

Streaming Practices and Implications in the Education System: A Survey of Mazowe District, Zimbabwe

Monica Matavire¹

Bindura University of Science Education
Department of social sciences
P. Bag 1020,
Bindura, Zimbabwe.

Vongai Mpofu²

Bindura University of Science Education
P. Bag 1020
Bindura
Zimbabwe.

Alois Maveneka³

University of Zimbabwe
Department of Curriculum and Arts
P.O. Box MP167
Mt. Pleasant
Harare.

Abstract

This is a cross sectional survey of the possible effects of streaming pupils according to ability on pupils' behaviour, resource allocation and institutional relationships in Mazowe District secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Six secondary schools out of fourteen in Mazowe District of Mashonaland Central, in Zimbabwe were purposively selected for the study. Data was gathered from a random sample of 1794 pupils through questionnaires. Overallly the study revealed a wide streaming intention and practice gap of which pupils of high ability mostly benefit from ability streaming while pupils of low ability are negatively affected. The negative effects include segregation of the slow learners from the fast learner, institutionally defining the future of the pupil negatively; it promotes discrimination tendencies and

increases the likelihood of delinquent behavior as well as an imbalance in resource allocation. The study also revealed that streaming of pupils usually results in the hierachisation of subjects in their order of perceived difficulty and importance. The low ability classes were mostly allocated fewer subjects that are perceived to be less challenging and with low market value. In light of these findings, the study, therefore, recommends that mixed ability be practiced in place of streaming according to ability.

Key words: ability grouping, streaming, school administrator

Introduction

Bottle neck education system in Zimbabwe which existed between 1960 and 1979 was restrictive in nature to the black Zimbabwean. The majority of the black people could not afford high fees the system demanded. There were very few government sponsored secondary schools which could not absorb all pupils from primary school. This resulted in many pupils failing to advance to secondary school. Furthermore, streaming according to ability was practiced from Junior Certificate to Ordinary level further reducing the chances of an African child to education. Upon Zimbabwe's attainment of her independence in 1980, new education policies were advanced, for example, free and compulsory education. Free in the sense the government heavily subsidizes tuition at both primary and secondary schools. Compulsory education meant that children of school going age (6 – 18 years) were lawfully expected to be in school. It became an offence for parents/guardians to deny children in this age group their right to education. Free and compulsory education resulted in an automatic promotion of pupils from primary to secondary school regardless of their grade seven results.

Hordes of pupils of various abilities enrolled in secondary schools including some of these pupils could hardly read or write. This scenario enforced many schools to introduce a system of ability streaming in an effort to overcome the instructional challenge. Streaming referred to as channeling and tracking by Harlem (2000) is the grouping of pupils according to their academic potential (Griffiths, 1977; Muronda, (1997). Teachers may adapt within class ability grouping, mixed ability, between class ability grouping and subjects competence ability grouping to allocate pupils to classes Harlem(2000). To date the streaming practice is a common feature in some schools in Zimbabwe. School authorities such as Churches, Government and Private owned schools spell high expectations in pass rate to school Heads,

as a result they stream pupils in order to meet the high demands for academic excellence that are imposed on them. Some school authorities pay incentives for higher pass rates to teachers and headmasters. This has resulted in the discrimination of the slow learner because teaching them would bring no monetary gains since they will always fail. What needs to be explored are the effects of ability grouping on pupils and the rationale behind this practice.

There are two contrasting schools of thought on ability streaming. On one hand is the view that ability grouping is an organizational strategy that increases learning opportunities to high ability learners as well as low ability learners (Pallas 1994). Thus considering individual differences in a multitude of ways, which range from interest, ability, social skills, ideas and attitudes (Gordon, 1996) teachers need to note such differences on school children and tailor make their teaching to suit these differences. Ability grouping therefore enable teachers to cater for individual attention in form of teaching pace, remediation, extension work thus help pupils to progress at their own pace without being rushed or held back by other pupils through the learning process (Neubeck 1979; Mwamwenda,1996). Mwamwenda (1996) further emphasizes that in mixed ability classes, low ability pupils are overstretched while high ability ones are under-utilized in their intellectual capacities.

