

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

Signature

(Amy O'Connor)

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Table of Abbreviations

DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFSTED – Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

DES – Department of Education and Skills

Abstract

The chosen research question is ‘Investigating teachers' perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and exploring the implications for education policy.’ This question aims to explore teachers’ perspectives and experiences of ability grouping within a DEIS band 1 primary school. Elucidation of key factors influencing ability grouping will be explored such as socio-economic status, prior academic attainment, standardised testing, children’s awareness and the focus of the research question, teachers’ perceptions, attitudes and expectations. This study draws on qualitative interviews with eight primary school teachers, including two learning support and one resource teacher. The data provided an understanding of current grouping practices within a DEIS band 1 primary school. Findings conveyed that although children have an awareness of their group assignment and evidence highlights its negative impact, ability grouping practices are still prevalent across DEIS schools. Ability grouping for literacy and numeracy was consistently deemed necessary by the eight interviewees. This identifies a mismatch between departmental aspirations of equity and social inclusion within the classroom and teachers’ advocacy of grouping based on prior academic attainment among other factors. This study found that ability grouping is inadvertently affected by a combination of economic, institutional, and social influences with teachers’ attitudes and expectations having a critical contribution to both the ability grouping process and children’s learner identities. In support of two key contributors to the field of ability grouping, Judith Ireson & Susan Hallam, this study concludes that schools must be cognisant of becoming too fixated by a technical approach to ability grouping and instead focus on fostering dispositions such as positive attitudes towards learning and self-concepts.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Research Context and Rationale

The title chosen for this research study is ‘Investigating Teachers’ Perspectives on Ability Grouping in the Primary School Classroom and Exploring the Implications for Education Policy’. Grouping pupils by ability is a topic of abiding contention in education policy, research and practice (Francis et al., 2016). It has been a subject of research for most of the twentieth century (Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). While advocates maintain the practice raises educational standards, research has consistently failed to find significant benefits of ability grouping, and indeed has conveyed several disadvantages for lower achieving pupils (Hallam & Parsons, 2013b; Schofield, 2010; William & Bartholomew, 2004). Evidence has revealed that movement between ability groups is infrequent, and that children tend to remain at the same level throughout their schooling thus limiting their educational opportunities and effecting their views towards education as a whole (Ball, 1981; Boaler, 1997; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). In addition to this, ability grouping has personal consequences for pupils (Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). However, the aforementioned arguments have failed to alter practice in many Irish primary schools where ability grouping is prevalent and deemed necessary in many cases. This study is contextualised by the researcher’s interest in current ability grouping practices in Ireland, as well as how it indirectly mediates children’s experiences of schooling. It seeks to ascertain teachers’ perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom, encompassing their personal experiences, in order to help shape education policy.

1.2 Research Aims

Within the context this study aims to:

- i.** Make a contribution to the literature apropos of ability grouping in the primary school classroom.
- ii.** Ascertain teachers' perspectives, experiences, and levels of use of structured ability grouping and mixed-ability grouping within the primary school classroom.
- iii.** Explore the impact ability grouping can have on children and how this can mediate their experience of primary school as a result.
- iv.** Identify areas for further study and investigation on the topic of ability grouping as well as implications for education policy.

1.3 Research Questions

The research question which will be explored and reviewed is 'Investigating teachers' perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and exploring the implications for education policy.' Several sub questions guided the enquiry and assisted in creating the qualitative instrument:

- i.** How frequently do teachers organise the learning in their classroom using ability grouping as a mechanism?
- ii.** How is the ability grouping process assessed and monitored?
- iii.** Do teachers experience any external/internal pressures that influence their use of ability grouping?
- iv.** What are the advantages and disadvantages to structured and mixed-ability grouping, from a teacher's perspective?
- v.** Are children impacted by an awareness of ability grouping practices in the classroom?

1.4 Research Design

The composition of the dissertation includes five chapters;

1. Introduction
2. Literature Review
3. Methodology
4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings
5. Conclusion and Recommendations

1.5 Definitions of Key Terminology

For the purpose of this study, it is essential to define the following key terminology:

- i.** Structured Ability Grouping – This term is considered as the organisation of children into groups by teachers, based on standardised testing for the teaching of particular subject areas.
- ii.** Mixed-Ability Grouping – This term is considered as the organisation of children into groups of different ability levels by teachers.
- iii.** DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools is “aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities”. (DES, 2011, p. 1). DEIS provides for a standardised system of identifying levels of disadvantage. DEIS schools are entitled to receive a range of additional resources including additional staffing, funding, and access to literacy and numeracy programmes. There are two categories: DEIS Band 1 (the most marginalised and disadvantaged) and DEIS Band 2.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided the context and rationale for this research study while identifying the prevailing issues. The research question and guiding sub questions were detailed along with the aims of the study. The next chapter will provide an overview of the literature pertinent to ability grouping.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The research question which will be explored and reviewed is ‘Investigating teachers’ perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and exploring the implications for education policy?’ This question has been chosen due to a particular interest by the researcher on the extent to which ability grouping is used in Irish primary schools and how it mediates children’s experiences of schooling. The researcher hopes this study will not only inform her future profession as a primary school teacher, but contribute to the wider evidence base on ability grouping.

Grouping students by ability has been a topic of long-standing contention in educational policy, research and practice (Francis et al., 2016). Early studies by Kulik and Kulik (1982) state “The practice of ability grouping has had a long and a sometimes stormy history” (p. 424). This is supported by two seminal contributors to the field, Ireson and Hallam (2001), who state it been renowned as “a thorny issue, tied to fundamental, often conflicting, ideological positions” (p. 1). It has been a focus of educational research for most of the twentieth century (Hallam, 2002). Since then, copious research studies have been undertaken in this area and there have been many literature reviews and syntheses of research findings (Hallam, 2002; Hallam et al., 2002; Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Harlen & Malcolm, 1997; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Kutnick et al., 2005; Sukhnandan & Lee, 1998). Today, the practice of ability grouping is becoming more and more prevalent in schools (Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). According to Marks (2016), many approaches adopted by teachers take the form of some type of ability-grouping to accommodate

differentiation among a wide attainment range. With respect to the Irish context, a key recommendation of policy is the use of differentiation practices, in the form of ability grouping, as an exemplar of best practice towards improving learning outcomes (DES, 2009).

The literature review chapter will present an overview of the existing research on ability grouping. Using thematic content analysis of the literature, the researcher has identified four prevailing themes:

2.2 Ability in Education

2.3 Pertinent Influential Factors

2.4 Teachers' Attitudes and Expectations

2.5 Impact on Children

2.2 Ability in Education

During the 1990s, an increased emphasis on raising standards in education paralleled a widespread assumption that the optimal way of achieving this was through ability grouping (Hallam & Parsons, 2013a). According to Francis et al. (2016), “ability grouping obfuscates several issues” (p. 2). They postulate that this term confuses educational attainment with an idea of an innate potential academic ‘ability’ which would perceive educational inequalities as natural and inevitable outcomes. In their view, ability is not ascribed or fixed but rather malleable, reflecting a range of societal factors which contribute to educational progress. Their denunciation of the term ‘ability grouping’ is conveyed by stating “Arguably the term is so unhelpful that it should be discarded” (Francis et al., 2016, p. 2). Instead, ‘attainment grouping’ is referred to as an alternative.

With regard to an Irish study conducted on ability grouping within DEIS primary schools in Ireland, McGillicuddy (2013) considers ability grouping as “the organisation of children into groups based on perceived ability” (p. 1). Lynch and Baker (2005) note that “Grouping students on the basis of prior attainment (so-called ‘ability’) is a standard practice in most educational systems” (p. 137). Ireson and Hallam (2001) justify that from an organisational perspective, structured ability grouping minimises the range of abilities within a class which in turn allows the teacher to plan for their students’ academic needs more effectively. However, concerning negative effects on students in the lower groups have emerged consequentially which will be discussed in theme 2.5.

