Teachers' Perspectives on Grouping Poorly Performing Learners in the Same Classroom

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Abstract: Grouping poorly performing learners together in classrooms is a widespread yet contentious practice, often adopted to address diverse academic needs but criticised for perpetuating inequities. Limited studies focus on teachers' perspectives, particularly in South Africa, where resource constraints and systemic pressures complicate classroom management. Thus, this study examines teachers' perspectives on grouping poorly performing learners in the same classroom. Grounded in Vygotsky's Theory of Social Development, the study applies the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding to evaluate how grouping aligns with or contradicts social constructivist principles of peer-assisted learning. Adopting a transformative paradigm, the study employs a qualitative exploratory design to analyse teachers' views shared on TikTok. The population comprised 346 publicly available comments on a video discussing classroom grouping; through purposive sampling, 32 comments were selected for relevance and diversity. Thematic analysis was used to code and interpret data, ensuring rigour via an audit trail and iterative theme refinement. Findings revealed, among others, the following key themes: simplifying instruction and classroom management; targeted teaching and curriculum pacing; influence of school policies and systemic pressures; challenges and drawbacks of grouping poor performers; and alternative strategies and perspectives. While teachers perceived short-term benefits, the practice often undermined peer learning and inclusivity. The study recommends professional development for differentiated instruction, mixed-ability grouping to leverage peer scaffolding, and policy reforms to address systemic barriers. By bridging theory and practice, the findings advocate for strategies that balance managerial needs with equitable, constructivist pedagogy.

Keywords: Classroom grouping, educational strategies, teacher perspectives, social constructivism.

1. Introduction

Grouping learners by ability level remains a widely debated practice in contemporary education, with scholars divided on its pedagogical value and social consequences. At its core, ability grouping involves organising students into homogeneous clusters based on academic performance, a practice justified by its potential to allow targeted instruction and improved classroom management (Anthony & Hunter, 2017; Plooy, 2019). Proponents argue that such grouping can benefit learners by enabling educators to tailor instruction to specific skill levels, with research indicating meaningful achievement growth among gifted students when grouped together (Brulles et al., 2010). The theoretical benefits extend to all learners through differentiated pacing, reduced frustration, and more focused teacher attention, particularly in contexts where classrooms have wide ability ranges (Busso & Frisancho, 2023).

However, the challenges of ability grouping are equally well-documented. While tracking and bimodal grouping show modest average learning gains (0.08 standard deviations), these benefits disproportionately favour high-achieving students while offering no significant improvement for struggling learners (Busso & Frisancho, 2023). The practice often leads to unintended social consequences, as low-ability children become particularly vulnerable to negative social comparisons and stigmatisation (Webb-Williams, 2021). Furthermore, ability grouping tends to reinforce

socioeconomic disparities by creating rigid academic hierarchies that limit mobility between groups (Zubair et al., 2023). Teachers themselves report the complexity of these practices, noting how schools frequently adapt grouping strategies in ways that may not align with research evidence (Taylor et al., 2020).

In the South African context, where this study focuses, the dynamics of grouping poorly performing students remain understudied despite the country's unique challenges of educational inequality and resource constraints. International research highlights how ability grouping often fails to address the needs of struggling learners while potentially exacerbating achievement gaps—a concern particularly relevant in South Africa's unequal education system (Zubair et al., 2023). The current study seeks to address this gap by examining teachers' perspectives on grouping practices through the lens of social media discourse, building on existing scholarship about ability grouping's mixed outcomes and social implications. This research contributes to ongoing debates about equitable pedagogical approaches for diverse classrooms by focusing on educator viewpoints in a resource-constrained environment. Thus, the study seeks to respond to the following main research question: *Why do teachers group poorly performing learners in the same or one classroom*? and objectives:

- To explore teachers' perspectives on grouping poorly performing learners.
- To understand the challenges of this classroom placement strategy from the teachers' point of view.
- To examine alternative grouping strategies and teacher perspectives on mixed-ability classes, individualised support, and inclusive practices.

2. Theoretical Framing

This study employs Social Constructivism, drawing on Vygotsky's Theory of Social Development and concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. Social Constructivism is a learning theory that emphasises the role of social interaction and cultural context in the construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Cole, 1996). According to this theory, learners actively construct their understanding of the world through experiences and interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is characterised as a collaborative process wherein meaning is co-constructed through dialogue, negotiation, and shared activities (Pritchard & Woollard, 2013). Social Constructivism is closely associated with Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist who developed the Theory of Social Development. Vygotsky's work concentrated on the social origins of higher mental functions, and he is renowned for introducing concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978).

At the core of Social Constructivism lies the fundamental premise that learning is inherently a social process, whereby knowledge is not merely transmitted but actively constructed through meaningful interactions and collaborative engagement (Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective challenges traditional notions of learning as an individual pursuit, instead emphasising how cognitive development emerges through dialogue, shared activities, and negotiated understanding within communities of learners. Notably, this social process of learning is deeply embedded in cultural contexts, as Vygotsky (1978) and Cole (1996) contend; the tools, values, and belief systems of a society fundamentally shape how individuals derive meaning from their experiences. This cultural mediation elucidates why learning manifests differently across contexts and underscores that educational approaches cannot be divorced from their social milieu. The theory introduces two particularly powerful concepts that have transformed pedagogical practice: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. The ZPD represents the critical space between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with guidance, highlighting the social nature of cognitive growth (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding operationalises this concept through the intentional, temporary support provided by teachers or more capable peers, which is gradually withdrawn as learners develop competence (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978). Collectively, these assumptions form a coherent

framework that positions learning as a dynamic, socially situated process in which development occurs through guided participation in culturally valued activities, rather than isolated knowledge acquisition. This has profound implications for classroom practice, particularly concerning how we structure collaborative learning environments and design instructional support.

