

**Ability grouping in primary physical education in England: Moving beyond binary
discourses and practices**

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Abstract

This study recognised that there is currently limited understanding of the extent and nature of ability grouping practices in subject areas other than mathematics and English in primary schools. Using survey methods, this research sought to generate data of sufficient scale to extend understanding of the use of ability grouping practices in primary physical education (PE) in England. Administration of a web-based survey to all (n=917) state-funded mainstream and special schools catering for students in Key Stage 1 (aged 5-7) and/or Key Stage 2 (aged 7-11) in the North-East of England produced a response rate of 27.7% (n=254). Analysis of responses revealed that invariably class groups for PE lessons are deemed mixed-ability, with a very small number of schools using streaming, setting, or blending elements of approaches (e.g., mixed-ability grouping with a separate top and/or bottom set) to create class groups for PE. However, analysis of responses regarding within-class grouping practices revealed that ability is a prime point of reference for arranging students into smaller groups for teaching and learning activities in PE. The study findings point to the need for an expansion in research and professional learning relating to abilities and grouping practices in primary PE.

Keywords: Ability grouping; mixed-ability grouping; setting; streaming; physical education

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper addresses the incidence of different ability grouping practices in primary PE, including their use within-class groupings, and considers the rationales for their use and non-use and the processes and criteria associated with their application.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper provides unique empirical insights into the complexity and diversity of ability grouping practices in primary PE, with most schools using mixed-ability grouping in conjunction with different forms of within-class grouping to respond to the particularities of the learning situation and/or the various learning needs of students.

Introduction:

Ability grouping practices are a topic of sustained interest and debate in education systems internationally (Conservative Party, 2007, 2010; Francis et al., 2020; Johnston & Taylor, 2023; Loveless, 2013; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Research to date that has examined ability grouping practices has however frequently focused attention on secondary schooling and/or directed greatest attention to mathematics and English (Baines et al., 2003; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Hallam et al., 2003; McGilliguddy & Devine, 2018; Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 2013). Comparatively little is known about the extent and nature of these practices in other curriculum subjects, particularly in primary schooling (a notable exception being Hastie et al's (2023) investigation of within-class ability grouping practices in PE). This research contrasts with much of the existing literature by directing attention to ability grouping

practices in primary physical education (PE) in England¹. The primary school years are a critical period in shaping students' attitudes and continued involvement in sport and physical activity (Griggs, 2007; Morgan & Hansen, 2008; Pickup & Randall, 2022). However, the highly public nature of the learning environment in PE has frequently been shown to accentuate students' feelings of scrutiny, vulnerability, success, and/or failure in the subject (Hay & Macdonald, 2010; Wilkinson & Penney, 2022a, 2022b; 2024b). As Evans and Davies (1993, p. 3) noted, 'its [PE's] social processes centre upon the display of physical ability and performance in which the relations and differences between individuals become much more vividly apparent than in other areas of the curriculum'. Hence, it is important to know more about how students are grouped in PE in primary schools, and the impact of different forms of grouping on their learning, engagement, and wellbeing. We are particularly mindful of the importance of grouping arrangements for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in primary schools, with previous research showing that they may spend over a quarter of their time away from the mainstream class, the teacher, and their peers (Blatchford & Webster, 2018). They are also much more likely than typically developing students to be taught separately in small, low attaining groups in primary schools (Blatchford & Webster, 2018). This study was designed to extend understanding of the incidence of different forms of ability grouping in PE in mainstream and special primary schools², including their use within-class groupings, the rationales for their use and non-use, and the processes and criteria associated with their application.

¹ We refer to 'primary PE' rather than 'primary schools' because the education system in the North-East of England includes a wide variety of schools that cater for primary-aged children (aged 4-11), including infant (aged 4-7), first (aged 4-9), primary (aged 4-11), middle, (aged 9-13), and all-through (aged 4-18).

² A special school is a school that caters specifically for children with SEND. Most children with SEND attend a mainstream school in the UK, with less than 10% attending a special school (Gov.uk, 2024). The number of children with SEND has increased in recent years however, prompting concerns about the quality of SEND provision in mainstream schools (Blatchford & Webster, 2018).

In referring throughout to ability grouping, we foreground ability as a contested construct and direct attention particularly to grouping practices that may be grounded in narrow and/or reductionist notions of ability. We also distinguish reference to ability/ies from considerations of attainment. While these terms are often conflated and used interchangeably in the literature, we recognise attainment as a performance-oriented notion of educational achievement that may relate to and/or serve to evidence various abilities (Hay & Penney, 2013; Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). Accordingly, in considering ability grouping practices in PE, we also probe the content, mode, and context of the attainment measures that are used as markers of ability/ies and their consequences for students' educational opportunities and experiences.

The paper proceeds in five parts. It begins by providing a brief history of ability grouping practices in primary schools in England, before highlighting the main findings of research examining these practices in classroom-based subjects and PE. It then describes the design of the study and provides empirical evidence to reveal the extent and nature of ability grouping practices in schools involved in this study, including the reasons for and processes associated with their use. The paper concludes by identifying the need for research that focuses on the voices and experiences of students in different types of PE classes in primary schools.

The history of ability grouping practices in primary schools in England

There is a long and contentious history of ability grouping practices in the education system in the United Kingdom (UK). There remains however, considerable uncertainty about which approach (or combination of approaches) should be utilised, and under what circumstances. Over the course of the last hundred years or so, streaming, setting, and/or mixed-ability

grouping³ have been variously advocated by government administrations and agencies and have been used to varying degrees by primary schools. As far back as the 1930s, the Hadow Report recommended that where numbers allowed, children below the age of 11 should be streamed according to their 'natural gifts and abilities' to enhance their learning and academic achievement (Board of Education, 1931, p. 77). Just over a decade later, the Butler Education Act further established the need for streaming in primary schools to ensure the effective selection of students to different types of secondary schools (grammar, secondary modern, or technical) (Ministry of Education, 1944). Research revealed that streaming was increasingly widespread in primary schools in England throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (Barker Lunn, 1970; Jackson, 1964). In a survey of 660 primary schools in England and Wales in the 1960s, for example, Jackson (1964) found that almost all (96%) chose to do so, particularly in Year 5 (aged 9-10) and Year 6 (aged 10-11).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, accumulating evidence revealed the detrimental effects of streaming on students' social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Barker Lunn, 1970; Bealing, 1972; Hargreaves, 1967; Jackson, 1964; Lacey, 1970; Newbold, 1977). Disproportionate impact was associated with social class, with students from working-class backgrounds more likely to be placed in lower streams and subsequently be taught a restricted curriculum by teachers (often those who were least experienced and/or qualified) who had limited expectations of their abilities and possible futures. The Plowden Report commissioned by the UK government concluded that primary schools should abolish streaming in favour of mixed-

³ Streaming refers to the practice of assigning students to homogenous classes based on an overall assessment of their general ability. Students remain in these classes for all or most subjects (Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Taylor et al., 2022). In principle, setting offers a greater degree of flexibility and nuance than streaming because students are organised into homogenous classes based on their prior attainment in individual subjects only (Taylor et al., 2022). Hence, students may be in different ability level classes for different subjects in school. Mixed-ability grouping differs from streaming and setting insofar as classes are formed (either randomly or purposefully) to ensure that each includes students with a broad range of prior attainment (Francis et al., 2020).

ability grouping to ensure that all children regardless of their background and prior attainment had equal access to teachers, curriculum materials, and resources (Department of Education and Science, 1967). Against this backdrop, streaming began to decline in primary schools in England such that by the 1990s, most primary schools were utilising mixed-ability grouping to address issues of equity and equal opportunities (Lee & Croll, 1995).