An alternative to structured ability grouping is mixed-ability. Ireson and Hallam (2001, p. 12) provide a comprehensive overview of mixed-ability grouping;

Mixed ability grouping is based on the recognition that children have different strengths and weaknesses and develop at different rates. It also provides equal opportunities to learn for all pupils, who follow the same curriculum, and are provided with the same instruction, resources and learning activities. Mixed ability teaching places greater demands on the teacher and requires extra curriculum resources.

Gregory (1986) reaffirms this demanding role of the teacher in mixed-ability grouping settings. He states that successful mixed ability grouping is dependent on the teacher being able to differentiate their teaching to all ability levels. Early research conveys this ideal has not translated into practice in many school settings (Kerry & Sands, 1984). Studies focused on the observation of teachers in the classroom revealed that teachers often teach at a whole class level to an ‘imaginary average’ child, failing to consider the wide range of abilities which necessitate differentiation (Hacker & Rowe, 1993; Wragg,

1984). Ireson and Hallam (2001) refer to the assumption that ability grouping provides a logical and rational response to the problem of low attainment within the classroom. This is based on the theory that “if pupils of similar ability are taught together, it should be possible to tailor teaching to meet their needs and thus raise their attainment” (p. 1). However, evidence acknowledges both benefits and criticisms for each type of ability grouping, indicating no one ideal form exists and several factors should be considered when determining the type of grouping, if any, to be used (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). These factors will be discussed throughout the next theme.

2.3 Pertinent Influential Factors

Historically, the assignment of pupils to groups was a somewhat arbitrary affair, often not reflective of ability or prior academic achievement (Dunne et al., 2007; Jackson, 1964). Hallam and Parsons (2013a) refer to several factors influencing ability grouping across different contexts including “social relationships between pupils, gender, behaviour, the physical aspects of the classroom and class size” (p. 517). Research has also shown that teachers and schools are inclined to underestimate the extent of this misallocation of pupils (Hallam & Ireson, 2005). Within the context of this study internal factors and external pressures will be discussed.

2.3.1 Internal Factors

The school context often influences ability grouping practices. McGillicuddy’s (2013) completed a comprehensive analysis of the implementation and use of ability grouping for numeracy and literacy in DEIS primary schools. She found that the rationale underpinning the use of ability grouping directly correlated with internal factors such as the school’s context and standardised test results. A key finding from her study indicated

that 71.5% of teachers in the DEIS schools organised the learning in their classroom for literacy and numeracy using ability grouping. It was conveyed that teachers use ability grouping as they feel it allows them to adapt instruction to meet the individual needs of the children in their class as well as providing additional support to those who are considered to be struggling, while allowing the higher ability children to work more independently (McGillicuddy, 2013). This perspective is supported by the early researcher Turney (1931), who Slavin (1993) acclaims as “remarkably current” (p. 13). According to Turney (1931), structured ability grouping allows pupils to make progress commensurate with their ability level. It facilitates differentiation of instruction to the needs the group. Teaching at a slower pace in small groups is allowed for and it maintains interest and motivation levels as higher achieving students are not bored by the participation of lower achieving students in their group. Similarly, Slavin’s (1990) systematic review also identified that advocates of ability grouping maintain it allows teachers to adapt instruction to the needs of a diverse student body through differentiation of material to challenge higher achievers and to provide support for those who are considered to be struggling.

2.3.2 External Pressures

Evidence conveys that external pressures have also had a significant influence on ability grouping. Reid, Clunies-Ross, Groacher, & Vile (1982) suggest that teachers feel less comfortable with mixed ability grouping practices as external examinations approached and simultaneously pressure increased. Similarly, McGillicuddy (2013) conveys external factors such as Departmental policy and the Inspectorate were influencing teachers’ decisions to use ability grouping due to curriculum content pressures. These views are supported by Ireson and Hallam (1999, p. 344) who maintain that “grouping practices

may differ from one year to the next, in response to pressure from school inspections or changing views of staff’.

2.4 Teachers’ Attitudes and Expectations

This theme will explore and review the literature which is most pertinent to the research question. According to Ireson and Hallam (2001), teachers’ attitudes towards ability grouping differ depending on the type of school in which they work and the subjects they are teaching. Equally, Reid et al. (1982) discovered that teachers’ attitudes vary depending on the school context and their level of access to resources for differentiation purposes. Ireson and Hallam (1999) refer to the difficulty of “providing appropriate work for pupils of high and low ability in the same class” (p. 351). They also found that irrespective of existing school policy on mixed-ability grouping, individual teachers often group their students by ability in their classes. It is suggested that this is perhaps “a reflection of the immense complexity of the task of responding to the differing needs of a class of 30 learners” (Ireson & Hallam, 1999, p. 351). Supporting arguments relate to the ease of teaching (Hallam & Parsons, 2013b). Oakes (1985) argues that grouping children of perceived similar abilities makes the teacher’s task easier as they are better able to meet the needs of their students. Evidence from research with teachers supports this (Wright-Castro, Ramirez, & Duran, 2003). Therefore, it appears that a wide range of grouping strategies may be operating simultaneously at different class levels within the one school (Slavin, 1987). Reflecting this, Hallam and Parsons (2013b) highlight that “individual schools have the responsibility for taking decisions about the extent to which they adopt structured ability grouping” (p. 394).

Barker Lunn (1970) reported that teachers' attitudes towards mixed-ability teaching were crucial in relation to its implementation in the primary school classroom. Research conveys that experienced teachers appear to be more supportive of the mixed-ability teaching approach (Clammer, 1985). With respect to structured ability grouping, McGillicuddy (2013) found that "younger, less experienced teachers and those who had not engaged in additional professional development were more likely to use ability grouping in the teaching of literacy and numeracy" (p. 2). Conversely, earlier literature identifies that experienced teachers find it more difficult to put mixed-ability grouping into practice than newly qualified teachers who have been recently trained to adopt such practices in teacher training colleges (Reid et al., 1982). According to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (1994), experienced teachers are struggling with the instruction of mixed-ability teaching as they find it difficult to achieve the appropriate level for both high and lower ability pupils. As a result, higher ability children are not being adequately stretched and lower ability children are struggling to cope with the workload.

Evidence has shown that teachers think about and respond differently towards children according to perceptions of their ability (Croll & Moses, 1985; Hacker et al., 1991; Jackson, 1964; Suknandan & Lee, 1998). Marks (2016) speaks of the 'Pygmalion Effect' which first emerged in literature in the 1960s but appears to prevail. This suggests that teachers hold different expectations and teach differently within each ability group (Friedrich, Flunger, Nagengast, Jonkmann, & Trautwein, 2015; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992). Although each structured ability group will be made up of children with similar abilities, teachers tend to treat the group as homogeneous and having identical learning needs (Boaler, 1997). This is supported by Stipek (2010) who suggests that ability

grouping can create an exaggerated sense of within-group homogeneity in the teacher's mind. In line with previous research, McGillicuddy (2013) found that teachers had greater expectations of higher groups and lower expectations of the lower ability groups. Children assigned to higher groups were expected to work at a faster pace and often independently whereas those allocated to the lower groups tended to work on more repetitive tasks in a more structured environment with teacher supervision (Boaler, Wiliam, & Brown, 2000; Ireson, Hallam, & Hurley, 2005; McGillicuddy, 2013). Therefore it can be concluded that, "ability grouping directly influences expectation and practice across ability levels" (McGillicuddy, 2013, p. 3).