Social Constructivism is pertinent to this study as it provides a framework for understanding how teachers perceive the grouping of poorly performing learners within the classroom. The theory facilitates exploration of whether teachers view this practice as fostering a collaborative learning environment where students may support one another and receive more targeted assistance (Pritchard & Woollard, 2013). Furthermore, it aligns with the investigation into teachers' rationale, which may be grounded in the belief that grouping can facilitate scaffolding and learning within the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

3. Materials and Methods

I adopt a transformative paradigm, which aligns with the qualitative approach and exploratory design used in this study. The transformative paradigm is appropriate as it focuses on understanding participants' subjective experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Brown & Dueñas, 2020). This paradigm allows the researcher to explore teachers' perspectives on grouping poorly performing learners in the same classroom. A qualitative approach was suitable for gaining in-depth insights into the lived experiences and nuanced understandings of teachers, particularly as expressed in their own words through non-numerical data (Saunders et al., 2019; Haki & Prahastiwi, 2024). The exploratory design further supports this aim by allowing for a flexible and open-ended examination of an under-researched phenomenon—why teachers group poorly performing learners together (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2009). This design is particularly useful when the problem is not clearly defined, as it facilitates a comprehensive exploration of social behaviours and attitudes within their real-life context (Saunders et al., 2019). Together, this approach and design enable the study to contribute to both empirical knowledge and theoretical understanding by explaining how and why teachers think and act as they do in response to classroom challenges. The research involved thematically analysing teachers' perspectives as expressed in comments under a video posted on the TikTok social media platform.

The study utilised a publicly available TikTok video as its primary data source, serving as a naturalistic discussion platform for teachers to share their perspectives on grouping practices. The video, posted by an educational content creator, posed a direct question to viewers: "Why do teachers group poorly performing learners in the same classroom?" This open-ended prompt generated organic responses from educators across various teaching contexts. The video did not specify any particular learner age group, allowing for responses that encompass different educational experiences.

The video achieved significant engagement metrics, accumulating 72,000 views, 3,806 likes, and 155 shares during its active period. Most importantly, this study generated 346 comments from participating educators. Data collection occurred over a three-month period (specify months/year if available) to allow for comprehensive response generation and to reach theoretical saturation—the point at which new comments ceased to provide substantially different perspectives on the research question. From the total of 346 comments, 32 were selected for in-depth analysis through purposive sampling. Although formal employment records could not be verified, the combination of professional content in the comments served as a reasonable proxy for active teacher status. Participants demonstrating a consistent educational perspective across multiple comments, engagement with other teachers' responses, grade-level-specific examples, and contextual factors such as class size were prioritised.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Free State (Ethical Clearance number: UFS-HSD2024/1769). Participants were not assured of anonymity, as the data collected is publicly available on social media and did not require permission for use. However, this study collected no personal identifiers such as names, emails, or phone numbers, and used pseudonyms to refer to the participants in presenting the results (Participant P1-P32). This ensures the confidentiality and privacy of participants, adhering to ethical research standards (BERA, 2018).

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method, which provided a structured yet flexible approach to identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data. The process began with familiarisation, during which I read through all 346 comment responses multiple times, taking notes and recording initial impressions to identify emerging ideas related to teachers' perspectives on grouping poorly performing learners in the same classroom. Following this, I generated initial codes manually by systematically examining each comment and highlighting significant segments of text without using qualitative data analysis software. These codes were then organised into potential themes by grouping similar concepts; for instance, responses referencing "unmanageable" or "disruption" were grouped under the broader theme of "Classroom Management." The third step involved developing preliminary thematic maps to explore relationships between codes and themes. In the reviewing phase, I revisited both the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure each theme accurately reflected the data, making iterative refinements as necessary. I then defined and named the themes, developing clear descriptions that captured the scope and relevance of each theme in relation to the study's research questions. The final step involved producing a comprehensive thematic report, supported by illustrative participant quotes and interpreted through the lens of Social Constructivism—particularly Vygotsky's Theory of Social Development, including the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. To ensure credibility and dependability, the study maintained an audit trail and provided thick descriptions of both the data and its context, enabling transparency, transferability, and replicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. **Presentation of Results and Discussion**

This section presents the key findings that address the study's central research question: *Why do teachers group poorly performing learners in the same classroom?* The discussion is structured around three core objectives: (1) to explore teachers' perspectives on grouping poorly performing learners, (2) to understand the challenges of this classroom placement strategy from the teachers' point of view, and (3) to examine alternative grouping strategies, as well as teacher perspectives on mixed-ability classes, individualised support, and inclusive practices.

