Some effects of ability grouping in Harare secondary schools: a case study

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This article describes the experiences of the first author in the research he conducted in two Harare secondary schools. The objective of the research was to assess the influence of ability grouping on learners. In particular, the research sought to examine how this practice affected classroom instruction, learner performance and the social stratification among learners. A qualitative research methodology was followed during which in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators and learners. These were complemented with informal conversations, where relevant comments were noted. Analysis of relevant documents, observations and limited participation were also employed as means of collecting data. The main findings of this study were that: teachers tended not to prepare thoroughly for the so-called low ability classes; learners placed in low ability classrooms felt that school authorities and learners in high ability classrooms discriminated against them; learners in high ability classrooms believed that teachers who "bunked" their classes saw them as intelligent enough to learn on their own and that learners in low ability classes were disruptive and did not want to learn; social relationships among learners from the two groups were poor, creating an unhealthy social stratification. It was therefore concluded that the negative aspects of ability grouping outweighed its often professed positive aspects. It is therefore recommended that this practice be re-examined.

Background

Ability grouping, though not mandated by the National Education Department, is a reality in some of the schools in Zimbabwe. This reality prompted the first author, hereafter referred to as the researcher, to carry out a study of the practice of ability grouping in two Zimbabwean secondary schools. A qualitative research methodology was followed in conducting the study. This methodology was chosen because qualitative research methods of collecting data such as in-depth interviews would give the researched individuals opportunity to voice out their own views on the subject of ability grouping, not restricted by the pre-stated formulations based on researchers' own frames of references often guided by theory studied by the latter. The extended contact period of three months with respondents on the site allowed the researcher adequate time to observe activities of the respondents and the culture of their schools.

Preliminary literature review had revealed that there were two schools of thought on the subject of ability grouping. One school of thought postulated that ability grouping is an organisational strategy that increases learning opportunities for both high ability and low ability learners (Bowles & Gintis, 1982; Abadzi, 1994; Kelly, 1990; Good & Brophy, 1991). According to this school, placing slow learners in a separate group from fast learners allows teachers to adjust their teaching to the learning pace and learning styles of each group. A contrasting view is held by the school of thought which maintains that ability grouping places low ability learners at a disadvantage, and encourages social stratification among learners of different abilities (Oakes, 1982; Makunde, 1986; Marjoribanks, 1986; Meijnen, 1991; Carpenter & Darmody, 1989).

The researcher set himself the task of determining the effects of this practice of ability grouping on learners in the Harare secondary schools, to establish which of the opposing views was true in the Zimbabwean situation. In an attempt to accomplish this task, the researcher decided to cover the perceptions and experiences of different roleplayers with regard to ability grouping. The research therefore focussed on the effects of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification, as perceived by administrators, teachers and learners.

This study was done in two Harare secondary schools in Zimbabwe, using qualitative research of the interpretative ethnographic design. As a result, the researcher focused on two secondary schools to enable him to conduct an in-depth study of the culture of ability grouping. The site chosen constituted two secondary schools which, according to the Zimbabwean state schools system, belonged to the Group A and Group B type. The Group A schools are located in areas that are inhabited by people of average and above average economic means and the Group B schools are situated in areas inhabited by people of below average economic means. Interestingly, the findings of the research did not reflect any differences which may be ascribed to the dissimilarities in socio-economic cultural backgrounds of learners in these schools.

Objectives of the research

This research sought to investigate the perceptions and experiences of different roleplayers on ability grouping with reference to:
1. the reasons the two secondary schools had for practising ability grouping;
2. the amount of preparation undertaken by teachers for the teaching of different ability groups;
   the effect of ability grouping on the instruction of different ability groups;
4. the effect of ability grouping on the learning motivation of different ability groups; and
5. the effect of ability grouping on the social relationships between different role players.

Research methodology and data collection methods

Customary to the qualitative ethnographic research paradigm, the primary researcher himself was the instrument of data collection (Borman, 1986; Lincoln & Cuba, 1985; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Robinson, 1993; Moris & Copestake, 1993; Vakalisa, 1995). The researcher employed the following data collection methods:
• interviews
• observations
• analysis of documents.

These methods or techniques of collecting data, and how they were used in the study, are discussed briefly below.