On the other hand, ability grouping is perceived as a social stratification strategy among learners of different abilities which places low ability learners at a disadvantage (Kelly, 1990; Griffiths, 1977; Hallinan, 1994). Such disadvantages include, labeling of lower ability pupils as dull, receipt of low quality instruction and allocated low and poor resources. Authorities against streaming advocate for mixed ability grouping (Kelly, 1990).

The major argument put forward by proponents of mixed ability classes is that pupils learn to live amicably and democratically with different kinds of people, a common social phenomenon.

Mixed ability grouping prepare pupils to fit into their society as people in society are a mixed lot. Schools as miniature societies, therefore, should resemble society. Chisaka (1996) studied streaming in Harare schools and found out that streaming promotes segregation and develops discriminatory tendencies.

The purpose of this study is to establish schools practicing ability grouping in Mazowe district, their rationale of the practice and of greater interest the effects of ability grouping on pupils in terms of classroom instruction, resource allocation, learner identity, learner-learner and teacher- learner relationships and behaviors as well as learners' aspirations. The findings in this study will expose the effects of homogenous grouping on pupils. These findings are very important to schools that still practice streaming according to ability despite its overwhelming criticism.

The following questions guided this study in an attempt to answer the issues raised above

- a. What type of streaming do schools in Mazowe district practice?
- b. Why do schools stream the way they do?
- c. How is the streaming intention related to the practice in the classroom?
- d. How is the streaming practice beneficial/detrimental to pupils?

Methodology

A descriptive cross sectional survey design was used in this study. Its features which include, collection of ounces of data at a point in time and description of existing phenomena (Robson, 2002) necessitated the choice of this design. Thus the design was appropriate for identification of streaming problems, comparison of current streaming practices and

their justifications. Furthermore; this design enabled data to be collected from numerous respondents widely spaced at one point in time (Keeves, 2004). Three thousand seven hundred and sixty six (3766) pupils in fourteen (14) widely spaced secondary schools in Mazowe District of Mashonaland Central, Zimbabwe constituted the target population. The use of the survey allowed us to study and interpret a wide spectrum of variables and their relationships to give a full description of the phenomenon under study (Walliman and Buckler 2008).

One thousand seven hundred and ninety four (1794) ordinary level (form 3 and 4) pupils in six purposively sampled secondary schools and eighteen school administrators constituted the sample. The Ordinary level students were used as participants in this study in view of our knowledge of streaming practices usually starting at form three. The schools were chosen to represent the categories of schools (rural council, mission and government) in Mashonaland Central. This gave a sample size of 48% of all informants which the researchers considered to be fairly representative of the target population. Data was collected through a self developed; pilot studied and administered questionnaires for pupils and school administrators. The school administrators who responded to the questionnaire were chosen by their seniority in school. That is school head, deputy head and senior teacher, who are key school curriculum designers and implementers. The school administrators were chosen as key informants. This provided source triangulation for verification and clarification. The questionnaires consisted of structured items with some follow up open ended questions on selected items. Structured items were slotted to allow the respondents to provide specific responses. The open ended follow up question allowed the respondents to elaborate on underlying reasons or issues.

Furthermore, the questionnaire was considered to be an appropriate data collection tool where respondents were widely spaced and collection was done at one point in time as in this study. Sampling, size and sample proportion

The questionnaire was self administered. The researchers visited a school on an agreed date with the school authorities. The questionnaires were distributed to all the O-level students who were present on the day in their respective classroom. Instructions on how the questionnaire was to be filled were provided. The researchers left the student to complete the questionnaires at their own pace without the influence of the researcher. The student took an average of thirty minutes to complete the questionnaire. The researchers collected back the completed questionnaire. This ensured high completion and return rate of 96% and 100 % respectively. The data collection took six days.

The names of people and schools used in this research have been changed for ethical issues. Pseudo names have been adopted.

The data on structured items of the questionnaire was analyzed using the SPSS version 10. Content analysis technique was used to analyze open response items. This involves describing and interpreting the meaning of the categorized data to arrive at substantive conclusions (Walliman and Buckler, 2008). Analysis of these open ended questions was done by all researchers independently in order to authenticate (validate) the results.

