

# Attainment grouping and social inequality

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## Outline

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- Background – and terminology
- Summary of our key findings
- Discussion of implications

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England has much higher rates of within-school ability grouping than similar countries, study finds

By Catherine Lough  
24 September 2019

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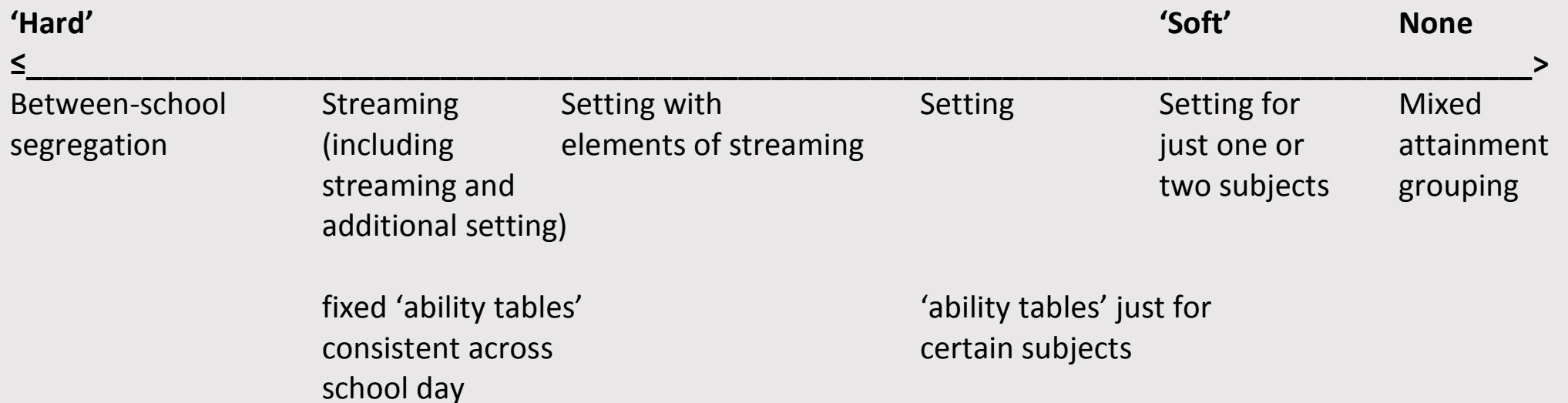
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## Attainment grouping spectrum



Source: Francis, Taylor & Tereshchenko (2020) *Reassessing ability grouping*. London: Routledge.

## Background to the study

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- Educational attainment and socio-economic background are closely correlated
- Disadvantaged students are disproportionately concentrated in low sets and streams
- Students in lower sets and streams have poorer progress and attainment outcomes
- So, segregation by 'ability' within schools exacerbates wider social inequalities
- Research finds no significant benefit overall for attainment grouping





## Explanations for poor outcomes of students in low sets and streams

- Misallocation to groups
- Lack of fluidity of groups
- Quality of teaching for different groups
- Teacher expectations and related pedagogy
- Impoverished curriculum and qualifications
- Student engagement and attitudes to school
- Self-fulfilling prophecy

## The 'Best Practice in Grouping Students' Study

- Focused on English and mathematics.
- Followed pupil cohorts from beginning of Year 7 (age 11) to end of Year 8 (age 13).
- Mixed methods study including:
  - 2 RCTs: Best Practice in Setting (126 schools); Best Practice in Mixed Attainment (13 schools)
  - Baseline and follow-up surveys with students and teachers (13,462 student responses, 597 teacher responses)
  - Interviews with students (246) and teachers (54).
- Idea was to test impact ('effect') or otherwise of two interventions, against two key measures, as well as gathering other data. Evaluated by NFER.
- Team: Becky Francis (PI), Jeremy Hodgen, Becky Taylor, Antonina Tereshchenko, Louise Archer (UCL) and Paul Connolly and Nicole Craig (QUB)



## Our research findings

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- Misallocation of students to groups
- Teacher quality
- Student self-confidence
- Schools find improvement in setting practice difficult



## Who is in which set?

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### **At the beginning of the study (Year 7):**

- Working-class and FSM students were more likely to be in middle and bottom sets.
- White students were significantly more likely to be in top sets for English and maths.
- A greater proportion of boys were in the bottom set for English (60% vs. 40%), but more boys were in the top set for maths (56% vs. 44%).
- Black and mixed-ethnicity students (and Asian in the case of English) were more likely to be in lower sets for both maths and English.