Interviews

Formal interviews and informal conversations were conducted with participants at different levels, namely, teachers, administrators, and learners from different learning ability classes at the two schools. Short interview guides were used for the formal interviews, and informal interviews took the form of conversation with different participants at different times as opportunity presented itself. The formal

Table 1 Interview guide

Administrators	Teachers	Pupils/Learners
1. Why have you found it necessary to assign your pupils to ability classes?	1. Why have you found it necessary to assign your pupils to ability classes?	1. How has your assignment to a high ability class affected your learning?
2. Is streaming a government or school policy?	2. What have been your experiences in handling ability grouped pupils?	2. How has your assignment to a low ability class affected your learning?
3. How is streaming done in your school?	3. Does streaming at this school allow for free interaction between high and low ability pupils?	3. Does streaming allow for free social interaction between you and your peers in other streams?

interviews revolved around three broad questions of each category of interviewees. The rest was probing and seeking clarification on the responses of participants.

Table 1 shows the questions contained in the interview guide used in this study.

It should be noted that effectively only two questions were asked from learners, namely, 1 and 3 from learners in high ability classes, and 2 and 3 from learners of low ability classes. In accordance with qualitative research methods, the number of questions were kept to a minimum and stated as broadly as possible in order to leave the talking to the respondent, and to avoid imposing the researchers' own views and/or language on the respondent. This allowed the respondent time and space to express his/her views using his/her own words. Only if this has been achieved successfully can one claim that the findings of one's study have emerged from the data.

All respondents gave the researcher verbal permission to record the interviews by means of an audio-tape recorder. He also made detailed field notes of the interviews as back-up should technology fail. All audio-tape recordings were transcribed verbatim.

The researcher in this study covered a substantial number of interviewees because he was able to spend three months at each one of the two schools that were identified for this study. The total size of the sample of this study was 31 interviewees (N = 31) (see Table 2). This was a large sample for a qualitative research considering its need for in-depth interviews. However, since the sample represented different stakeholders this size of sample could not be avoided, and the researcher had to do the best he could to cope with the situation. The long stay at each school (three months), and the fact that learners were at times interviewed in groups helped a great deal towards capturing significant data. It also helped the researcher to become acquainted with the situation prevailing at each school, and made him a familiar figure around the school and allowed him not to be viewed as an outsider by both teachers and learners.

Table 2 shows the number of interviewees in each of the two schools, and the categories they represented:

Table 2 Interviewees from the two schools

	Brickhill	Chikomo
Administrators	2	2
Teachers	3	4
Low ability learners	5	5
High ability learners	5	5
Total	15	16

Brickhill and Chikomo are fictitious names the primary researcher gave to the schools to ensure that they remained anonymous. All participants were also given pseudonyms to ensure that their identities remained anonymous. Giving pseudonyms was one of the precautions taken to ensure that this part of the bargain between the researcher and participants was upheld.

By the end of his stay at both schools the researcher had accumulated volumes of information in the form of audio-tapes, transcripts and field notes from interviews. Despite the fact that some preliminary analysis of data had been done along the way, the major task of the final analysis was about to begin. More about this stage is given under Analysis of data.

Observations

Observations may be described as participant or non-participant observations (Wolcott, 1987). In this research non-participant observation was used to a greater extent. However, some element of participant observer status was adopted when the researcher undertook to mark some scripts of some history tests, to assess the performance of learners from the high ability and the low ability classes. By so doing the researcher placed himself in the position of the teacher, and had first hand experience of how it felt to mark the work of a high ability learner, and that of a low ability learner.

During observation the researcher made field-notes on how the different ability groups learned, the levels of their participation in the lesson and their eagerness (motivation) to participate in the learning activity. He also tried to assess the teacher's instructional strategies, and the extent to which teachers appeared to have prepared the lessons they were presenting to each ability group, and how they responded to learners' questions and/or answers and requests during the lessons in the different ability classes. In other words the researcher made detailed field notes of what he saw, felt or sensed and heard. Pertinent observations were later used in follow-up interviews and informal conversations with respondents depending on the nature of each issue. For example, where a teacher seemed to have exclusively used expository methods of teaching in a particular lesson, the researcher would later ask the teacher concerned if this was done deliberately, and reasons for it. If learners showed some reluctance to answer teachers' questions, the researcher would later try to find out from learner participants in that class what they thought was the cause of such reluctance. In other words the perceptions the researcher had during lesson observations were later used to further draw more data from the respondents, through the process of interviewing. This way the researcher tried to validate his own perceptions of classroom activities and procedures from the parties concerned. This also helped him to validate some of the statements the respondents had made earlier.