2.4.1 Monitoring Ability Grouping

McGillicuddy's (2013) study addresses the inflexibility of movement between ability groups. Results conveyed that while teachers supported the possibility of movement, very little evidence existed of this occurring from both teachers and children. Hallam and Ireson (2005) support these findings as they claim teachers and schools tend to overestimate the extent of movement between ability groups. In theory, movement between groups is possible but in practice this has been restricted (Barker Lunn, 1970; Douglas, 1964). Similarly, more recent literature conveys that once allocated to an ability group, children tend to remain there, irrespective of their progress (Dunne et al., 2007; Dunne et al., 2011; Flores, 1999). Ofsted (1998) strongly emphasise the cruciality of students being able to move between groups for the succession of structured grouping systems. Lack of upward movement directly correlates to feelings of individual failure, versus the true failure being the organisation and monitoring of ability grouping within the school systems (McGillicuddy, 2013). Hallam and Parsons (2013a) note that "children tend to remain in the same groups throughout their school careers limiting their

educational opportunities” (P. 514). The impact ability grouping has on children will be detailed in the next theme.

2.5 Impact on Children

Ability grouping “has a profound impact not only on how children identify themselves as learners in the classroom, but also on how they feel about themselves as social beings” (McGillicuddy, 2013, p. 4). This impact will be explored throughout this theme.

2.5.1 Academic Outcomes

Hallam and Parsons (2013a) identify the lack of recent literature on the impact of ability grouping on attainment in the primary school. However, extensive research does exist on its impact on pupil outcomes (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Kutnick et al., 2005; Slavin, 1987; Slavin, 1990). Several studies found that structured ability grouping had no effect on pupils’ achievements (Barker Lunn, 1970; Higgins et al., 2013; Ireson, Hallam, & Hurley, 2005; Loomer, 1962; Nomi, 2009; Slavin, 1987). A recurrent finding among literature is that less able pupils suffer from this form of grouping (Borg, 1965; Flair, 1964). Hallam (2002) identifies a potential disadvantage stating “the concept of differential ability sets a ceiling on what can be expected from a child” (p. 4). Therefore, as Boaler and Wiliam (2001) summarise “streaming has no academic benefits whatsoever, while setting confers small academic benefits on some high-attaining students, at the expense of large disadvantages for lower attainers” (p. 179). In line with this summary, Francis et al. (2016) also deduce from the literature that “overall these practices are not of significant benefit to attainment, with a negative impact for lower sets and streams” (p. 3). However, findings are mixed. Paradoxically, other studies convey that less able pupils benefit from structured ability grouping as Ireson and Hallam (2001) argue in favour “ability grouping

is effective in raising pupil attainment” (p. 17). Hallam (2002) also supports this perspective with specific reference to the lower groups, “Streaming and setting tend to benefit the less able” (p. 2). The literature conveys that “Those favouring structured grouping tend to stress its effectiveness in terms of pupil achievement, whereas those against stress the inequity of the system and its social consequences” (Ireson & Hallam, 1999, p. 343). Arguments and evidence exist to both support and criticise ability grouping practices, in turn fuelling intense discourse.

2.5.2 Affective Outcomes

Affective outcomes of ability grouping are a contentious issue as “Students’ self-perceptions form an important part of their adjustment during childhood and adolescence” (Ireson & Hallam, 2009, p. 201). This vital concern surrounding students’ self-image was fuelled by research which conveyed “streaming had an adverse impact on the self-esteem of pupils in the lower groups” (Ireson & Hallam, 2001, p. 40). Ireson & Hallam (2009) pose ability grouping as central to the economy of student esteem and argue that “academic self-concept is formed through processes of social comparison” (p. 201). Research has repeatedly identified that labelling and stigmas attached to these groups by staff and their peers may result in students disengaging with school (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Turney, 1931). Likewise, Oakes (1985) argues that for lower achieving pupils, self-concept becomes progressively negative over time leading these pupils to become increasingly self-critical. A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) publication providing recommendations to avoid system level policies conducive to school and student failure reports “Early student selection has a negative impact on students assigned to lower tracks and exacerbates inequities, without raising average performance” (p. 3).

McGillicuddy (2013) conveyed teachers' sense of oblivion towards children's awareness of their group positioning stating that "they believed it did not matter to the children to which group they had been assigned" (p. 3). However, evidence from the children found the contrary to be true, indicating that ability grouping had a direct impact on students' experience of learning in school with evidence of one low ability group child explaining "There is smart maths, there's medium maths and there is dumb maths". McGillicuddy (2013) describes how children vocalised a psycho-social response to their group assignment. Emotions associated with being considered 'clever' included "pride, confidence and happiness, consequently associated with an elevated sense of self-esteem" (p. 3). In contrast, low ability group students harboured feelings of sadness, shame and upset which in turn resulted in lower levels of self-concept and self-esteem.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview on existing ability grouping literature pertinent to the research question. Significant issues of concern have been highlighted, most specifically the potential for ability grouping to perpetuate academic and social inequalities among children within the education system when used ineffectively. Overall, it can be suggested that the effectiveness of ability grouping is relative to many variables including class size, teaching methods, resources, differentiation, curriculum content and ultimately the focus of the research question; teachers' perspectives, experiences and expectations of ability grouping in the classroom. As considerable pressure is placed on raising educational attainment, Ireson and Hallam (2009) emphasise the salience of focusing on the "affective and moral aspects of young people's development" (p. 211). They argue that students' interest and enjoyment of

learning, as well as their self-perceptions of their own ability level, have a substantial impact on their achievement, course choices and future careers. Ireson and Hallam (2001) provide a thought-provoking statement;

Positive attitudes towards learning and positive self-concepts are important elements fostering a disposition to learn in the future. It is important for schools to beware of becoming too seduced by a technical approach to ability grouping and to ensure that all pupils are supported and encouraged to develop these dispositions (p. 62).

McGillicuddy (2013, p. 5) recommends that Initial Teacher Education programmes should “prioritise teacher understanding of the impact of grouping children by ability on their academic and social experience of primary school”. Ireson and Hallam (2009) maintain that overlooking such aspects will “not only impinge on individual lives but also the future prosperity of the nation” (p. 211). The next chapter will provide information on the methods chosen in order to gather accurate information to explore the research question.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the methodology chosen for the purpose of the research question ‘Investigating teachers' perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and exploring the implications for education policy.’ The methodology will be outlined within the following themes:

3.2 Research Design

3.3 Qualitative Research

3.4 Sample

3.5 Data Collection

3.6 Data Analysis

3.7 Ethical Considerations

3.8 Limitations

3.9 Conclusion

3.2 Research Design

“Research design...involves the intersection of philosophy, strategies of enquiry, and specific methods” (Creswell, 2009, p. 5). There are four identifiable philosophical worldviews that influence the practice of research. The term ‘worldview’ is defined as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17). These worldviews include; “postpositivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism” (Creswell, 2009, p. 6). The term ‘positionality’ describes both an individual’s worldview and the position they have chosen to adopt in relation to the research project (Foote &

Bartell, 2011; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The individual's worldview concerns four philosophical assumptions which Creswell (2013) identifies as "ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified), axiology (the role of values in research), and methodology (the process of research)" (p.20). Cohen, Mannion & Morrison (2011) refer to the term 'reflexivity' as the concept that researchers should both acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research process while seeking to understand their potential influence on the research. Aull Davies (1999) defines reflexivity as a "turning back on oneself, a process of self reference" (p. 4). Reflexivity requires continuous reflection on the researcher's behalf about their own views and positions and how these may have influenced the design, execution and interpretation of the research findings (Greenbank, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to note the researcher has completed school placement in the school where the interviewees teach, therefore a sense of familiarity exists. Limitations associated with this will be discussed further in the chapter. Although the researcher is aware of the ongoing debate on ability grouping, objectivity remains due to her minimal experience in the profession.