Subsequently, ability grouping returned to the fore in the light of growing concerns about the quality of instruction provided in mixed-ability classes (e.g., teaching pitched at the middle of the class) and its limiting effect on the educational outcomes of students at both ends of the ability spectrum (Conservative Party, 2007, 2010; Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 1997, 2001; Ofsted, 2013). The Labour Party's White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*, contended that in too many cases, mixed ability grouping 'had failed both to stretch the brightest and to respond to the needs of those who [had] fallen behind' (DfEE, 1997, p. 38). Hence, it recommended that setting should be the 'norm' in secondary schools (unless they could demonstrate better than expected results through a different approach) and was also worth considering in primary schools (DfEE, 1997). The latest suggestion from the Department for Education is that it remains 'up to schools to decide on their approach to ability grouping, taking into account the evidence available and the specific needs of their own students' (Weale, 2021, para. 14).

Notwithstanding repeated government proposals for an increase in the use of setting in primary schools, it is notable that despite some variation between subject areas and/or year groups, research has repeatedly indicated that mixed-ability grouping is the dominant approach in Key Stage 1 (aged 5-7) and/or Key Stage 2 (aged 7-11) (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Hallam

et al. 2003., Hallam et al., 2004a; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b; McGilliguddy & Devine, 2018; Towers et al., 2020). Survey data in the late 1990s and early 2000s reported that students were typically taught in mixed-ability groups for all or most subjects of the curriculum, with the highest incidences found in art, music, information technology, and PE, but were occasionally taught in streams or sets in mathematics and/or English, particularly in Year 5 and Year 6 (Baines et al., 2003; Hallam et al., 2003; Hallam et al., 2004a; Ofsted, 1998). More specifically this research suggested that students were likely to remain in the same mixed-ability class (typically their registration class) with the same teacher for much of the school day. More recent research reaffirms these findings, while also pointing to increases in the adoption of setting in mathematics and English (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b; Towers et al., 2020). In a survey of more than 1,400 teachers and school leaders in England, Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) found that children as young as three were placed in sets and/or within-class ability groups (e.g., divided onto tables with others at a similar level of ability and/or prior attainment) for mathematics, literacy, and/or phonics, and that the frequency of these practices increased with age. Similarly, in a survey of 212 primary schools across all regions in England, Towers et al. (2020) found that the predominant mode of grouping in mathematics and reading in Key Stage 2 was by ability and/or attainment, whether this was within-class ability grouping⁴, setting, and/or streaming. Secondary schools tend to be different to primary schools in that they are reported to make greater use of setting for several subject areas, most notably mathematics and English (Francis et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2017).

Research perspectives on ability grouping practices in schools in England

⁴ Within-class grouping is a practice where students within the same class are organised into smaller groups for specific activities and/or purposes (Taylor et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a).

The extent of use of mixed-ability grouping indicated above is arguably well justified given that despite the claims made by successive UK governments, there is no consistent evidence that setting improves attainment and/or that it should be considered the preferable approach in primary schools. Reviews of the existing evidence have mostly demonstrated that ability grouping (setting and streaming) are not effective ways to raise the attainment of ‘most’ students in schools (Francis et al., 2020; Higgins et al., 2015; Hodgen et al., 2023; Sukhnandan & Lee 1998). Rather, ability grouping is associated with a small positive effect on students in higher ability groups and a small negative or zero effect on students in lower ability groups (Higgins et al., 2015; Hodgen et al., 2023; Kutnick et al., 2006; Slavin, 1987, 1990; Sukhnandan & Lee 1998). By comparison, mixed-ability grouping has often been found to have neutral to positive effects on the attainment of higher attaining students and positive effects on the attainment of mid- and lower attaining students in classroom-based subjects (Higgins et al., 2015; Ireson et al., 2002; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Venkatakrishnan & Wiliam, 2003). Mixed-ability grouping has also been shown to foster greater self-esteem and positive attitudes towards learning, particularly among lower attaining students in classroom-based subjects (Francis et al., 2020; Higgins et al., 2015; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). The use of flexible and carefully structured within-class groupings based on specific purposes and objectives has also been associated with small positive effects on students’ attainment and self-confidence in classroom-based subjects (Francis et al., 2020; Slavin, 1987; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998).

Further, while it has been claimed that setting better enables teachers to target instruction to the individual needs of students in a class (Conservative Party, 2007; Department for Education and Skills, 2005; Ofsted, 2013), research has consistently shown that teachers tend to respond to setting by embracing a one-size-fits-all approach in classroom-based subjects, with students

given identical tasks to complete at a uniform pace, whether they found them easy or difficult (Boaler 1997; Boaler et al., 2000; Davies et al., 2003; Francis et al., 2020; Hallam et al., 2004b). In summarising the literature, Fitz, Davies, and Evans (2006, p. 57) noted that setting encourages ‘the perception that all students in a classroom are of similar ability, such that pedagogically important differences between individuals and subsets tend to be overlooked’. Research also suggests that setting may encourage teachers to develop limited expectations for students in lower groups, with this leading to more structured, repetitive teaching activities and few opportunities for independent learning (Francis et al., 2020; McGilliguddy & Devine, 2018). Mixed-ability grouping has similarly been associated with a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching in terms of content and pace in classroom-based subjects, although teachers have often been shown to be more aware of the different needs and abilities of students in these classes (Francis et al., 2020; Hallam et al., 2004b; Marks, 2013; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998; Wilkinson & Penney, 2022a, 2024a). Findings such as these highlight that it is not merely the grouping arrangement, but the ways in which the arrangement is enacted by teachers, that is important for students’ learning and other wider outcomes (e.g., social and emotional) in schools (Francis et al., 2020; Johnston & Taylor, 2023; Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). For example, if teachers fail to provide appropriately differentiated expectations and experiences for students in lessons, then their learning will be compromised regardless of the grouping arrangement adopted. Maximising learning opportunities for all students likely requires that schools move beyond binary and/or overly simplistic thinking about grouping practices to consider more creative and flexible approaches that are responsive to the learning focus, environment, and or needs of students in the specific setting (Wilkinson and Penney, 2024a; Wilkinson et al., 2024).