Results

Type of streaming

Three schools practice ability group streaming and the three mixed grouping giving a ratio of 1:1 as depicted in table 1.

Table1: Characteristics of schools in the sample

Name of School	Curriculum Practice	Responsible Authority	Establishment Period	Sample Proportion
Barara	Mixed ability	Rural Council	After 1980	
Hovovo	Streaming	Mission	Before 1980	
Langster	Streaming	Mission	Before 1980	
Nyasha	Streaming	Rural Council	After 1980	
Marongwe	Mixed ability	Mission	Before 1980	
Nwimbo	Mixed ability	Government	After 1980	

Of the three schools that practice ability grouping two (67.7 %) are mission schools established before independence (1980). The remaining school (33.3%) was established after independence and is a rural council school. These schools are in the same cluster. The mission schools are boarding schools. One is coeducational whilst the other is girls- only school. Nyasha is a coeducational day school but was targeted to be a boarding school. The government wanted to make it a boarding school and the schools performance was constantly checked.

Table 2: Ability group by area of specialisation

Area of specialisation	Ability
Commercial	Mixed/High
Sciences	High
Arts	Low
Practical	Low

Table 2 depicts an analysis of area of specialisation by ability. The area of specialisation is allocated to groups in order of perceived level of difficulty. The commercial class in schools where ability grouping is practiced is allocated commercial subjects (commerce, accounts, and business studies) in addition to core subjects (English, history, mathematics, shona, integrated science). Subjects in the science class include physical science or chemistry and physics and biology in addition to core subjects. The arts and practical classes are taught core subjects with religious studies and any practical subject respectively. The core subjects are not taught to lower streams as they are taught to high ability classes. The teaching differs in content coverage, methods of teaching and materials used. The above allocation of subjects reveals some kind of segregation and hierarchisation of subjects.

Rationale behind streaming practices

The reasons advanced for a type of grouping per each school-by-school administrators are similar though with minor deviations for schools with the same curriculum practice. Justifications for ability grouping included motivation, effective participation and involvement of all the learners and individual attention and remediation. However, in the majority of cases such reasons deviated from the practice.

Ability streaming as a motivational and competitive tool:-The rationale behind streaming was premised on the notion that pupils of

similar ability compete among themselves, less able pupils are encouraged to work harder in their own class with the hope of being promoted to a high ability class whilst the high ability students would want to remain in their classes. At Langster Girls High, pupils were either promoted or demoted to another class depending on their previous term's performance. Their ability class consistently changed as students were either moved to a higher ability class or demoted to a low ability class on termly basis. This however encouraged some pupils to work very hard with the hope of getting promoted to a high ability class. Those who failed to make it to the top class consequently resigned to fate and accepted the low ability tag associated with their class. At Hovovo High School and Nyasha Secondary School, students got streamed using their grade seven results if they are form ones though not necessarily predictors of performance all subjects at secondary school. In form three they were streamed on the strength of their end of form two results and what teachers said about the child. This method showed many discrepancies as pointed out by students' those teachers' relatives and friends were placed in high ability classes despite their poor performance. It was figured that most of such favoured pupils did not perform well in the public examinations. The school Head for Langster Girls High pointed out that the way they stream pupils has created an environment of competition rather than antagonism.

School Heads for Hovovo and Nyasha Secondary schools gave good intentions for streaming namely, to give pupils opportunity to learn effectively without discouragement or demotivating.

Participation and involvement: It emerged from school administrators that streaming pupils was meant to cater for individual and group interest. However, in our opinion this is difficult if the pupils are mixed. It was gathered that if pupils learn in a mixed class, the slow learner will be dominated by the fast learner. Also streaming pupils make teachers concentrate on individual problems.

Individual attention and remediation The last reason advanced for streaming was that it gives the teacher the opportunities to cater for the individual attention and remediation. These pupils needed special remedial work which is only possible if they are put in their own class. These responses suggested good intentions for ability grouping but ignores the detrimental effects that streaming may cause on pupil if it is not well managed.

