

Teachers' perceptions of ability grouping in the face of policy on inclusion: A case of Johannesburg metropolitan mainstream primary schools

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Background: This article reports findings of a qualitative study that investigated teachers' perceptions on the use of ability grouping as a classroom pedagogical practice at selected primary schools in South Africa in the wake of the inclusive education movement. Ability grouping is one of the most used grouping practices in South African schools, but little is known about how teachers view it in the wake of the policy on inclusion.

Aim: This study was aimed at exploring the mainstream classroom teachers' perceptions about the use of ability grouping in the classrooms and how it reflects on principles of inclusive education.

Setting: A total of ten teachers from ten different primary schools, two from each district, were purposefully selected to participate in the study.

Methods: A qualitative approach was used in this study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, which were conducted on two occasions with each participant at their respective schools. Data were analysed thematically for content and returned to participants for accuracy checking.

Results: Findings revealed that teachers perceive ability grouping as capable of facilitating interactions of learners with learning disabilities, offering opportunities for differentiated instruction and facilitating proper use of teaching and learning media. Despite its benefits, ability grouping can be viewed as contrasting with the ideals of inclusive pedagogy and perpetuating exclusion, as diverse learners are not given opportunities to learn together in the same groups.

Conclusion: The article recommends that ability grouping should be withdrawn as it perpetuates incidents of learner labelling. Differentiated instruction and the provision of varied teaching/learning media should be carried out within inclusive settings to prevent incidents of learner labelling. A model for an inclusive grouping practice is proposed.

Contribution: The study findings will help in improving teachers' competencies and understanding of inclusive classroom pedagogic practices that benefit all learners at primary school levels despite their differences.

Keywords: ability grouping; teacher's perceptions; primary schools; inclusive pedagogy; South Africa.

Introduction

Learner grouping by ability is still a commonly used classroom practice in South Africa, despite the adoption of inclusive education policy in 2001 (Muthivhi & Broom 2008). This has sparked a lot of debate on what causes teachers to continue using it in the classroom given the significant criticism it has received in recent years (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011). Ability grouping entails dividing learners into small instructional groups based on their academic abilities in a hierarchical form. Groups are formed as follows: firstly, a group containing high-performing learners; secondly, a group of learners who perform slightly behind them and thirdly, the lowest-performing learners are placed in their own group (Loveless 2013).

Ability grouping is a long-standing practice that can be traced as far back as the start of the 20th century when parents wanted their children to attend schools with a record of good performances (Viar 2008). The strategy followed a strict streaming system that differentiated learners into general, vocational and academic education groups (Dunne 2010). Academic results were used to allocate pupils to streams upon their entry to secondary schools (Hallam & Ireson 1999). The

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strategy exposed students to different educational environments and provided educational experiences that suited their existing abilities and knowledge.

Currently, the practice of learner grouping by ability is applied differently across countries globally; mainly informed by teachers' perceptions in its efficacy. Despite the widespread use of ability grouping, the adoption of policy on inclusion has seen the emphasis shifting towards responding to diverse learners in the classrooms, including those with special educational needs. This study sought to explore teachers' perceptions on the use of ability grouping in the classrooms considering the 2001 policy on inclusivity.

Selvaraj (2015) posited that, in the United Kingdom, teachers perceive ability grouping as being beneficial because learners with special educational needs can be offered more time and practice to cope with the content and to learn skills that would have been taught to the entire class, whilst the other learners are busy with enrichment activities. On the other hand, a qualitative study by Spear (1994) revealed that teachers practise ability grouping primarily to address the issue of curriculum and instruction, as they believe that it is content-centred. Gifted learners can be given more challenging and enriching activities whilst learners with special educational needs receive the assistance they require. The consistent message amongst different teachers is that ability grouping is instructionally effective in meeting students' educational needs (Harrison 2014). Teachers can give each child more attention and can provide support and challenges tailored to children's individual needs. Despite this, grouping learners by ability limits learners' potentials and opportunities to learn from one another within the classroom, thus negatively impacting the spirit of inclusion.

Proponents of ability grouping justify the strategy in various ways. According to Dupriez (2010), teachers practice ability grouping because it enables them to tailor curriculum content to specific groups of learners according to their levels of performance. Learners come to the educational table with varying abilities, talents and needs, which teachers tap into through the use of ability grouping (What Works 2006), positively impacting the improvement in educational standards of all learners (Senter 2013). In Finland, teachers practise ability grouping because they believe in the right for every child to receive the necessary educational support (Aziz 2018).

