An Investigation into Irish Primary Teacher’s Perspectives on Structured Ability Grouping for Literacy and Numeracy.

Marino Institute of Education

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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.

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Abstract

Grouping students according to ability has been a highly contested topic in educational research, policy and practice. Research on the topic is contradictory, which is why the practice is heavily disputed. Advocates of the practice claim that structured ability grouping can raise educational standards and aid with teaching (Dunne et al., 2013; Ward Schofield, 2010; Boaler, William & Brown, 2000; Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016) while critics claim that it can cause problems for both high and low ability children (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020; Merritt, 2009). Structured ability grouping is prevalent in Irish primary schools today. For this reason, it is important that educators have an informed understanding of the practice. This research aimed to investigate Irish teacher’s perspectives on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy in the primary classroom. It sought to gain an insight of the practice from teachers who had experience using structured ability groups in their classroom. A mixed methods approach (Mertens, 2007) (Creswell, 2018) was selected for this study which involved the use of an online questionnaire. 42 primary teachers participated in the questionnaire from a range of primary schools. A collection of data was uncovered as part of this research which underwent statistical and thematical analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings that emerged as part of the research were mixed. Some participants regarded structured ability grouping as a worthwhile practice while others were against it completely. These findings were used to make several recommendations for future practice and research.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the research question, purpose of the study and research objectives. It will also provide an overview of each of the chapters presented in this thesis.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

This research aimed to investigate primary teacher’s perspectives on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy. Grouping students by ability has been central to research, policy and practice for most of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century (Francis et al., 2016). Advocates maintain that structured ability grouping raises educational standards however research has identified several disadvantages associated with the practice (Hallam & Parsons, 2013; Schofield, 2010; William & Bartholomew, 2004). Evidence suggests that children tend to remain in the same ability group throughout their entire schooling which may limit their educational opportunities and impact their view towards education (Ball, 1981; Boaler, 1997; Hallam & Parsons, 2013). Structured ability grouping is considered necessary in many cases as teachers attempt to cope with a wide range of abilities in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to uncover the perspectives of Irish primary school teachers on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy.

1.3 Research Question

The central research question that will be explored as part of this thesis is:

- What are Irish primary teachers’ perspectives on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy?

Several sub questions guided the research:
● Is structured ability grouping implemented for literacy and numeracy due to that being the preference of the teacher or due to school policy?

● Are children impacted by the awareness of structured ability grouping in the classroom?

● What strategies are used in the classroom to cope with a diverse range of abilities if children are not grouped by ability?

● What are the advantages and disadvantages of structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy, from a teacher’s perspective?

1.4 Research Aims

● Investigate primary teacher’s perspectives of structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy.

● Explore teacher’s experiences of structured ability grouping in the primary classroom.

● Gain an understanding of alternative practices to structured ability grouping that can be implemented in the classroom to help cope with a diverse range of abilities.

● Explore the impact structured ability grouping can have on children.

● Contribute to the literature on structured ability grouping in an Irish context.

1.5 Definitions of Key Terminology

● Structured ability grouping – This term is considered as the organisation of students into homogeneous groups based on their ability.

● Mixed-ability grouping – This term is considered as the organisation of students into groups consisting of different abilities.

1.6 Thesis Outline
• Chapter 2 “Literature Review” examines the literature relating to the field of ability grouping. It provides an in-depth overview of structured ability grouping as a practice and how it is implemented in a classroom setting.

• Chapter 3 “Research Methodology” outlines the chosen methodology used in this study. It details the research instrument, researcher’s positionality, sample of the study, ethical considerations, pilot study, reliability and validity of the study and the study’s limitations.

• Chapter 4 “Analysis and Discussion” summarises the findings of the mixed methods research project that emerged during the study. These findings will be compared to the literature discussed in chapter 2.