For Nyasha it emerged that its curriculum practices have been greatly influenced by its renowned sister schools within the same cluster. It was deduced from the administrators' responses that these schools established before independence transported the system from the colonial F1 and F2 system. This system sought to discriminate the blacks against the whites in the education system. Another reason given for streaming by the administrators was that the schools aimed to maintain their high pass rate reputation in the province. This good reputation attracts high quality rewarding clientele. On the other hand the administrators of rural day secondary schools established after independence (80%) echoed that they have little control on the curriculum practice follow. Their answerability to rural councils dictates mixed ability practices to avoid discriminatory tendencies.

This also applies to Nwimbo Government School (20%). These schools are expected to cascade the Education for All which the government has earmarked for 2015 (Nziramanga 1999). The Nziramanga (1999) commission recommends for quality, equity and accessible relevant education to all students without discrimination.

Despite good reasons proffered for whatever type of grouping a school chooses to follow, findings show that the good intentions for schools which practice streaming are parallel to the practice on the ground. Comparatively, those practicing mixed ability grouping run in tandem with their instructional motives as presented in the ensuing section.

Curriculum Practices

The study reveals a clear distinction of curriculum practices between low and high ability classes in schools which practiced ability grouping. These practices include resource allocation, classroom practices and stereotyping. In a nutshell the low ability pupils who need more resources, good teachers and learning materials are denied the support they need.

Resource Allocation

The allocation of resources like learning materials, teaching staff and time allocated to academic subjects was discriminatory. It benefited pupils in high ability classes and disadvantaged those in low ability classes. The majority (89.0%) of pupils in high ability classes reported their textbook sharing ratio ranged from at least 1:1 to 1:3 pupils per copy. Forty seven percent (47.7 %) of pupils in low ability classes reported that they shared text books in the ratio of at least 1:6 to 1:10. pupils per copy. Thirty two point five percent (32.5%) reported that they were to do without text books. Low ability classes were allocated non-qualified teachers while high ability classes had the privilege of having qualified teachers.

Where there was staff shortage, low ability classes were meant to wait for the new teacher to be deployed whilst those in post were deployed the high ability classes. The majority (73.2%) of the pupils in schools practicing ability grouping indicated that teachers gave extra tuition to high ability classes whereas pupils in low ability classes lagged behind. Although resource allocation in which streaming is distinctly in favour of the higher ability classes, in schools which practice mixed ability grouping resource is moderately in favour of gifted pupils within the mixed ability as reported by 63.7% of that proportion of the sample.

Classroom practices

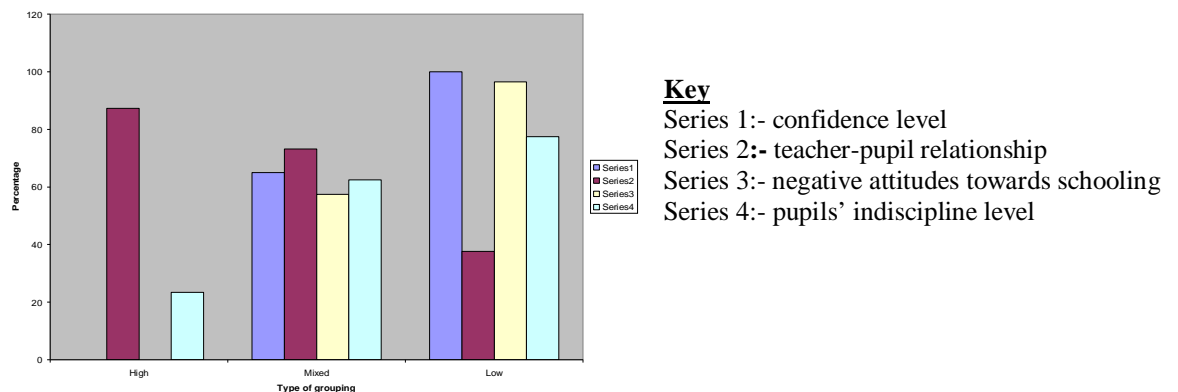
The research revealed that different classroom practices were employed on different ability classes. Low ability classes were characterized by erratic attendances of teachers, teacher

absenteeism and time wasting during lessons. In rare cases teachers gave notes to pupils to write on their own. On the other hand pupils in high ability classes (100.0%) reported fruitful classroom experiences.