Other teachers position the need for differentiated instruction as the main driving force behind learner grouping by ability. Teachers feel that grouping learners by ability enables them to vary work according to the levels of operation of the learners (Efthymiou & Kington 2017). They can give learners who are struggling fewer challenging tasks in their own groups, as much of the curriculum and lesson planning is aimed at addressing their common needs in the groups. Spratt and Florian (2013) observed that learners with special educational needs in New Zealand are assigned to their own groups as teachers are of the view that such an arrangement enables

them to revisit the content and skills covered in a particular unit or lesson. 'Gifted' learners can be allowed to proceed at their own pace, working on more challenging work in their own groups without being held back by learners with special educational needs (Yee 2013). Teachers find it easier to present content in an organised, direct and efficient manner, taking into consideration learners' abilities and interests and differentiating instruction according to individual strengths and needs.

Apart from grouping learners by ability for differentiation of instruction, teachers in the United States of America view learning styles as crucial in grouping learners by ability (Bachmann 2010), where explicit targeted instruction is provided systematically to meet the needs of learners in the group. Instruction is scaffolded so that learners can practise skills with support from the teacher, as well as being offered opportunities for engagement and immediate feedback (Tomalis et al. 2011). Learners who need specific instruction when beginning reading skills may be grouped together, and the desired curriculum skill is carefully structured so that the teacher teaches each step in sequence (Lerner & Johns 2012).

In Zimbabwe, learners are grouped according to their learning pace, with fast learners being grouped together (Nkomo 2013), whereas in Ghana, learners are grouped according to their learning styles because of the perception that each person is different and that the ways they learn will differ (Gyimah 2010). Teachers in South Africa separate learners with special educational needs from the rest of the class, as they believe they can offer more personalised assistance when those who need assistance are in groups of their own (Engelbrecht et al. 2015). In line with the given discussion, Muthivhi and Broom (2008) reported that teachers in Limpopo group learners with special educational needs in their own groups in order to improve their levels of achievements. Bojuwoye et al. (2014) in the Western Cape province reveals that teachers believe that it is easier to offer supplementary or extra class instructions for numeracy when learners with special educational needs are separated from the rest of the class. This practice is associated with the training that teachers had received that focused on the academic aspects of learning, prior to the policy on inclusion (Engelbrecht et al. 2015). Another study by Du Plooy (2019) on the practice of ability grouping in the Western Cape revealed that ability grouping is the dominant practice in Grade 1 in South African schools, as teachers see it as the most beneficial strategy in the classrooms.

Despite its benefits enunciated here, critics of ability grouping perceive the practice as an act of injustice towards those who are grouped in low-achieving groups. A study by O'Rourke (2013), through the theoretical framework of democratic education and constructivism, revealed that teachers feel that grouping learners by ability habitually aggravates existing academic inequities. Furthermore, a mixed methodological study by McGillicuddy and Devine (2018), exploring teachers' perspectives on the use of ability grouping in primary schools in Ireland, indicated that teachers consider grouping learners by ability as an act of symbolic violence

towards learners assigned to the weaker groups. A qualitative study by Kim (2012) in Korea established that both teachers and learners are concerned about emotional challenges that arise as a result of grouping learners by ability. Teachers feel that schools must offer academic support classes for learners with special educational needs and extensive professional development for all teachers, instead of perpetuating inequalities through ability grouping (O'Rourke 2013).

In line with the policy on inclusion, it is important for teachers to move away from traditional teacher-directed or teacher-centred approaches and move towards learner-centred methods that facilitate the inclusion of all learners. Learners have the right to learn in environments that promote social and academic growth (Lerner & Johns 2012) and to build a community in which everyone belongs and is accepted and supported by peers (Friend & Bursuck 2011; Lewis & Doorlag 2011). As observed by Florian (2015), teaching should not be provided to some learners while excluding others. Learners can be empowered to construct meaning through interactions with others and can be encouraged to actively participate in dialogue through planned activities. Learners with special educational needs acquire greater experiences of practice through cooperation and support from their classmates without disabilities (Dupriez 2010).

This study was aimed at exploring mainstream classroom teachers' perceptions about ability grouping in light of the policy on inclusive education. Ability grouping is one of the most commonly used classroom pedagogic practices, but little is known about the perceptions of teachers towards this practice to warrant its continued use. This article aims to capture teachers' views on how ability grouping facilitates inclusion.

