-3, 4-4, show drawings from the perceived weaker ability group.

The theme was "natures fruits" which gave the pupils a good variety of imagery to work with, from fruit and vegetables to shells, pine-cones and leaves. My teaching aids showed a good variety of lines and marks used to describe the surfaces of the different objects. I also showed both groups references of work by artists who had used different lines and marks to describe texture. Figures 4-5, 4-6 and 4-7 show examples of art historical references used.






























Week two involved designing the print. I photocopied the drawings by the pupils and therefore rather than concentrating on drawing the objects again the whole emphasis was on balance and composition. The pupils cut out the drawings and arranged them on a sheet ruled with the size of the lino. The pupils worked out the composition by moving the cut out drawings around the sheet, when they found a composition that was balanced they stuck the drawings down. To reinforce the element of visual texture through line, the pupils created different textures and added them to the background of the design. Figure 4-8 and 4-9 show designs by the "top" ability group. Figure 4-10 and 4-11 show designs by the "bottom" ability group. I showed examples of different lino-cuts and wood-cuts to show the pupils the variety of compositions that can be created, see Figure 4-12 and 4-13.

The following weeks, three and four, involved transferring the design on to the lino block and then cutting the lino. These week involved learning skills. I demonstrated the different techniques of cutting to the pupils, demonstrating a variety of effects that could be made by cutting the lino in different ways. I showed examples of prints which showed a variety of cuts made to give different effects, see Figure 4-14 and 4-15.

Weeks five, six and seven involved printing from the block. Again pupils had to master the skills involved in printing. Firstly pupils printed using black ink on white paper, see Figure 4-16 and 4-17 for examples of prints made by the "top" stream group. See Figure 4-18 and 4-19 for prints made by the "bottom" ability group. Pupils were also given some experience of working with colour. I did some reduction printing with the "top" ability group. They worked with three colour inks. They found this quite difficult, although the more able pupils in the group gained excellent results, see Figure 4-20, 4-21 and 4-18. With the weaker ability group, I chose to work with colour by using coloured paper and printing with different inks on different colour papers to achieve different results. I felt that reduction printing would have been too difficult for this group. I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 5, my results chapter. These pupils created some interesting effects which were entirely of their own invention, see Figure 4-22, 4-23 and 4-24.















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Fig. 4 - 11



























Fig. 4 - 16














































The scheme took seven weeks to complete with both groups although I had double classes with the "top" ability group and single classes with the "bottom ability" group. Both classes I feel achieved excellent work. Although the scheme's organisation was basically the same for both groups, during the classes I did notice some differences between the groups, which I had to allow for. I will discuss this in detail in Chapter 5.



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CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I wanted, through my methodology, to establish teachers views of the streaming system. Sheelagh Drudy and Kathleen Lynch found that "most teachers prefer streaming"(1) to mixed ability teaching, "they believe strongly that it is in the interest of the students to do so"(2). I wanted to discover if the teachers in the school favoured streaming and what they felt were the advantages and disadvantages of ability grouping.

I held an informal interview with six teachers in the staff room. The line of questioning was as follows:

Q. "Do you feel the lower streams should be excluded from any subjects in particular?"

One language teacher felt teaching French to the weak ability class she took was futile. Her feeling was that French was far too complex a subject for them. Another teacher, a maths and science teacher, felt that even if weaker ability pupils never take a foreign language in an exam, they should be offered some experience of a foreign language for their personal development if nothing else. The majority of teachers I interviewed felt that weaker pupils should not be offered languages and science subjects as they felt the students would find these subjects too difficult. They felt that it is very difficult to teach these subjects to the lower ability groups. This relates to Reid et al's findings that "mathematics, science and languages were seen as less appropriate" subjects for weaker ability groups or mixed ability teaching(3).

Q. "Do you feel extra help, withdrawal helps pupils with difficulties?"

All teachers felt that usually the pupils will show progress and some will not need withdrawal teaching after first year. All teachers felt withdrawal teaching is an effective method of dealing with pupils displaying difficulties in school.