These included high teacher turn up for lessons, frequent and regularly marked written work. The majority (87.13%) of participants in the sample reported that teachers gave low ability classes derogatory identification. These identifications are exemplified by such names as Form 1 ‘Mortuary’ for 1M, Form four ‘Worst’ for Four West. This finding explains the classroom behaviour of the teacher in low ability classes presented above. Teachers approach low ability classes with a stereotyping attitude. Notably, 43, 02% of pupils in schools which practice mixed ability grouping reported stereotyping practice towards pupils of low ability within the mixed ability class.

Immediate Effects of Ability Grouping

The negative effects of ability grouping which emerged from the data are summarised in figure 1.



Generally, ability grouping has been found to have more negative effects on low ability pupils than on pupils in mixed and high ability groups (Figure 1). Teacher–pupil relationships, attitudes towards schooling, level of confidence and discipline of the pupils were found to be depended on the ability group class.

All respondents (100.0%) reported that they had strained relationships with their teachers while the opposite has been reported from participants in the high ability classes. Sixty five percent (65.0%) of pupils in mixed ability classes reported strained relationships with teachers. There is a positive relationship between ability group and enjoyment of school.

Approximately, eighty seven percent (87.4%), 73.1% and 37.6% of pupils in high, mixed and low ability classes respectively revealed that they enjoyed schooling. Respondents in high (100.0%) and low (96.5%) ability classes were in agreement that pupils in low ability classes become generally indisciplined whilst only 57.4 % in mixed ability classes reported placement of pupils to low ability classes as a cause of indiscipline. The findings show a negative relationship between ‘0’ level passing confidence level and ability group. Pupils in high, mixed and low ability classes reported that they were not sure of passing their ordinary level examinations in the proportion of 23.4%, 62.5%, and 77.4% respectively.

Long Term Effects of Ability Grouping

The majority (73.4 %) of pupils in high ability class, 60, 3 % of pupils in mixed ability class and 70.0% of the pupils in low ability classes aspired for highly rated careers. A large proportion of pupils remain aspiring for high class jobs in spite of the ability class in which the pupil belong. The impression these results may create is that ability grouping may not

necessarily dampen the spirits of the low ability pupils.

On academic aspirations 90.0% of pupils in high ability classes and 65.5% of pupils in the mixed ability classes reported that they aspired to attain a graduate qualification. On the other hand 83.7% of pupils in low ability classes indicated that they were content with an Ordinary level certificate. This is confirmed by the Ordinary level Zimbabwe School Examination Council results over a period of three years as depicted in Figure 2. It indicates that the schools which practice streaming had overall percentage pass rate of 55% to 100% whilst those practicing mixed ability grouping ranged from 19% to 65%. However, further document analysis reveals that the high percentage pass in schools practicing ability grouping was accounted for by High ability classes only. The low ability classes’ pass rates in such schools ranged between 0% and 29% but were forced to register as external candidate so their result will have a bearing over the overall school pass rate. The desire by low ability pupils for high class jobs was not in tandem with their academic aspiration