The study was carried out through the lens of inclusive pedagogy by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) in order to understand teachers' perceptions on the use of ability grouping in the regular classrooms. Inclusive pedagogy was framed out of the need to define what constitutes good inclusive classroom practices in the mainstream classrooms in light of the inclusive education movement (Florian 2015). The inclusive movement seeks to attain equity, justice and quality education for all learners regardless of the differences they might have (Marin 2014). Fundamentally, inclusive pedagogy advocates for changes in teaching and learning approaches from those which work for some learners towards practices that involve learning opportunities that suit all learners, as well as providing rich learning communities (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011). Florian (2007) found that teachers who want to become more inclusive in the classroom respect and respond to their learners' differences and are able to include learners rather than excluding them from what is generally available in their classrooms. Learners need to be grouped in ways that embrace diversity and, at the same time, are able to give support to learners who need it; ensure improvement in learners' academic attainment without excluding anyone from any group setup; and give optimum support to all learners.

Methods

This study adopted a descriptive phenomenological research design as it offered 'plasticity to burrow deep into the topic and excavate the most information possible to explain the rich details of the phenomenon' (Williams 2012). The in-depth interviews embedded in descriptive phenomenology enabled the study to go beyond that which is generally perceived as obvious and allowed participants to explain their lived experiences through their individual voices (Williams 2012). A descriptive phenomenological design provided a platform to ask for clarity beyond the meanings of words and phrases expressed by the participants, giving both flexibility to the study and detailed accounts of their experiences with ability grouping in their classrooms. Each individual gave his or her own account of perceptions on the use of ability grouping in the regular classrooms, which gave depth to the study. A descriptive phenomenological research design was selected as it enabled a rich account of the perceptions of teachers on the inclusiveness of ability grouping to be obtained.

Participants and setting

A total of ten participants, two from each of the five Johannesburg districts, were purposefully selected to take part in the study. Johannesburg metropolitan has five districts in terms of delimitations by the Gauteng Department of Education. These districts are Johannesburg Central, Johannesburg East, Johannesburg North, Johannesburg South and Johannesburg West. Participants were selected on the basis of: (1) having an understanding of South African policies on inclusive education; (2) qualification in inclusive education or special needs education; (3) more than five years of teaching experience in the mainstream classrooms; and (4) having five years or more of experience in teaching learners with special educational needs in the mainstream classrooms. Of the ten selected participants, six were female and four were male, whose ages ranged from 33 to 52 years. Selection of participants in the schools was done with assistance from the school-based support teams who had knowledge of the teachers who could give detail of the phenomena under study. All the sites that were sampled were of non-fee paying schools, which enrol diverse learners in line with the dictates of the Department of Education (DoE) (2001), which stipulates that all children should be accommodated in schools nearest to them. Site sampling from where the participants were drawn was performed with assistance from district-based support teams of the five Johannesburg Districts, because they had information about the schools with teachers in the district who would be of benefit to the study in giving both detail and insight into the study. The participants are identified by pseudonyms. All names used in this study are fictitious.

Data collection

Data were collected using individual interviews, which were carried out with each participant on two occasions at their schools. It lasted for 60 min. To ensure accurate data capturing, the interviews were audio-recorded, with the

permission of each participant. We were able to probe for additional information that could clarify the data collected. The individual interviews were aimed at obtaining in-depth information about the teachers' perceptions about ability grouping in the face of global shifts towards inclusive education. An interview guide comprising two semistructured and open-ended questions was used, which gave direction to the interviews.

The questions on the interview guide were:

1. How do you group learners according to ability to ensure the inclusion of all learners?
2. What are your views about the use of ability grouping in the classrooms?

To get additional information that would allow us to explain phenomena in detail, we probed and prompted participants.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out from the time data collection commenced. Thematic analysis approach was used, using a model by Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle (2010). The data analysis process started by preparing and organising the collected data, which entailed putting data that were collected through interviews in a form that could be easily analysed. The process of data transcription that was undertaken related to the site or location from which data were collected, persons studied and times and periods during which data were collected, in order to build a clear understanding of the data. The second phase of data analysis entailed reviewing and exploring the data in order to capture the important aspects of the data. This was aimed at understanding the scope of the data before dividing them into more manageable chunks organised through codes (Lodico et al. 2010). Related data were put together for easy discussion and interpretation. The coding of data was followed by the construction of thick descriptions of both participants and the schools that were visited for the purposes of data collection, after which themes were identified in the study.