3.3 Qualitative Research

Worldviews give rise to three types of research approaches; qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. Creswell (2014) differentiates between qualitative and quantitative research as he associates words and open-ended questions with qualitative research as opposed to using numbers, statistics and closed-ended questions in quantitative research. Mixed methods research resides in the middle of the continuum as it incorporates aspects of qualitative and quantitative approaches where both methods are used symbiotically in order to enhance the strength of a study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

Creswell (2014) maintains that “in planning a study, researchers need to think through the philosophical worldview assumptions that they bring to the study” (p. 5). The researcher espouses the social constructivist worldview. Social constructivists believe that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Social constructivism is typically associated with the qualitative research approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). They outline that qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Some of the major defining characteristics of a qualitative study include that “The focus is on understanding the meaning of experience, the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis, the process is inductive, and rich description characterizes the end product” (Merriam, 2009, p. 19). Essentially, qualitative research aims to encapsulate people’s experiences and understandings of the world around them. Therefore, in the context of this research study, a qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate as a diversity of teachers’ perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom are required. This will be achieved through semi-structured interviews with eight teachers. The researcher maintained that adopting a quantitative or mixed-method approach would limit the findings as the focus of the study was to measure teachers’ perceptions.

3.4 Sample

An essential part of the research process is establishing where to conduct the research and what participants to include in it (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher conducted her research in the school building. Interviewees included seven female and one male teacher, two

who were responsible for learning support and one for resource. Their teaching experience ranged from three years to forty years. The sampling method adopted by the researcher was purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is when “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 97). This indicates the researcher could not choose participants at random as they must contribute to the investigation of the aims and objectives of this study. The eight interviewees were chosen specifically by the researcher to gain a broad range of perspectives on ability grouping within the primary school. The researcher accessed permission from the school principal to conduct the research within her school and received a positive response allowing her access to interview teaching staff.

3.5 Data Collection

Interviews were chosen as the data collection instrument for this study in order to gain valuable insights into experiences and privileged information from key professionals in the primary sector on ability grouping. Interviews are particularly valuable as they “involve a set of assumptions and understandings about the situation which are not normally associated with a casual conversation” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 173). Denscombe (2007) differentiates between an interview and a conversation by acknowledging that while there are apparent similarities, an interview has a specific purpose. He states that “...when the researcher needs to gain insights into things like people’s opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences, then interviews will almost certainly provide a more suitable method” (2007, p. 174).

There are three types of research interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Early researchers Grebenik and Moser (1962), view the different types of interviews as ranged on a “continuum of formality” (p. 16). They suggest that at one end of the continuum the structured interview is completely formal, whereas at the other end it is entirely unstructured. Denscombe (2007) supports this concept and states that “...it is likely that any interview will slide back and forth along the scale” (p. 176). According to Denscombe (2007), structured interviews are essentially a questionnaire that is administered by the researcher to the participant whereas unstructured interviews are largely determined by the participants (Bell, 1993). Denscombe (2007) supports this perspective “...emphasis is placed on the interviewee’s thoughts” (p. 176). For the purpose of this research study, some aspects of the interview were structured in order to gather demographic data about the participant such as their number of years’ service and the class level they are currently teaching. However, a predominantly semi-structured approach was deemed most suitable, thus allowing the researcher to be flexible in terms of the order in which the questions were asked and providing the interviewee with opportunities to expand and develop their responses. “Allowing interviewees to ‘speak their minds’ is a better way of discovering things about complex issues and, generally, semi-structured and unstructured interviews have as their aim ‘discovery’ rather than ‘checking’ (Denscombe, 2007, p. 176).

One-to-one interviews were chosen as the form of semi-structured interview by the researcher. This form was chosen in order to accommodate the teachers as schools are extremely busy settings as well as ensuring interviewees gave their own perspectives and experiences without being influenced by other staff members. The researcher used the research question, aims and objectives as a guide when formulating the interview

questions (See Appendix A). A pilot interview was conducted with a part-time learning support teacher. According to Kim (2010) “The principal benefit of conducting a pilot study is that it provides researchers with an opportunity to make adjustments and revisions in the main study” (p. 191).

3.6 Data Analysis

Denscombe (2007, p. 288) identifies five stages involved in the analysis of qualitative data. In logical order these are:

- i.** preparation of the data;
- ii.** familiarity with the data;
- iii.** interpreting the data (developing codes, categories and concepts);
- iv.** verifying the data;
- v.** representing the data

“Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data...Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data...” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.111). In order to organise and prepare the data collected for analysis, the researcher transcribed the eight interviews to assist the assimilation and familiarity with the findings. The researcher reread the data thoroughly, reflecting on its overall meaning. With regard to data interpretation, four iterative tasks include; code the data, categorise these codes, identify themes and connections among the codes and categories, while developing concepts and arriving at critical conclusions (Denscombe, 2007). “Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p.171). Evidence of how the researcher conducted this can be seen in Appendix B. The researcher categorised the codes into similar themes which

represented sub-headings in Chapter 4. The final stage in the analysis of qualitative data is representing the data. This involves evidencing the codes and themes used when analysing the interview transcripts and questionnaire responses to derive conclusions which will be discussed within chapter 4.

Silverman (2000) stresses the fundamentality of the verification and credibility of qualitative research. Denscombe (2007) states that researchers should not take the credibility of research for granted and assume people are naive and will believe their findings. He claims that in order “for the research to achieve credibility it needs to demonstrate in some way or other that the findings are based on practices that are acknowledged to be the bases of good research” (p. 296). He refers to these practices which assess the quality of research as: validity and reliability. Seale (1999) states that the “trustworthiness of a research report lies at the heart of issues conventionally discussed as validity and reliability” (p. 266). Joppe (2000) defines reliability as “The extent to which results are consistent over time...if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable” (p. 1). Joppe (2000) also explains “Validity determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are” (p. 1).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

As Denscombe (2012) states, “The responsibility for conducting research in an ethical manner always rests with the individual” (p. 135). The researcher envisaged no risks or harm caused to participants in this piece of research. “The notion of ‘informed consent’ lies at the heart of ethical research” (Denscombe, 2012, p. 129). This ensures the

participants are fully aware of the context of the research topic and why the researcher has chosen them to participate in the study of this topic. All participants were adults, were not vulnerable, and therefore could provide their own verbal and written consent. When seeking consent, the researcher sent a letter to the principal of the school to gain permission to access the teaching staff (See Appendix C). The researcher then sent letter to the teachers outlining the purpose of the interview and seeking their consent to participate with a consent form. (See Appendix D).

The interview questions aimed to gather information about the participants' experiences and perspectives of ability grouping within the primary school classroom. Interviewees were made aware of their right to withdraw consent from the interview at any stage and for their information to be removed from the dissertation. In order to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality of their data, research codes were adopted. The participating teachers were assigned the letter 'S' denoting 'speaker', and an accompanying number from 1-8, i.e. S1, S2 etc. Data collected using the instruments was stored on the researcher's laptop and access will be limited to the researcher and her supervisor. All information collected, including interview recordings, will be stored for assessment purposes, and will then be discarded. The research was designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality.

3.8 Limitations

During the research process, the researcher encountered some limitations:

- i.** As this is a small scale research project, it is essential to note that the findings of this research study are not suggesting a generalisation of teachers' perspectives

on ability grouping in the primary school classroom. The aim of this research project is to contribute to the broader knowledge on ability grouping.