• Chapter 5 “Conclusions and Recommendations” summarises the key findings of this study and makes recommendations based on these findings.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Literacy and numeracy are important life skills that are taught in primary schools (Quinn, 2011). Literacy skills refers to student’s ability to use and understand spoken language, print, writing and digital media. Numeracy skills refers to student’s ability to use mathematics to solve problems and meet demands of day-to-day living (DES, 2011). Literacy and numeracy skills are needed for children to be able to access the full primary school curriculum (NCCA, 2007 (a)). The Department of Education (2011) published “The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Young People 2011-2020 (DES, 2011). The Minister for Education recommended that this strategy be the focus of all schools (Quinn, 2011). Children should not leave school without mastering these skills to the best of their ability. Mastering literacy and numeracy skills allows children to develop fully as individuals, participate fully in society and live a satisfying and rewarding life (Quinn, 2011). Children’s achievement level in literacy and numeracy are subject to individual difference. Every class at primary level will feature children of varying abilities (NCCA, 2006). There have been ongoing debates among educators regarding the best way to meet the literacy and numeracy needs of all learners in primary classes (Hallam, Ireson & Davies, 2013). Structured ability grouping has been suggested as an effective way to raise pupil attainment in literacy and numeracy (DES, 2000). This is where students are categorised into various homogeneous groups based on their intelligence (Merritt, 2019). Irish policy regards structured ability grouping as best practice for the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy. However, there is evidence to suggest it can be destructive for students (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020). Some research suggests that it can produce positive outcomes for all children, some suggests it can have
positive outcomes for high ability children and negative outcomes for low ability children and some suggests it can have negative outcomes for children of all abilities (Merritt, 2009). There has been a long tradition of grouping structured ability grouping in Ireland. The purpose of such grouping is to provide instruction to students at an appropriate level (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Structured ability grouping can occur in the form of tracking or setting in which students are grouped on a subject-by-subject basis or streaming in which students are grouped for all subjects at once (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). In Ireland structured ability grouping is based on tracking. This practice is mainly linked to the English and maths curriculum (Macintyre & Ireson, 2002). Structured ability grouping is a common practice in Irish secondary schools in which students are divided into certain classes based on their overall academic ability in a subject. At primary level, there tends to be ability groups within mixed ability classes (Merritt, 2009). Students can be grouped by ability for literacy and numeracy as young as junior infants (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000).

2.2 Policy

Irish policy makers within education have promoted structured ability grouping at primary level for literacy and numeracy. It is regarded as an effective pedagogical tool (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020). A single class can feature a range of individual needs and so, structured ability grouping can help categorise similar students, thus, making the teachers job easier (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Policy makers argue that grouping students by ability allows teachers to better organise teaching and learning as children of similar abilities can work collaboratively (DES, 2000). The same strand and strand unit can be taught to all groups but at a varying pace that corresponds to the ability of the group (DES, 2009). Some research suggests that structured ability grouping is the most effective way to improve the achievement of all students (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). Many teachers have positive
attitudes towards structured ability grouping. They argue that the task of teaching literacy and numeracy is too difficult in a mixed ability setting as the range of abilities in the class can vary considerably (Boaler, William & Brown, 2000). It can be difficult to work with students with different levels of knowledge and ability for complex subjects such as mathematics and English (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). With structured ability grouping, content, pace, and teaching methods can be adapted to suit students of varying abilities (Boaler, William & Brown, 2000). Teachers can engage better with smaller ability groups and can adapt lessons based on the response from students. (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Grouping according to ability can give teachers more time to assist those who are struggling and meet the needs of individual students (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Many educators would argue that the national primary curriculum is incompatible with mixed ability teaching (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). In mixed ability grouping, the pace can often be too slow for high ability children which can cause them to disengage. Lower ability children may find the pace of lessons too fast which may cause anxiety. With ability groups, teachers can tailor the pace of lessons so that learning objectives can be achieved (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Those against mixed ability teaching argue that high ability students miss out on challenging content in mixed ability settings and that cognitive demand is significantly lower than what it could be if children were placed in ability groups (Ireson & Hallam, 1999).