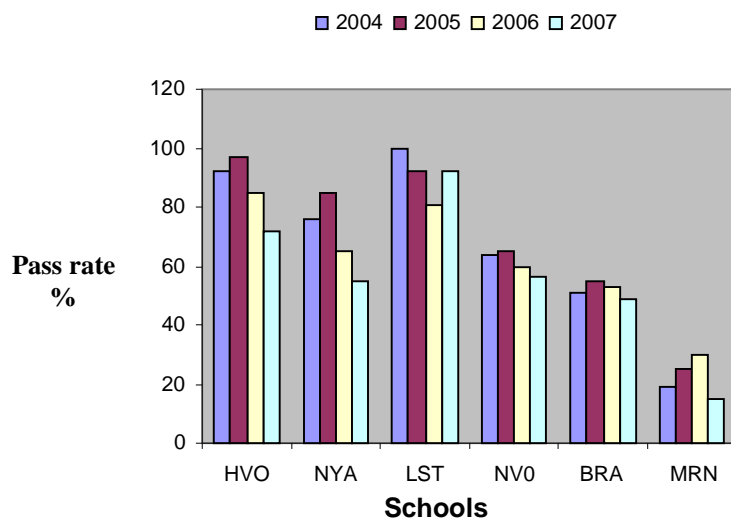


Figure 2: Public Ordinary level examination results: 2004-2007

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

This study contributes to the unveiling of ability grouping practices, rationale behind the identified practices and their effects. Though streaming intention was meant to be beneficial to pupils the study revealed that the streaming practice done in schools was in total contrast to its intentions. The rationale behind ability grouping remains ideal confirming Chisaka's (1996) idea that instructional benefits to low ability pupils are more imaginary than real. Streaming of pupils leads to the streaming of resources, such as, unequal distribution of textbooks to the advantage of high ability classes, awarding favorable learning conditions and allocating more competent teachers to them. When more competent, qualified and experienced teachers are allocated to high ability classes, the attitudes of these pupils towards teachers of the low ability classes become negative. They rate these teachers lowly, placing them in the same category with their low ability pupils. Streaming by ability brings about antagonism between teachers of different streams. Segregation and favoritism because of homogenous grouping ignores the feelings of the pupils themselves. The future of pupils relegated to low ability groups is jeopardized by this inhuman treatment. The end result is manifestations of negative attitudinal complexes that are associated with a feeling of rejection. According to Abadzi (1984) ability grouping confine low ability groups to low socio-economic status.

Pupils in low ability classes become frustrated through being labeled and being discriminated against. Their aspirations and interest are not being promoted by the society, be it academic society or the larger society. However, they remain aspiring for high class jobs. This might be only implying a societal rejection of the despised manual jobs of the working class. These aspirations became simply an emotional feeling driven by poverty and a dream rather than a reality. It is also possible to interpret the

desire for high class jobs by low ability pupils as an indication of the influence of the social values set by the dominant groups in the society. This may be regarded as the development of a negative social value that discriminates between occupations and social status. This is in tandem with the thinking of a number of authorities, like, Griffiths (1977), Gamoran and Berends (1987), that ability grouping develops social values of segregation and class conflict rather than a culture of cooperation and harmony. The rejection by low ability pupils to be associated with low status jobs may be taken as a rejection of low status that their class is labeled with and consequently, a rejection of the curriculum practice of segregation through ability grouping. Findings of similar studies else where, inside and outside Zimbabwe, (Griffiths, 1977; Hallinan, 1989; Chisaka, 1996; Watyoka 1999) concurs that ability grouping tends to create in pupils relegated to lower classes low self concept and stratifies pupils largely on the pattern of their real life.

Literature provides a different picture at schools where mixed ability is practiced. In a mixed ability class low and high ability pupils mingle in their classes. Pupils benefit from peer support especially those who can not grasp concepts as fast as their peers (Smith, 2007). The practice of social integration and interaction is promoted where there is mixed ability. If low and high ability pupils are in the same class with the same teachers, the low ability pupils become encouraged to work harder. The researcher also gathered that in mixed ability schools no one class dominated the pass rate. Though, pupils in a mixed ability benefit from the same teachers' instruction this study revealed that favouritism and segregation is practiced. The low ability pupils are still treated unfairly in terms of resource allocation and teachers' attention.

The foregoing discussion prove streaming to be socially, culturally and philosophically impoverishing in the sense that it focuses the curriculum on monolithic knowledge and skills. Standards Site (2010) summarized the effects of streaming thus it plays a major role in polarizing pro-and anti-school attitudes among pupils (with higher level pupils being pro and lower ones anti). According to Smith (2005) pupils of below average ability who were streamed to lower classes became friendless or are neglected by others.

Therefore, this study recommends that schools practice mixed ability for the purposes of destroying social conflicts in schools, stereotypes and complexes. It should be an endeavour of every school to practice mixed ability grouping in view that a school is miniature society representing the larger society. Also, all pupils should benefit from teachers' instruction. High ability pupils will learn to accommodate those who are less privileged and feel obliged to assist in every way they can. Another reason in support of mixed ability practice is that the Zimbabwe School Examinations does not cater for ability grouping but provides universal summative evaluation for all.

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