Some pupils will improve more quickly than others, though all are receiving extra help.

Q. "What factors do you feel can deter improvement?"

Most teachers felt that the pupils attitudes towards school, and their parents attitudes were an important factor influencing improvement. Some teachers felt that if the pupils and their parents held no value for education then it was almost impossible to help them. One teacher felt if the pupils attitude to school was negative it was not his issue, he could do nothing about this. When parents displayed concern about their child's performance in school the chid was more likely to improve.

Q. "Do pupils who enter school with learning difficulties have poorer attitudes to learning and their own abilities than the average child?"

The response to this question varied. Some agree that their attitude to school was fairly negative. They agree also that these pupils had little confidence in their own abilities. Others felt that the pupils often entered the school with great enthusiasm but lost hope, becoming discouraged because of their experience of failure. In comparison to pupils in the "top" ability grouping, the teachers felt overall that pupils in the "bottom" ability grouping do show lower self-esteem and are more likely to hold "anti-school" attitudes.

Q. "What help do you feel can be given to help improve a pupil's confidence and attitude towards learning?"

The majority of teachers felt giving encouragement could help improve pupils' attitudes. One teacher felt there was little he could do, he could only teach the pupils to the best of his ability, that not every pupil will display a positive attitude, this was a fact to be accepted.

Q. "Do you feel that pupils are very aware of the streaming system and the ability bracket that they have been placed in?"



All teachers agreed, they felt this was perhaps one of the greatest drawbacks of ability grouping. Pupils had nicknames for the various groups. The school uses letters to distinguish between the different classes, the letters are changed each year, for example "d" might be the letter for the top ability group one year, the following year the letter might be "n" and "d" might be the letter for the bottom ability group. The teachers felt this does nothing to prevent pupils from being aware of the measure put on their ability. They also felt there was no solution to this problem as they feel it is necessary to teach differing ability groups separately. They agreed the streaming system causes divisions between the different groups in the school and these remain throughout the pupils school life-time. Again, although the teachers felt this was a drawback to ability grouping it could not be prevented.

Q. "Despite poorer achievement in academic areas, lower self-esteem and poorer attitudes to school, do pupils in the lower ability bracket display any other differences which might deter their success in school?"

Most teachers felt that pupils who enter the school displaying educational backwardness usually come from deprived backgrounds where they may have had little or no educational experiences outside the classroom, such as educational toys or books in the home. They can also display more behaviourial problems but this is specific to particular pupils and may cause them to perform poorly in school. It was not felt that pupils in the lower streams in general showed any more behaviourial problems than pupils in the middle streams. The teachers did feel that the top ability band caused little difficulty and some did admit that they preferred to teach this group.

I found that all the teachers I interviewed felt that ability grouping is necessary in schools. Although they admitted that streaming had negative effects such as labelling pupils to belong to a particular group and caused divisions within the school, they felt this was an unfortunate drawback of the system. Their attitudes varied as to the effects streaming had on pupils attitudes to themselves and to school. Some teachers were very concerned about this, others showed less concern. Overall they expressed an interest in the welfare of all pupils, but I felt many would favour the more able pupil. One teacher related that the current concern within the school was to improve the performance of the



more able pupils. The feeling is that the school is able to help the majority of weaker pupils to pass exams. They feel currently that their priority is to encourage the "top" ability pupils to do better. My personal feeling on this issue is that the concern of every school should be that all pupils should be encouraged to do their very best in all areas of the curriculum, not just tested areas all of the time.

Through the scheme of work I devised, I wanted to evaluate the effects of ability grouping on pupils. An understanding of these effects would help me facilitate all levels of ability in my teaching.