2.3 Criticism

More recent research has cast doubt on whether placing students in ability-based groups is the best way to deal with diversity of ability in the classroom (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). Structured ability grouping is based on the idea that children have fixed levels of ability and should be taught accordingly (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Those against structured ability grouping would argue that this is not the case, and that ability levels are more fluid.
Some research suggests that grouping students by ability widens the gap between students beyond what would be expected in terms of initial differences (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). It can be difficult to move between groups as the achievement gap is constantly widening and soon, the student who may have been able for the challenge of a high ability group is no longer equipped for it (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). They argue that groups are not flexible and the only way to progress upwards is to perform well on standardised tests (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Structured ability grouping has been criticised for fostering exclusion. Some argue that grouping children by ability can deprive them of learning of specific content as they have been deemed ineligible. There is no telling if children in lower ability groups would be able for the challenge as they are not given the chance (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998).

2.4. Inclusion
Research has highlighted the inequality involved in structured ability grouping, particularly for students placed in low ability groups (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). The type of students that are placed in low ability groups tend to be those who are disadvantaged by the school system in some way due to race, gender or class. Studies show that there is an overrepresentation of working-class children in low ability groups (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Some research suggests that low ability groups receive low quality teaching which can lead to lower teacher expectations (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). Students in high ability groups can be disadvantaged due to high expectations, fast-paced lessons and pressure to succeed (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Children in ability groups are grouped together because they are believed to be of similar ability. However, ability-based lessons are often taught as though these students are of identical ability which is not the case (Dunne et al, 2013). For
this reason, those against structured ability grouping would argue that students should be in mixed ability groups where differentiation is incorporated (Boaler, William & Brown, 2000).

2.5 Teacher Expectations

Teachers play an important role in shaping student’s beliefs about their educational prospects (Greshenson, Holt & Papageorge, 2016). International research suggests that there is a strong link between student’s social backgrounds and educational achievement (Ward Schofield, 2010). Children placed in low ability groups tend to be from working class backgrounds which may contribute to widening the gap between the working class and middle class (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Lowering expectations for students can have damaging effects on their overall educational achievement (Greshenson, Holt & Papageorge, 2016). Students may be left unstimulated in their ability-based group due to teachers’ low expectations of them (Boaler, William & Brown, 2000). Teacher expectations for children in high ability groups can be very high. Teachers may think that students in high ability groups do not need detailed help, time to think, or the space to make mistakes (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). This may discourage students from asking questions if they do not understand something for fear of being reprimanded or feeling embarrassed in front of their peers (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Teachers may run through material very quickly in high ability groups, without providing students with proper in-depth explanations. Students in high ability may be left with a basic understanding of content. They may know how to get the correct answers but may be unaware why they are using specific methodologies (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Students in high ability groups are often left to figure out content for themselves as they are deemed clever enough to do so (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000).
2.6 Educational Achievement

The effects of structured ability grouping on students is a central issue in educational research. Some research suggests that high achieving students can make satisfactory progress in high ability groups while the progress of lower ability students is hindered when they are placed in low ability groups (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). There is also research to suggest that structured ability grouping can have a negative impact on children in both high and low ability groups (Boaler, William & Brown, 2000).

2.6.1 Learning Experience

Structured ability grouping can have a negative effect on students in low ability groups in terms of self-esteem and attitudes towards literacy and numeracy (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). US research suggests that structured ability grouping can cause low ability students to have an anti-school attitude and may cause them to alienate themselves from school (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). A 2016 study conducted by Bolick & Rogowsky examined students in ability groups and mixed ability groups. The results revealed that low ability students in mixed ability groups in one school performed better than children of similar ability in ability groups in another school. Research suggests that time can be wasted on behaviour management in low ability groups (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016).

2.6.2 Learning Technologies

There has been a growing support for mixed ability grouping in the primary classroom in recent years (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Surveys of teachers attitudes towards grouping in the USA, Israel, Sweden and England reveal that generally teachers prefer mixed ability groups for teaching and learning (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). With mixed ability groups, teachers can provide high ability students with more challenging work, while providing additional support to struggling students (Boaler, William & Brown, 2000). Mixed ability
grouping can relate to social terms by fostering inclusion (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Those in favour of mixed ability grouping argue that it is possible for students of all ability levels to effectively learn literacy and numeracy skills in mixed ability groups (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). Mixed ability grouping allows students to learn from each other and learn to be supportive of one another (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Studies show mixed ability grouping does not give rise to a significant gap between higher and lower ability students (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). Research suggests that low ability students can be unmotivated in ability groups but are encouraged when in mixed ability groups (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016). Educators in favour of mixed ability groups argue that they are more effective as they provide equal opportunity for children to engage with the curriculum, they promote social integration and reduce competition within groups (Merritt, 2009). International research suggests that being in a group with high achievers can raise the achievement of struggling students (Ward Schofield, 2010). Research suggests that the success of mixed ability grouping is dependent on the skills of the teacher. Teachers should be flexible, vary the pace of lessons, use a variety of teaching methodologies and a variety of audio and visual material for teaching and learning (Ireson & Hallam, 1999).