4.1 Teachers' perspectives on grouping poorly performing learners in the same classroom

This section responds to the first objective by examining teachers' rationales for grouping poorly performing learners together. Three sub-themes emerged: Simplifying Instruction and Classroom Management, Targeted Teaching and Curriculum Pacing, and Influence of School Policies and Systemic Pressures.

4.1.1 Simplifying instruction and classroom management

Grouping poorly performing learners together simplifies classroom management and instruction by allowing teachers to focus on a uniform level of performance and behaviour. Several participants expressed that this practice reduces disruptions and improves the learning environment for high-performing students. This strategy is supported by Zólyomi (2022), who advocates for differentiated instruction that meets learners where they are. Ability grouping in education allows for tailored teaching strategies, enhancing classroom management by minimising the challenges of mixed-ability settings. This approach can improve academic performance, particularly for high-achieving students,

as evidenced by studies showing significant learning gains in homogeneous classrooms (Busso & Frisancho, 2023).

P (23) explained, *"When they are all in the same group, I don't need to juggle different levels at once. I can focus on one lesson and ensure they all get it before moving on."* P (16) indicates that this grouping assists in separating learners who may *"badly influence the smart kids and cause havoc and disturbances in the classroom, as these kids don't care about their school work and lead to demotivation of performing learners."* P (5) and P (17) concur that keeping them separate is better because if they are *"mixed with performing learners, their class becomes unmanageable; sometimes poor-performing learners drag high-performing learners down"* because *"they also get frustrated, become restless and start disruptions from boredom."* P (27) shared, *"This grouping assists in separating learners that may badly influence the smart kids and cause havoc and disturbances in the classroom, as these kids don't care about their school work and lead to demotivation of performing learners."* In addition, P (9) highlighted that *"it's not about marks from what I saw; it's about trying to divide naughty learners from each other so that not all naughty learners are in one class and behaviour can't spill over."*

The statements above reflect the logistical advantage of grouping poorly performing learners, as it allows the teacher to concentrate on a specific level of comprehension without being pulled in multiple directions (Ziernwald et al., 2022). From an educational standpoint, the teacher can deliver content more effectively to a homogeneous group, ensuring everyone keeps up with the lesson before progressing. The above highlights the teacher's concern for maintaining a conducive learning environment, especially for higher-performing students who might be distracted or demotivated by poorly performing peers. This speaks to balancing academic performance with behavioural management in mixed-ability classrooms (Busso & Frisancho, 2023). Furthermore, the above points to the challenge of catering to different learning speeds and abilities within the same classroom. Educationally, this highlights a key issue in mixed-ability classrooms, ensuring that all students are engaged and challenged appropriately without causing frustration for either group.

The participant statement aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding, where teachers provide support at a level appropriate for learners within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). When students are at a similar level, the teacher can scaffold instruction more efficiently, focusing on collective needs. However, scholars such as Zubair and Dukmak (2023) argue that mixed-ability groups encourage cognitive development through peer collaboration, which is absent in segregated groups. Regarding social constructivism, Vygotsky's (1978) theory emphasises the role of social interaction in learning. Therefore, by segregating poorly performing students, teachers limit opportunities for these students to engage in positive, peer-mediated learning experiences that could improve both behaviour and academic outcomes. Scaffolding, in this case, is restricted to teacher intervention rather than peer support, which could lead to missed opportunities for social learning (Pritchard & Woollard, 2013; Palincsar, 1998).

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of ZPD is particularly relevant in a mixed-ability classroom; higher-performing students may be left without appropriate scaffolding if the teacher focuses on the lower-performing learners, leading to disengagement and boredom. Conversely, homogeneous grouping may provide more focused scaffolding but at the cost of reducing the richness of peer interactions that can facilitate learning across abilities. Considering the above, I argue that managing classroom frustration and boredom in mixed-ability settings requires a nuanced approach. Grouping students based on performance may provide short-term relief from these challenges. However, teachers should also consider differentiated instruction strategies within mixed groups to maintain engagement and foster positive peer interactions.

4.1.2 Targeted teaching and curriculum pacing

A key reason for grouping poorly performing learners is to provide targeted teaching and adjust the curriculum pace to suit their learning needs better. Teachers believe this strategy allows them to slow

down the lesson plan, ensuring that these learners do not fall behind. This practice is supported by Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism theory, particularly the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. According to Vygotsky, learners benefit most from tasks beyond their current level of independent functioning, achievable with support from teachers or peers. By grouping poorly performing learners, teachers aim to provide the appropriate scaffolding within the ZPD, helping students progress without feeling overwhelmed by the faster pace of higher-performing classmates (Nazerian et al., 2020).

P(3) commented, *"It helps because I can go over the same topic more than once without worrying about holding anyone back. These students need extra time to grasp some concepts."* This statement suggests that teachers believe poorly performing learners require repeated exposure to content, which may not be feasible in mixed-ability classrooms. This echoes Vygotsky's idea of providing learners with the time and support necessary to internalise concepts within their ZPD. Similarly, P(25) mentioned, *"They should not delay those who are doing well. They are free when they are alone and can learn at their own pace."* This statement underscores the teachers' perception that grouping students with similar learning speeds prevents higher-achieving students from being held back. According to this participant, the freedom to progress at their own pace helps the weaker learners, aligning with the scaffolding concept, where individualised support is better managed when learners with similar needs are in the same group.