## Which students are wrongly allocated?

### Misallocation of students to maths sets by gender & ethnicity

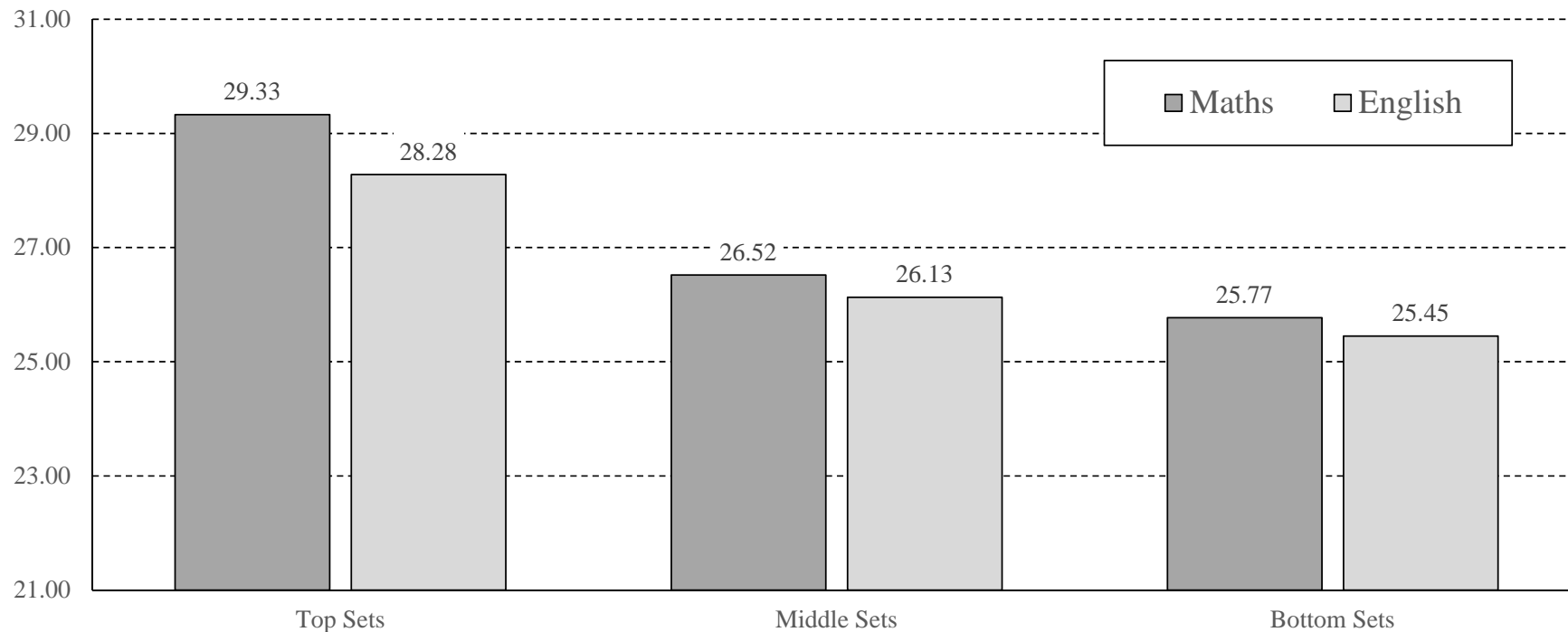
Nature of misallocation	Difference in odds of being misallocated
To lower set in maths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Black students <b>2.54</b> times more likely than White students.</li><li>• Asian students <b>1.77</b> times more likely than White students.</li><li>• Girls <b>1.55</b> times more likely than boys.</li></ul>
To higher set in maths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• White students <b>1.79</b> times more likely than Black students.</li><li>• White students <b>1.69</b> times more likely than Asian students.</li><li>• Boys <b>1.42</b> times more likely than girls.</li></ul>

