The Pedagogical Implications of Ability Grouping on Students Performance in Secondary Schools in Tanzania

James Anthony Nyangas

¹ Department of Educational Psychology & Counselling, Sokoine University of Agriculture, P. O. Box 3038 Morogoro, Tanzania
Corresponding Author: James Anthony Nyangas

ABSTRACT: *Students learning abilities vary from one individual to another. This implies that teaching instructions must be modified to reflect students' capacities, leading to ability grouping as one of the strategies for this purpose. This study was conducted to examine the effects of ability grouping in secondary schools in Tanzania. A descriptive phenomenological design embedded with qualitative approach was used for this study. Ten secondary school teachers were interviewed for the study, among them five were male and five female teachers. The findings of the study revealed some various opinions about ability grouping. The positive implications were shown, whereby, higher-achieving students were grouped in the fixed grouping and some positive implications when learners in the low-ability group were placed in the mixed grouping. However, there were also negative effects of ability grouping, whereby ability grouping is not effective as it causes many harms and damages to students; there are no overall effects of ability grouping on academic performance if students are grouped by achievement; it is not only ability grouping itself that increases students' performance but also the role of peers. It is also not clear whether teachers really use appropriate strategies to instruct groups with different abilities. Many teachers use the ability approach as a mechanism to identify low achievers in learning; in some cases, teachers even demoralize lower achievers or pay less attention to the lower achievers, attributing their poor performance to laziness. Consequently, the tendency towards labelling results in the declining performances of lower achievers. This study recommends the use of effective practices and alternatives to ensure equality and access to learning. There is a need to conduct a study to determine teachers' use of strategies along with ability grouping.*

KEYWORDS: *Pedagogical Implications; Ability grouping; Students performance; Secondary schools.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The ability grouping in secondary schools is a subject of debate as various groups argue either for or against the practice. Students learning ability varies from one individual to another (Bygren, 2016). For this reason, instructions must be modified to reflect students' capacities. As such, ability grouping is considered one of the strategies for this purpose. This literature review focuses on practices of placing students in groups with homogenous academic performance. It gathers information from various studies that support or are against the practice. This review presents studies from various research studies investigating teachers' practice of grouping strategies. It focuses on ability grouping and the implications of this practice for the achievement of students in secondary schools. The study identifies different strands of ability grouping and the involved processes in practice. It also reveals the positive and negative effects of ability grouping. This will help to suggest whether an alternative practice is required to improve students learning and increase their achievement.

Ability grouping is a common pedagogical practice that addresses learning variations. It is referred to as instructional variation based on some measure of students' performance or grouping (Bygren, 2016). This approach can be traced back to the 1900s (Gentry, 2016; Johnston & Wildy, 2016), where grouping ability concerned teachers tailoring of learning content and pace, which reflected the abilities of students. To raise the academic achievement of the lower-ability students, the grouping practice uses streaming to separate high-ability students from the lower-ability students (Hornby & Witte, 2014). The system of ability grouping is categorised into homogenous, heterogeneous, differentiation, and peer effect (Bygren, 2016). Also, performance grouping can be further divided into lower-achieving, average-achieving, and higher-achieving.

Tanzanian secondary education adopted the Cambridge model, in which there are four years of ordinary secondary education (form one to four) and two years of advanced level secondary education (form six to five) (Sifuna, 2007). In Tanzania, after completing every two years of study, students are obliged to sit for the national examinations (Mwenda, 2012). This means that students complete national examinations after forms two and four. After achieving the pass marks for Form four in certain subjects, the students can be promoted to

Forms five and six. In Tanzanian secondary schools, the practice generally occurs in the system of grouping learners into different classes at the same grade level on the basis of their ability. In many schools, both public and private ability groupings are a common phenomenon in Tanzania. Ndalichako and Komba (2014) acknowledge that this practice, as it is used in Tanzania, leads to subject streams in which teachers group the students without or with the consent of students. This is supported by Gentry (2016), who asserts that teachers group students according to their performance.