Conversely, P(15) highlighted a different view, stating, *"We can mix them and still create time for those top achievers separately. Top achievers don't need to be taught. They want to discuss their misunderstandings most of the time."* This perspective challenges the segregation approach, suggesting that high achievers benefit from mixed groups but require different types of engagement, such as discussions rather than instruction. This indicates the need for flexible differentiation strategies, even within mixed-ability groups, which some scholars argue can enhance peer learning (Robert, 2016). Further supporting the notion of tailored pacing, P(29) pointed out that *"learners who grasp information quickly get irritated when the same thing is being repeated."* This reinforces the idea that mixed-ability classrooms can frustrate high achievers, reducing their engagement and motivation, which Ziernwald et al. (2022) warn may occur in undifferentiated instruction as teachers typically do not use it proactively or regularly.

The educational significance of these statements points to the challenge of balancing curriculum pacing in mixed-ability classrooms. Teachers face the dilemma of either progressing slowly to accommodate lower performers or pushing forward, potentially leaving some students behind. The participants' views illustrate the complexity of differentiation, which requires careful planning and instructional agility. Ziernwald et al. (2022) and Roberts (2016) support differentiation, arguing that it allows for tailored instruction that meets diverse learners' needs, a concept mirrored by the participants' comments on adjusting teaching strategies and lesson pacing for low-performing students.

Concerning Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism and the concept of the ZPD, these statements show that teachers aim to create a learning environment where scaffolding is possible. By grouping learners at a similar developmental level, teachers can provide targeted assistance that helps learners move from what they can do with help to what they can do independently. This aligns with Vygotsky's assertion that instruction should be closely matched to the learner's current developmental stage to be effective (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, scaffolding becomes easier when students work within the same ZPD, allowing teachers to apply strategies that fit their learning needs.

The participants' statements and the scholarly discussion above indicate a practical tension in teaching. While some advocate for mixed-ability classrooms where students can learn from each other, others argue that grouping poorly performing learners together allows for better pacing and

more focused interventions. In light of Social Constructivism, it becomes clear that teachers value grouping strategies that allow them to scaffold effectively within the learners' ZPD. However, mixed-ability settings may offer benefits too, particularly when teachers can differentiate instruction in ways that engage all learners.

Ultimately, the decision to group learners based on performance or to maintain mixed-ability classrooms depends on the teachers' ability to balance these factors. The challenge lies in how differentiation can be implemented to cater to all students without sacrificing the needs of those at different levels of understanding. This debate resonates with broader educational issues concerning equity and inclusion, where the ideal solution may involve hybrid approaches that provide differentiated instruction while maintaining the social benefits of mixed-ability classrooms.

4.1.3 Influence of school policies and systemic pressures

Teachers' decision-making regarding student placement is often shaped by external forces such as school management teams (SMT), resource limitations, curriculum demands, and systemic constraints, rather than purely pedagogical considerations. This subheading directly addresses the research question by focusing on how institutional pressures contribute to the practice of grouping poorly performing learners.

A Theory of School and Classroom Organisation by Slavin (2013) provides a framework for understanding how policies and hierarchical decisions impact classroom dynamics. Due to administrative and systemic constraints, teachers often have limited autonomy in deciding how to group learners. Al-Thani (2024) also discusses the impact of educational policies and how they are interpreted and implemented by different stakeholders, often leading to practices that may not align with the best interests of the students. These systemic factors challenge the ideal learning conditions advocated by Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, where the focus should be on tailoring instruction to individual learners' needs through scaffolding.

P(2) noted, *"We don't always have the resources to manage big numbers as the department expects one adult to be responsible for more than 40 learners."* This statement underscores the strain that systemic resource shortages place on educators, which in turn influences the grouping of learners. With such large class sizes, individualised instruction becomes nearly impossible, leading to the need to group poorly performing learners to manage them more effectively. This reflects broader issues in educational infrastructure that impede the provision of differentiated instruction.

P(26) added, *"It's the SMT (School Management Team) that does placements, not the Post level 1 (PL1) teachers."* This comment highlights the lack of teacher autonomy in student placement decisions, as administrative bodies often dictate these. Similarly, P(7) indicated that *"in those meetings, it's all about power play 👊 not the kids or teachers… it's about their egos."* This perspective reveals internal politics within schools, suggesting that decisions may be based on personal power dynamics rather than what is pedagogically best for students.

Further complicating the issue, P(24) noted, "*teachers reshuffle learners because they also know nothing about inclusive education.*" This comment points to a gap in teacher training regarding inclusive practices, which contributes to the perpetuation of grouping poorly performing learners together. The lack of professional development in inclusive education leaves teachers ill-equipped to manage diverse classrooms, forcing them to resort to strategies like grouping students by performance.

The challenges are also compounded by curriculum design, as P(11) highlighted: *"No, the curriculum caters for clever learners, it's too fast for slow learners. Topics are not repeated like in the previous years."* This statement draws attention to systemic pressures from a curriculum that moves at a pace too rapid for slower learners, reinforcing the need to group these learners separately. The rigidity of the curriculum further limits teachers' ability to scaffold learning appropriately for all students.

