

Ability Grouping as an Approach to Narrow Achievement Gap of Pupils with Different Cultural Capitals: Teachers' Involvement

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ABSTRACT Streaming is where students are graded into form classes according to ability. Movement from one class or level to another by a student entails movement to a different level in all subjects and perhaps a change of subjects also. Many countries have abolished this practice. The reason was to avoid branding students as overall achievers or non-achievers/failures according to form classes. This study therefore sought to investigate if secondary schools in Zimbabwe do subscribe to this practice. It adopted an interpretive qualitative research methodology and a case study research design. A purposive convenient sample of 5 school heads and 20 secondary school teachers formed the study. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews, documentary analysis and observation of two staff meetings per school. The study established that ability grouping is rampant in most schools in Zimbabwe although it is considered a problematic practice as it is associated with social segregation. The findings of the study therefore depict that teachers in all the five schools under study are empowered to make decisions in the streaming process.

INTRODUCTION

Streaming (ability grouping) refers to the grouping of students by ability (Fabian 2012). In other words, students within a certain ability range are grouped together as a class. Fabian further asserts that the objective is to allow the students to move ahead at a pace which matches their abilities. Wikipedia (2011) views streaming as separation of pupils by academic ability, into groups for all subjects or certain classes and curriculum within a school. Wikipedia elaborates more on the definition of streaming by postulating that in streaming, the entire school population is assigned to classes according to whether the students' overall achievement is above average, normal, or below average. In this regard, students attend academic classes only with students whose overall academic achievement is the same as their own. According to Early Childhood Education (2007), three major types of grouping occur in schools as follows: (a) ability grouping, sometimes called streaming- that is the practice of grouping children on the basis of their performance or their perceived abilities (b) ability grouping in particular subjects-that is, students stay in heterogeneous groups for most subjects but are regrouped, depending on skill level, for particular subjects, usually reading and mathematics (c) within-class grouping-this is the practice of assigning students in heterogeneous classes to sub-groups or clusters within the class on the

basis of their achievement. Of the three grouping types above, the first has been the most controversial and the subject of more research studies than almost any educational practice (George and Alexander 2003).

Proponents of ability grouping (including parents and teachers) maintain that teachers can target instruction to meet individual needs more effectively if students are grouped by ability Early Childhood Education (ECE) (2007). Opponents according to ECE (2007) argue that intended gains for all students in different streams generally do not materialise and streaming tends to stigmatise and perpetuate the disadvantage of those students who are already the most disadvantaged with regard to socio-economic status and race (George and Alexander 2003). In fact, the research into ability grouping finds few studies that yield positive results (Gamoran and Weinstein 1998; Vang 2005; Catsambis et al. 2001; Watanabe 2006; Slavin 1993). The effects of streaming are particularly negative for poor, minority students and those with limited English proficiency (Vang 2005), but they also do not necessarily assist students in the high-ability groups. For example, Catsambis et al. (2001) found that when young adolescents were streamed in mathematics, the academic self-concept of the male students diminished while female students thrived. Furthermore, in the short term, male students in the low-ability groups actually experienced increased self-concept as cited by Early Childhood Education (2007).

EFFECTS OF ABILITY GROUPING

A 2005 study (Mulkey et al. in ECE 2007) examined data from the National Education Longitudinal Study in the United States to see if there were any differences in mathematics achievement and self-concept between streamed and unstreamed students in Year 8. Few of their findings were positive. They found that students placed in high-ability mathematics classes in Year 8 had diminished mathematics self-concept in Years 10 and 12 compared with students in non-streamed classes, and this in turn was linked to students' academic choices in the senior years and to lower mathematics grades. The effect was particularly problematic for boys. Students in the lower streams fared no better, with those Year 8 students placed in lower streams continuing to perform most poorly in mathematics in the senior years. In practically all cases, Mulkey and his associates found the data favoured those students assigned to unstreamed classes.