## Teaching quality

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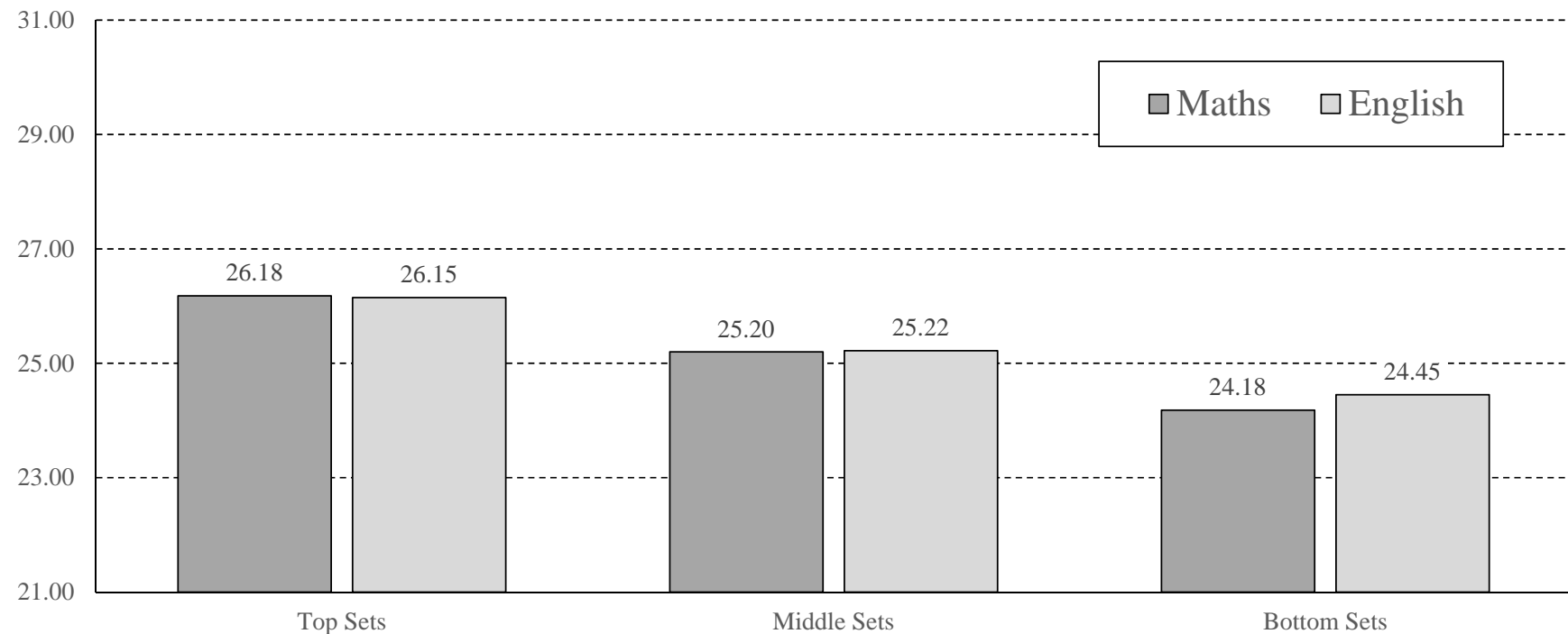
- Some evidence of allocation bias: teachers highly qualified in their taught subject were less likely to be allocated to low sets
- Some evidence of mitigation for intervention schools
- Pupils perceived teachers of high sets to have:
  - rigorous expectations of discipline,
  - 'pushing' pupils to do their best,
  - respect for their pupils, conveyed by the provision of independent learning opportunities.
- By contrast, pedagogy for low sets was widely perceived to be:
  - more tolerant and relaxed,
  - 'spoon-feeding', with less opportunities for independent study and skill development
  - slow-paced and less demanding

**Figure 1. Adjusted Mean Scores for Self-Confidence in Maths and English by Perceived Set Allocation\***



\*Estimated using multilevel model (students within classes within schools) and controlling for ethnic group, family occupational background and number of set levels within school