Ethical considerations

Permission to recruit participants and carry out the study in the schools was sought from the Gauteng Department of Basic Education. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa College of Education Research Ethics Review Committee (ref. no. 2015/05/13/47000872/22/ MC). Information on the submitted research form included how the study would be conducted, the purpose of the study, the aims and objectives of the study and the target districts. Permission to access the districts was obtained from the Provincial Department of Basic Education for Gauteng. Schools, where rich and in-depth data about teachers' perceptions on ability grouping could be obtained, were identified with the help of district-based support teams. Permission to access the selected schools and participants for the interviews was sought from

the relevant districts. The purpose of the study was explained to both the security personnel at the gates and the principals of the schools. Participants were identified with assistance from school-based support teams, with consent from the principals. Consent was sought from participants in the form of a letter, which they signed after the purpose of the study had been explained to them.

Results

Results indicate that ability grouping is one of the classroom pedagogies that are still commonly practised in Johannesburg's regular primary schools, in spite of the country's adoption of the policy on inclusion. The findings are presented using two themes that emerged from the data, namely (1) ability grouping practices; and (2) ability grouping in facilitating inclusion of learners with disabilities. Learner labelling was observed as one of the major problems related to the use of ability grouping.

Ability grouping practices

All ten participants grouped their learners by ability in their classrooms, as confirmed by the following instructive vignettes. Ms Dhlodlo, who practises ability grouping in mathematics, English and life skills in Grade 3, said:

'I group my learners according to their learning abilities. When I am saying "according to their ability," it's how strong they are and how weak they are. I have strong learners; I have the average learners; I have weak learners. The strong learners sit on their own, the average learners sit on their own and the weak learners, they sit on their own.' (38-year old female educator; Advanced Certificate in Inclusive Education; 11 years of teaching experience)

Learners are grouped according to their levels of performance (abilities) after they have been assessed by their teachers in various subjects. The purpose of assessment prior to grouping is to actualise the approximate levels of the learners' performance in order to determine in which group the individual learners should be placed. The groups are not static but are based on each topic, as observed by Mr Sithole who said:

'I give them a test. We call it a gap analysis test to find individual strengths and weaknesses of the learners. Then, from there, I group them according to their performance in the gap analysis test. For example, if I am teaching multiplication, you know, multiplication involves numbers, questions with one-digit numbers, two-digit numbers, onwards. If teaching in Grade 5 and the concept is multiplying three digit numbers like 312×115 , which is the level of the content at Grade 5, you give them a test based on this and, after giving the test, you find there are learners who are struggling with the concept of multiplying two and one digit numbers, you put them in one group.' (46-year-old male teacher; Certificate in Education and Bachelor of Education Degree in Inclusive Education; 18 years of teaching experience)

In some cases, groups are changed on a fortnightly basis after assessment in spelling. The purpose of having learners in ability groups during spelling is to enable learners to have

more practice in spelling, based on their levels of achievement. Ms Sekhoto gave an example of spelling as an area where she puts learners who are struggling in their own group. She explained:

'I make sure that after every two weeks, I group my learners according to their performance. So I mark whatever the assessment is there, then that is the assessment which I use after every two weeks to group them, for example, in spellings. We want them to practise spellings so that they start to make sentences. By writing spellings and practising spellings, it will be easy for them when they are writing creative writing. I check the learner who gets 20 out of 20; then he sits in the first desk, then the second, following each other like that. They sit in three rows. The first row will be having learners sitting according to their marks from 20 going down. Then, we go to the second row, they follow that channel, then we go to the third row. After that, I will be having three groups, as in three rows. The first row will be having those with higher marks going down, as we arrange them until we get to the third row.' (45-year-old female educator; Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Education Degree in Special Needs Education and Honours Degree in Inclusive Education; 19 years of teaching experience)

Groups for oral activities are different from groups for written activities but all are based on how the learners are performing in those two different activities. Fundamentally, grouping learners by their performances in both oral and written activities is performed to provide learners who have difficulties in writing the opportunity to practise separately. Three participants indicated that there are learners who perform well when doing oral work but struggle with written activities. Ms Dhlamini asserted:

'Some are able to present themselves very well when they are doing oral work. When we are doing math sums orally and practically with them, they are able to give those correct answers. But when it comes to writing, you find they can't even write. If it's in English or isiZulu, they can't even spell the simplest word of three letters like "cat." So I will take the learners whom I know that they are struggling the most, and then I put them together in one group.' (51-year-old female teacher; Diploma in Education and Bachelor of Education Degree; 23 years of teaching experience)

Ability grouping in facilitating inclusion of learners with disabilities

This study established that teachers perceive ability grouping as effective in facilitating interactions amongst learners with learning disabilities, enabling differentiation of instruction in the classrooms and facilitating the proper use of teaching and learning media.