Additionally, there are issues of school leadership and administration that directly affect teacher morale and classroom decisions. P(19) stated, "*At a certain school, they place all slow learners in one class to spite the class teacher, so that they embarrass you in a staff meeting via analysis of results. Management is toxic, yoh 💔 💔.*" This comment points to the toxic culture within some school environments, where decisions are made based on personal vendettas rather than student welfare. It also reflects how systemic pressures can demoralise teachers and distort educational practices.

Finally, P(20) highlighted, "*It's not teachers, though, who do placements. Trust me when I tell you it frustrates us just as much, and we'd all love performing students to balance that frustration.*" This underscores how teachers feel powerless in the face of systemic pressures and policies that dictate their classroom practices, limiting their ability to create balanced learning environments.

These participant statements highlight several critical issues in education, particularly the role of policy and systemic pressures in shaping classroom practices. Teachers often find themselves constrained by decisions made by school management teams, curriculum designers, and the broader education system, which may not always align with best pedagogical practices. The grouping of poorly performing learners is often a response to these constraints, where teachers feel forced to compromise due to resource limitations, lack of autonomy, and an inadequate curriculum structure.

From an educational perspective, this raises questions about the alignment between policy and practice. If policies do not consider the realities of classroom management and student diversity, they may inadvertently promote practices detrimental to student learning. The participant (P11) who mentioned that "*the curriculum caters for clever* learners" reflects a systemic issue where the curriculum fails to accommodate the full spectrum of learner abilities, thereby necessitating practices like grouping poorly performing students together.

The participants' concerns resonate with the arguments made by scholars like Al-Thani (2024) and Angrist and Dercon (2024), who argue that educational policies are often implemented in ways that reflect bureaucratic priorities rather than pedagogical principles. The disconnect between policy and classroom realities forces teachers into compromising positions, where they may be unable to implement the best teaching practices.

Similarly, Slavin (2013) emphasises that the school's organisational structure often dictates classroom arrangements, sometimes at the expense of students' educational needs. As a result, teachers have to navigate these institutional pressures, which may limit their ability to provide individualised instruction or engage in more inclusive practices. The statements from participants reflect this challenge, as they point out how administrative decisions override teacher input, leading to the systematic grouping of poorly performing learners. Despite these challenges, some argue that the involvement of educators as key policy actors can bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring that educational reforms genuinely benefit students (Ryan et al., 2020).

Vygotsky's (1978) theory emphasises the importance of social interaction and scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners are supported to reach higher levels of understanding through interaction with more knowledgeable others. However, systemic pressures and policies often prevent the realisation of these ideals in the classroom. For instance, when teachers are assigned large classes and given little control over student placement, their ability to scaffold learning is compromised.

As described by participants, the systemic placement of poorly performing learners in one group limits opportunities for these learners to engage with higher-achieving peers, which could otherwise facilitate cognitive growth. In this way, school policies contradict the principles of Social Constructivism, which emphasise mixed-ability interaction and the benefits of peer-assisted learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

While Vygotsky's Social Constructivism advocates for peer learning and scaffolded support within mixed-ability classrooms, systemic pressures often force teachers to adopt more rigid, less inclusive practices. The mismatch between educational policy and the realities of classroom management exacerbates these issues, leaving teachers to manage the consequences. Therefore, a critical reevaluation of how policies are designed and implemented is necessary to bridge this gap, enabling teachers to create more dynamic and inclusive learning environments that support all learners.

4.2 Challenges and drawbacks of grouping poor performers in the same classroom

Grouping poor-performing learners in the same classroom often leads to unintended consequences. Thus, this section addresses the second objective by analysing the challenges and drawbacks of grouping poorly performing learners together. Six sub-themes emerged: stigmatisation and labelling, reduced motivation and lack of competition, misconceptions about learner ability, behavioural challenges and classroom management issues, feelings of neglect and marginalisation, and missed opportunities for peer learning and scaffolding. Feedback from participants sheds light on these practical and emotional consequences, resonating with the overarching research question.

Grouping learners based on performance has been widely debated in education. According to Slavin (2013), such grouping can exacerbate academic inequalities by reinforcing a fixed mindset, which impedes growth. Additionally, Saleh et al. (2007) argue that ability grouping can reduce student confidence and engagement, while mixed-ability groups offer opportunities for peer learning. This debate is closely tied to Vygotsky's theory of Social Constructivism, which emphasises the importance of mixed-ability settings to foster collaborative learning and the scaffolding process in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

4.2.1 Stigmatisation and labelling

P(30) observed, the emotional toll of being labelled as a poor performer and indicated "*that's so unfair; it creates a stigma against learners who perform poorly* 💔 💔," highlighting how grouping poorly performing students fosters an environment where learners feel labelled and stigmatised. This stigma can damage their self-esteem and negatively affect their willingness to engage in learning activities, aligning with Saleh et al. (2007) findings on the emotional consequences of ability grouping.

4.2.2 Reduced motivation and lack of competition

Stigmatisation in classrooms can reinforce negative self-perceptions, hindering academic growth and motivation. P(4) added, "*I do understand that aspect, but I think it makes learners to be in their comfort zone, there is no competition, and everyone is getting levels 1's or 2's.*" This statement underscores the lack of motivation in classrooms where poorly performing learners are grouped. The absence of competition or higher-performing peers to model success means these learners may not feel challenged to improve and, as a result, remain stuck in low achievement levels. This observation aligns with Slavin's (2013) argument that competitive yet supportive mixed-ability environments promote higher academic engagement.