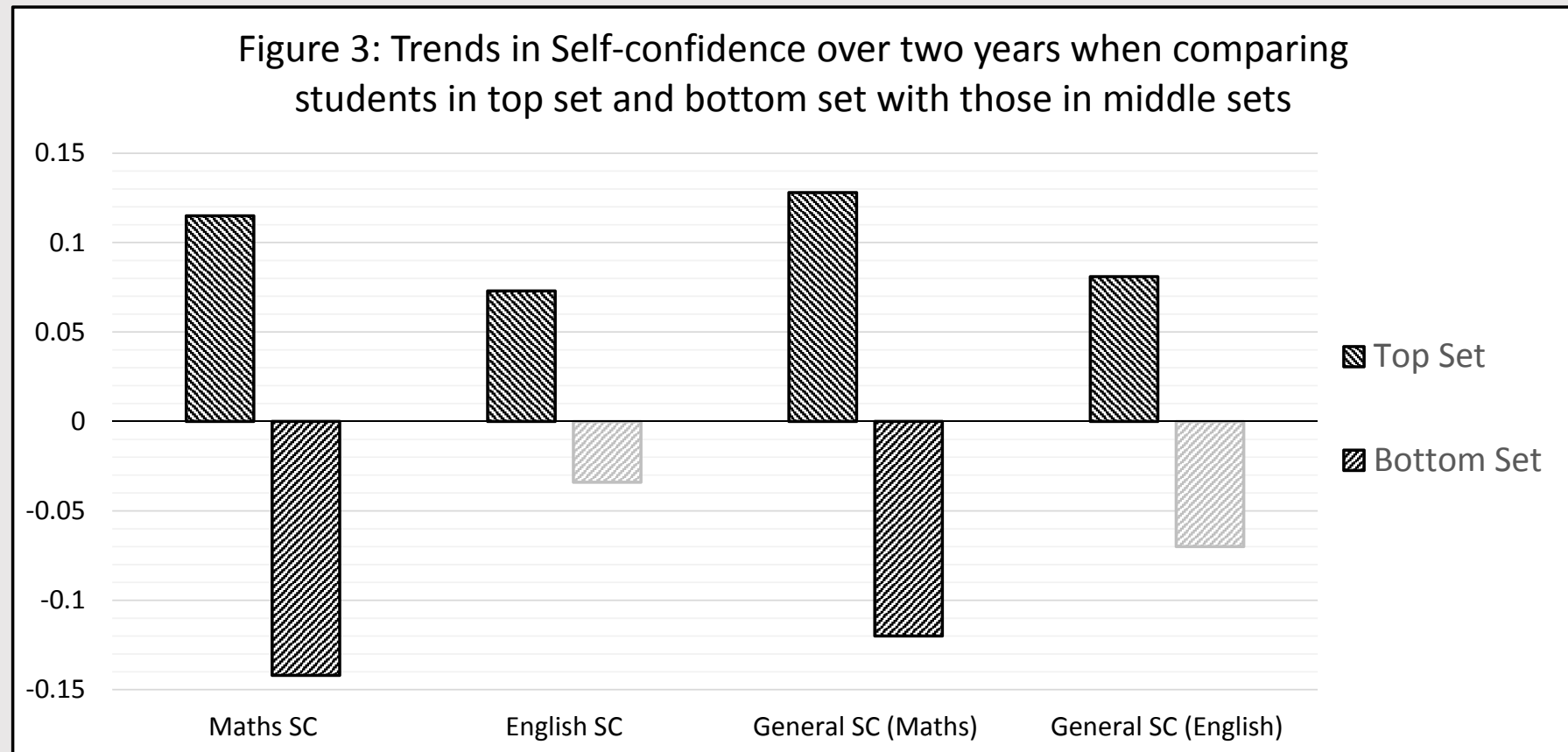
**Figure 2. Adjusted Mean Scores for General Self-Confidence by Perceived Set Allocation in English and Maths\***



\*Estimated using multilevel model (students within classes within schools) and controlling for ethnic group, family occupational background and number of set levels within school