Grouping practices in PE

As indicated above, research engaging with the potential nuances and variations of grouping practices in subjects other than mathematics and English is relatively limited. In noting that their study did not distinguish between ‘other subjects’, Taylor et al. (2022, p. 214) acknowledged that further research was needed to ‘provide a more detailed picture of grouping in specific subjects other than English and mathematics’. Previous research has also tended to characterise ability grouping practices in simplistic binary terms (e.g., mixed-ability grouping, setting, or streaming), and in doing so has neglected to consider different variants or combinations of these practices in schools (notable exceptions being Taylor et al., 2022 and Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). Recently, however, a small body of research has explored ability grouping practices in PE, particularly in secondary education settings (Wilkinson & Penney, 2022a, 2022b, 2024a, 2024b). In a national survey of 903 secondary schools in England, for example, Wilkinson and Penney (2024a) found that setting was widespread in PE in Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14), particularly in Year 8 (aged 12-13) and 9 (aged 13-14), with some schools choosing to delay setting until Year 8 to provide students with a sense of continuity to support their transition to secondary school. Mixed-ability was reported as the most common practice in Key Stage 4 (aged 14-16), often because students had greater choice over their curriculum options or because there were only enough students to form a single ‘mixed-ability’ teaching group (e.g., in examination PE) (Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). Wilkinson and Penney (2024a) also found many secondary schools blending elements of mixed-ability grouping and setting (e.g., a mixed-ability middle group with a separate top and/or bottom sets) in PE, although little is known about the nature and extent of these practices in PE in primary schools. Internationally, Hastie et al.’s (2023) research focusing on within-class ability grouping in PE in a primary school in the United States found that teachers adopted flexible situation-specific grouping arrangements that reflected the objectives of the curriculum. In situations where units involved some game play where the outcomes had consequences (e.g., standings in a league),

and where there was deemed to be a wide diversity among students' prior attainment levels, teachers felt that having small, similar ability teams playing against one another promoted balanced and fair competition (Hastie et al., 2023). Comparatively, where more affective or cognitive outcomes were the focus of the lesson, teachers would produce mixed-ability groups to ensure there was an even spread of leaders across groups (Hastie et al., 2023). Teachers also recognised the dynamic and contextual nature of ability, suggesting that students could find themselves in different within-class groups (higher or lower) depending on the curriculum area (Hastie et al., 2023). While Hastie et al.'s (2023) research provides valuable insight into within-class grouping practices in PE in a primary school, little is known about the extent and nature of these practices in PE across different primary schools across or within various jurisdictions internationally.

This study contrasted to much previous research by directing attention to ability grouping practices in primary PE in England. The research was designed to provide a picture of the profile of ability grouping practices currently adopted in primary PE in England, while also providing an extension to recent research addressing these practices in secondary PE (Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). Specifically, the study explored the incidence of different ability grouping practices (including their use between- and within-class groupings), processes and criteria associated with their application, and the reasons for their adoption. In pursuing this intent, we also aimed to extend insights into the understandings about ability that are expressed in and through current grouping practices in PE. Following Evans (2004), the research recognised ability as a contested and socially constructed concept that may be interpreted very narrowly in grouping decisions and practices. Research internationally has shown that ability in PE is frequently associated with proficiency in a relatively narrow range of activities (particularly competitive team games) that have historically been privileged in the curriculum,

and that performance in these activities is crucial to students' perceptions of their abilities and/or sense of self (Giles et al., 2024; Hay & Macdonald, 2010; Hay & Penney, 2013; Wilkinson & Penney, 2022a, 2024a). Extending research insight into ability grouping practices in PE is thus significant in the context of continued concerns that PE in primary schools should provide *all* students with quality learning experiences that enable and inspire them towards physically active lives (Griggs & Randall, 2022; Pickup & Randall, 2022).

The study addressed the following research questions:

- To what extent are various ability grouping practices used in PE in Years 1-6 in state-funded mainstream and special schools in the North-East of England?
- Why are these ability grouping practices used in PE in Years 1-6 in these schools?
- What processes and criteria are used to group students in PE in Years 1-6 in these schools?

Method

The design and administration of the survey

The data were collected through an online survey conducted via the JISC Online Survey platform (<https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/>). The survey consisted of multiple-choice and free-response questions, with multiple-choice questions designed to assess the incidence of different forms of ability grouping in PE, and free-response questions designed to encourage respondents to explain the reasons for using these arrangements and the processes associated with their application. The survey also collected demographic information from respondents (e.g., position at their school and teaching qualification in PE), which was supplemented with school-related information (e.g., size and phase of education) obtained via the Get Information

About Schools database, to understand the make-up of the sample and account for any factors that may have led to differences in the ability grouping practices reported in PE. A summary of the questions asked, and the response options provided, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of survey questions and response options

Survey questions	Response options
Please select the best description of current ability grouping practices in PE in each year group at your school	Mixed-ability grouping; setting; streaming; combined approaches; other (please specify); not-applicable
Please explain why students are grouped in this way in PE at your school	Free-text response
If you use setting, how are students allocated to sets in PE at your school?	Free-text response
If you use mixed-ability grouping, how are mixed-ability groups formed in PE at your school?	Free-text response
How frequently do you use within-class grouping in PE?	In all lessons; in some lessons; never
How are within-class groupings formed in PE, and what criteria are used?	Free-text response
Why do you use these within-class grouping practices in PE?	Free-text response
Do you have a preference for ability- or mixed-ability grouping in PE?	Yes; no
Which grouping arrangement do you prefer in PE?	Ability grouping; mixed-ability grouping; combined approaches
Please explain why you have this preference	Free-text response

The survey received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Anonymous University and was piloted with a convenience sample of six Subject Leaders of PE (in primary schools outside the North-East of England) prior to distribution to solicit feedback on the clarity of questions and ease of completion. The Subject Leader of PE was recognised as a key person involved in making decisions relating to teaching and learning in PE (including grouping arrangements), although it was acknowledged that they may not be a teacher with specialist

training in PE. In England, primary PE is taught by one or a combination of three different groups: generalist classroom teachers, specialist primary PE teachers, and/or sports coaches (who are usually ‘outsourced’ from commercial providers) (Jones & Green, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2024). In primary schools that do not employ a specialist PE teacher, generalist teachers are likely to assume the role of Subject Leader of PE (Wilkinson et al., 2024). Minor changes were made to the survey based on the feedback received, including rephrasing and reordering some questions to improve their clarity.

The finalised survey was distributed via email to all state-funded mainstream and special schools catering to students in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2 in the North-East of England (917 at the time of study). This included infant (aged 4-7), first (aged 4-9), primary (aged 4-11), middle (aged 9-13), and all-through (aged 4-18) schools. Contact details for schools were sourced from their individual school websites. Two emails were sent one month apart to the school office email address with a request to forward to the Subject Leader of PE. The first email explained the purpose of the study, provided assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and requested participation. This approach was based on research indicating that pre-notification emails can have a significant positive effect on response rates for online surveys because they contribute to increases in trust and study legitimacy (Cook et al., 2000; Dillman et al., 2014). The second email provided the hyperlink to the survey and general instructions about completing the survey. Prospective respondents could only progress to the survey questions if they checked a box to provide their informed consent. Participation in the study was incentivised through the opportunity to be entered into a draw to win one of seven One4all gift cards valued at £50 each.