2.7 Standardisation

Ability groups at primary level are largely based on standardised tests and class tests issued throughout the school year. Under Section 22 of the Government of Ireland Education Act (1998) schools must administer standardised tests to students in 2nd, 4th and 6th class (DES, n.d.). The main instruments for standardised testing in Irish primary schools are the Drumcondra Reading/Mathematics Tests and The Micra/Sigma-T tests (Mac Ruairc, 2009). These tests are intended to assess the learning of all students irrespective of gender, race,
ethnicity or class (Mac Ruairc, 2009). Test results are recorded and analysed, and children are grouped into literacy and numeracy groups according to achievement (DES, 2009).

According to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) the aim of assessment as part of the 1999 Primary School Curriculum is to enrich teaching and learning. The NCCA and Department of Education and Skills recommend that there should be a balance of assessment for learning and assessment of learning in schools (Mac Ruairc, 2009). Standardised tests and class tests are mainly used as an assessment of learning (AOL) tool as it indicates the child’s performance at the end of a unit of learning (NCCA, 2007 (b)). There are arguments for and against the use of this type of testing at primary level. Those in favour of testing in this way believe that they lead to higher achievement (Mac Ruairc, 2009). They aid teacher’s monitoring of students’ progress and can identify the needs of individual children. A child with learning difficulties can be identified and in turn appropriate supports can be put in place (NCCA, 2007 (b)).

Those who discourage the use of class tests and standardised tests question what counts as standard, who sets these standards and what counts as meeting these standards (Mac Ruairc, 2009). A standardised test score measures a child’s performance on that day, but this may not reflect their overall ability in that subject. External factors may affect the student’s test score (NCCA, 2007 (b)). A child could perform poorly on a standardised test for several reasons and subsequently could be placed in an ability group based on these test scores. Two hypothetically identical ability students could end up with significantly different knowledge in the areas of literacy and numeracy if placed in the wrong group (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). The argument of social class background has been raised with regards to standardised tests. Mac Ruairc’s study (2009) revealed that middle class children were more confident when answering questions as part of literacy and numeracy standardised tests while
working-class children experienced a lack of certainty (Mac Ruairc, 2009). This argues that middle class children are in a more privileged position and in turn have potential to achieve higher results in standardised tests. The standardised testing experience for working-class children was characterised by struggles and challenges (Mac Ruairc, 2009).

2.8 Conclusion

Grouping children by ability for literacy and numeracy is a controversial and disputed issue in primary education (Bygren, 2016). A review of the literature on structured ability grouping has revealed that there are many arguments for and against it, and that there is an ongoing debate about whether it should be implemented for literacy and numeracy at primary level. Advantages and disadvantages of grouping students by ability have emerged from various studies on the topic, yet nothing conclusive. Research suggests that teachers tend to support the system (structured ability grouping or mixed ability grouping) that is employed in the school that they are working in (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). Those in favour of structured ability grouping argue that it can facilitate more effective teaching by allowing teachers to pitch topics at different levels depending on what group they are working with (Hallam, Ireson & Davies, 2013). It can also allow children to make progress in line with their literacy and numeracy abilities (Bygren, 2016). Those against structured ability grouping argue that it can lead to considerable variations in attainment among students (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). In some cases, teachers may forget about individual capabilities of students and focus on the group the student has been placed in. Both students in low and high ability groups can experience damaging repercussions as a result (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). For structured ability grouping to be eliminated, adequate training would need to be provided to student teachers at 3rd level so that they can effectively deal with students of varying abilities.
in a mixed ability classroom (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998). Differentiation could be used to overcome the challenges associated with mixed ability grouping in literacy and numeracy. This can be achieved by providing children with different tasks within the same group (differentiated by task) or by altering the learning objectives (differentiated by outcome). Children can work through differentiated work at their own pace in mixed ability groups (NCCA, 2006). This is an alternative to issuing all students in a mixed ability group with the same work and expecting them to complete it at the same speed (Boaler, Wiliam & Brown, 2000). Evidence suggests that teachers’ opinions on structured ability grouping varies from study to study. As the literature is contradictory more research needs to be carried out on this area. The next chapter will provide information on the methods chosen to uncover Irish primary teacher’s perspectives on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy.
Chapter 3
Methodology