It is a tradition that after students sits for annual or national examinations; their results are used to determine the streams in which they are to be grouped, such as a group of higher achievers, average achievers, and lower achievers (Mahende, 2021). At the school level, this approach is implemented by designing streams in the classrooms based on subjects and students' performance. These streams are divided between higher achievers and lower achievers: science and art streams (Matavire et al., 2013). On a national level, the practice goes a long way towards determining the next schools to which the students shall be admitted and enrolled based on the results of the previous national examination (Yassin et al., 2015). This resulted in some public schools being famously known as special schools (Possi, 2003). While this occurs in public schools, there are some private secondary schools that also demand special entrance and selection of students for enrollment based on their higher performance in the previous levels.

Possi and Milinga (2017) began by providing the varied definitions of special schools, referring to both schools for disabled and gifted or talented children. Public special schools, in the case of grouping, can be categorised as the schools with higher achievers; they receive special treatment and attention from the government. Students enrolled in these schools are considered the cream of the nation (Liwa, 2001). On this, Possi and Milinga (2017) reported that in public special schools, gifted and talented children are enrolled and educated by using special materials, settings, and specially trained teachers, which are different from non-special students. Similarly, the private secondary schools with higher achievers also continue to maintain the status quo by admitting only students who performed higher in their previous schools.

However, in Tanzania, the ability grouping practice is unclear, whether it's the role of grouping strategy functions or the special attention and treatment that helps the students to continue with higher performance. If this is the case, it is equally expected that lower achievers, with tailored instructional strategies, could increase or improve their performance and elevate them to higher achievers. But the experience shows that many higher-achieving schools have consistently remained at the top, while the lower-achieving schools have always remained lower (United Republic of Tanzania, 2019). This implies that probably teachers do not really bother themselves to use strategies to help lower achievers as the principle of ability grouping requires. On the contrary, the teachers tend to demoralise the lower achievers, and in some cases, they discourage them or pay less attention to them, attributing their poor performance to laziness. This is a missed use of the role of ability grouping by the teachers, as Ndalichako and Komba (2014) found that teachers' influence is important in motivating students' choices and ability to study.

The main aim of this study was to determine the impact of ability grouping as a pedagogical practice in secondary schools in Tanzania. To achieve this end, the study was guided by question such as: What are the effects of performance grouping in secondary schools?

II. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in Morogoro municipality secondary schools in Tanzania. The research location was chosen because secondary schools in the area use ability groupings. Both public and private schools have been included in this study. The study employed a descriptive phenomenological design. Savin-Baden et al., (2019). argue that this design helps to examine the substance of lived human experiences. Based on the participants' everyday experiences, the researcher can delve deeper into the subtleties of how the secondary school ability grouping system affects students in mainstream classrooms. The design may enable participants to use their voices to describe their lived experiences (Williams 2012). As a result, they can explain the impacts of ability grouping on learners' performance and achievement of learning outcomes. The study mainly used qualitative data to gather information on ability grouping in secondary schools in Tanzania. Wellington (2015) acknowledges that qualitative data explain why and how an event occurred. The qualitative approach examines participants' real-world experiences, feelings, and perceptions of the effects of ability grouping using their own words (Mertens 2013). Qualitative research explains the meanings of events given to them by individuals (Mertens, 2010). Purposive sampling was used for the study. This sampling strategy is helpful in obtaining information-rich situation in which researcher can learn a great deal of information on key aspects of the study (Savin-Baden et al., 2019). As such, ten teachers from secondary schools in Morogoro Municipality were purposively selected. Among the participants five of whom were male and five of whom were female. A participants profile is presented in Table 1.

