

Attainment grouping and social inequality

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England's pupils among the most segregated by ability

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

By Catherine Lough
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Outline

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

Background to the study

- 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



Conclusion of EEF Toolkit

“On average, pupils experiencing setting or streaming make slightly less progress than pupils taught in mixed attainment classes. The evidence suggests that setting and streaming has a small negative impact for low and mid-range attaining learners, and a small positive impact for higher attaining pupils. ... it appears that setting or streaming is not an effective way to raise attainment for most pupils.” (EEF, 2018)

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, Jeremy Hodgen, Becky Taylor, Antonina Tereshchenko, Louise Archer (UCL) and Paul Connolly and Nicole Craig (QUB)



Our research findings

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

Which students are wrongly allocated?

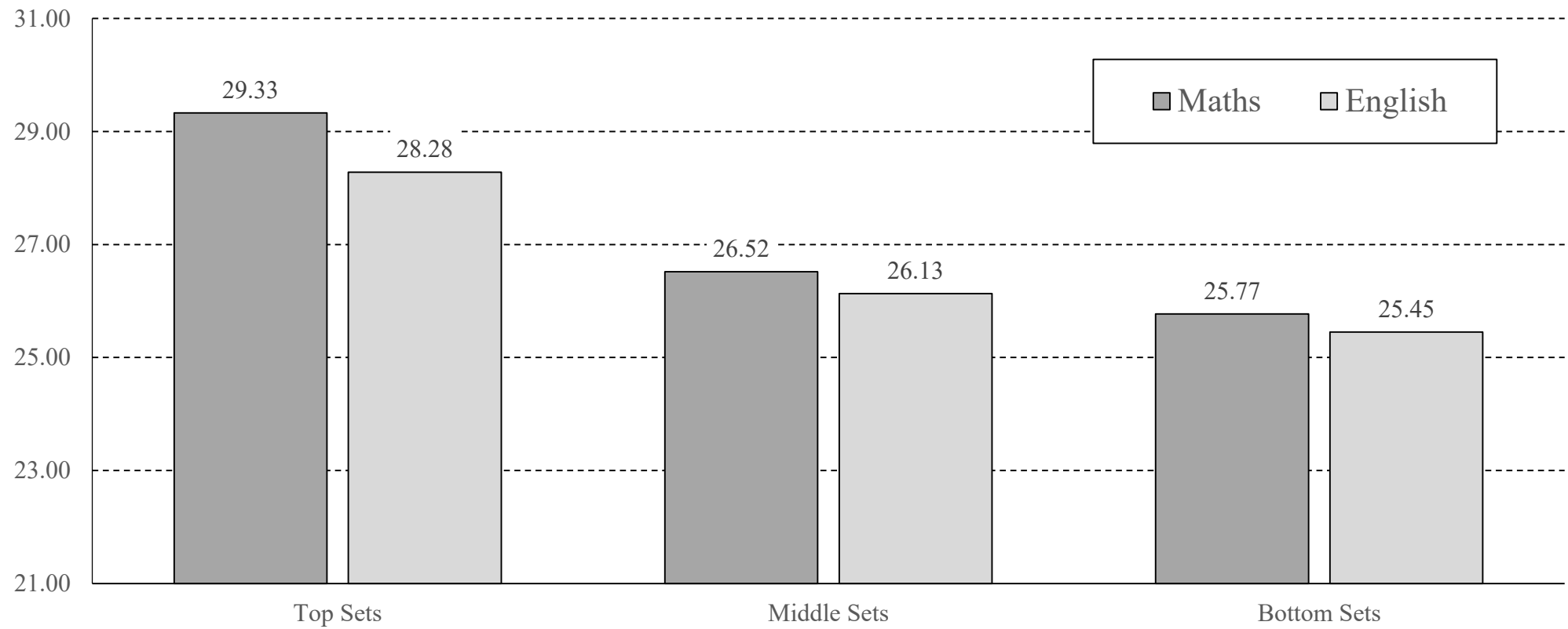
Misallocation of students to maths and English sets by gender & ethnicity