- ii.** A limitation to this study was that children were not interviewed to attain their perspective on ability grouping. This was decided to be ethically inappropriate by the researcher for such a small scale research project. However, research evidence on children's perspectives on ability grouping was explored and viewed in the literature review and their awareness from teachers' perspectives was detailed in the presentation and discussion of findings.
- iii.** With regard to positionality, is it significant to note that the researcher's familiarity with the interviewees, as a result of completing a placement in this school, could have impacted the data collection as the researcher had assisted with and experienced station teaching and power hours in many of the participants' classrooms.
- iv.** The researcher acknowledges the particular school context, DEIS Band 1, throughout the dissertation. She maintains if it was a larger scale project, invaluable insights would be gained from comparing ability grouping practices between DEIS schools and non-DEIS schools.

3.9 Conclusion

The methodology chapter outlined the three types of research; qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. A qualitative approach was rationalised as the optimal method within the context of this study. The data collection instrument of semi-structured interviews was justified and the five stages of data analysis were explicated. In conclusion, pertinent ethical implications were addressed and several limitations of the study were

acknowledged. The next chapter will provide a presentation and discussion of the data collected.

Chapter 4

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will simultaneously present, discuss and interpret the data collected towards exploring and reviewing the research question ‘Investigating teachers' perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and exploring the implications for education policy?’ Using thematic content analysis of the data, the researcher proposed six themes:

4.2 A Teacher’s Perspective

4.3 Organisation

4.4 A Critical Analysis

4.5 Influential Factors

4.6 Teachers’ Attitudes and Expectations

4.7 Children’s Awareness

4.2 A Teacher’s Perspective

Marks (2016) maintains that grouping by ability requires an understanding of this term by teachers. He identifies the unlikeness of all teachers giving the same definition which “in itself reveals something of the difficulty and complexity of ability-grouping” (p. 2). This is evident in the findings which transpired from the eight interviews. A commonality evident across the teachers’ responses was the salience of children working at their own level. For example, S1 defined ability grouping as “putting the children of equal abilities or very similar abilities into a group together and setting them work at their level”. Similarly, S6 stated “it means that the children will be working to the level that they are

able for”. According to S3, “Ability grouping allows each child in the class to do as best they can, it pushes them as much as they can be pushed”. This is supported by the early researcher Turney (1931), who maintains that ability grouping facilitates children making progress commensurate with their ability level.

A significant finding among the participants was that each teacher underlined the use of ability grouping from a literacy and numeracy perspective with S2, S4 and S7 referring to these subject areas solely in their definitions. S2 detailed “...so putting children into different groups according to their literacy and numeracy for English and Maths”. S7 proclaimed “you wouldn’t really need to ability group for anything else in my experience anyway”. This perspective is consistent with prior research as McGillicuddy (2013) found that 71.5% of teachers use ability grouping as a strategy for organising children’s learning in literacy and numeracy within DEIS primary schools in Ireland. However, findings from this study which conveyed “younger, less experienced teachers and those who had not engaged in additional professional development were more likely to use ability grouping in the teaching of literacy and numeracy” (McGillicuddy, 2013, p. 2) were evidenced to be spurious in this particular school, as a range of teachers, having between three and forty years’ experience, strongly advocated its use within the classroom. The interviewees unanimously stated there was no existing policy regarding ability grouping within the school with both S7 and S8 suggesting it is used at the teacher’s discretion; S7 “I think it depends on each class and on the teachers’ own perspectives”, S8 “it’s left up to the teacher here...”. This is reflected in the literature which identifies schools’ and teachers’ authority “for taking decisions about the extent to which they adopt structured ability grouping” (Hallam & Parsons, 2013b, p. 394). It also supports findings which maintain

several grouping mechanisms may be adopted across classes within the one school (Slavin, 1987).

4.3 Organisation

Station teaching and power hours were prevalent among the interviewee's classrooms. S1, a learning support teacher, spoke of the station work he does with the junior end of the school that is based on ability grouping. S3 and S6, 2nd class teachers, combine their classes for an English 'power hour' with assigned groups based on standardised testing. S4 considered "I think it depends on the topic that you're doing...and on the ability of your class". This is in accordance with Ireson and Hallam (2001) who claim that the type of grouping used should depend on the type of learning activity or the particular groups of pupils.

It can be anticipated that this organisation of learning correlates to the school's context being DEIS Band 1. S8 provided this context "Especially in a school like this...you have so many different levels in a class". S7 revealed "It's the attention level, the ability to concentrate and the ability to listen". She compared her current experience to "an upper middle class" school she worked in previously, "I never had a child with a STEN lower than 4 in my last school and here you would have 1s, 2s and 3s...there's a big difference in ability". S7 and S8 advocated the use of ability grouping within the context of DEIS schools, "We're better in this school at doing grouping because you have some very weak kids and you have your bright ones and you have to make allowances" (S7). This perspective relates to literature which claims grouping by ability facilitates teachers' adaptation to a diverse spectrum of needs (Slavin, 1990).

With reference to group allocation, S7 highlights “first you have to find out how to group them”. S1 describes this procedure “They do standardised testing and then diagnostic testing at the start of the year”. He also referred to the school’s use of graded levelled readers. Determination of a child’s reading age is assessed by “running records for reading”. Contrary to this, in line with prior research on group assignment (Dunne et al., 2007; Hallam & Parsons, 2013a; Jackson, 1964), S5 revealed the children in her class are grouped based on “what I think they are able to achieve”. This highlights the capacity for teachers’ perceptions to significantly impact group allocation.

Literature pertinent to ability-grouping suggests it may be effective where the level of group movement is highly flexible and children’s positions are continually monitored in light of their progression and assessment records (Hallam et. al., 2013). S8 reflected this when she signified the importance of “constantly trying to push kids up” the ability spectrum. She continued “You can’t just be like, you’re going to be in the bottom group for this year and that’s fine”. When questioned on the occurrence of movement between groups, S6, S3 and S1 evidenced the frequency of its occurrence. S3 accentuated “Yes, all of the time...every couple of weeks...if it happens that a child is struggling within the group, it is really identifiable and then we can move them”. S7 accentuated that “the whole point of ability grouping is to allow for their abilities, so you have to move them if they need to be moved”. Paradoxically, she acknowledged the lack of physical resources available which restricts movement “you can only have so many in a group because we’ve only got so many books”. Contrary to preceding positivity towards change and movement, S7 displayed a relief at her ease in justifying a child’s movement to a lower group to a parent “But luckily enough she went on holidays, so that was the excuse”. This infers a certain level of fear and reluctance to move children from higher to lower groups.

A key insight in this research project conveyed that the aforementioned findings conflict with a substantial research literature which maintains little evidence of movement exists from both teachers' and children's perspectives (Barker Lunn, 1970; Douglas, 1964; Dunne et al., 2007; Dunne et al., 2011; Flores, 1999; Hallam & Ireson, 2005; McGillicuddy, 2013).

4.4 A Critical Analysis

This theme will critically analyse ability grouping, including the perceived advantages and disadvantages of both structured ability grouping and mixed-ability grouping from teachers' perspectives.

4.4.1 Structured Ability Grouping

A considerable amount of advantages emanated with regard to the use of structured ability grouping, the most prevalent advantage being its contribution to the ease of teacher planning. S8 explained "...you can have clear objectives for each group, it's easier to assess how different children are doing". S5 claimed the introduction of station teaching to be "the best thing we have ever done, it's brilliant, it's made my life so much easier". S2 detailed "it makes the class teacher's planning a lot easier, especially in a school like this, a disadvantaged school, where the abilities are much lower". Arguments among the literature supporting structured ability grouping, including research with teachers, relate to this ease of teaching (Hallam & Parsons, 2013b; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Oakes 1985; Wright-Castro et al., 2003).