The two groups to which I taught the same scheme of work, which I described in detail in Chapter 4, were of two different levels of ability in regards to academic ability. In relation to their ability in art I did not find the gap in artistic talent to be very great. The "top" ability group did have more pupils who displayed a high ability for observational drawing than the "low" ability group. However in both classes, there were children of considerable talent and also less talented children. Figure 5-1 shows work by a pupil of strong artistic ability from the "top" ability group. Figure 5-2 shows work by a weaker child in this group. Figure 5-3 shows work by a pupil of strong artistic ability in the "bottom" ability grouping. Figure 5-4 shows work by a pupil of less ability in the same group.









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The fact that pupils who are termed "weak" in academic ability can shine in the art class is very encouraging for both pupils and teacher. However the teacher aims to help every pupil succeed.

I did find the "bottom" ability group to display some of the characteristics of learning difficulties which I mentioned in Chapter 1 when discussing the work of Bill Gearheart. The pupils did display an inability to follow class discussions, to follow directions given. They displayed hyperactivity and many appeared to have a short attention span(4). I often had to repeat instructions for the pupils in the "bottom" ability group, or break instructions down into steps, dividing the lesson into different short tasks. Pupils could follow instructions if they were repeated in this way. The pupils did have short attention spans. I only had a single class with these pupils, while I had a double class with the "top" ability group. A single class was enough for these pupils, some of whom found it quite difficult to concentrate for forty minutes. The "top" ability group had a double class of eighty minutes. They worked consistently for the full duration of the class. These differences in attention span that exist mean that a teacher must plan her class to suite. I could give a long introduction to a lesson with the "top" ability group. While I might break the introduction into two halves with the weaker group. Gearheart also mentions that pupils with learning difficulties often have "difficulties in relating ideas in logical sequence"(5). I found this to be true of the "bottom" ability group. I described the sequence to them, explaining how the print is made by cutting the design into the block and printing the block. Many pupils in the bottom ability group did not connect how each lesson related to the next. They often asked at the beginning of a new lesson what we would be doing that day, or when they had finished cutting the lino they believed they were finished the scheme. When given ink and rollers, although I demonstrated the task, I found they had difficulty repeating the process. The solution to such problems is repeating instructions, more demonstrations of tasks, repeating demonstrations when necessary. With these provisions I found pupils could carry out lesson as well as pupils who did not display difficulties.

In research into Irish Community Schools, O'Kelly found "those in the lowest streams had very low self-images, both educationally and personally"(6). In my dealings with two



classes perceived to be of very different levels of ability with the school, I did notice considerable differences in the pupils self confidence. The pupils in the "top" ability grouping seemed to be confident in their own abilities, they worked very independently rarely asking for my assistance or approval. The pupils in the "bottom" ability group appeared to lack confidence, they relied a great deal on my judgement and approval. At times I had pupils exclaiming despair "I can't do this" when often they had not even made an attempt. These pupils needed much praise and support to help them succeed. They needed a great deal of attention and I believe they needed to feel I really valued their work. Often I would stop the class and hold up a few examples of work and emphasise their positive qualities. This motivated the pupils to continue working feeling that they were on the road to success.

The level of motivation between the two groups was also quite different. The "top" ability group were very much self-motivated. I rarely found pupils who were not working for the duration of the class, who showed little interest in their work. Children who experience failure in school often avoid learning situations rather than face the humiliation of failure(7). I found with the "bottom" ability group that the pupils needed a great deal of encouragement to continue working. Praise was a motivator for them. They were also motivated by being allowed to use new materials such a lino cutters and inks. I feel they were more comfortable working with something new that had been demonstrated clearly for them and where the belief that they could succeed was communicated to them. The "top" ability group as a class in general communicated that they felt confident that they would succeed. They were not motivated by simply completing the task but by completing it well. The "bottom" ability group after experiencing success in the initial stages of the scheme could then feel confident enough to evaluate their work.

I feel that this scheme of work, carefully planned to safeguard against failure helped all pupils to grow in self-confidence, as Viktor Howenfeld and W. Lambert Brittain state "getting satisfaction from one's one expression is a step toward a positive self-concept"(8).