The survey was open for completion between January and May 2023 and non-respondents received a reminder email two weeks prior to the survey closing. A total of 254 schools responded representing a 27.7% response rate. The characteristics of respondents and schools are provided in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2. Breakdown of survey respondents

		Survey (n=254)	
		Frequency	%
Role	Subject Leader of PE	238	(93.7%)
	Head/Deputy head	5	(1.9%)
	Class teacher	7	(2.8%)
	Sports coach	1	(0.4%)
	Office administrator	2	(0.8%)
	Prefer not to say	1	(0.4%)
Completed training in PE	Yes	52	(20.5%)
	No	201	(79.1%)
	Prefer not to say	1	(0.4%)
Length of time teaching	Less than one year	2	(0.8%)
	2-5 years	41	(16.1%)
	5-10 years	85	(33.5%)
	More than 10 years	122	(48%)
	Prefer not to say	4	(1.6%)

Table 3. Characteristics of responding schools

		Survey (n=254)	
		Frequency	%
Location	Darlington	7	(2.8%)
	Durham	34	(13.4%)
	Gateshead	23	(9.1%)
	Hartlepool	13	(5.1%)
	Middlesbrough	17	(6.7%)
	Newcastle	27	(10.6%)
	North Tyneside	30	(11.8%)
	Northumberland	47	(18.5%)
	Redcar and Cleveland	12	(4.7%)
	South Tyneside	15	(5.9%)
	Stockton-on-Tees	9	(3.5%)
	South Tyneside	20	(7.9%)

Phase of education	Infant	7	(2.8%)
	First	17	(6.7%)
	Primary	205	(80.7%)
	Middle	12	(4.7%)
	All-through	2	(0.8%)
	Special education	11	(4.3%)
School type	Academy convertor	84	(33%)
	Academy sponsor led	12	(4.7%)
	Community	102	(40.2%)
	Free	2	(0.8%)
	Foundation	32	(12.6%)
	Voluntary	22	(8.7%)
Gender of entry	Co-educational	254	(100%)
Admission policy	Non-selective	254	(100%)
Number of students	Less than 150	51	(20.1%)
	From 151 to 250	83	(32.7%)
	From 251 to 500	96	(37.8%)
	More than 500	24	(9.4%)
Ofsted rating	Outstanding	30	(11.8%)
	Good	181	(71.3%)
	Requires improvement	12	(4.7%)
	Data is not available	31	(12.2%)
FSM proportion	Less than 15%	55	(21.7%)
	From 15% to 30%	68	(26.8%)
	More than 30%	126	(49.6%)
	Not recorded	5	(1.9%)

Analysis of survey responses

Responses to multiple-choice questions were analysed using descriptive statistics to calculate frequencies and percentages of responses. Valid percentages are reported based on the number of responses for each question, excluding non-responses. Responses to each free-response question were analysed using inductive coding. This was a recursive process that involved an initial reading and several subsequent re-readings of free-text responses to gain a sense of familiarity and identify recurring words and phrases that were relevant to the aims of the study. These words and phrases were then coded into provisional category labels (e.g., timetabling arrangements and staffing) and free-text responses were further assessed to determine the comprehensiveness and scope of these labels. This included developing new category labels

when they did not fit with provisional labels (e.g., cooperative learning), identifying relationships among the category labels and assigning these to overall category labels (e.g., timetabling arrangements and staffing to pragmatic factors), and finding illustrative excerpts to support the development of these category labels. This process continued until all meaningful data had been identified and assigned a category label. Lastly, category labels were rank ordered to determine the level of agreement between respondents.

In reporting free-text responses, it is acknowledged that in many instances data relates to a small percentage of respondents and should not be interpreted as representative of the broader sample population. The qualitative data does, however, add important depth of insight into grouping practices being employed in PE. For all instances where the percentage figure is less than 10%, the actual number of responses rather than percentage is reported to provide greater clarity about the extent to which particular category labels were evident in the data.

Findings

The prevalence of different between-class ability grouping practices in PE

As shown in Table 4, nearly all schools were using mixed-ability grouping in PE in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2. This included 89.7% of schools in Year 1 (aged 5-6), rising slightly to 90.1% in Year 2 (aged 6-7) and Year 3 (aged 7-8), before falling slightly to 89% in Year 4 (aged 8-9), 84.2% in Year 5, and 85% in Year 6. By contrast, only 1.2% of schools were using streaming in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2. A slightly higher proportion of schools were using setting in PE in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2, with 1.6% using this practice in Year 1, rising slightly to 2% in Year 2, and 2.8% in Year 3, before remaining stable at 3.5% across Key Stage 2. Of the remaining schools, a small proportion (2.4%) were using a combination of

elements of mixed-ability grouping and setting in PE in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2. Two respondents described these arrangements as follows:

We have four teaching groups in each year. Three are mixed-ability groups and the fourth is set by need. This set has a population of students who require work to be at a slightly slower pace and who require more support. This is a mix of SEN and non-SEN students (Subject Leader of PE, Middle School).

We are a three-form entry school. So, we have one class that is mixed-ability and two classes (one high and one low) that are set by ability (Subject Leader of PE, First School).

Table 4 provides full details of the frequencies and percentages of ability grouping practices by year groups in PE in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

Table 4. Ability grouping types by year groups in PE in Key Stage 1 and 2

	Streaming	Setting	Mixed-ability	Other	Not applicable
Year 1	3 (1.2%)	4 (1.6%)	228 (89.7%)	3 (1.2%)	16 (6.3%)
Year 2	3 (1.2%)	5 (2%)	229 (90.1%)	3 (1.2%)	14 (5.5%)
Year 3	3 (1.2%)	7 (2.8%)	229 (90.1%)	4 (1.6%)	11 (4.3%)
Year 4	3 (1.2%)	9 (3.5%)	226 (89%)	4 (1.6%)	12 (4.7%)
Year 5	3 (1.2%)	9 (3.5%)	214 (84.2%)	6 (2.4%)	22 (8.7%)
Year 6	3 (1.2%)	9 (3.5%)	216 (85%)	6 (2.4%)	20 (7.9%)

Note: 'Not-applicable' was provided as an option choice as some schools do not teach students across all year groups in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

The processes used in between-class ability grouping decisions in PE

Of those respondents providing details of the processes and criteria used to form mixed-ability groups in PE in their school (n=211), nearly all (97.6%) reported that registration classes were the basis for mixed-ability grouping. For the most part, students in these schools arrived at PE

in same-age form classes (either in a single form class or with other form classes in the same year group) (77.7%), with fewer (22.3%) arriving at PE in mixed-age form classes. Mixed-age classes were particularly prevalent in special schools, with many of these schools (64%) grouping students to classes based on their 'stage of development' and/or 'level of need' rather than their age. The following comments were made:

All children are taught in their year group classes by their class teacher, meaning classes stay as mixed-ability as they are for every other subject (Class Teacher, Primary School).