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

Teaching quality

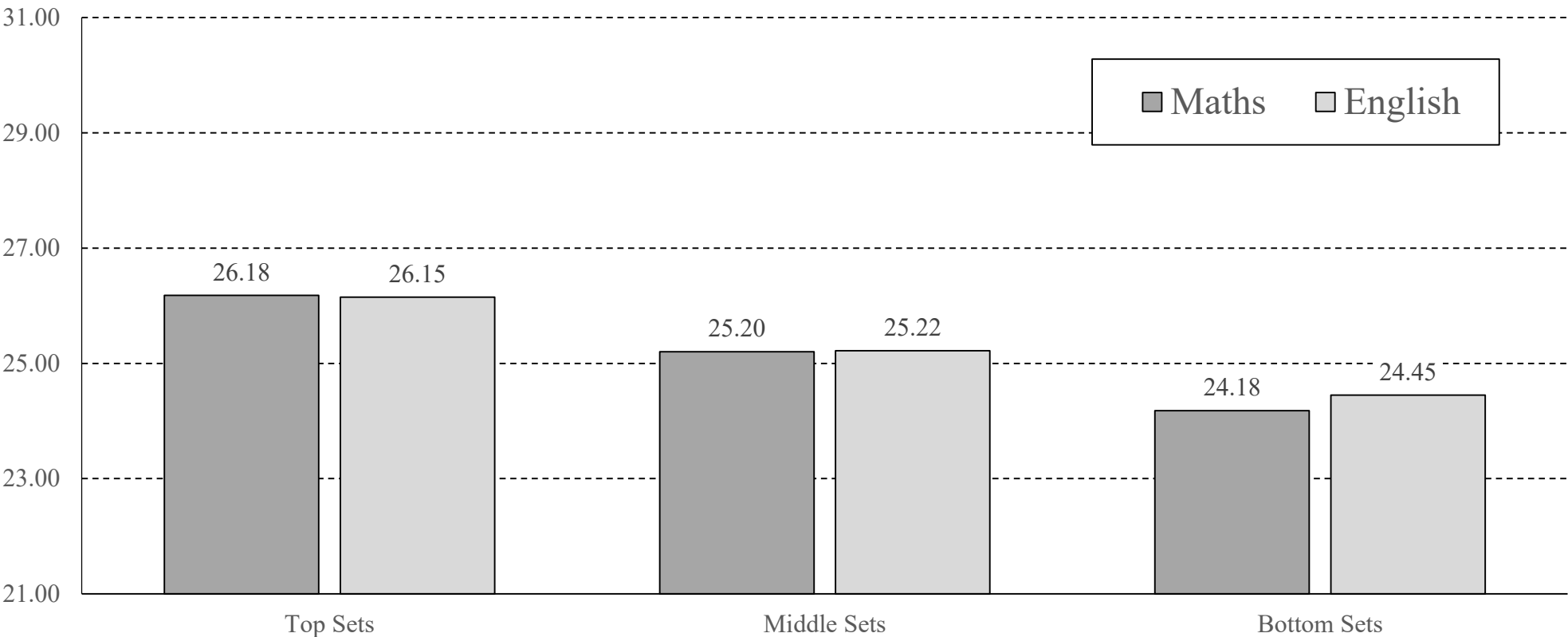
- Some evidence of allocation bias: teachers highly qualified in their taught subject were less likely to be allocated to low sets
- Some evidence of mitigation for intervention schools
- Pupils perceived teachers of high sets to have:
 - rigorous expectations of discipline,
 - 'pushing' pupils to do 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*