3.1 Introduction
This chapter presents an account of the methodological approaches employed for this research project. It will outline how the aims of the study were pursued and how the findings emerged. The broad objective of this study was to uncover Irish primary teacher’s perspectives on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy. This chapter outlines the research methodology used for this study and identifies the rationale for its choice. It details the research instrument and identifies its advantages and disadvantages. The sample, ethical considerations, researcher’s positionality, pilot study, reliability and validity and limitations will also be discussed.

3.2 Research Methodology
A mixed methods approach was selected for this study. A mixed methods approach can be defined as the merging of quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2009). According to Creswell (2018) “Qualitative and quantitative approaches should not be viewed as rigid, distinct categories, polar opposites, or dichotomies… A study tends to be more qualitative than quantitative or vice versa” (Creswell, 2018, p. 51). In the case of this research, it was more quantitative than qualitative as there were 20 quantitative questions (including 3 Likert scale questions) and 6 qualitative questions. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected at the same time using a mixed methods questionnaire (See Appendix C). Mixed methods research provides an avenue for obtaining data that represents a variety of different perspectives (Mertens, 2007). It recognises that there are multiple ways of making sense of things which can all be relevant to the research question (Greene, 2008). To ensure that the research question would give rise to a variety of different perspectives, a mixed methods
approach was deemed an appropriate form of research. Mixed methods research can provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon as it allows for the triangulation of data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). This means that by the end of the study I had gathered both quantitative and qualitative data which in turn provided a broad understanding of how structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy is perceived by Irish primary teachers. The qualitative responses obtained in the questionnaire helped shape the quantitative responses and vice versa. This provided me with detailed responses that led me closer to answering the overall research question (Risjord et al., 2001).

This research was conducted from a pragmatic worldview (Creswell, 2018). It is important to identify the philosophical worldview of the researcher as this may influence the practice of the research (Creswell, 2018). Pragmatism allows the researcher the freedom of choice in terms of the research methodology, the research instrument and research procedures (Creswell, 2009). It is based on the idea of “what works” meaning that if the research methods and data collected contribute to answering the overall research question, they are acceptable (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, pp. 64). Pragmatism allows for investigation of the multiple views associated with a phenomenon. It recognises that there may be multiple versions of reality (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). This allowed for various perspectives to be uncovered, while recognising that each teacher may have had a different experience with structured ability grouping as a pedagogical practice. A key component of pragmatism is the idea that “knowledge is provisional (Denscombe, 2007, p. 117). Thus, it is understood that due to the ever-changing nature of cultural contexts, perspectives are continuously changing. Consequently, I acknowledge that the views presented in this study may not be reflected in past or future studies on structured ability grouping at primary level.
3.3 Positionality

Positionality refers to the researcher’s position in relation to the social and political context of the study (Gary & Holmes, 2020). It is essential to consider the positionality of the researcher to evaluate its impact on the research in question (Bourke, 2014). I have memories of being grouped for literacy and numeracy during my own primary education. At the time I was aware that I was always placed in a middle group. I remember some classmates being more academically able than me and some classmates struggling more. I noticed the practice of structured ability grouping as an adult while on teaching practice and while taking on the role of substitute teacher in various schools. I have gained first-hand experience with structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy at primary level, however these experiences are limited. Therefore, I do not have adequate experience with structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy in a teaching role to have an informed opinion on the practice. I would like to gain an insight into the practice of grouping children by ability for literacy and numeracy so that I can decide whether to implement it in my own classroom when qualified if given the option.