The evidence from previous research indicates that the effect of ability grouping on pupil attainment is limited. British studies according to Plewis et al. (1999 citing Kerckhoff 1986, Kulik and Kulik 1990) indicate mixed findings for the effects on academic achievement. Two important British studies were based on data from the National Child Development Study. The first found little difference in performance on standardised tests of achievement in mathematics and reading when ability level was controlled, but there were differences in the patterns of entry in national examinations and in access to the curriculum (Fogelman 1983 in Plewis et al. 1999). The second study compared pupils attending four types of secondary school, secondary modern, grammar, comprehensive and private (Kerckhoff 1986 in Plewis et al. 1999). Data were collected at ages 7, 11 and 16 years. Standardised tests of reading and mathematics, and verbal and non-verbal scores from a general ability test administered at age 11 were used. Children attending grammar schools showed relatively greater improvement in mathematics over time, compared with those in the secondary modern schools. In schools that grouped pupils by ability, there was a marked divergence of attainment, with students in remedial classes falling further behind, while those in the high ability groups increased their average performance beyond that exhibited by com-

parable pupils in ungrouped classes. The pattern was sufficiently clear that it was possible to differentiate between the effects of a two and a three-group system, the latter producing a greater divergence of attainment scores.

There have been a number of smaller studies, based in single schools. Two of these investigated the impact of different forms of grouping within a single school and found that streaming had little impact on the performance of high ability pupils whereas pupils of lower ability performed better in mixed ability grouping (Plewis et al. 1999). They found no difference in the attainment of two groups, streamed and mixed ability, in the same secondary school. In a study based in one comprehensive school with mixed ability and streamed 'halls', Newbold (1977 in Plewis et al. 1999) found similar mean scores for a variety of measures of achievement including standardised tests of ability, examination performance and teacher devised tests. There were, however, larger standard deviations in the streamed sample, except in free writing, indicating that streaming tended to widen the range of attainment. More differences were reported within the two systems than between them. There was no evidence that the high ability pupils were performing differently in the two systems, although the low ability pupils made significant gains in the mixed ability classes. A follow up study Plewis et al. (1999) demonstrated better overall performance by the less able pupils in the mixed ability situation, without any reduction in the levels of attainment achieved by the more able.

Proponents of streaming say that tracking has several important strengths. A major advantage of ability grouping is that it allows teachers to better direct lessons toward the specific ability level of the students in each class (Wikipedia 2011). While streaming for regular instruction makes no real difference in scholastic achievement for low and average ability students, it does produce substantial gains for gifted students in tracks specially designed for the gifted and talented. Streaming meets the need for highly gifted students to be with their intellectual peers in order to be appropriately challenged and to view their own abilities more realistically (Wikipedia 2011). The teacher can move ahead at a brisk pace with a group of twenty five bright students as they do not require much supervision and little or no individual attention. The converse is true for a class of slow students

where a more reasonable number to work with would be ten to fifteen students if teaching is to be effective. At any rate the teacher is able to select a pace and move ahead with it (Fabian 2012).

Another positive aspect of ability grouping is that since it separates students by ability, students' work is only compared to that of similar-ability peers, preventing a possible lowering of their self-esteem that could result from comparisons with the work of higher ability students, or inflating the egos of the high-ability students when compared to low-ability, same-age students. Since high self-esteem is correlated with high academic achievement, ability grouping should, theoretically, promote academic success. However, the awareness by the student of being placed into a low track might lower self-esteem and vice-versa (Wikipedia 2011). According to Bedard (1998) at risk students should routinely moved from the mainstream to remedial classes so that classroom curricula are tailored to their ability level (Bedard 1998). In support (Wadesango 2011) states that a better learning environment is one of the advantages of streaming in schools as it helps to prepare appropriate materials to teach students according to ability.