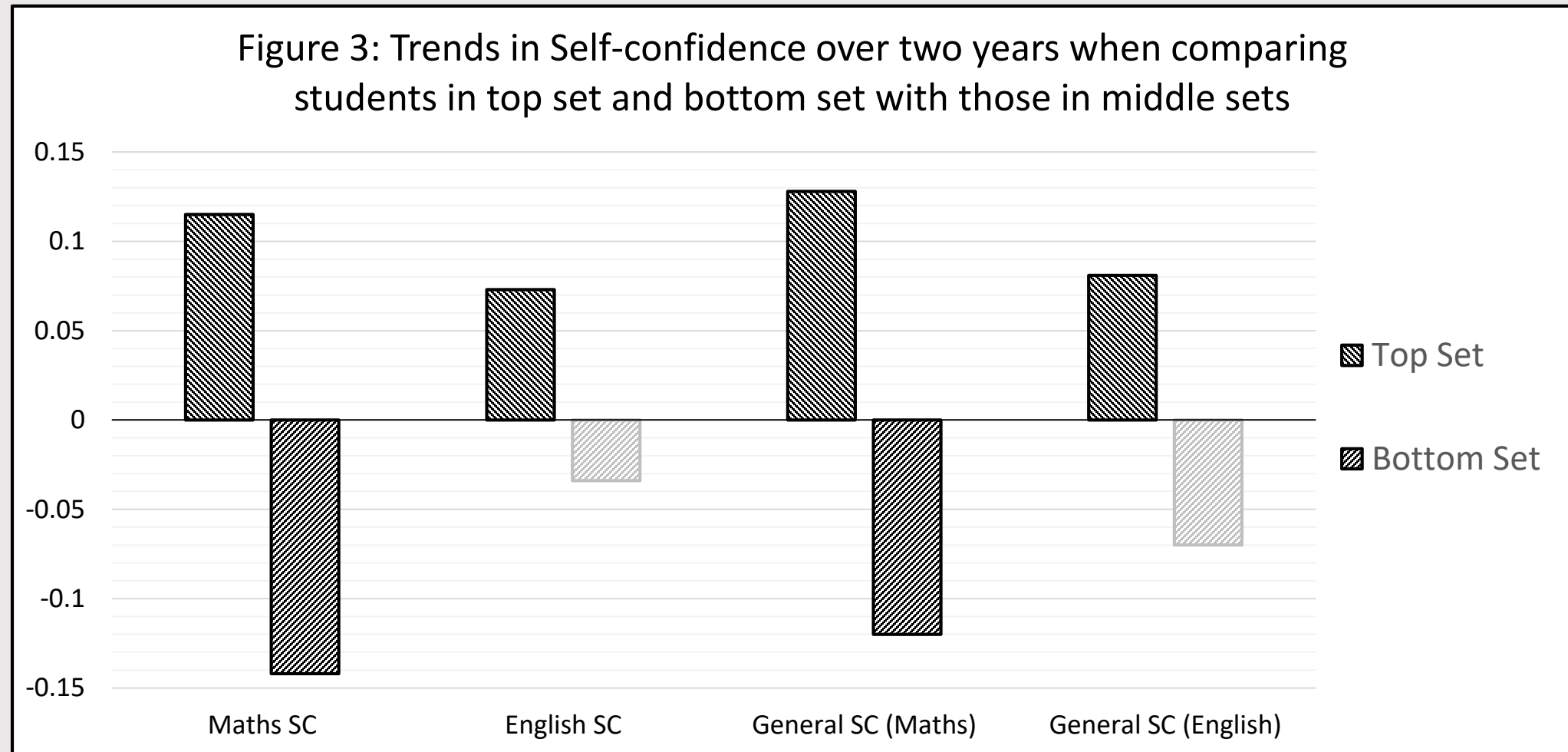
*Estimated using multilevel model (students within classes within schools) and controlling for ethnic group, family occupational background and number of set levels within school