4.2.3 Misconceptions about learner ability

Teachers may misinterpret underperformance as a lack of intelligence rather than a need for support. P(13) commented, "*They can't be managed on their own. I think if you can mix them, but have a well-planned setting plan, it will be much better. Most of them are just lazy, not slow.*" This speaks to the misconception that poor performers are inherently slow learners. It suggests that proper classroom management and structured support could encourage better participation. This relates to Vygotsky's ZPD, which proposes that with appropriate scaffolding from teachers and peers, learners can perform at higher levels than they could on their own. Mixed-ability grouping supports this scaffolding process, whereas isolating poor performers deprives them of this essential learning opportunity.

4.2.4 Behavioural challenges and classroom management issues

Participants raised concerns about behavioural disruptions in classrooms composed entirely of struggling learners. P (1) reflected on the long-term consequences of this practice, stating, "*It is not effective because in that school learners are still performing badly, they misbehave, and they do not complete their homework.*" This highlights the behavioural challenges in classrooms solely populated by poorly performing learners. Without external motivation or exposure to positive academic role models, learners may engage in disruptive behaviour or fail to meet academic expectations. This statement echoes Vollet et al.'s (2017) research, which found that peer group engagement and teacher involvement uniquely predict changes in students' engagement, with engaged peer groups partially buffering students' engagement from the effects of low teacher involvement. This means that students in lower-ability groups often face lower teacher expectations, which can lead to disengagement and poor performance. P (32) and P (6) expressed similar concerns: "*The learners in those classes do not care, they misbehave a lot, they do not complete their home-works. It is a disaster 😭 😭 💔*" and "*But a classroom of learners who are struggling is a disaster, they always make noise, there is no competition, yoh, they are all in their comfort zones 💔.*" These comments reiterate that isolating poor performers may create a chaotic learning environment without incentive for students to improve. When learners are grouped without clear goals, structure, or role models, they are more likely to feel disconnected from their education, hindering their academic and behavioural progress.

4.2.5 Feelings of neglect and marginalisation

P (28) explained further: "*That mostly happens when the separated group feels neglected.*" The neglect described here points to a significant issue where these learners feel marginalised, reinforcing their disengagement and lack of motivation. Vygotsky's theory highlights the importance of social interaction for cognitive development, and if learners feel neglected or excluded, they are less likely to benefit from meaningful learning experiences.

The participants' statements reflect deep concerns about the effectiveness of grouping poorly performing learners together. The main educational issue raised is the stigmatisation and lack of motivation often arising in such settings. When learners are separated based on their academic performance, they may internalise negative labels, leading to disengagement and poor behaviour. Moreover, the absence of higher-performing peers removes opportunities for struggling students to learn through peer modelling and competition, which are essential for fostering a productive learning environment.

From an educational perspective, the challenge lies in balancing the needs of poorly performing learners with the benefits of mixed-ability teaching. While grouping by performance may seem like a practical solution to manage classroom behaviour, it ultimately undermines opportunities for cognitive development. As Al-Thani (2024) noted, mixed-ability classes can promote deeper learning through interaction with diverse peers, enabling struggling learners to achieve more than they would in isolated settings.

Slavin (2013) and Ziernwald et al. (2022) strongly critique the practice of ability grouping, arguing that it reinforces inequalities and hinders the social interaction necessary for cognitive growth. They assert that mixed-ability classrooms provide a richer learning environment where struggling learners can benefit from the knowledge and motivation of their higher-performing peers. Additionally, Vollet et al. (2017) found that learners in lower-ability groups often suffer from lower teacher expectations, further hampering their academic progress. These perspectives align with the participants' concerns about stigmatisation, lack of motivation, and behavioural challenges in classrooms where poorly performing learners are grouped.

4.2.6 Missed opportunities for peer learning and scaffolding

The participants' statements are highly relevant to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of Social Constructivism, particularly the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. According to Vygotsky, learners develop best when they can interact with peers who are slightly ahead of them in terms of understanding and skills. This interaction enables them to work within their ZPD, where they can achieve higher levels of understanding with support. However, grouping poorly performing learners denies them the opportunity to benefit from this peer interaction and scaffolding, as they are only surrounded by others at the same or lower performance levels.

Additionally, the participants' concerns about stigmatisation and neglect reflect the social aspect of Vygotsky's (1978) theory. Learning is a social process, and when learners feel marginalised or labelled as "*poor* performers," their sense of belonging and motivation to learn diminishes. Mixed-ability classrooms, where students can engage with peers across various abilities, offer more opportunities for social interaction, fostering academic and emotional growth. In light of the participants' feedback and the supporting scholarship, it becomes clear that grouping poorly performing learners in the same classroom has significant drawbacks. These include stigmatisation, disengagement, behavioural issues, and a lack of motivation. While such grouping may seem like a practical solution for managing classrooms, it ultimately undermines the principles of Social Constructivism, which emphasise the importance of peer interaction, scaffolding, and learning within the Zone of Proximal Development.