Gamoran (2002) outlines the following demerits of ability grouping:

- Because of conditions outside school, when educators sort students on the basis of test scores they also segregate them by race, ethnicity and social class
- When students are divided for instruction by ability, either through setting or streaming, their achievement levels tend to become more and more unequal over time
- Unequal classroom conditions in high versus low level classes are major reasons behind the increasing inequality in students' achievement levels, the more experienced, qualified teachers are commonly assigned to higher sets where more challenging material is used and where there is greater emphasis on discussion and interaction with students
- Division of students by ability exacerbates inequality more when it is more rigid and far-reaching
- Streaming at the secondary level may benefit high achievers, but these benefits invariably come at the expense of losses for low achievers

Wadesango and Shumba (2009) argue that

students in low-rank classes are likely to not be able in achieving their full potential. They further stresses that a class in low-ranks classes, students will normally be given average learning materials suitable to their learning needs. Without teachers noticing, they are actually pampering the students by only giving them average materials to work with. This causes students to prefer to stay in their comfortable zone and do not have the initiative to go further beyond their abilities. Besides that, students may find that learning is troublesome and boring because there is no competition since students are of the same level. One of the concerns of those who argue against grouping by ability is that placement in the bottom groups has an adverse impact on pupils' self esteem, self concept and on their attitudes towards school and schoolwork (Plewis et al. 1999 citing Gamoran and Berends 1987). Gamoran and Berends (1987 in Plewis et al. 1999), reviewing the international literature, suggested that there was a negative impact of ability grouping on the motivation and self-esteem of students in the lower groups. Oakes (1985) suggests that for low track students the self-concept becomes more negative as years go by and these students tend to be critical of their ability. According to Vang (2005), studies have proved that a class with mix-ability students can contribute to success.

Wikipedia (2011) asserts that low track classes tend to be primarily composed of low-income students, usually minorities, while upper-track classes are usually dominated by students from socioeconomically successful groups. This therefore brings in the issue of cultural capital. According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, children from middle-class families are advantaged in gaining educational credentials due to their possession of cultural capital (Bourdieu 2002). We will conclude that cultural capital is transmitted within the home and does have a significant effect on performance in the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations (Wadesango 2011).

CULTURAL CAPITAL

The term cultural capital refers to non-financial social assets; they may be educational or intellectual, which might promote social mobility beyond economic means (Dumais 2002).

Other authors view cultural capital as the advantages that one is given due to the environment they grow up in and the attitudes of parents. This includes such things as having a computer in the house, or having parents who value the importance of education (Brinton and Yamamoto 2005). This goes to say that for children in poverty there would be a lack of cultural capital which explains why those growing up in poverty have limited opportunities compared to those who grow up in middle class families. In this study, the concept "cultural capital" will be viewed as forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that an individual has, which gives the particular individual a higher status in society. It is assumed that parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current educational system. This assertion is supported by Yang (2003) who postulates that Cultural capital in families and more specific, the educational level of parents, has during the last decades been proved as the most important dimension of socio-economic influence on school performance in many countries.

TEACHERS' PARTICIPATION IN THE PRACTICE

Teacher participation in decision-making is a trend that is set to transform top-down approaches which reduced teachers to tools of implementing policies and decisions without making any meaningful contribution (Bezzina 1997; Sabar 1985). The idea of participation is applied in various parts of the world and Zimbabwe is no exception. Teachers work closely with students and have first-hand knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, they are therefore the most valuable people to develop and implement policies (Kumar and Scuderi 2000). Teacher participation refers to the extent to which subordinates or groups who are affected by decisions are consulted and involved in making of decisions (Khoza 2003). This concept refers to the decentralization of authority to the lowest appropriate level in the school where teachers participate in making decisions that affect them (Beckmann and Visser 1999). Participation is not only about taking part in decision making process but it is also about being valued (Lilyquist 1998). Teachers feel rewarded