Benefits for children are invaluable according to the interviewees. S2 claimed "Children are going to get a lot more from a lesson differentiated to their needs, rather than being

all lumped in together for a numeracy lesson when it's so much above some children and not challenging enough for others". Correspondingly, S3 rationalised "there is not constant repetition of the same materials, some can go on, some children might need that repetition more". S1 and S2 acknowledged "...nobody is being held back...they are able to really push on" (S1). From S3's experience she elucidated "Advantage wise, it is absolutely amazing...they all think they are brilliant readers...It does nothing but increase their confidence because suddenly they are that child that can read". S7, a first class teacher in her fortieth year of teaching, detailed her experience of ability grouping, "It works extremely well, especially with the junior classes". However, she intentionally made a point of emphasising her use of ability grouping as solely for the purpose of reading "They do not sit in those groups, they just come together for reading once a day...I don't stream them for anything else". It can be deduced that her experience of forty years teaching has contributed to her awareness of the negative effects of the overuse and mishandling of such grouping practices.

Although a plethora of advantages exist, negative aspects materialised during the interviews also. Children's awareness of ability grouping is widely recognised as the predominant disadvantage. This will be detailed in theme 4.6 as teachers' attitudes and expectations of ability grouping often contribute to children's awareness. Research suggests that lower ability group pupils' negative view of schooling and bad behaviour make them more difficult to teach (Finley, 1984; Hargreaves, 1967; Taylor, 1993). S8 challenges this viewpoint as she questioned whether misbehaviour results from ability grouping or the child's innate ability which manifests to a negative view of schooling, "I think more what has the effect on them is their ability and constantly being frustrated in school and finding school difficult...than them being put into a group in English or Maths

that suits their ability”. Paradoxically, the same speaker recognised a frustration which occurs within grouping “If a child in the middle is always pushing themselves really hard but they never quite get into that top group, it’s really frustrating for them”. S3 also recognised a critical disadvantage of structured ability groups, “There’s always going to be the few that are between the band and what do you do there?” Throughout the interview, this resonated with her.

4.4.2 Mixed-Ability Grouping

Many of the interviewees associated mixed-ability grouping with History, Geography and Science. For example, S2 claimed “For the SESE subjects, I would try mix that up a bit because children who are weak academically...socially they might be very good so they might want to be reporter for the group presentation”. Likewise, S1 noted “for project work I would have used mixed ability grouping so that children who don’t tend to achieve success in a subject would have the opportunity”. These findings suggest mixed-ability grouping allows for multiple intelligences to be recognised and praised accordingly. S3 referred to the social advantages of mixed-ability grouping as “it does not single anybody out...it’s mixed-ability, it’s combined ability, it’s equal”. In line with this, S7 maintained that it ensures lower achievers “have a bit of companionship”. S4 identified an advantage of mixed-ability grouping which is perhaps unique to this particular DEIS school. She explained that children who are just above the cut-off point to receive learning support often benefit from mixed-ability groups. S6 supported this in suggesting “Some of the brighter children can actually help some of the weaker children and bring them on a bit”. Overall, S4 summarised “I think the advantages are that the stronger ones really push themselves and they can see how good they are. The weaker ones can bounce off the stronger ones, they can get a little bit of support off the stronger children”.

However, arguments emerged against mixed-ability grouping structures. Regarding reading, S1 argued that when placed with higher achievers, lower achievers tend to “drift off and they are not paying attention” because they are struggling to comprehend the story. Simultaneously, higher achievers “get frustrated” as their peers are “stopping at every second word and trying to sound out”. Consistent with this, S5 responded that it would be “an absolute waste of time...for the lower ability group and for the higher achievers”. S7 revealed “It frightens me...to think there are teachers who would be happy to have a book and the whole class on the same page...you’re not teaching anyone if you’re doing that...ability grouping for reading is absolutely something that everyone should see the necessity for”. S8 also recalled a disadvantage of mixed-ability grouping “I find that the weaker children if they’re much weaker can feel a lot of pressure and it can become very overwhelming for them because you have to try and work at a middle level for everyone”. She has observed children becoming “stressed” and “shutting off” as a consequence. This observation is reflected in the research which conveys that teachers tend to teach mixed-ability groups as homogeneous and having identical learning needs (Boaler, 1997; Stipek, 2010).

4.5 Influential Factors

Findings from the interviews identified several internal and external factors as having implications on ability grouping. These factors will be discussed within this theme.

A Whole School Evaluation took place last year in the school having a significant impact on classroom practices. The teachers unanimously spoke of the inspectorate’s “strong encouragement” for them to adopt station teaching practices within the classroom (S3).

S4 explained “The department and the inspectors have really been pushing in class”. However, she appears disillusioned by the movement, “Sometimes it’s just not possible you know...I can see it in my class, I’ve got a few new kids this year and they are just so weak and they’re lost. They need one-to-one or small grouping”. Likewise with reference to the recommendation, S1 revealed “I mean that doesn’t work...you would have five teachers and five groups in the one class...you could not get five groups discussing around the one class, it would be bedlam”. This indicates a gap in communication between the department’s recommendations and teachers’ experiences on the ground. S3 recalled the inspectorate’s shock at their lack of station teaching within the classroom. Nevertheless, similar to S1, she justified its absence as not having the practicalities such as the manpower to support the stations. S4 reiterated the need for manpower “You definitely would need another teacher with you, I would find it very difficult to do on my own”.

S7 referred to a common misconception in her experience of being a teacher in a DEIS school, “you can be fooled into thinking that your bright children are achieving as well as they should be and usually they’re not”. This reflects Ofsted’s (1994) findings which revealed higher ability children are not being adequately stretched and lower ability children are struggling to cope with the workload. S7 noted the pressure from parents as a contributor in challenging the higher achievers “They seem so bright that you’re not inclined to push them as much and their parents aren’t pushing you to push them”. S7 acknowledged “In some schools, you’d have the external pressure from parents, but I don’t find it so much here”. Correspondingly, S5 expressed “The really frustrating thing is that the children that are struggling with their reading, the parents have no involvement with their homework and they’re not interested in school”. S4 revealed “I find with this

school...we are at a disadvantage because it is solely us. The children go home or are off for the holidays and there isn't being anything done and there's a huge gap". The preceding findings convey a lack of parental involvement as an influence on ability grouping.

Regarding their experiences of teacher training college, the interviewees were in harmony about the lack of input received on the topic. This contradicts research which maintains newly qualified teachers have been trained to adopt mixed-ability practices in their teacher training colleges (Reid et al., 1982). S6 referred to the impression she took from college that ability grouping was "frowned upon...I always felt it was never something that was encouraged". Similarly, S8 has observed "It seems to be frowned upon in a way". She explained, "When I was in college there was a massive move away from ability grouping, but then when you went into schools it was being used all of the time...because practically it makes sense". She concluded "there definitely are external pressures to use it but then not to use it. It's a funny dynamic with ability grouping". This is supported by research which maintains the topic has always fuelled intense debate and discourse (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Kulik & Kulik, 1982).

As a result of the preceding critical analysis of the factors influencing ability grouping, it can be deduced that a combination of attributes contribute to the efficacy of ability grouping. Some of these include; departmental policy, teachers' discretion, the topic, the task, the use of continuous assessment for group movement and the close monitoring of the process by the teacher.

4.6 Teachers' Attitudes and Expectations

A prevailing theme among the interviewees was the development in their level of confidence towards ability grouping throughout their teaching careers. S1 recalls his first year teaching experience nine years ago, "I wasn't really very confident in doing a lot of group work...it was pretty much sit down, you're going to do the work and we are going to get through the books". Upon reflection, he has gained perspective "I would say if I had that group now I would have much better strategies for dealing with group work and doing group work...that I did not have in my first year". When questioned regarding an increase in confidence throughout the profession, S4 replied "Oh yes, definitely...even to know what to put in each group". Similarly, S5 stated "Definitely, oh my god I am so much more confident now".