Mixed-ability groups in PE are formed through form classes. So, we have a range of abilities in one class (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

They do PE in form classes of combined year groups e.g., Nursery and Reception, Years 1+2, Years 3+4 (Subject Leader of PE, First School).

Mixed-ability groups were also formed purposefully in a small number of schools (2.4%) to ensure a range of ability levels and/or a particular mix of students in a class. Specifically, respondents in these schools explained that particular care was taken to ensure that mixed-ability groups contained a balance of students with learning and/or behavioural difficulties and/or students who would work well together. The following quotes exemplify these points:

We group our pupils based on their stage of development rather than their ages, meaning there may be a mix within the class (Subject Leader of PE, Special School).

Classes are formed through SEN and ability levels across subjects to achieve a range of ability (Subject Leader of PE, Special School).

Groups are organised based on who works well together, who may need extra support, behaviour, friendship groups, etc (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Of those respondents providing details of the processes used to create sets in PE (n=7), most (n=5) were using baseline activities and/or assessment tasks related to a particular ‘strand’ (e.g., invasion games) or activity of the curriculum. Two respondents explained:

Children are assessed using assessment tasks at the beginning of every activity and split according to their levels of ability in that activity (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Initial core task/assessment lessons each term to establish two ability groupings in Year 5 and Year 6 (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Although these respondents did not specify the criteria for organising students into sets in PE, previous research suggests that the mode and context of these activities and tasks privilege motor skills and/or sport performance as the essence of ability in PE (Hay and Penney 2013; Wilkinson & Penney, 2022a, 2024a).

The remaining respondents (n=2) were using schemes of work to track students’ progress and thereby guide setting decisions in PE, as one respondent explained:

We use a scheme of work (REAL PE) that gives clear progression and guidance for which children are working below, at, and above expected levels (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

The reasons for different between-class ability grouping practices in PE

Respondents were asked to provide details of the reasons for using different between-class ability grouping practices in PE in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2, to which 245 (96.5%) responded. The most frequently reported reason for using mixed-ability grouping in PE was that students were taught in their form classes (39.6%). For the most part, this was because the

number of classes per year group (13.9%), the number and availability of teaching staff (n=19), the constraints of the timetable (n=16), and/or the availability of teaching space for PE (n=6) meant that this was the only viable approach. Form classes were deemed mixed-ability because they contained students across the full range of ability in a year group. Two respondents summed up the situation as follows:

All children are taught PE in their form class. This class is mixed-ability because it includes students from the full ability/attainment range in the year group. We are also a small school (one-form entry), so we don't have the capacity to set students in PE (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

We can't split students into ability groups due to the whole-school timetable, staffing constraints (only one member of staff per year group), and the lack of available space for PE in the school (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

A smaller number of respondents (15.9%) reported that mixed-ability grouping provided a structure for facilitating cooperative and collaborative learning between students in PE. In most cases, these respondents articulated the importance of using more able students in the role of helper to support less able students in their learning, although there was some recognition that all students could assume this role. The notion of ability was crucial to this recognition, with several respondents (n=17) explaining that students revealed different abilities in different areas of the curriculum. The following comments were typical:

We believe that children of all abilities can help support and learn from each other and just because someone might not be strong at a team sport doesn't mean they aren't strong in dance or gymnastics for example (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Children need to see good practice modelled by other children. As PE is so diverse e.g., dance, gym, etc. children tend to be more able in some skills than others. Mixed-ability grouping allows us to scaffold learning by using more able (or confident) children to help and support less able (or confident) children (Subject Leader of PE, First School).

As a result of these practices, most of these respondents (12.7%) believed that mixed-ability grouping fostered a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment for all students in PE. Specifically, it was explained that mixed-ability grouping provided students with opportunities to form (and develop) positive and supportive peer relationships, demonstrate leadership, communication, and teamwork skills, and/or understand and accept differences in others. This is clear in the following comments:

Mixed-ability grouping enables more able children to coach and support other children. So, they develop their communication skills, leadership skills, and empathy towards others, while less able students become more confident and gain knowledge and understanding (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

In mixed-ability groups children can develop better coaching, teamwork, and respect for others. It [mixed-ability grouping] also gets children used to working with each other and builds relationships between children outside of PE (Subject Leader of PE, First School).

In conceptualising ability as multifaceted and contextually specific (e.g., framed in relation to activities and/or movement contexts that feature in PE curriculum), a small number of these respondents (n=4) also expressed reservations about the generalised approach of streaming and/or rigid ability grouping practices more broadly, as is shown in the following comments:

As PE is so diverse e.g. dance, gym, etc children tend to be more able in some skills than others. So, I'd be uncomfortable with streaming them (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Not all typically 'able' children are strong in every strand of PE. It would be silly to set permanent groups (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

There are so many strands to PE that ability grouping becomes tricky to manage. I've seen it happen where one child is good at football, so they are classed as more able, but then someone who is very able at karate is seen as less able overall because it's not part of the PE curriculum (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Relatedly, a small number of respondents (n=12) expressed concerns about the efficacy and potential adverse effects of setting students in PE in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2, including the misplacement of students to sets, the impact of labels and stigma, the loss of opportunities for collaborative learning, and/or the potential to unsettle students by moving them away from their friends. Three respondents explained:

I'd be worried about the possible negative side-effects of putting children into low ability groups, particularly at such a young age (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Every class I have ever taught has had a wide range of ability. I feel children are very aware of being grouped by ability and it can put restraints on how they see themselves and their potential (First School, Class teacher).

If we set children, we'd potentially be separating them from someone who could help develop them in a particular activity (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

There was also a belief among some respondents (n=10) that the breadth of activities and experiences offered in the PE curriculum lent themselves more to mixed-ability grouping than setting or streaming. For the most part, these respondents explained that they had worked

conscientiously to provide students with a 'broad and balanced curriculum' in PE. This encompassed a variety of team games, athletics, dance, and gymnastics, and/or encouraged the development of fundamental movement skills and cooperative learning (rather than an individualistic orientation) among students. Two respondents commented:

The curriculum focus allows for mixed-ability grouping because most of the activities are based on developing fundamental movement skills and encouraging cooperation and participation - rather than competition in team sports. So, everyone gets a chance to show what they can do and to experience success (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

PE shouldn't be about 'being the best'. It's about encouraging children to work together and support one another to improve. That's why we prefer to use mixed-ability grouping (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Several respondents (14.7%) also felt that by adapting their teaching methods to the individual and varying needs of students in mixed-ability classes in PE, they were able to cater for all students without needing to adopt setting. Specifically, these respondents believed that this approach enabled teachers to communicate the same high expectations to all students and ensured that all students were provided with equitable and equal access to learning opportunities in PE. Two respondents commented:

All lessons are differentiated to meet the needs of all children in the class, so there's no need to set by ability into different groups (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