3.4 Research Instrument

Originally, I aimed to use semi-structured interviews for data collection for this study, however, interviews were ultimately disregarded based on a few grounds. Interviews can be time consuming and inconvenient for potential participants (Bell, 2005). Teachers tend to be busy and so arranging time for interviews may have proved to be difficult. Interviews would have had to be conducted virtually due Covid-19, which could have potentially led to technical issues which can be frustrating for both the participant and myself. Consequently, based on the timescale of the study, its word count and restrictions relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, I decided to disregard semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection.
These pragmatic considerations instead led me to select an online questionnaire as the instrument for data collection for the study.

A questionnaire was chosen as an appropriate research instrument for this research (Gillham, 2008). There were many benefits of choosing an online questionnaire as the research instrument. It was cost efficient as there was no printing, postage or paper involved. It was time efficient as it was easily distributed to many participants via direct message and completed in a matter of minutes. It was convenient as participants had the liberty of completing the questionnaire from the comfort of their own home at a time that suited them. It was completed without the presence of the researcher which may have resulted in more open and honest responses from participants. Participants may have felt freer in this anonymous style of responding (Gillham, 2008). However, I did experience some disadvantages associated with online questionnaires as a research instrument during this study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Some teachers may have had less developed computer skills than others. This may explain why so many young teachers participated in the survey. The response rate for teachers with 0-5 years’ experience was much higher than that of teachers with 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, and 21+ years. Another disadvantaged that presented itself in this study was “abandonment and drop out” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, pp. 363). I received some incomplete surveys whereby not all questions were answered. 42 participants consented to taking part in the questionnaire. However, after the third question there are only 41 responses recoded for the remainder of the questions. As well as this, some participants submitted their questionnaire without responding to one or more of the questions.

I had to ensure an in-depth review of the literature involving structured ability grouping was carried out. This ensured that subject specific questions would feature in the questionnaire,
that would contribute to answering the research question. I began to develop questions by referring to the aims of the study and determined the exact questions that needed to be answered as part of the research (Gillham, 2008). The length of the questionnaire was also considered. I did not want the questionnaire to be too short as sufficient data would not be collected. Furthermore, I did not want the questionnaire to be too long and risk high “abandonment and drop out” rates (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, pp. 363). The questionnaire adapted mixed methods as it included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, thus providing both qualitative and quantitative data (Mertens, 2007). Some of the questions required numeric responses and other required text responses. This was easily facilitated through the online questionnaire. The questions investigated how participants have experienced structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy, how well participants felt they were equipped in dealing with a wide range of ability and the perceived advantages and disadvantages associated with ability grouping. The questionnaire involved 17 multiple choice questions, 3 Likert scale questions in which participants selected their position on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree and 6 open ended questions in which participants could write as much or as little words as they liked in response. The multiple-choice and Likert scale questions provided quantitative data which is “easily analysed” and comparable (Denscombe, 2007, p. 116). The open-ended questions provided qualitative data which allowed participants to express their opinions and discuss their experiences. This was relevant to this study as the aim was to investigate teacher’s perspectives on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy.
3.5 Sample

Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). I began by identifying a small group of qualified primary school teachers who participated in the questionnaire. The research was “respondent-driven” as I was reliant on the participants to identify others to participate in the questionnaire (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, pp. 221). This group then passed the questionnaire onto people they knew who met the participation criteria of being a qualified primary teacher. 42 qualified primary teachers from around the country participated in the questionnaire. Teaching experience ranged from one year to forty years. If participants had experience with structured ability grouping, they completed four sections of the questionnaire. If participants had no experience with structured ability grouping, they completed three sections of the questionnaire. One of the sections required participants to draw on their experience with structured ability grouping in the classroom. As a result, if participants had no experience, they were redirected to the next section of the questionnaire.