when they are part of the decision making process. Teacher participation calls for teachers to assume leadership roles in schools and it requires that principals encourage such leadership from teachers (Wagner 1999). Principals cannot manage schools alone nor take the burden of motivating others to achieve objectives and complete tasks without support from their colleagues, they must actively involve them (Bell 1999).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research methodology. The study concentrated on the qualitative form since this research aimed at elucidating what the participants had to say with regard to decision-making in their natural settings. In this regard, it was imperative that a methodological perspective be adopted to allow the findings to develop "from the data itself rather than from preconceived, rigidly structured, and highly quantified techniques that pigeonhole the empirical social world into the operational definitions that the researcher has constructed" (Creswell 2002). The problem identified in this study demanded that the participants themselves be allowed to freely express their feelings, views and opinions. To this end, Sherman and Webb (in Ely 1991:4) provide the following definition "...qualitative implies a direct concern with feelings, experiences and views as lived or felt or undergone..." This study adopted a case-study research design. A case study is described as a form of descriptor research that gathers a large amount of information about one or a few participants and thus investigates a few cases in considerable depth (Thomas and Nelson 2001). Purposive convenience sampling of twenty two school heads and three education officers from Gweru Education District was adopted in the selection of participants for this study

Data Collection Instruments

The researchers looked for rich, detailed information of a qualitative nature. The methods that were used to gather information for this study were concerned with seeking participants' written and verbal information on the way problems are solved and decisions are taken in their schools. Therefore, the strategies used produced

descriptive data based on insights rather than statistical data where hypothesis testing is involved. Two types of strategies that were used to provide the data for this study were: individual interviews and document analysis.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. This method was preferred because data was gathered systematically and the researchers were assured that no data was omitted. Through the use of interviews, the interviewer was able to elaborate on issues and questions as well as clarifying the meaning of statements, answers or questions that may not have been clear to the interviewee. Through use of semi-structured interviews, respondents were able to express themselves freely since the main purpose of this study was to let respondents narrate their experiences with regard to the teacher recruitment policy. In the process the study was able to get rich thick data from participants and this increased the validity of the findings of the research. During the interviews, certain issues respondents tended to leave unexplained were effectively probed. By so doing the study was able to gain a detailed understanding of the respondents' opinions rather than would be the case when using mailed questionnaires.

Documentary Analysis

Various documents that were related to teacher recruitment practices were examined. Such documents included public records, personal documents and physical material already present in the research setting. Documents helped the researchers to uncover meaning, develop understanding and discover insights.

Ethical Considerations

According to Creswell (1994), a researcher has an obligation to respect the rights, needs, values and desires of the respondents. The research was therefore conducted with respect and concern for the dignity and welfare of the informants. The individual's right to decline to participate was respected in this study. The researchers ensured that the purpose and activities of the research were clearly explained to the participants. The authors of this document

ensured that promises and commitments were honored by safeguarding participants' identities.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

All the twenty responding teachers agreed that they are fully involved in deciding how to stream their students. However, all of them feel that the exercise does not require any specialized skills, for streaming of students is usually based on overall form positions and hence does not put much weight on their participation in the area as they do not consider it to be critical decision. Below are some of the sentiments of the respondents:

- R8 *All staff members are involved in the decision making process. This is done in staff meetings. Each teacher tables the mark schedules from their classes. These are the schedules that are used when streaming students.*
- R2 *This is done by subject teachers as well as the class teachers but then class teachers usually are part and parcel of that string because they will be involved in the teaching of these pupils*
- R6 *It is done by subject teachers together with the deputy looking at the performance of the kids say after midyears or end of year examinations. Here I think almost every teacher is involved*

All the twenty teachers agreed to the fact that they are fully involved in decisions on streaming students. One of the school heads (H4) stated the following:

We are very democratic here as you can see that all the teachers are involved in decision making as far as streaming of students is concerned. You see streaming is a very important task. We have to be very accurate, fair and transparent to make sure that every child is properly placed."

The other school head (H1) made the following comment: *"We regard streaming as very important because it means the future of the child. Any mistake can ruin the entire life of the student in terms of career development."* The sentiments expressed above reveal that there is 100% participation of teachers in this decision making area. Staff meetings attended by the researcher confirmed the assertion that all staff members get involved in the streaming of students. As this was the end of year, school heads

in all cases advised class teachers in the meetings to quickly compile end of year reports so that streaming of students would be done before they left for holidays. Minutes reviewed also indicated that at the end of each year, teachers would sit down and allocate students to relevant classes based on their end of year performances.