Facilitates interaction with learners with learning disabilities

Teachers engage in learner grouping by ability because they hold the view that the practice enables them to give more assistance to learners with special educational needs, who are positioned to receive optimum support from teachers if they are in a group of their own. A total of seven participants who practiced ability grouping observed that they felt that

they were able to give more assistance to learners with special educational needs if they were in groups of their own, as indicated by the following instructive comments by Ms Mzila who stated:

'You can concentrate a lot on the low achievers because others will be able to assist themselves. I will attend to them as a group. When I find out that they are struggling, say with addition, I help them alone [*learners with special educational needs*] and I try to explain again. As an educator, you get sort of enough time of interacting with learners who are struggling, checking on what they are doing.' (47-year-old female educator; Certificate in Education and Diploma in Special Needs Education; 20 years of teaching experience)

One participant was more precise in the kind of assistance that she was able to offer to learners with special educational needs when they are grouped by ability. Ms Mhlongo observed that she used ability grouping as it empowers her to give more assistance to learners with reading problems in their own groups, as shown by the following statement:

'Let's say we had a reading exercise, then I realise the learners didn't do well on fluency; maybe learners didn't do well on pronunciation of words. I can focus now on those learners to say these ones have a problem of pronunciation or a problem on fluency. I can focus on those learners to help them, having extra work with them, giving them extra reading.' (40-year-old female teacher; Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Education Degree in Inclusive Education and Honours Degree in Inclusive Education; 14 years of teaching experience)

Differentiation of instruction

A total of seven participants stated that ability grouping enables them to differentiate work according to the abilities of learners in their different groups. Mr Khazi stated:

'I can give those who are able to do more challenging work [*in their own groups*], and those who are not able to grasp concepts fast, you give them less challenging work, but the concept is the same ...' (52-year-old male educator; Certificate in Education and Bachelor of Education Degree in Inclusive Education; 24 years of teaching experience)

Ms Sekhoto stated that she can change the way of teaching in cases where learners fail to comprehend the question:

'Let's say we have prepared a lesson in a general way. After marking, you will find that this one is struggling. I will go back and make sure I give the instruction in a differentiated way to the groups of learners who are struggling.' (45-year-old female educator; Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Education Degree in Special Needs Education and Honours Degree in Inclusive Education; 19 years of teaching experience)

Facilitates proper use of teaching and learning media

A total of four participants indicated that they felt they could use relevant teaching and learning media designed to meet the needs of learners with special educational needs if they are in a group of their own. These teaching and learning media included objects that allow learners to use their senses, such as sight, touching and listening. Ms Gwala indicated

that learners with challenges in language structures can learn through the use of concrete aids:

'We can use pictures for struggling learners in their groups; we will be showing them the tangible objects so that they will understand. I see them learning better ...' (38-year-old female teacher; Diploma in Education and Bachelor of Education in Special Needs Education; 10 years of teaching experience)

Mr Sithole added:

'I can use counters for challenged learners so that they can touch and see ... Those with special educational needs, when you give them tough concepts and also using the advanced learning materials, they don't participate very well. But if you give them the learning aids which suit their level, they participate ...' (46-year-old male teacher; Certificate in Education and Bachelor of Education Degree in Inclusive Education; 18 years of teaching experience)

On the other hand, Ms Dhlamini stated that she is enabled by using compact discs (CDs) for phonic sounds in reading for those learners who have difficulty in reading whilst others would be working abstractly. She stated:

'Whilst the others who are able are busy ... forming their own sentences, I will be sitting with those who are struggling in their group with a radio ... they listen to a story from different CDs. Maybe that CD is about a certain phonic that we are doing ... they will be listening to that, but they are listening to a story whereby some of the words will be mentioned.' (51-year-old female teacher; Diploma in Education and Bachelor of Education Degree; 23 years of teaching experience)