We believe all students are entitled to equal and fair treatment. Although the lesson is taught to a mixed-ability group, activities are tailored to the range of abilities within a session to support and stretch all students (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Given that only a small number of schools were using streaming, setting, or combination of elements of mixed-ability grouping and setting in PE, only a few comments were made about the reasons for using these practices (n=15). A small number of respondents (n=7) explained that setting enabled them to attend more closely to the learning needs of students in PE. Specifically, these respondents explained that setting enabled them to challenge and extend more able students and provide additional support for less able students in PE. This was explained in the following way:

Setting helps us challenge more able children and provide appropriate levels of support for less able children (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

This model [setting] ensures that children who excel in areas of PE are challenged appropriately (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Setting was also associated with the presence of a secondary trained PE teacher delivering PE in one primary school:

I think its [setting] maybe because I'm secondary PE trained working as a specialist in the primary sector, so I have more experience of setting in PE and its benefits for all (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

A very small number of respondents (n=2) indicated that streaming was influenced by school timetabling arrangements, or that mixed-ability grouping with a separate set (or sets) better enabled them to maximise support for less able students and/or stretch and challenge more able students (n=3). Two respondents explained:

Students are grouped in their form classes based on a general measure of ability across subjects and are then timetabled together (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

It allows those pupils who need more support and a less competitive environment the opportunity to succeed and gain confidence in sport. Those pupils who are in mixed-ability groups get an appropriate level of challenge set with peers and task (Subject Leader of PE, Middle School).

The prevalence of within-class grouping practices in PE

It was notable that while very few schools were formally organising students into ability groups between classes in PE (e.g., streaming or setting), several were using ability as a basis to group students within classes in PE. Indeed, a significant proportion of schools (89.8%) were using some form of within-class grouping in ‘all’ (37.8%) or ‘most’ (52%) PE classes. Of these schools, most (69.6%) were organising within-class groups based on ability, although this was often in combination with behaviour and/or friendships. A smaller number of schools were further ‘mixing’ students by ability within mixed-ability classes (20.2%) or allocating students to within-class groups based on SEND (2.6%) or confidence (0.9%) (see Table 5). The following comments reflect how respondents described the composition of their within-class grouping practices in PE:

Ability (high/low mix, high together, low together), friendship groupings, and behaviour groupings (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Tends to be mostly friendship groupings and who works well together. Some children have more skills and will naturally come together. These can work well together and also be split to share their strength (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Respondents did not elaborate on why they considered SEND in their within-class grouping decisions, although previous research in classroom-based subjects suggests that students with SEND are often grouped together and/or with other students identified as low-attaining to receive more tailored learning experiences and/or share the support of a teaching assistant (Blatchford & Webster, 2018; Kutnick et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2022). While this is the case, Kutnick et al. (2006) found that this approach brought about an increase in misbehaviour and disruption of lessons, which impaired the learning of SEND students. It has also been shown to deprive SEND students of access to academic role models and peer support to enhance their learning (Blatchford & Webster, 2018; Kutnick et al., 2006). Other research has shown that students with SEND are occasionally grouped together within mixed-ability groups with other students across the ability range to help foster social integration and reduce isolation (Kutnick et al., 2006).

Table 5: Within-class grouping criteria in PE

	n/228	%
Ability	158	69.3%
Behaviour	72	31.6%
Friendship groups	62	27.2%
Mixed-ability	46	20.2%
SEN	6	2.6%
Confidence	2	0.9%

The responses in our study highlighted that a range of approaches were used to determine the allocation of students to within-class groups in PE. For the most part (73.1%), respondents indicated that within-class grouping decisions were at the discretion of individual teachers (informed by their own observational assessments and/or prior knowledge of students) to enable them to make choices about the best approach in a particular situation. A smaller number

of respondents (21.3%) allowed students to choose their own within-class groups, particularly when they were based on friendships and/or confidence levels. The following comments were made:

It tends to be at the discretion of individual teachers so they can make decisions based on the particular situation during lessons (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

It depends. Sometimes children are given the freedom to choose their own group if it is done by friendships. Sometimes the teacher will select children by behaviour or ability to ensure they get the most out of PE lessons (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Further, within-class grouping decisions were complex and contingent on a wide range of factors, including the nature of the activity being taught, the objectives of a particular lesson (i.e., social or physical), and/or the perceived needs of students. Many respondents (35%) were keen to stress therefore that within-class groupings were organised flexibly to suit the needs of particular situations. The following comments capture this view:

There is no set rule. It completely depends on the situation. It may be down to the activity or task that is taking place, the needs of the students at that time, the learning outcomes of the lesson, or the resources available. These can be different for every lesson, so the groups are constantly changing (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

It's different criteria for different activities and purposes. It might be a mixed-ability group if the activity was competitive to help achieve a balance of skills. It might be an ability group if the activity was to help move a group on more or provide more support to a specific group (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

The reasons for different within-class grouping practices in PE

Respondents were asked to provide details of the reasons for using different within-class grouping practices in PE in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2, to which 213 (83.9%) responded. The most frequently reported reason (34.8%) for using homogeneous within-class ability grouping in PE was to reduce the range of ability within a teaching group to facilitate the implementation of differentiation strategies and/or tailor instruction more closely to the learning needs of students. Specifically, respondents explained that they were better able to match learning activities, tasks, and/or resources to the needs of individual students and thereby encourage greater participation, engagement, and/or progress in PE. This is exemplified by the following comments:

It better enables teachers to differentiate lessons to ensure all students access PE at a level that is appropriate to their needs (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

It allows lessons to be adapted appropriately so that children have activities pitched at their level. It means they will be more engaged in their learning (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

The most frequently reported reason (20.6%) for using heterogenous within-class ability grouping was to support collaborative and reciprocal learning between students. Again, several respondents highlighted the use of peer tutoring, with more able students placed in the role of 'mini-teacher', as an effective strategy to enhance the learning of less able students and the leadership skills of more able students. Three respondents noted:

To have mini teachers within each group. Children learn from each other and see that some children have strengths in some areas and some in others (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Grouping more able students with less able students so that they can model correct techniques etc and support their peers in a pseudo coaching role (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

More able students can develop leadership skills and take responsibility for trying to help less able students. Less able students can be inspired to improve and achieve the higher standards set by more able students (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Several respondents (14.6%) believed that within-class grouping mitigated the negative effects of setting in PE. There was a general belief that within-class grouping provided a more nuanced and less restrictive approach than setting as students could be easily moved between groups during lessons for specific activities and purposes. The flexible and informal nature of these groups was seen as important for ensuring that students has less of a sense of their own ability, to support the idea that ability was not fixed, and to avoid labelling students as low ability. This was explained in the following terms:

It allows for more flexibility. They are also based on lots of different factors, so they do not draw attention to differences in ability (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Groupings are very fluid to keep morale and self-esteem high in all children ... Less chance of shaming the children (Subject Leader of PE, Special School).

Other reported reasons for using within-class grouping practices were to help with behaviour management (e.g., by separating disruptive students) (13.1%), to ensure fair and balanced competition in team activities (e.g., by ensuring that each team included students at different ability levels) (9.4%), to provide a means for students to build new social relationships (n=16),

and relatedly to encourage the mixing of students with different characteristics and abilities (n=8).