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



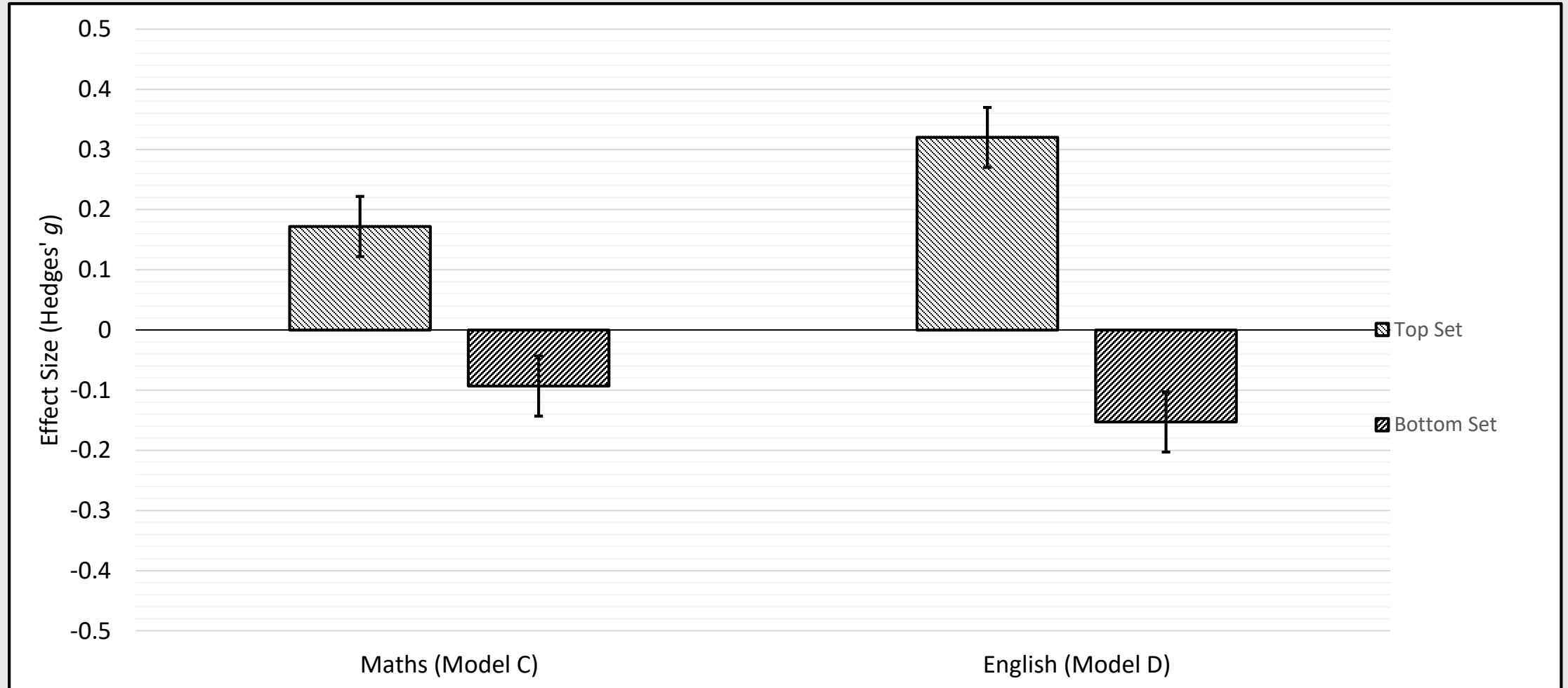
Self-fulfilling prophecy

- ‘Yes, some people think if they’re in a lower set they’re not good at anything’. (Kenneth, high sets, African heritage, working class).
- ‘It does sound really disheartening and really disappointing if you’re put into a lower group [...]. If you’re in the top group, you’d be like, ‘Yeah! I want to do this work, it will be hard and fun.’ But then when you’re in the lower groups, you’re like, ‘I’m in the lower group. It will be rubbish and boring because I’m stupid’ or whatever. (Henry, mixed attainment class)
- ‘Some sets learn other things, some bands learn other things; like S band, they don’t get taught what we get taught. **They get, like, easier work because they’re not as intelligent as we are.** (Joshi, Set 1 maths)
- ‘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 working class)

Impact on engagement

- Dumb, just not as smart as them [friends in higher sets]. (Bobby, Set 5 maths, Irish, lower middle class)
- Bad. I feel like I can do better. (Lydia, Set 4 English, White working class)
- ‘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, Set 3)
- “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 working class).

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 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



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

We are asking teachers to:

- Use research evidence to reflect on the grouping practices in their school
- Start a conversation about grouping practices with colleagues

www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/groupingpledge



to reflect on pupil grouping practices at your school

Reassessing 'Ability' Grouping

Improving Practice for Equity and Attainment

Becky Francis, Becky Taylor
and Antonina Tereshchenko