Participant	Age	Gender	Educational level	Experience

P1	43	Male	Bachelor	10 years
P2	28	Male	Bachelor	5 years
P3	32	Male	Bachelor	7 years
P4	41	Female	Diploma	9 years
P5	49	Female	Diploma	11 years
P6	48	Male	Masters	22 years
P7	38	Male	Masters	15 years
P8	45	Female	Bachelor	18 years
P9	29	Female	Bachelor	7 years
P10	35	Male	Masters	8 years

Table 1: The profile of study participants

Data was obtained through in-depth interviews. Individual in-depth interviews provide advantage of collecting data from individual participants, which enable the interviewer to clarify any unclear first responses. In this manner, a researcher can dig deeper into the participants' experiences and obtain more explicit data (Savin-Baden et al., 2019). Each participant was provided with two sessions of 40-minute in-depth interviews, in a gap of one-week between each session of interval. The second round was intended to clarify issues identified in the first session in order to ensure authenticity. This enabled researcher to get a chance to ask follow-up questions to obtain more explanations about the first answers. To avoid interfering with their academic obligations, the participants were interviewed in their spare time.

Qualitative data analysis was carried out for this study. The study followed six phases of thematic data analysis, which included the preparation and organization, review and exploration, coding of categories, descriptions of people, places, and activities, development of themes, and reporting and interpretation of data. Interviewing the participants marked the beginning of data analysis. It was necessary to prepare and organize the collected data in a way that would facilitate analysis following the transcription process. The location and person from whom the data originated were taken into consideration during the transcription process. The second part comprised a data review, which allowed the researcher to read and identify the different types of data obtained. This entailed noting words and phrases that encapsulated significant data points. The process of coding entailed identifying different data sections, characterizing associated study elements, and assigning them names. For example, all relevant data that provided information about the effects of ability grouping were grouped (categorised) and assigned a code name (E).

The various categories of connected data patterns were evaluated and classified. This technique aided in the consolidation of relevant material for later interpretation and discussion. Following the process of coding, a comprehensive narrative of the results was delivered, along with detailed descriptions of the participants and the schools visited for data collecting. Using Scharp & Sanders (2018). model, six phases of thematic analysis were carried out, including data preparation and organisation, data review and exploration, data coding into categories, detailed descriptions of people, places, and activities, theme development, and data reporting and interpretation. Interviewing the participants marked the beginning of data analysis. The preparation and organization of collected data was important in order to facilitate analysis after the transcription process. The transcription process takes into account the location and person from whom the data were originated. The second part comprised a data review, which allowed the researcher to read and identify the different types of data obtained. This entailed noting words and phrases that encapsulated significant data points. The coding process enhanced the identification of various data patterns with related characteristics and assigned some names to them. For example, all relevant data that provided information about the effects of ability grouping were grouped (categorised) and assigned a code name (E). The various categories of connected data patterns were evaluated and classified. This technique aided in the consolidation of relevant material for later interpretation and discussion. The process of coding led to the provision results narratives with the descriptions of the participants and the schools in which data were collected.

Participants were requested to participate in this study voluntarily. To conduct the study at the schools, the researcher obtained approval from the ministry. Participants were thoroughly briefed on the research goal and offered an opportunity to withdraw from the study. The study was conducted in an open manner, with participants having been fully informed about all relevant details and having confirmed their participation by signing consent forms that I had given them. These forms explained the study's purpose and the consequences of taking part. The participants understood that if they changed their minds about taking part in the study, they could leave at any moment. The study guaranteed confidentiality of all information.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Positive Effects of Ability Grouping

Maximising students' learning: The study shown that ability grouping maximizes students learning as one of participants narrated:

"When students are arranged according to their performance group they tend to compete in learning. Those in higher ability strive to maintain their status quo, while low achievers struggle to rich to the higher. These efforts motivate both levels of ability to increase learning capacity" (Participant 1, male, 43 years old)

This finding shows that practice of ability grouping provides homogeneous classroom environments that permit a focused curriculum and appropriate instructions, which lead to concentrated learning by all students. Through this strategy, the teacher is less worried about boring the fastest-learning students or leaving behind the slowest students (Hanushek & Wössmann, 2006). Grouping is a common strategy within many schools where teachers split students into different capacity groups so that students of the same level are taught together. Typically in the final years of secondary education, school systems in Europe and Asia still implement a strategy known as streaming. The students sit for examinations and are carefully chosen to attend separate schools rather than attending different classes at the same school based on their scores. For instance, Austria, Germany, and Hungary group their learners in schools as early as at the age of 10 (Bygren, 2016). While capacity grouping is used across the globe, research varies on the advantages of such a strategy.