DISCUSSION

It was established in this study that all teachers in the participating schools take part in the streaming of students. Teachers are assumed to have a better understanding of their pupils' abilities and capabilities. They spend a greater part of the year interfacing with the learners. Given this outlook, it is naturally acceptable that teachers get fully involved in decisions that are directly related to children like streaming of students as was found in this study. It would not be proper to find the streaming of pupils being done outside teachers' influence. If such practices are encouraged, what is likely to emerge is a ruinous streaming exercise. In which case students are mis-streamed and they end up taking a wrong combination of subjects. This may impact on the child's career.

A point at hand is where a child who has great potential in sciences is asked or put in a class that is Arts oriented. That child's future may be jeopardized for the child may fail to pursue his or her desired career parts at university level. In support Davies cited in Riley (1984) points out that teachers command greater control and knowledge in matters that are classroom based. It is therefore proper that teachers be fully involved in such decision making. Wrong decisions may also bring disharmony between the school and the community. The finding from this current study confirms Kumar and Scuderi's (2000) assertion that teachers work closely with students and have firsthand knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, they are therefore the most invaluable to develop and implement policies. Studies have shown that participation in deciding matters of concern has positive effects on the school climate. For example, a study carried out by Guthrie and Koppich (1993) in America revealed that autocratic (formal model) atmosphere generated a higher degree of tension amongst staff members than the democratic one (collegial), thereby creating an uncondusive school climate. There-

fore, Guthrie and Koppich's results confirm what emerged from this study as well. Thus, the management model in a given school has a lot to do with team building. However in the other four schools, teachers were working as a team because of their involvement in school-based decision-making processes.

While tests are accepted as the best tools for streaming pupils, sometimes they fail to measure accurately the degree of attainment that a particular student will have reached. It needs the input of the subject teacher who will explain the possible causes of the child's low performance in a given test. Therefore, it requires this additional information for a meaningful streaming to take place, just relying on the score sheet may ignore certain valuable information about the child. Thus, the fact that teachers are fully involved in decisions on streaming students is a well received position. The new dispensation in educational leadership calls for shared decision making by all the critical stakeholders. Teachers are *inter alia* stakeholders of a school system hence should occupy the central space in decision making (Beckmann and Blom 2000; Daun 2003b). The *prima facie* intent of this dispensational call is to increase the productivity of schools. With improved output, schools become more satisfying work places. One person cannot be a good resource for every decision. Advantages of team interaction are lost; zero team commitment is developed for implementing the decision. Resentment and disagreement may result in sabotage, deterioration of team effectiveness and resources of other team members are not tapped (Dimmock 1993).

As a matter of fact, if teachers are fully involved in such an important component of the life of a school, then there is an equal reason for their expertise to be used in other decision making processes which school heads consider to be their prerogative. This is in line with the results of a study conducted by McLagan in Drake and Roe (1999), which concluded that teachers get excited and motivated if they are involved in decision making in areas in which they command great expertise. However, teachers in this study have indicated that this is not a critical decision making area.

CONCLUSION

Teacher participation is a trend that is set to transform 'top-down' approaches, which re-

duced teachers to tools of implementing policies and decisions without making any meaningful contribution. It encourages teachers to improve the quality of their profession and workplace, which may result in a less stressful, more satisfying and motivating environment. While Shared Decision Making (SDM) enhances teachers' opportunities to influence decisions in the school, it emerged in this study that a number of teachers in the participating schools were active in the process of streaming of students. This makes decisions to be more likely to be acceptable and more likely to be implemented because they reflect and serve the interests of the people responsible for putting them into action. This results in the development of more inclusive partnerships among heads and teachers and there is harmony, trust, competence and joy in such an environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends school heads to involve all their teachers as much as possible in the streaming of students. They should refrain from centralizing this critical decision making process. By centralizing the decision making processes, school heads run the risk of compromising the chances of getting the best decisions.

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