I support the idea that mixed-ability settings, when managed well, are far more conducive to cognitive development and emotional well-being. Therefore, education systems should reconsider practices that isolate poorly performing learners and instead focus on creating inclusive, supportive classrooms where learners of all abilities can interact, collaborate, and grow. This approach aligns with both Vygotsky's theoretical framework and contemporary educational research, emphasising the value of diversity in the classroom.

4.3 Alternative strategies and perspectives

In this section, I explore alternative strategies for grouping poorly performing learners in one classroom and examine diverse teacher perspectives on mixed-ability grouping, individualised attention, and inclusive practices. This highlights the complexity of the issue and suggests various ways to approach the challenge of improving learner outcomes beyond the default strategy of separating poorly performing students.

4.3.1 Mixed-ability grouping and differentiated instruction

The debate around alternative strategies for grouping stems from differing views on whether mixed-ability classrooms offer better outcomes than ability grouping. Devi (2023), a key proponent of differentiated instruction, argues that mixed-ability classrooms allow teachers to tailor instruction to meet diverse student needs while fostering collaborative learning based on students' strengths, weaknesses, and interests, ensuring that each learner receives appropriate support. Collaborative learning is enhanced through differentiated instruction, as students engage in group activities that leverage their diverse skills and perspectives (Mustofa, 2024).

In line with Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivism, mixed groups offer learners opportunities for scaffolding through peer interaction within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), enabling both high- and low-performing learners to benefit from each other's strengths.

4.3.2 Vocational pathways as an alternative strategy

P(10) suggests a vocational pathway for poorly performing learners, stating, "*Poor academic performers must go for technical studies.*" This viewpoint offers an alternative strategy, advocating for vocational education as a solution for learners who may not thrive in conventional academic environments.

Vocational training can provide practical skills and cater to different learning styles, aligning with Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (1989), which suggests that students possess diverse strengths and talents beyond academic performance.

4.3.3 Behavioural influence in mixed-ability settings

P (18) noted, *"They misbehave a lot, hence I feel like if they are mixed with other learners their behaviour will change."* This reflects a belief in the positive influence of peer dynamics. The argument is that exposure to better-behaved and more motivated peers could encourage poorly performing learners to adopt more positive behaviours, resonating with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasises learning through observation and imitation (Boone, 1977). This suggests that students can model and learn positive behaviours from their peers by mixing ability levels, leading to improved classroom management.

4.3.4 Individualised attention through ability grouping

In contrast, P(31) observed, "*Genius learners like grouping themselves...so imagine now poor child now feels dumb because of his/her classmates. I think it's better when they are separated. Low performers are given full attention.*" This suggests that individualised attention is more feasible in ability-grouped classrooms, where teachers can focus exclusively on the needs of poorly performing learners. This echoes Slavin's (2013) research on ability grouping, which argues that targeted instruction can allow teachers to address specific learning gaps. However, this approach also risks reinforcing negative perceptions of ability, potentially affecting self-esteem, as noted in Ziernwald et al. (2022) critique of fixed-ability grouping.

4.3.5 Peer motivation and collaborative learning

Some participants advocated for mixed-ability classrooms, with P(21) stating, "*I don't believe that's okay. They should be mixed together. Learners can get motivation from others.*" This aligns with the idea that mixing learners allows for peer motivation and collaborative learning. This is supported by Vygotsky's ZPD theory, which suggests that learners benefit from interacting with more knowledgeable peers who can scaffold their learning. Mixed-ability groups enable students to help each other, fostering an environment of collaboration rather than competition.

4.3.6 Strategic pairing and classroom management

P(8) shared their practical strategy, stating, "*I use to mix those who can work independently with those who struggle. Those who need intervention were right next to me so I could assist them all the time.*" This highlights the possibility of adopting a differentiated instruction approach within mixed-ability settings. By strategically positioning learners, teachers can provide targeted support while encouraging peer collaboration, a key principle in Zubair and Dukmak's (2023) differentiated instruction framework.

4.3.7 Peer-assisted learning from lived experience

P(22) recalled their school experience*: "I remember we were mixed when I went to school in the '90s and we used to help one another. The teacher used the clever kids to help those who struggled."* This anecdote underscores the power of peer-assisted learning, a strategy rooted in Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction for cognitive development. When students support each other's learning, they engage in mutual scaffolding, allowing both stronger and weaker learners to benefit.

4.3.8 Advocating for inclusive education

P(12) strongly believed in inclusivity, stating, "*It shouldn't be that way. I advocate for inclusivity. I'm an education specialist. We need inclusivity across all schools.*" This reflects a commitment to inclusive education, where learners of all abilities are taught together, aligning with global trends toward educational equity. De Borba (2024) and Singh (2024) argue that inclusive practices ensure that all

students have access to high-quality education, regardless of ability, reinforcing the social justice aspect of education. Inclusive education fosters a sense of belonging and respect among students, which is crucial for their social and emotional development (Singh, 2024).

4.3.9 Peer tutoring and pairing

Finally, P(14) highlighted the pairing strategy used in primary schools: "*In my school, we don't do that, maybe because it's primary. We pair them according to their strengths, e.g., one who excels with one who struggles, so that they can get assistance.*" This example of peer pairing resonates with research on peer tutoring, which has been found to improve outcomes for both the tutor and the learner (Thurston et al., 2021). Peer tutoring allows for more personalised support within a mixed-ability framework, offering primary and secondary educators a practical strategy.