The supporters of ability grouping contend that grouping students by ability may result in various student outcomes, which include opportunities to learn and increasing students' achievement. Ability grouping practices increase educational opportunities by allowing teachers to deliver tailored instruction. In turn, this increases learners' performance as teachers devise different strategies when teaching students with different abilities. In this scenario, students with lower abilities are considered to be part of the most disadvantaged group. Similarly, Figlio & Page (2002) agree that when ability grouping is used, the lower-achieving learners are likely to benefit from the slower-paced instruction pedagogy designed by the teachers to help them, a fact that would not have been possible if teachers were simultaneously engaging higher-ability performance peers.

Increasing students' performance: The study revealed that ability grouping has a tendency to increase learner's performance due to the use of various strategies suitable for each category of students. This was informed by one of participants as:

"Teachers uses of different strategies to various groups tend to benefit both higher and lower achievers. For higher achievers due to their fast learning, teachers are likely to spend less time with significant impacts on the learners. While much time will be spent on the lower achievers and help them to boost their performance" (Participant 2, Male, 28 years old)

The above caption implies that ability grouping is important in the improvement of learning. For example, Hargreaves's report (2019) shows that the extreme use of ability group approaches on learners' achievement in core subjects, such as English language and Mathematics, steered learners self-recognition as more able when grouped in higher achiever clusters or less able when placed in lower capacity clusters. The study also revealed that higher-ability performers require an adequate academically challenging environment and equal learning-ability peers. It is also important to underscore that the grouping of students itself does not make the difference; it is the instructional effects and educational activities provided by the teachers (Bygren, 2016). By simply assigning students to groups without instructional adjustment or content, the students' performance achieves very little impact. In essence, to achieve efficiency in grouping, teachers are required to adjust the curriculum to match the abilities of students. Along with quality instruction, peer effect, teacher impact, and stigma could also affect students' performance. Due to these factors, various scholars (Hallam, & Ireson, 2006; Hargreaves, 2019) discourage the use of fixed ability because it restricts the students' ability to appreciate the social and cognitive benefits of group work despite being within the groups for a long duration of lessons.

Negative Effects of Ability Groupings

Some participants revealed that apart from positive impacts of ability groupings, there are some negative impacts which include the following:

Ineffective improvement of academic performance: The study revealed that ability grouping can lead to ineffective improvement of students' academic performance:

> *"Often, due to the lack of teachers and resources ability grouping has been improperly arranged. Few groups were formed; sometimes without considering the actual performance of learners rendering into learners misappropriate allocation of learners to the groups. Such practice results into ineffective improvement of students' academic performance"* (Participant 3, Male, 32 years old)

This finding implies that ability grouping is associated with some difficulties, including errors in grouping arrangements, underestimation of the attainment of students in low streams, unequal allocation of teachers to groups, and the lack of interactions of students between groups (Macqueen, 2011). Also, Vogl & Preckel (2014) noted that, due to a lack of funding, many schools tend to form only two groups instead of three, namely low ability and high ability. Grouping by ability and performance is also considered harmful to lower achievers in various ways. For instance, Macqueen (2011) argues that the homogenous grouping of low-ability students is ineffective in improving academic achievement.