Pupils in lower streams tend to show "a lesser commitment to school and display 'anti-



social' attitudes"(9). The experience of failure can cause pupils to become hostile towards the values of the school. I found this to be true of the pupils in the "lower" ability group. Many made very negative remarks about the school and some of their teachers. Many I feel were resistant to expressing interest in the work they were doing. The "top" ability group I worked with had a very different attitude towards school. They often discussed the grades they had achieved in exams or their hopes for forthcoming exams. Pupils in the "bottom ability" group, I found in my teaching experience with these pupils, rarely discussed school subjects or examinations. If I mentioned other school subjects with them they expressed little interest or often mocked the subjects or teachers of these subjects.

I believe these pupils need to feel that they have something to offer the school. Teachers must communicate acceptance of all the pupils they teach regardless of the pupils abilities or their attitudes towards school. I feel as a result of the scheme of work the pupils from the "bottom" ability group displayed a more positive attitude towards learning at least during the art class. Acceptance and encouragement were key factors for bringing about some change in the pupils attitude toward learning and success in school.

Teachers in this school, directly involved with pupils, who have difficulties in academic areas are extremely positive regarding the pupils they deal with. The resource/remedial teacher expresses great concern about the pupils self-images and how she can improve their self-esteem. The need within the school to help pupils with difficulties is that all staff should be involved in the process, and show acceptance and be encouraging towards every ability level in the school.



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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this dissertation I have been concerned with pupils whose ability and performance in school is classed as weak. Firstly, I discussed definitions of learning difficulty and discussed the characteristics which pupils with learning difficulties might display. In my review of the literature I also discussed influences on ability and achievement. Such influences on a child's performance in school include the teacher's attitude and expectations of the child, and the child's own self-esteem, how the child feels about his or her own abilities. I analysed the system of ability grouping and implications and consequences of such a system.

Through my own teaching experience I analysed teachers' views on ability grouping. Through dealing with two classes from different ability groupings within the school I analysed the effects the system of ability grouping had on these pupils and then offered ways of guarding against the negative effects of streaming. I offered ways of teaching and dealing with pupils that safe-guard against failure and encourage a more positive self-concept and attitude towards school for the pupil.

To encourage all pupils, both those who perform well in school and those whose performance is poor to reach their potential, teachers must be aware of the factors that influence ability and achievement. Teachers should be aware of how communicating the belief that a child can succeed is crucial to a child's performance and developing high self-esteem in the child. Teachers must understand that weaker pupils are more likely to have lower self-esteem and therefore need more encouragement. These pupils need to feel their efforts are worthwhile, they need to feel that the teacher values and accepts their efforts.

I feel teachers must be aware of the negative effects ability grouping has on some pupils, particularly those placed in the lowest streams. Being placed in the lowest stream can cause humiliation for many pupils. The shame they might feel can cause them to build



up hostility to school and resentment towards their teachers. I also feel it causes a lack of motivation among these pupils. Many teachers although they support ability grouping, I believe are very aware of its negative effects. They must consider them then in their contact with pupils of lower ability.

Recommendations for making school seem a less threatening place for weaker pupils:

My recommendation would be that all pupils should be accepted by teachers. If a teacher communicates positive expectations to weaker pupils, the pupils can feel they have the ability to succeed. Teachers may often need to repeat instructions to weaker groups, to re-demonstrate tasks. The teacher must do this in a positive way, to ensure that pupils feel they are accepted and their efforts are not futile. A pupil would be unlikely to ask the teacher to repeat an instruction if the teacher seemed to resent having to do this.

I feel giving encouragement is vital to pupils if they are to succeed. Encouragement is particularly important for weaker pupils who may have great doubts about their ability to achieve. Giving support and encouragement to all pupils should be an important aim of every lesson.

I believe all teachers must be involved in facilitating weaker pupils in school. I believe many teachers feel that provision for weaker pupils is not their concern, that it is the concern of the remedial teacher. If the entire staff are not dedicated to helping pupils with difficulties, then such pupils may continue to feel isolated in school, to feel they have little to offer the school.



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