## Trends in self-confidence over time



## Self-fulfilling prophecy

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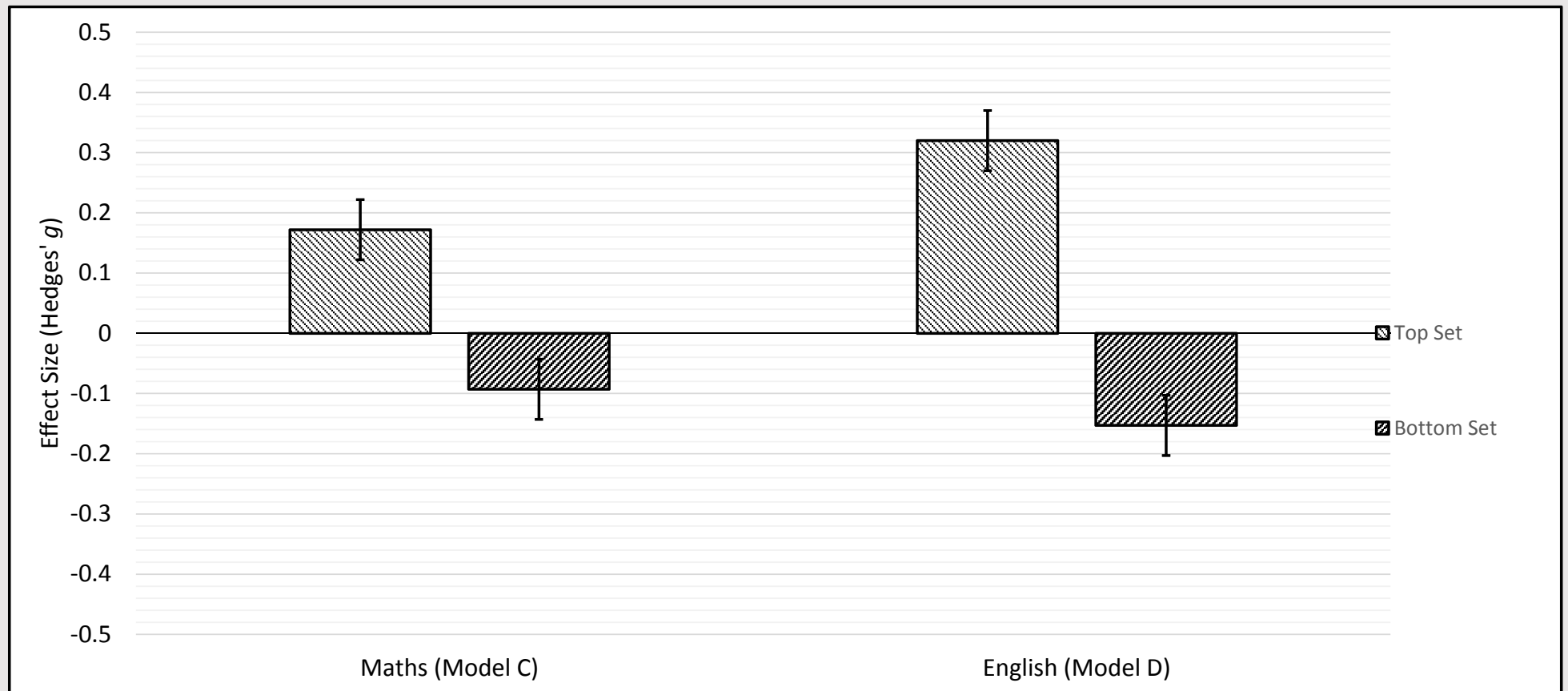
- ‘It affects us because it makes you feel either you are cleverer or have better abilities, **or not very good abilities...or not very good, basically.** [...] **I think like that sometimes**’.  
(James, Set 4 maths, White British, low SES)
- ‘Sometimes some children they’ll tease you about why are you in set five and it, kind of, does make you, like, **feel a bit nervous and anxious** about what — okay, that person said that you’re in set five but what is the other person going to say?’ (Naomi, Set 4 maths, Black Caribbean, middle SES)

## Impact on engagement

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- ‘Bad. I feel like I can do better.’ (Lydia, Set 4 English, White, low SES)
- ‘It makes me think, “Why can’t I be taught with everyone else who’s in the top group?” And then I try my best and I do try my best. Even though it’s my best and I get put low – not low – but in a different group than the high group, so it feels like if that’s my best and this is all I can do, what can I do?’ (Martina, Sets 3, mixed ethnic background, low SES)
- ‘I’ve heard people, they like freak out about being moved down a set and then they even get jealous if people get moved up a set. It’s like, ‘Don’t worry about it. Just get used to it’.’ (Kevin, Sets 4, White, low SES).

## Post-test mean gains in attainment by set level, controlling for prior attainment, number of sets in school, and gender compared with the middle set.



## What can we say about attainment grouping?

- Attainment grouping creates social segregation – and certain pupil groups more likely to be misallocated
- Students in low sets have low subject and general self-confidence. The self-confidence gap between high set and low set students widens over time
- Attainment outcomes also widen over time, with high set students advantaged and low set students disadvantaged
- Quality of provision differs between sets
- Schools find it hard to improve equity in setting (practical challenges; cultural challenges)
- Still not enough evidence about mixed attainment grouping



## Sources of fear of mixed attainment

### Stakeholder opinions

- Colleagues (6)
- Parents (3)
- Students (2)
- School leaders (1)
- Governors (1)

### Pedagogic factors

- Differentiation (4)
- Used to setting vs mixing (4)
  - Pace (2)
  - Nature of maths (1)
- High attaining students (1)
- Low attaining students (1)

### Workload factors

- Time (6)
- Workload (4)
- Resource development (3)
- Need for training (1)

### Change factors

- Resisting change until certain (3)
- Interpreting policy for the context (1)
- Lack of exemplars (1)
- Departmental autonomy (1)

### Accountability

- Results (1)
- Judgements (1)



## Implications

- Presently attainment grouping is perpetuating social injustice, and doubly disadvantaging students most in need of support
- ‘High integrity setting’ is preferable to other forms of between-class grouping (e.g. streaming). But, difficult – and still inequitable
- So, between-class grouping should be minimised
- Need to support good practice in mixed attainment grouping

## Dos and Don'ts of attainment grouping



<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/best-practice-grouping-students>

Or Google – Best practice in grouping students