Findings from the interviews suggest the teachers' monitoring of the ability grouping process as pivotal in avoiding issues of inequality within the classroom. S7 claimed "I think it's really important...that you're monitoring how they're doing". She revealed "a lot depends on the teacher's attitude...the way the teacher approaches it". This reflects the literature which reports that teachers' attitudes were crucial in relation to its implementation (Barker Lunn, 1970). She also underlined the teacher's responsibility to "boost their self-esteem because of improvements they are making in their own ability". S2 restated this duty of care by the class teacher to "be always praising them for their efforts and good work" irrespective of their ability level. With reference to labelling, S7 emphasised "You would not call them the A group and the C group or anything like that...self-esteem could be damaged if ability grouping was not handled very well". S6 highlights the teacher's responsibility to achieve a balance between structured and mixed-ability grouping "I suppose if you do give them the opportunities to be in mixed-ability

grouping too then they don't feel as bad". Essentially, "if it's done properly it really should not have an effect" (S7).

4.7 Children's Awareness

Findings that emanated from the eight interviewees conveyed the potential impact of teachers' attitudes and expectations on children's awareness of ability grouping, depending on how they organise and monitor their ability groups. Seven out of the eight interviewees acknowledged the children's awareness of the ability spectrum. This is inconsistent with the literature which suggests teachers did not see an impact on the child with regard to their group assignment (McGillicuddy, 2013). S8 proclaimed "Yes, definitely in my experience, I think the kids are always aware of where they stand in terms of their ability". S1 emphasised "there is no animosity about it, there is no 'we're smarter than you'". He attributed this to the balance which is achieved throughout the rest of the school day, outside of ability grouped activities. Conversely, S3 was the only interviewee to believe that the children were unaware of their ability groups. She maintained this is due to the teachers' careful handling of the process "There is no group 1, 2 and 3...They are all so busy doing their own work, there isn't a second between the stations to look and think". S7 provided a concise summary in stating that "I think they can be aware but I don't think it's always a bad thing...you have to just be aware when you're doing the teaching".

With regard to the impact on children's self-esteem and confidence, literature suggests ability grouping has an adverse impact on the lower groups (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Contrary to this, S1 argued that it "does not affect a child's self-esteem because they can see their own achievements and success that they are making themselves". Conversely,

S5, a senior infant teacher, stated “They’re really aware...I’ve been trying really hard to say the book levels don’t mean anything...but they know”. She conveyed a certain guilt about the process but admitted “it’s so hard to avoid it”. S7 revealed that the higher group “boast about it every day...and you don’t hear the ones at the lowest group boasting about the level they’re on”. She described the awareness as “unfortunate” but emphasised “if they move from a level 3 to a level 7, it’s still progress”. S8 reflected this opinion by stating “Obviously it’s a bit hurtful for the kids...but there isn’t really much you can do about it because it does really benefit them and I think it outweighs it”.

4.8 Conclusion

To conclude the interviews, the teachers were asked if they had anything to add on the topic of ability grouping within the primary school classroom. Comments emerged which the researcher espouses as an effective summary of the preceding presentation and analysis of findings.

S1: “I think it’s like classroom management. It comes from experience. You do not really know what works for you until you go out and try it. All of the theory in the world is great but until you try to put it into practice, you will find your own way with it”.

S2: “Overall, it’s good to have a mix of mixed-ability and streaming for the core subjects. I think it is about self-discovery as a class teacher, you discover it as you go along yourself. I think that’s how you get your experience with it”.

S4: “I definitely learned about ability grouping from being out teaching and I can say I’m still learning and I’m teaching a few years now. You learn so much with a new class all of the time”.

S5: “It wasn’t until I had my own class and I learned from my own mistakes. It’s just trial and error...it’s all experience, learning as you go basically”.

S6: “The way I look at it is, you’re expected to differentiate. To me, ability grouping is differentiation”.

The findings provided the researcher with a significant insight into the experiences and perceptions of ability grouping within the classroom from primary teachers’ perspectives. This allowed the researcher to consider several factors such as; departmental influences, socio-economic status, school DEIS status, parental involvement, socialisation and relationships, group allocation, flexibility of movement and the core focus of the research question, teachers’ perspectives, when analysing and interpreting the current context of ability grouping within the primary school classroom in Ireland. However, while many of the findings reflected the literature, gaps were identified by the researcher and therefore warrant further investigation in the field of ability grouping. These will be discussed in recommendations within the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Research Question

‘Investigating teachers' perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and exploring the implications for education policy’.

5.2 Summary of Findings

This study set out to ascertain teachers’ perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and explore its implications for education policy. The researcher gained invaluable insights into how eight teachers perceive and experience its practice in a DEIS Band 1 primary school. The most pertinent findings that have emanated from the data are as follows:

- i.** All eight teachers are currently using structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy in their classrooms which is predominantly based on standardised testing. However, other influential factors had an impact on the group allocation process such as the teacher’s perceived ability of the child and the teacher’s attitude towards ability grouping. They primarily associated mixed-ability grouping with History, Geography and Science, suggesting children who are academically weak in literacy and numeracy may shine in such subject areas.
- ii.** The context of the school being DEIS Band 1 has a significant impact on how the teachers organise the learning in their classrooms. Findings conveyed the diversity of existing abilities which necessitate ability grouping practices. A lack of parental involvement with the school was also recognised by many of the interviewees as a contributing factor.

- iii.** Seven out of eight of the teachers maintain that the children are aware of ability grouping. They recognise its potential impact, however, they unanimously maintained that the benefits and potential for progression outweigh its negative effects.
- iv.** All interviewees demonstrated the flexibility of movement between groups which contradicts a substantial research literature stating little evidence of movement exists.
- v.** All of the teachers conclusively revealed that their training colleges did not instil considerable knowledge in them on the topic of ability grouping, thus revealing a gap in initial teacher education programmes.

5.3 Recommendations

A number of recommendations can be made on the basis of findings from this study:

- i.** Extensive research findings identifying the potential for the poorer progress of children in the lower groups have had little impact on policy and practice. Structured ability grouping continues to predominate in areas of literacy and numeracy. Therefore, it is recommended that the implementation and use of mixed-ability group work is considered for literacy and numeracy.
- ii.** Teachers expressed their difficulties in addressing the needs of a diverse range of abilities in their class. The school's DEIS Band 1 status was identified as a contributor to this. Therefore, more support, information and training could be provided to teachers working in DEIS schools on the most efficacious yet equitable way of organising the learning for literacy and numeracy. This recommendation is supported by McGillicuddy, 2013.

- iii.** A key gap among the findings was the perceived lack of input during the interviewees' Initial Teacher Education programmes. Varied recommendations for the use of ability grouping were experienced by the teachers. They noted their oblivion during college towards the potential impact ability grouping can have on the academic and social experience of the child in primary school. Therefore, it is recommended that Initial Teacher Education programmes provide an objective perspective regarding ability grouping while prioritising the dissemination of research evidence on the psycho-social response of children to their ability-related positioning in class and how this impacts on their learner identities.
- iv.** With regard to professional development, the interviewees identified the absence of courses on ability grouping skills and practices. Therefore, teachers' continual engagement in professional development courses on this topic is recommended where teachers can reflect and question inconsistencies between theory, policy and practice.