The participants offer diverse perspectives on the issue of grouping poorly performing learners. Some argue for separating learners to provide them with individualised attention, while others advocate for mixed-ability settings to promote inclusivity and collaborative learning. The suggestion to direct poorly performing learners towards technical education reflects a broader societal debate about the value of vocational pathways for students who may not excel in traditional academic subjects. This aligns with Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory, emphasising the need to recognise diverse talents. From an educational policy perspective, this raises important questions about the availability and accessibility of vocational options for learners who may benefit from a more practical, skills-based approach.

The perspective that poorly performing learners' behaviour improves when mixed with higher achievers is consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which suggests that students learn behaviours by observing and imitating peers. This idea implies that placing poorly performing students with well-behaved, motivated peers could be a behavioural intervention. However, this assumes that the positive behaviours of high achievers will outweigh any negative influence from disruptive students, a dynamic that could vary by context.

The argument for separating learners to give them focused attention suggests a desire for a more manageable classroom environment where teachers can address specific needs without being overwhelmed by a diverse range of abilities. However, Al-Thani (2024) noted that separating learners by ability can create a fixed mindset, where learners internalise negative labels, potentially limiting their academic growth. This practice also clashes with the principles of Social Constructivism, which emphasise the importance of peer interaction in fostering cognitive development.

Participants advocating for mixed-ability classrooms suggest that students can be motivated by their peers and benefit from mutual assistance. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and the concept of scaffolding, where learners improve by interacting with peers who are slightly ahead of them in understanding. By fostering a collaborative environment, teachers can leverage the strengths of higher-performing students to support those who struggle.

Some participants highlighted differentiated instruction and peer tutoring as viable strategies within mixed-ability classrooms. Differentiated instruction, supported by Ziernwald et al. (2022), allows teachers to tailor their teaching to the diverse needs of students. As suggested by participants, peer tutoring provides opportunities for learners to support each other, reinforcing the constructivist principle that social interaction enhances learning.

These diverse perspectives tie closely to Vygotsky's Social Constructivism and the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding. Vygotsky's theory suggests that learners benefit from engaging with more knowledgeable peers who can help them reach higher levels of understanding. When poorly performing learners are separated, they lose the opportunity for this kind of peer scaffolding.

Conversely, mixed-ability settings provide a dynamic environment for collaborative learning, where students can support each other in meaningful ways.

The idea of inclusive education, as advocated by some participants, also resonates with social constructivist principles. Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging and ensures that all students can access learning opportunities regardless of ability. This is critical for cognitive and social development, as learners who feel excluded may struggle to engage fully with the educational process.

Considering the participants' feedback and existing research, it is clear that alternative strategies for grouping poorly performing learners should be explored. While separating learners may provide opportunities for focused attention, this approach risks reinforcing negative labels and limiting growth. Mixed-ability classrooms, on the other hand, offer a more inclusive and dynamic environment where learners can benefit from peer interaction and mutual support.

I argue that teachers should adopt flexible, differentiated strategies within mixed-ability settings. This allows for individualised support without the drawbacks of ability grouping. By leveraging peer interaction, scaffolding, and collaborative learning, educators can create a more supportive and effective learning environment for all students, regardless of ability. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's Social Constructivism and contemporary inclusive education trends, ultimately fostering academic and social development.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to investigate why teachers group poorly performing learners together by examining educators' perspectives shared on social media. Through qualitative analysis of teacher comments, we discovered that this practice stems primarily from pragmatic concerns: simplifying instruction, managing classroom behaviour, and protecting high achievers from disruptions. Teachers reported that homogeneous grouping allowed for targeted support and reduced cognitive load in lesson delivery, aligning with findings from Brulles et al. (2010) on the benefits of ability-grouped instruction. However, the study also revealed significant drawbacks, including the reinforcement of ability-based hierarchies (Zubair et al., 2023) and missed opportunities for peer learning, which are central to Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism. Notably, many grouping decisions appeared to be driven by systemic constraints, such as large class sizes and rigid curricula, rather than pedagogical ideals, echoing Taylor et al.'s (2020) observations about the complex realities of classroom organisation. Several limitations qualify these findings. The study's reliance on public social media comments limited the ability to verify participants' teaching credentials or contextual details about their schools. The sample, while insightful, represents only those teachers motivated to discuss this topic publicly on TikTok. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents assessment of how these grouping practices affect long-term student outcomes. Based on these findings, we recommend a multi-pronged approach to improve grouping practices. First, professional development programmes should equip teachers with research-backed strategies for differentiated instruction (Ziernwald et al., 2022) and inclusive classroom management. Schools should pilot mixed-ability grouping models that leverage peer-assisted learning (Thurston et al., 2021), supported by additional resources like teaching assistants where needed. Policymakers must revisit grouping-related policies to better align with evidence about equitable pedagogies, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Future research should employ longitudinal mixed-methods designs to track how different grouping strategies affect both academic outcomes and student motivation across diverse South African schools. By addressing both the practical challenges teachers face and the theoretical imperatives of inclusive education, these measures could help reconcile the tension between managerial efficiency and equitable pedagogy that emerged so prominently in teachers' accounts.

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