Problems with ability grouping

Learner labelling was flagged as one of the major challenges inherent in ability grouping, as learners in low-achieving groups were mostly regarded as different from others because of their difficulties in performing tasks that average and above-average learners can do. Consequently, learners in the top-performing groups label learners who are struggling, as they are in groups of their own. This arises because learners in high-achieving groups feel they are academically better than learners from other groups in terms of performance. Three participants from the interviews believed that incidents of learner labelling have been experienced in the classes when learners were in ability groups. Mr Mpofo indicated that learner labelling arose on the basis of learner ability:

'There is labelling that comes with the learners who are doing well in one group and those who are not doing well in one group. Learners who have got challenges when they are in one group, usually other learners call them names basing on that they are not intellectually good. When they are labelled like that, they feel inferior and their confidence is lowered.' (42-year-old male teacher; Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Education Degree and Honours Degree in Inclusive Education; 17 years of teaching experience)

Mr Mofokeng indicated that learners who do well regard those with special educational needs in a demeaning way. He observed that:

'Learners with higher marks [*in a group of their own*], look at those with the least marks in a certain way. For example, a certain learner gets 19/20, then the other learner gets maybe 2/20. That learner with 19/20 might think that "I am better than this one." So he or she might have an attitude to say, "You can't tell me anything because I am better than you."' (40-year-old male teacher; Diploma in Education and Advanced Certificate in Education in Special Needs Education; 14 years of teaching experience)

Although teachers would need to change the group setup in line with learners' performances in different subjects and topics, teachers criticised the lack of time for grouping purposes at the expense of teaching and learning. This occurs against the backdrop that learner performance is not the same across all subjects, yet they are being grouped according to their abilities. Ms Dhlodlo stated that it was difficult to change the groups after every lesson because of time constraints, although it would be the ideal practice to do so:

'I would love to group my learners per subject, but it is difficult when you consider the time that we have. But my groups should not be stagnant for the whole term; they should change now and again depending on the subjects. If I decide, as the teacher, that this week I want to group them according to their English performance, I do that.' (38-year old female educator; Advanced Certificate in Inclusive Education; 11 years of teaching experience)

Learner grouping by ability is practised in subjects such as mathematics, English and isiZulu in Grades 3, 4 and 5. Other subjects that group learners by their abilities include spelling, writing and oral activities. Learners are assessed first and the marks they obtain are used to group them. Top-achieving learners, average learners and the lowest performing learners are placed in separate groups. Groups are not permanent, as they are changed on a fortnightly basis in some cases. However, teachers face challenges in changing the groups because of time constraints.

Discussion

Findings of this study indicated that teachers still view ability grouping as one of the best classroom practices, despite the adoption of the inclusive education policy in South Africa. However, from the inclusive pedagogy perspective, the practice of separating learners and grouping them by ability is perceived as a perpetuation of exclusionary practices (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011). Although learners with special educational needs are enabled to have more drill time, practice and support from teachers, the challenge is that they have been labelled based on what they cannot do (Spratt & Florian 2013). This contradicts one of the principles of inclusive pedagogy, which states that there must not be certain activities for specific learners but that all learners should receive the same activities in the same environments (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011). Du Plooy (2019) averred that ability grouping, whether within class or by streaming, creates different environments within the same classroom or grade, enabling some learners to shine whilst disabling

others, thus compromising the provision of quality education to all learners as envisaged by UNESCO (2005). Grouping learners based on their perceived ability results in gaining differentiated learning experiences and ultimately attaining different learner achievement levels (Du Plooy 2019). Teachers are forced to focus their support more on learners with special educational needs than on other learners in the classroom.

Issues of justice in education are violated if learners are treated differently because of their ability in the classrooms, as learners who are average and above average receive more quality work compared with the content given to learners with special educational needs (Mahlo 2013). Inclusion requires that learners with diverse abilities be taught together in the same groups, conflicting with the findings which indicate that learners should be separated according to their abilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011).

The consequence of grouping learners based on ability is that learners with special educational needs may derive negative views about themselves from the way they are grouped. Learners in lower ability groups may see differences as the norm, yet inclusion is about learners' entitlement to education without discrimination (Bubpha 2014). All learners should be accommodated on an equal basis by erasing discriminatory attitudes and creating welcoming learning environments that respect both the differences and the dignity of all learners (DoE 2001).