3.6 Ethics

It is important to take ethical considerations into account when conducting any form of research. Ethical standards guide the researcher during the research process (Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2007). This research was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of Marino Institute of Education and appropriate steps were taken to eliminate the likelihood of any ethical issues. I provided participants with an information letter (see appendix A) which outlined my identity as the researcher, the aim of the research, participation requirements, information on data storage and analysis and the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. Having read the information letter, participants were directed to sign the consent form (see appendix B). “The notion of ‘informed consent’ lies at the heart of ethical research”
Here, participants were required to complete the consent form before taking part in the research. This ensured that the participant has “been advised about the requirements of the research and understood what is involved” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 147). All participants were adults and were not vulnerable. As a result, they were able to provide their own verbal and written consent (Denscombe, 2007). Due to the “snowballing” method of recruitment, participants were aware of the nature of the questionnaire before they participated (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Anonymity was upheld throughout the research. Participants names were not taken at any stage of the research. Consent forms and questionnaire responses were only accessible to the researcher.

3.7 Pilot:

A pilot study was carried out to “pre-test” the questionnaire before it was distributed to participants (Malmqvist et al, 2019, pp. 2). According to Mertens, the pilot study should be carried out with “a small sample similar to your intended group of respondents” (2010, pp. 191). I asked my placement host teacher and two student teachers also in the PME course to participate in the pilot study. The aim of the pilot questionnaire was to increase the quality of the research by identifying any inconsistencies within the questionnaire (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Three pilot questionnaires were conducted with colleagues before the questionnaire was sent to participants. I held feedback sessions in which I asked participants to relay how they felt the questionnaire could be improved. Following the feedback from the pilot questionnaire, some changes were made to the questionnaire. Originally the questionnaire contained more quantitative questions. I realised that statistical data was not sufficient for certain questions. A numeric response would not have contributed to answering the research question. Some of the multiple-choice questions had to be altered to include the option for participants to explain their reason for their choice. This kind of response was
much more valuable to the data collection and could be analysed in a way that would contribute to answering the research question. There were also some changes made to the wording and order of questions to make the questionnaire more accessible to participants. The pilot study eliminated any ambiguities and improved the readability of the questionnaire.

3.8 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is the process of identifying themes or patterns within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). An inductive approach to thematic analysis was adopted as part of this research, meaning that the data collected was used to determine the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Braun & Clarke’s six phase guide was used as a framework for the analysis of the data for this study. This process involved:

(1) Becoming familiar with the data by reading and re-reading.

(2) Generating initial codes through a theoretical lens by taking note of data that captured something interesting about the research topic.

(3) Fitting codes together to generate themes.

(4) Reviewing themes by organising data into an appropriate theme and ensuring there was enough data to support each theme.

(5) Defining and naming each theme in line with the data.

(6) Writing up an analysis of the data under the five themes that emerged as part of this research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.9 Reliability and Validity

It is of great importance to any research that the data gathered is “accurate, reliable and valid” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 43). To achieve validity and reliability, the researcher must identify any “potential threats” to the validity of the study (Creswell, 2009, p. 162). According to Cohen, et al., “validity is an important key to effective research. If a piece of research is...
invalid then it is worthless” (2013, p. 133). I clearly outlined the inclusion criteria for participants to ensure that validity and reliability were not compromised. In terms of reliability, I strived to yield similar results under constant conditions. The initial test for reliability occurred during the formation of the questionnaire with regards to both its wording and structure. In addition, reliability was also determined during the pilot study. Following the pilot study, alterations were made to strengthen reliability (Silverman, 2011). In terms of validity, I selected an appropriate instrument for data collection and implemented consistency throughout the data gathering process. A mixed methods approach was adopted for this study, which is an effective way of demonstrating validity as it incorporates both quantitative and qualitative responses (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). I ensured that questions were relevant to the research question so that responses would accurately represent the perspectives of teachers on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy.

3.10 Limitations

It is important to recognise this study is not without its limitations. This study featured a relatively small sample size. With only 42 participants, results cannot confirm generalisability (Robson, 2011). Instead, the study gives an insight into the perspectives of a small number of primary school teachers on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy. A larger sample size would allow “some balance between the proportions within the sample and the proportions which occur in the overall population being investigated” (Denscombe, 2007, p. 25). Future studies involving a larger sample size may contribute to more generalisable findings on the topic. Given that the questionnaire was online, data was collected only by respondents with internet access and a fair understanding of how online questionnaire platforms operate. Despite internet accessibility increasing globally, particularly in the developed world, as referenced by Denscombe (2007) it would be “premature” to assume that
everybody is skilled online. Therefore, limiting teacher responses to an online survey only, potentially prevents respondents without internet access and skills from participating in the study.