Analysis of documents

Interviewing and observing participants in any given situation does not give one a full picture of all that goes into the making of the culture under investigation. Documents like syllabi, textbooks, work-books, preparation books, teacher-made tests, mark sheets, copies of learners' end-of-term reports, personal files of learners, minutes of staff meetings, records of school's events, lists of school regulations or rules, circulars to teachers, written announcements to learners etc, fill in the gaps that may be left open by interviews and observations, or these may enlighten the researcher on some issues that remain puzzling to him/her despite his/her observations and interviews.

Table 3 Administrator's perspective

Emerging themes	Substantiating statements from data
1. Accommodating teacher preferences	Teachers want to teach pupils of almost equal abilities and they will have to cover their syllabus with the upper classes in the stipulated time, because they grab fast … whilst (with) those third, fourth and fifth classes (who) don't catch up very easily … you try by all means to move slowly (Mr Chimbudzi: Brickhill).
	… to be honest, we have to accept that in life … people are classified… because to be sincere, these two top classes (4N[1] and 4S[1]) are the classes on which we bank on when it comes to results. Otherwise the rest is made up of mediocre to poor students whom we just have to entertain and at least give them the basics of education (Mr Magara : Chikomo).
2. In the interest of learners	… to avoid the pupils who are above average being disturbed by pupils who have discipline problems (Mrs Mhlanga: Brickhill).
	We do it (ability grouping) to give the best stream some challenging subjects, that is the sciences (Mr Makanika: Chikomo).
3. Different subject offerings	(Ability grouping) is also meant for them (high ability learners) to do certain subjects which are regarded as most difficult, like Physics and Chemistry … so they will need someone who is academically strong (Mr Chimbudzi: Brickhill).
	… we look at specific subjects because these two top classes are the classes which do the challenging subjects, which are Physical Science (Physics and Chemistry) as well as Literature on top of the other subjects (Mr Magara: Chikomo).
4. Differential treatment by teachers	Teachers don't prepare much for the lower streams… they don't research much for these streams… but with the upper streams they really work, they really research (Mr Chimbudzi: Brickhill).
	… teachers give more written work to A classes than to B classes… We tell them that things should be the opposite but they insist that lower streams write a lot of rubbish (Mr Makanika: Chikomo).

Table 4 Teacher's perspective

Emerging themes	Substantiating statements from data
1. Self-pity	Streaming affects teachers' attitude… Teaching poor students affects us in the sense that when you enter the class you cannot help but feel the difference, knowing fully well that the class you are going to (teach) is not the same as class 1 (Ms Matsvuku: Chikomo).
	'Now I must prepare myself for the nightmare with that class.' This remark overhead by the researcher from different teachers when they had to go to a low ability class at Chikomo school.
	I find that, because of unavailability of resources (such as textbooks), teaching the lower streams becomes a nightmare. With upper streams, I can dictate notes, but if I do this to the lower streams, it won't work, they would not understand concepts (Mrs Mhlanga: Brickhill).
2. Low ability learners' resignation to fate	… low ability pupils have found that they are not capable enough, as a result they resort to playing rather than being serious with their school work (Mrs Mufumi: Chikomo).
	Streaming affects the … attitude of the children as well, sometimes manners… sometimes children look at themselves as not having the same potential as their counterparts in the good classes (Ms Matsvuku: Chikomo).
3. Stigmatisation	… those are a problem, because they seem not to mature… and apart from that they don't like school … (Mr Mbeva: Brickhill).
	… those who are in the lower forms think that they are neglected, and hence they behave in such a way that you won't understand them (Mr Chimbudzi: Brickhill).
	… pupils who have discipline problems (a description of learners in low ability classes by one roleplayer: Brickhill).

The researcher analysed the following documents: school syllabi and other curriculum documents issued by the Zimbabwean Department of Education, records of previous years' national results, teacher-made tests, and students' records kept by the schools.

Triangulation

Using different data-collecting techniques (interviews, observations and analysis of documents) and different sources of data (administrators, teachers and learners) is a form of triangulation which, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), add to the trustworthiness of data, which to some extent addressed questions of validity and reliability demanded of scientific research. Lincoln and Guba (1985:283) maintained that:

Triangulation of data is crucially important in naturalistic studies. As the study unfolds and particular pieces of information come to light, steps should be taken to validate each against at least one other source (for example, a second interview) and/or a second method (for example, an observation in addition to an interview). No single item of information (unless coming from an elite and unimpeachable source) should ever be given serious consideration unless it can be triangulated.