Within-class grouping was also initiated by a small number of respondents (n=6) because of pragmatic issues related to the size of a class and the availability of facilities and/or equipment in PE:

We split them so that they're not all playing a game at the same time. Space can be an issue for multiple matches to take place at the same time (Class Teacher, Primary School).

We use grouping within classes to ensure children can be more active or so there's enough equipment for the children to use (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Preferences for particular ability grouping practices in PE

Many respondents (33.9%/n=86) reported a preference for a particular ability grouping arrangement in PE in Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2. Of these far more (52.3%) expressed a preference for mixed-ability grouping than ability grouping (14%) or a combination of approaches (33.7%). Notably, respondents who had completed their training in PE were more likely to express a preference for ability grouping than those who had not (15.4% compared to 1.6%). Of those respondents providing an explanation for their preferred approach (n=83), the most frequently reported reason for preferring mixed-ability grouping (71.1%) was that it was the best way of providing equal opportunities for all students in PE (by encouraging them to support each other in their learning). One respondent commented:

It [mixed-ability grouping] benefits all children because it promotes an inclusive climate that provides opportunities for all children to achieve and learn from one another. It also means that nobody feels like they have been left out because of their ability (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

The most frequently reported reason for preferring ability grouping (n=8) was the possibility of making teaching easier and more manageable by enabling instruction and pace of learning to be tailored more closely to students' needs and abilities. Some of these respondents expressed anxiety about their ability to adapt or differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of students (and therefore enable all students to learn and make progress) in mixed-ability classes, with one teacher explaining:

It (ability grouping) makes teaching easier because there isn't that range that you get with mixed-ability groups. I'd also not be 100% confident in my ability to support and challenge all children in a mixed-ability group in PE (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

The most frequently reported reason for preferring a combination of ability- and mixed-ability grouping was to provide a more flexible and responsive approach to teaching and learning (n=15). For the most part, respondents perceived that ability- and mixed-ability grouping were more suited to different learning situations in PE, with ability grouping more suited to situations requiring direct competition and mixed-ability grouping more suited to situations where students were learning a new skill and/or activities that encouraged positive team interactions and relations. One respondent commented:

It allows for a more flexible approach because sometimes some lessons are more suited to a particular type of grouping. It's good to group by same ability in times of competition to provide an appropriate level of challenge. Mixed-ability is good for allowing children to help and model when they are learning a new skill and in times when it's important to cooperate and collaborate with peers (Subject Leader of PE, Primary School).

Discussion

In line with previous research (Hallam et al., 2003; Ofsted, 1998), the findings of this study suggest that mixed-ability grouping is the norm in PE in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Specifically, most students remained in their mixed-ability registration classes for PE but would often be split by ability (similar and/or mixed), behaviour, and/or friendships within these classes. Similar practices have been reported in other subjects in primary schools in England, although the lack of adoption of setting in PE in primary schools in this study contrasts with the situation in mathematics and English, where this practice is on the rise (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a, 2013b; Towers et al., 2020). Reported reasons for using mixed-ability grouping reflected both pragmatic and educational considerations, including the number of classes per year group, school timetabling arrangements, and/or the capacity to facilitate cooperative learning experiences. The constrained nature of ability grouping decisions has similarly been reported in previous research in primary and secondary schools (Hallam et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). Findings such as these prompt recognition that ability grouping decisions do not take place in a contextual vacuum, and as such do not necessarily reflect the free choice of individual teachers. As Francis et al., (2020, p. 25) remind us, 'teachers are working in challenging conditions and face a range of institutional constraints, regarding available

resource, capacity, and discursive/policy climate, within which decisions about student grouping are made'. Nonetheless, mixed-ability grouping retained the support of most respondents because it was perceived to lead to a fairer distribution of learning opportunities than would be possible with setting. This finding contrasts with previous research showing that teachers tend to exhibit more positive attitudes towards setting than mixed-ability grouping in classroom-based subjects in primary and secondary schools (Francis et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2017) and PE in secondary schools (Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). The findings also add nuance to previous research in primary schools by showing that teachers may express preferences for a combination of ability grouping arrangements in PE.

In other instances, the decision to use mixed-ability grouping in PE reflected assumptions about the nature of ability. Several respondents were conceptualising ability as multifaceted and contextually specific (e.g., students could be deemed more able in some areas of the curriculum and less able in others) and consequently highlighted the problems of using streaming and/or fairly and accurately allocating students to sets in PE. Many respondents reported providing a 'broad and balanced' curriculum that enabled students to demonstrate their abilities in varied movement settings and/or that fostered cooperative and collaborative learning experiences. As such, there was general recognition that setting was not necessary in PE because different students could assume the role of helper to support others in their learning. The flexibility inherent in this approach is important given that previous research has shown that the repeated use of the same students in this role can leave some students feeling patronised and others feeling bored in lessons (Francis et al., 2020; Wilkinson & Penney, 2022b, 2024b). Contrary to concerns about teaching to the middle in mixed-ability groups (DfEE, 1997; Ofsted, 2013), several respondents also placed significant emphasis on developing differentiated materials to accommodate the diverse needs and abilities of all students in PE.

The findings also demonstrate the complexity and diversity of contemporary ability grouping practices in PE in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2, with nearly all schools using mixed-ability grouping in conjunction with some form of within-class grouping. These practices were not applied in a uniform manner within or between schools. Instead, as has been reported in previous research (Hastie et al., 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2016; Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a), most schools were using different forms (and combinations) of within-class grouping to respond to the particularities of the learning context and/or the changing needs of students in PE. Data further revealed notably varied understandings of ability being applied in within-class grouping practices in PE. For the most part, within-class grouping decisions were based on ability, although a complex combination of other factors was also often considered, including social and working relationships between students. Encouragingly, these within-class grouping practices were mostly used on a temporary basis for specific tasks and purposes. Previous research suggests that when within-class groupings are fixed, they may result in many of the same negative effects of streaming and setting, including a loss of self-competence, status, and/or learning opportunities (Francis et al., 2020; Marks, 2013; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Some schools were also blending elements of setting and mixed-ability grouping (using mixed-ability grouping with a separate top and/or bottom set) for teaching and learning purposes in PE. Similar practices have recently been reported in classroom-based subjects and PE in secondary schools and tend to be adopted to cater for students at the extremes of the ability range (Taylor et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a).

In the small number of schools using setting in PE, most respondents identified student performance in baseline activities and/or tests as the prime point of reference. Although these

respondents did not clarify the criteria for organising students into sets in PE, previous research points towards a tendency for baseline activities and/or tests to privilege a narrow conceptualisation of ability that centres on movement skills and values associated with games-based activities, including competitiveness, speed, and coordination. (Hay & Penney, 2013; Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). As Hay and Penney (2013) emphasise, these tests are value laden and thereby destined to privilege some abilities over others. It is important therefore that teachers consider the scope that assessment practices present for students to demonstrate their varied abilities, and relatedly the abilities that they privilege and/or marginalise in ability grouping decisions in PE.