The effects of teachers' labelling and stigma on student: It was further revealed that ability grouping is resulting in labeling and stigma among students as participants revealed:

> *"The constant use of ability grouping names on students such as low achievers or slow learners has affected many students. Through this practice labeling and stigma have been frequently occurring. Those low achievers student tend to feel isolated and the stigma further deteriorates their zeal to learn and seek for improvement. It is also taken by teachers as this group of students is hard to teach. Such situation put the low achievers in a disadvantaged position for instructional support"* (Participant 4, Female, 41 years old)

This finding shows that ability grouping was considered to accelerate teachers' judgments, which influence the labeling of students (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Francis et al., 2020, cited by Campbell (2021), equated the impact of this practice of labelling to "snowballing prophecy". This implies that ability grouping controls and limits students to ensure that they are in conformity with the definitions of ability clusters provided by the school. In addition, Vogl & Preckel (2014) assert that among students, especially low achievers, the practice of ability grouping leads to demotivation and negative attitudes towards schooling. The practice has a potential limit on students learning as it places a bar on what the students are estimated to achieve (Roberts-Holmes & Kitto, 2019).

Similarly, in ability grouping, stigma occurs in many ways, and this affects both the higher and lower groups. Terwel (2005), cited by Baker (2018), assert that when ability presents immutable traits, stigma occurs. This stigma will cause the students to live up to that trait. In this regard, higher achievers tend to thrive among their highly accomplished educators and the critical thinking challenge posed to them. While the lower achievers will stay behind instead of working hard, confirming the low achievement stigma. As a result, bad behaviour will persist among low-ability students because they recognise their position in the scheme of things as being at the bottom. Also, many teachers use the ability approach as a mechanism to identify low achievers in learning; in some cases, teachers even demoralise lower achievers or pay less attention to the lower achievers, attributing their poor performance to laziness. Consequently, the performances of lower achievers continue to decline.

Deprivation of peer support: The practice of ability grouping has been criticized by some participants as it deprives peer support in learning.

> *"The tendency of separating learners into capacity group is damaging as it deprives learners from learning from their peers. In collaborative learning students teach each other. Low achievers are likely to learn from the high achievers if students are mixed in capacities. In a mixed capacity it is also possible for a low achiever to elevate into high achiever though peer support. But the separation removes that possibility of peer learning support."* (Participant 5, Female, 49 years old)

This implies that in ability grouping it is not only the initial ability of students that influences the performance of a student but peer influence or the average ability of the class (D'souza, 2017; Bygren, 2016). There are some positive implications when higher-achieving students were grouped in the fixed grouping and some positive implications when learners in the low-ability group were placed in the mixed grouping. This is

also plausible because low-achieving students can improve their abilities by simply observing and interacting with high achievers (Poole, 2008). This means that having an example of effective study habits and learning techniques is important for low-ability students to succeed in academic achievement. As such, mixed-ability groups are preferred over homogenous abilities. In Poole's study (2008), it's obvious that students were highly motivated towards a common goal of mastery learning of each concept, in which low and high achievers are more motivated to learn in mixed groups. In the same regard, Sermier, Dessemontet, and Bless (2013) insist on collaboration and the use of teaching strategies that meet the diverse needs of learners. This lays the foundation for discouraging homogenous grouping. To achieve higher progress among the most disadvantaged learners, inclusive teaching in the general classroom with differentiated teaching aids is necessary. It is therefore important to note that reorganizing students into performance-based groups has the possibility of splitting peer groups and depriving learners of peer learning support (Hallam & Ireson, 2006).

IV. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that there are varying effects of ability grouping in the study area. While in some instances ability grouping maximizes students' learning, increases students' performance, others contend that ability grouping is not effective as it causes many harms and damages to students as result of labelling and stigma among students. When errors occur in the arrangements of capacity groups the practice becomes difficult. It is also pertinent that it is not only ability grouping itself that increases students' performance but also the role of peers. In some schools, particularly in Tanzania, there is a tendency to group students by ability. But it is not exactly clear whether teachers really use appropriate strategies to instruct groups with different abilities. The study recommends the use of effective practices and alternatives to promote equality and access to learning. There is a need to conduct a study to determine the use of strategies along with ability grouping.

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