McMillan and Schumacher (1998:520) support this view and point out that, "To find regularities in the data, the researcher compares different sources, situations, and methods to see whether the same pattern keeps recurring."

Analysis and interpretation of data

Although analysis and interpretation of data are often taken as a single process, Wolcott (1994) differentiates between analysis and interpretation of ethnographic research data. He contends that analysis involves a careful and systematic way of identifying key factors and relationships among them. It tends to be cautiously "scientific" in its attempt to be loyal to, and restricted by observational data. Interpretation on the other hand seeks to make sense of the data by reaching out "for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis" (Wolcott, 1994:10-11).

Analysis and interpretation of data in this research took a typical

Table 5 Low ability learner's perspective

	Emerging themes	Substantiating statements from data
1.	Low morale	Being placed in 4-Five itself makes the person feel he is dull and just flock with the crowd. Even when the person was intelligent from the start, and was placed in 4-Five this person's hopes are decreased (Margaret: Brickhill). … I feel very pained to be in form $4S^5$ because teachers do not treat us well in this class… (Janet: Chikomo).
2.	Teacher insensitivity	Teachers always taunt us saying, we are dunderheads. Sometimes some of these teachers spend the whole lesson scolding us (Lovemore: Brickhill). When they (teachers) are leaving our class going to upper streams they say, "Now I'm going to the real school children," implying that we are not real school children (Jacob: Chikomo).
3.	Neglect of duty by teachers	These teachers do not always make an effort to come to teach us. They absent themselves from our lessons, but they do not do the same in 4^1. So, how do they expect us to do well when they do not come to teach us? (Robert: Brickhill). … some of the teachers do not come to take their lessons with us. They come for only a few lessons in a term (Mark: Chikomo).
4.	Stigmatisation	…the $4N^1$ and $4S^1$ pupils laugh at us. I think this is influenced by teachers who, when coming to us say now we are going to a class of dunderheads, thus stigmatising us (Jacob: Chikomo). … some teachers openly say to us, "you are dunderheads." And this tends to affect our feelings. It makes us feel useless (Emily: Brickhill).
5.	Neglect and discrimination	… the teachers we are given sometimes don't come to our lessons. They say because we are $4N^5$ therefore we are dull, and there is no use wasting time coming to us (Irene: Brickhill). … even when I make an effort, it is not recognised because teachers already think of me as a student of no ability because of the class I am in (Jacob: Chikomo). … teachers … don't give us opportunity to show them what we are capable of doing because they already have low opinion of us (Robert: Brickhill). … there are times when we miss lessons, because we will be on punishment — the whole class. Sometimes the whole term will be spent on one subject, because for the rest of the term we will be on punishment for making a noise in class. Yet the other classes (high ability) also make a noise, but they are not sent for punishment (Mark: Chikomo).

Table 6 High ability learner's perspective

Emerging themes	Substantiating statements from data
Neglect of duty by teachers at Brickhill	I think that 4^1 is a very intelligent class. So they [teachers] tend to bunk other lessons, because they think we are too intelligent. … they find it not necessary to come all the time (Peter: Brickhill). Well, some of the teachers assume that we are so intelligent that they don't have to come for lessons. Most of them bunk lessons terribly, and those who come for difficult subjects they don't explain much… they just assume you are very intelligent, you can read on your own (Clara: Brickhill).

ethnographic approach. Following Bogdan and Biklen's (1982) recommendation, we identified prominent themes, which emerged from respondents' statements. These were organised into categories which, in our view, captured what respondents were saying about ability grouping. Mindful of Wolcott's (1994:36) assertion that, "Description is the fulcrum, the pivotal base on which all hangs" we applied the technique of thick description, using respondents' own words to show how themes were identified, and why they were placed into respective categories.

Analysis of data

Data were analysed at two levels. While the research was in progress, data were analysed continuously to determine the main themes that emerged from them. This gave the researcher opportunity to verify with the respondents if the preliminary analysis was indeed representing their responses during the interviews, or if it was a correct interpretation of what had been observed, while still on the site. This attempted to address the need for member checking which is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985:314) as "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility". These authors went on to say that:

Member checking is both informal and formal, and it occurs continuously. Many opportunities for member checks arise daily in the course of the investigation. A summary of an interview can be "played back" to the person who provided it for reaction, the

output of one interview can be "played" for another respondent who can be asked to comment; insights gleaned from one group can be tested with another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:14).