Furthermore, findings established that teachers hold the perception that grouping by ability enabled them to give learners with special educational needs more assistance when they are in a group of their own than other learners who are doing well in any aspect of learning and who are in their own groups. However, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argued that the problem with assisting learners separately is that the practice is deeply embedded in the traditional model of disability (medical model), which views disability as a personal constraint that limits the capacity of the learners with special educational needs to participate in normal settings. Inclusion requires that all learners learn and receive extra assistance whilst with their so-called "normal" peers so that they can have a happy social life with others (Bubpha 2014).

This study further established that teachers find it easy to differentiate instruction when learners are grouped by ability, based on the argument that teachers need to account for individual differences in instructional activities (Frederickson & Cline 2011). On the other hand, learning in inclusive groups entails diverse learners sharing and actively listening to each other's different viewpoints, feeling safe and confident to 'express themselves and to know that their perspectives will be valued and respected' (Garibay 2015). Learners' needs have to be addressed within the establishment of an all-inclusive grouping practice (Florian 2015) in order to shift away from the traditional approach of separating learners to accommodate learner diversity. Instructional

differentiation becomes valuable when it is used elastically and creatively rather than as an unsophisticated 'linear means' of sorting learners into ability groups (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011).

The presence of diverse learners in the classroom implies the need for the provision of teaching and learning media that address the unique needs of individual learners. Findings indicate that teachers perceive grouping learners by their abilities as an effective route to the provision of appropriate concrete teaching and learning media that learners with special educational need to require. Teaching and learning media can increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of learners with special educational needs (Vaughn, Bos & Schumm 2011). Teachers can use charts, compact discs, abacuses and other concrete objects according to the areas of need for those with special educational needs. The provision of teaching and learning media reflects well on the principle of inclusion, which calls for the need to avail such media to learners with special educational needs in order to maximise learning. However, the transition into the inclusion era necessitates that rich environments should be created within the learning centres for learners of different abilities to learn through manipulation (DoE 2014). The provision of teaching and learning media should be extended from what is ordinarily available to all learners in the class, rather than making 'different' or 'additional' provisions for some individuals who might be experiencing difficulties in their learning (Florian & Black-Hawkins 2011).

Recommendations

Successful inclusion involves restructuring classrooms to meet all learners' individual needs (Frederickson & Cline 2011). Teachers are expected to engage in classroom practices that are inclusive in line with the policy on inclusion. Grouping practices should not only focus on improving the levels of academic achievement of learners in regular classes, as this can lead to the social exclusion of some learners on the basis of their levels of achievements in these regular classrooms. From this perspective, ability grouping should be done away with as it promotes the labelling of some learners. Negative labels demean learners who may develop low self-esteem, which could lead to their withdrawal from both academic and social activities in the classroom. Differentiated instruction must be provided within an inclusive grouping practice in the regular classroom and must focus on offering learners with special educational needs work that they are able to complete within the allocated time.

The proposed model of an inclusive grouping practice in regular classrooms should have seven key issues that must be considered when grouping learners for inclusion in regular classrooms. These seven key issues relate to small group sizes, the age of learners, the gender of learners, learners from different backgrounds, the ability level of learners, resource provisions and differentiated instruction;

all these must be key features of every grouping practice in the regular classrooms.

Learners may possess more than one characteristic from the given list. For example, one learner may be struggling in terms of academic achievement but may have a higher age than the average learners in the class and come from a different background from most of the learners in the class. Different learner characteristics should be considered, and all diverse learners should be found within one grouping practice for it to be inclusive.

Conclusion

The study was aimed at establishing the perceptions of regular classroom teachers on the use of ability grouping practices considering the policy on inclusion in Johannesburg metropolitan regular primary schools. Qualitative methodology was used and ten participants were purposefully sampled. Findings established that ability grouping enabled teachers to give more assistance to learners with special educational needs, provided opportunities to differentiate instruction and enabled the provision of teaching and learning media that were appropriate for learner needs. However, the observed benefits of ability grouping are not in line with inclusion, as it is practised by separating learners, a feature that perpetuates the exclusion of some learners. Incidents of learner labelling were established, which can lead to learners with special educational needs losing confidence in their learning abilities. A model for an inclusive grouping practice has been proposed that allows for learners diverse in age, gender, background, ability and with the need for more teaching and learning media and differentiated instruction to be grouped together in the same group.

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Authors' contributions

This article emerged from N.H.'s Doctor of Education thesis that was supervised by N.T.P. While N.H. received guidance from the N.T.P. on article writing, the actual writing of the article was carried out by N.H.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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