5.4 Conclusion

Both the researcher's exploration of the literature pertinent to ability grouping and the primary data collected have reflected authors who denote ability grouping as a topic of contentious debate and discourse (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Kulik & Kulik, 1982). Dracup (2010) suggests this is due to research conclusions being contested and not entirely objective. He maintains that equity advocates "tend to marshal the arguments in such a way that helps them conclude that tracking/setting/streaming is detrimental to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds" (p. 5). Conversely, he highlights that those with an excellence in educational standards perspective "tend to work towards the conclusion that it is markedly beneficial to high achievers" (p. 5). The researcher experienced this

throughout the examination of the literature and recognised the difficulty in sourcing a balanced, objective systematic review of ability grouping. Dracup (2010) supports this experience in stating “both groups tend to downplay the evidence that does not fully support their position”. Two fundamental arguments among the research literature on ability grouping are that no single optimal solution of how to best organise and differentiate has been identified, and a lot is to be learned about what constitutes effective practice. The primary and secondary findings could indicate that ability grouping is context dependent encompassing a diverse range of attributes which are inclined to influence practices adopted within the primary school classroom.

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Appendices

Appendix A

- 1) For the purpose of the data collected
 - Could you state how many years you have been teaching?
 - How long have you worked in this school?
 - What class level are you teaching?

- 2) What does the term 'ability grouping' mean to you as a primary school teacher?

- 3) Is there a policy in relation to ability grouping in your school that you are aware of?
 - If so – can you tell me about it?

- 4) Do you use ability grouping as a way of organising the learning in your classroom?
 - If yes – which type of ability grouping: streaming or mixed-ability grouping?
 - Does the type of ability grouping used differ depending on the subject being taught?
 - Why?

- 5) Can you share an experience of when you used mixed-ability grouping to organise the learning for a subject being taught?
 - What are the advantages from your perspective? Why?
 - What are the disadvantages from your perspective? Why?

- 6) Can you share an experience of when you used streaming to organise the learning for a subject being taught?
 - What are the advantages from your perspective? Why?
 - What are the disadvantages from your perspective? Why?

- 7) With regard to the practicality of ability grouping - are there many resources available in your school to support differentiation?
 - If so, can you please discuss some of them?
- 8) Are there any (external) pressures that make you choose one form of ability grouping over the other (streaming or mixed-ability)?
- 9) Have you experienced different levels of ability grouping within different schools that you have worked in? (if teacher has worked in more than this school)
- 10) From your experience, do you think children are aware of the different levels of ability grouping within the class?
 - If so, how do you think they feel within the different groups?
- 11) Have you experienced a child moving into a higher/lower ability group?
- 12) From your experience, do you think there is a connection between ability grouping in school and a child's self-esteem and confidence?
- 13) From your experience, do you believe ability grouping has any influence on a child's attitude/behaviour towards learning at school?
- 14) From your experience, do you think there is a connection between ability grouping in school and who children create friendships with?
(i.e.: Have you experienced/noticed children who are in the same ability group playing together at yard time or do the children all mix regardless of their ability group?)
- 15) Do you feel your teacher training during college equipped you appropriately with knowledge and research evidence about best practice for ability grouping?
- 16) Have you anything else to add on the topic of ability grouping within the primary school classroom?

Appendix B

⑦

Teacher's Definitions
organisation
critical comments

cores:
influential factors
Teacher's attitudes + expectations
children's awareness

Interviewee: Speaker 7 → 40 years teaching experience
Duration: 26:18 → oldest teacher interviewed

1) For the purpose of the data collected

- Could you state how many years you have been teaching?
- How long have you worked in this school?
- What class level are you teaching?

I have been teaching for 40 years. I have worked here about 18 or 19 years. I am currently teaching 1st class.

2) What does the term 'ability grouping' mean to you as a primary school teacher?

It means that you would put children in groups according to their ability for a particular subject, usually for maths or for literacy; you wouldn't really need to ability group for anything else in my experience anyway.

* Ability groups for maths + Eng. only

3) Is there a policy in relation to ability grouping in your school that you are aware of?

- If so – can you tell me about it?

I'm not aware about a policy about ability grouping in this school no, I don't think there is. I think it kind of depends on each class and on the teachers own perspectives.

4) Do you use ability grouping as a way of organising the learning in your classroom?

- If yes – which type of ability grouping: streaming or mixed-ability grouping?
- Does the type of ability grouping used differ depending on the subject being taught?
- Why?

I use it for reading; I kind of see streaming as the whole class being streamed, do you know what I mean, that you'd have an A class and a B class and a C class. And I know it's kind of a word that people look down on, but for reading anyway we have graded leveled reading in the school and I think it works extremely well especially with the lower classes, not so much with the higher classes. My class, I have 4 groups and I have the best children reading together and they would be on level 20, and the next ones are on level 19 and so on. So they do not sit in those groups, they just come together for reading once a day and they do the reading and then they go back to where they sit normally. So it's literally just for the reading activity. I don't stream them for anything else.

* emphasises use of ability grouping for reading only

For maths do you? (Benefit of semi-structured interviews)

Not really, no. A group goes out to learning support and they would be the weakest children. So they have been tested and we've picked out, so as far as maths is concerned, I just keep an eye on the ones who need extra help. And if we were to do, we have done kind of like power hour activities in maths, but they're not streaming for that they're in mixed-ability groups.

Yes, ability grouping just for reading literacy, I don't do it for anything else. If I was grouping them for SESE, I would use a mixed-ability. For example with a presentation, I would choose someone who is very vocal and someone who is quiet and the in-between ones. And I suppose they will be grouped for different reasons as the year goes on but usually you'd try and put a good mix of abilities together.

5) Can you share an experience of when you used mixed-ability grouping to organise the learning for a subject being taught?

- What are the advantages from your perspective? Why?
- What are the disadvantages from your perspective? Why?

I would do mixed-ability just for example, today we were in the computer room. And they were doing a maths activity, so I kind of made a point of saying, if you found them difficult make sure you share a computer. Just so something that simple, so that they'll be with somebody else and if they had any difficulty the other person, they'd have a bit of companionship, they wouldn't be sitting there a bit lost on their own. Or mixed-ability grouping, like for example if they did a project and they were presenting

* benefits of mixed-ability → not isolated.

Appendix C

Dear Principal,

I am conducting a research project entitled 'Investigating teachers' perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and exploring the implications for education policy'. This study seeks to examine teacher's views and experiences of ability grouping in the primary school classroom in order to help shape education policy.

I am writing to you to ask your permission to conduct some of my research in your school. This would involve a series of short interviews with willing teaching staff members. The purpose of the interviews is to ascertain information about how the teachers view and experience ability grouping within the classroom. Each interview will take approximately 15-20 minutes.

Strict confidentiality is central to my research and, in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying details will be revealed in my project. Neither the name of the school nor any geographical details will be disclosed.

I would be very grateful if you could consent to me conducting research in your school, depending on the suitability of your staff. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Faithfully,

Amy O'Connor

Appendix D

Dear Teacher,

My name Amy O'Connor and I am a Marino student currently on 10 week placement in your school. I am conducting a research project entitled 'Investigating teachers' perspectives on ability grouping in the primary school classroom and exploring the implications for education policy'. This study seeks to explore teacher's views and experiences of ability grouping in the primary school classroom in order to help shape education policy.

I am writing to you to ask your permission to participate in a short interview of approximately 15 - 20 minutes. The purpose of the interview is to ascertain information about how teachers view and experience ability grouping within the classroom.

Strict confidentiality is central to my research and, in order to protect participant anonymity, I will ensure that no identifying details will be revealed in my project. Neither the name of the school nor any geographical details will be disclosed.

I would be extremely grateful if you could consent to participating in the interview for my research project by filling in the attached Participant Consent Form. Should you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance.

Yours Faithfully,

Amy O'Connor

Participant Consent Form: An Examination of Teacher's Perspectives on Ability Grouping in the Primary School Classroom

I have been fully informed as to the nature of the research	Y	N
I understand my role in the research	Y	N
I understand that no identifying details will be used in the final report	Y	N
My participation is voluntary	Y	N
I understand that I can withdraw from this research at any time without adverse consequences	Y	N

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____