Conclusion

In closing, it is important to acknowledge that the findings reported in this study are limited in scope to schools in one region of England. While the findings provide valuable empirical insights into ability grouping practices in primary PE, they cannot be applied in any straightforward sense to schools throughout the UK and definitive conclusions cannot be drawn. Nonetheless, the findings may provide a reference for identifying the ability grouping practices adopted in PE in schools with similar characteristics (e.g., schools with one class in each year group where setting is practically infeasible). Further, while the survey approach adopted in this study was useful for mapping the incidence of different forms of ability grouping in primary PE, it was less able to capture the nuances and intricacies of these arrangements as they are enacted in everyday practice within and between schools and classes. Within-class groups, for example, will usually be formed or reformed on an ad hoc basis according to the activity context and/or the needs of particular groups of students. Thus, we recognise that the extent and nature of ability grouping practices in PE is likely to be much more complex and

nuanced than has been reported in this study. The study also included only a small number of special schools, which limited exploration of the nuances and complexities of grouping arrangements in these schools. Further in-depth research is therefore needed to understand the contextual factors that shape the adoption of particular ability grouping arrangements in PE in these schools and how these arrangements are enacted in PE with special school students.

The study is also acknowledged as limited to the perspectives of teachers and there remains a conspicuous and arguably significant absence of research on students' perspectives of different ability grouping practices in primary PE. Recent research in secondary schools suggests that many students prefer setting to mixed-ability grouping in PE, most notably because it creates a situation where they are less exposed to judgement, criticism, and/or surveillance by more able peers (Wilkinson & Penney, 2024b). The profile of ability grouping practices reported in primary schools in this study are however in sharp contrast to those reported in PE in secondary schools, with setting particularly widespread in Key Stage 3 (aged 11-14) (Wilkinson et al., 2016; Wilkinson & Penney, 2024a). This raises important questions about the impact of moving from mixed-ability grouping in primary PE to setting in secondary PE on students' affective outcomes, including their motivation and self-confidence, and their PE experiences. Further in-depth research is also needed to understand students' perspectives and experiences of the ability grouping practices reported in this study. Such research is crucial in exploring the efficacy of these practices from students' perspectives and for providing a stronger and more robust evidence-base for decisions about these practices in PE.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

Ethical statement

The study was conducted in line with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.

Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1: Summary of survey questions and response options

Survey questions	Response options
Please select the best description of current ability grouping practices in PE in each year group at your school	Mixed-ability grouping; setting; streaming; combined approaches; other (please specify); not-applicable
Please explain why students are grouped in this way in PE at your school	Free-text response
If you use setting, how are students allocated to sets in PE at your school?	Free-text response
If you use mixed-ability grouping, how are mixed-ability groups formed in PE at your school?	Free-text response
How frequently do you use within-class grouping in PE?	In all lessons; in some lessons; never
How are within-class groupings formed in PE, and what criteria are used?	Free-text response
Why do you use these within-class grouping practices in PE?	Free-text response
Do you have a preference for ability- or mixed-ability grouping in PE?	Yes; no
Which grouping arrangement do you prefer in PE?	Ability grouping; mixed-ability grouping; combined approaches
Please explain why you have this preference	Free-text response

Table 2. Breakdown of survey respondents

		Survey (n=254)	
		Frequency	%
Role	Subject Leader of PE	238	(93.7%)
	Head/Deputy head	5	(1.9%)
	Class teacher	7	(2.8%)
	Sports coach	1	(0.4%)
	Office administrator	2	(0.8%)
	Prefer not to say	1	(0.4%)
Completed training in PE	Yes	52	(20.5%)
	No	201	(79.1%)
	Prefer not to say	1	(0.4%)
Length of time teaching	Less than one year	2	(0.8%)
	2-5 years	41	(16.1%)
	5-10 years	85	(33.5%)
	More than 10 years	122	(48%)
	Prefer not to say	4	(1.6%)

Table 3. Characteristics of responding schools

		Survey (n=254)		
		Frequency	%	
Location	Darlington	7	(2.8%)	
	Durham	34	(13.4%)	
	Gateshead	23	(9.1%)	
	Hartlepool	13	(5.1%)	
	Middlesbrough	17	(6.7%)	
	Newcastle	27	(10.6%)	
	North Tyneside	30	(11.8%)	
	Northumberland	47	(18.5%)	
	Redcar and Cleveland	12	(4.7%)	
	South Tyneside	15	(5.9%)	
	Stockton-on-Tees	9	(3.5%)	
	South Tyneside	20	(7.9%)	
	Phase of education	Infant	7	(2.8%)
		First	17	(6.7%)
Primary		205	(80.7%)	
Middle		12	(4.7%)	
All-through		2	(0.8%)	
Special education		11	(4.3%)	
School type		Academy convertor	84	(33%)
	Academy sponsor led	12	(4.7%)	
	Community	102	(40.2%)	
	Free	2	(0.8%)	
	Foundation	32	(12.6%)	
	Voluntary	22	(8.7%)	
	Gender of entry	Co-educational	254	(100%)
Admission policy	Non-selective	254	(100%)	
Number of students	Less than 150	51	(20.1%)	
	From 151 to 250	83	(32.7%)	
	From 251 to 500	96	(37.8%)	
	More than 500	24	(9.4%)	
	Ofsted rating	Outstanding	30	(11.8%)
Good		181	(71.3%)	
Requires improvement		12	(4.7%)	
Data is not available		31	(12.2%)	
FSM proportion	Less than 15%	55	(21.7%)	
	From 15% to 30%	68	(26.8%)	
	More than 30%	126	(49.6%)	
	Not recorded	5	(1.9%)	

Table 4. Ability grouping types by year groups in PE in Key Stage 1 and 2

	Streaming	Setting	Mixed-ability	Other	Not applicable
Year 1	3 (1.2%)	4 (1.6%)	228 (89.7%)	3 (1.2%)	16 (6.3%)
Year 2	3 (1.2%)	5 (2%)	229 (90.1%)	3 (1.2%)	14 (5.5%)
Year 3	3 (1.2%)	7 (2.8%)	229 (90.1%)	4 (1.6%)	11 (4.3%)
Year 4	3 (1.2%)	9 (3.5%)	226 (89%)	4 (1.6%)	12 (4.7%)
Year 5	3 (1.2%)	9 (3.5%)	214 (84.2%)	6 (2.4%)	22 (8.7%)
Year 6	3 (1.2%)	9 (3.5%)	216 (85%)	6 (2.4%)	20 (7.9%)

Note: 'Not-applicable' was provided as an option choice as some schools do not teach students across all year groups in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

Table 5: Within-class grouping criteria in PE

	n/228	%
Ability	158	69.3%
Behaviour	72	31.6%
Friendship groups	62	27.2%
Mixed-ability	46	20.2%
SEN	6	2.6%
Confidence	2	0.9%