The preliminary analysis assisted us to identify what Bogdan and Biklen (1982) call context codes at an early stage. In our research, we called these recurring themes. Among others, recurring themes gleaned from responses of administrators, teachers and learners, respectively, are summarised in Tables 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Interpretation of data

This represents, as stated earlier, the researchers' intuitive and speculative interpretation of what the data meant to them. We, as researchers in this case, looked at the data against the background of the literature which had been reviewed initially, on ability grouping, as well as the principles of education to which we, as educators subscribe.

Contrary to the theory referred to earlier on, that ability grouping benefits both high ability and low ability learners, the findings of this research pointed to the fact that neither the high ability learners nor the low ability learners benefited from ability grouping as was practised in the two schools which constituted this case-study (see Tables 5 and 6). Actually the findings support the school of thought which asserts that ability grouping disadvantages low ability learners. Statements of learners in Table 5 above attest to this: they were stigmatised as

learners with discipline problems (Table 3), "dunderheads", "not real school children", left unattended while their counterparts in high ability class were learning (Table 5), and teachers also expressed that it was depressing to teach low ability streams and regarded it as a nightmare. In short, learners assigned to these lower streams, as they were also described, were actually assigned to eternal failure. The remark made by one of the administrators that, "… the rest is made up of mediocre to poor students whom we just have to entertain and at least give them the basics of education" does not even attempt to disguise the low opinion the administrator has of learners in the low learning ability classes. In our view, ability grouping as practised in the two schools deprived learners of even the official contact time that was reflected on the schools' time-tables. Learners in the low ability group received no special attention from teachers either in the form of additional assistance or remedial teaching that is often alleged by supporters of ability grouping.

The unexpected finding was that of the apparent neglect of the high ability learners as well by teachers who did not turn up in class for the lessons they were supposed to give. From our perspective as researchers this had more to do with the lack of professionalism among teachers than it had to do with ability grouping. Apparently according to these teachers it was a waste of time to teach the low ability classes because learners in those classes were incapable of learning anything, and it was not necessary to teach the high ability groups because they could learn on their own. Then one would ask, why do children go to school at all? This was a betrayal of the trust that learners, parents, government, tax payers and indeed the country as a whole, had in the schooling system. The fact that the school administrators appeared unaware of, and/or unperturbed by, this gross negligence of duty by their staff members was disconcerting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the findings of this study, we take the view that ability grouping disadvantaged the learners who were assigned to the so called low ability classes at the two schools. We also want to underline the unusual situation that prevailed in these two schools, where even learners in high ability classes experienced neglect. This shows how ability grouping may be abused by teachers with poor professional ethics to justify not teaching low ability learners because they would never pass examinations anyway, and neglect learners in high ability classes because they were intelligent enough to pass examinations without the guidance of a teacher.

This study has shown that ability grouping as was practised at these schools did not improve teaching or instruction and learning. Instead it encouraged unhealthy social stratification where learners in high ability classes and those in low learning ability classes felt that they had nothing in common even outside their segregated classrooms. We therefore agree with the view expressed by Lyle (1999: 292) that:

The division of children into ability groups within classes, setting for subjects across a year group, or streaming across one or two year groups, is a socially divisive policy which could lead to falling standards for those labelled low achievers.

Schools that practise ability grouping should therefore be advised to do some serious reflection on this practice. Heterogeneous grouping has more to offer through strategies like co-operative learning, peer coaching and small groups discussion all which can be explored and used to create good social relationships among learners of different learning abilities, whilst improving their learning abilities (Chava, 1980; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Cummings, 1982). High ability learners do not perform better just because they are placed in separate class-

rooms, not to be disturbed by the mediocre to poor learners. They learn better if they are challenged with enriched programmes and given opportunity to explain the learning material to their peers who may be less gifted than themselves (Kelly, 1990). More importantly all learners have some potential to learn something, a fact which our teacher participants seemed to have ignored. The school administrators did not help the situation by not monitoring teachers' attendance to their classes. In fact neither of the two groups, namely, low learning ability or high learning ability learners, benefited from this grouping. Low learning ability groups lost more since they perceived teacher absenteeism as rejection and condemnation to failure, and thus encouraged development of a low self-concept.

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