Data was collected using self-reporting questionnaires without the presence of the researcher. According to Robson, (2011) “a low response rate is a serious and common problem with self-completion questionnaires” (Robson, 2011, p. 246). Often, people are biased when they report on their own experiences (Rosenman et al., 2014) and may be consciously/unconsciously influenced by social desirability (Holden, 2009). Participants may have lacked introspective ability (Fleming et al., 2010) or struggled to be honest (Meleis, 1980). For some participants, when discussing structured ability grouping, the rating scales used may have been too restrictive or vague for their experience, thereby potentially making participants feel inclined to give middle responses to questions (Kieruj, 2010). Furthermore, teachers who chose to participate within the study were self-selected, and therefore may have already possessed prior interest and greater knowledge about structured ability grouping while other teachers may have lacked this insight.

3.11 Conclusion:

I believe the mixed methods questionnaire was an appropriate form of data collection as it collected both quantitative and qualitative data that was needed to answer the research question. I intended to get an insight into the perspectives of the participating teachers, which according to Morse (2003) is obtainable when more than one method is used in the study. An online questionnaire was chosen as the research instrument which collected satisfactory data to answer the research question. The research identified several emergent themes which will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 4
Findings & Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present and analyse the data collected towards answering the research question on teacher’s perspectives of structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy at primary level. It will also discuss the findings in accordance with relevant literature. A mixed methods questionnaire was employed to collect data for this study therefore, both quantitative and qualitative data was gathered. Quantitative findings of the questionnaire will be presented in the form of graphs while qualitative findings will be presented in thematic form.

4.2 Demographics

42 primary teachers completed the questionnaire (n=42). Of the 42 teachers who took part, 71% had been teaching for 0-5 years (n=30), 14% had been teaching for 6-10 years (n=6), 5% had been teaching for 11-15 years (n=2) and 10% had been teaching for 21+ years (n=4). There were not participants who had been teaching for 16-20 years (n=0).
Figure 1. Years of teaching experience.

Of the 42 participants 76% were teaching in a co-educational school (n=32), 5% were teaching in an all-boys school (n=2) and 19% were teaching in an all-girls school (n=8).

![Pie chart showing percentages of school types](image)

Figure 2. Type of school participants are teaching in.

Participants were asked if they had ever implemented structured ability grouping for literacy or numeracy in their class. Of the 42 participants, 88% had implemented structured ability grouping for literacy or numeracy (n=37) and 12% had not (n=5).
Figure 3. Teachers with experience of structured ability grouping in their class.

Of the 37 participants who had implemented structured ability grouping in their class, 60% of those implemented ability as a whole school initiative (n=22) and 40% implemented it as an individual choice (n=15).

Figure 4. Implementation of structured ability grouping in participant’s schools.
4.2.1 Discussion

These findings reveal that structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy is implemented in all types of Irish primary schools (co-educational, all-boys and all-girls). It also revealed that majority of participants had experience with ability grouping. This supports the claim that grouping students by ability is a “standard practice in most educational systems” (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 137). For over half of the participants, structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy was implemented as a whole school initiative. When structured ability grouping is implemented in such a way that is in accordance with a whole school policy, this may be due to the principal’s views on structured ability grouping as a practice. The principal of such a school may believe that structured ability grouping can raise pupil attainment (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). This policy may change should the principal leave their post and be replaced by a principal who is against structured ability grouping as a practice. 40% of participants stated that the implementation of structured ability grouping was an individual choice. Ireson and Hallam (1999) found that individual teachers often group their students by ability for certain subjects in response to the “complexity of the task of responding to the differing needs of a class of 30 learners”, irrespective of school policy on structured ability grouping (p. 351).

4.3 Thematic Analysis

Five primary themes emerged from the data collected as part of this study:

- Children’s awareness
- Impact on children
- Classroom organisation
- Perceived advantages
- Perceived disadvantages
4.3.1 Children’s Awareness

One theme that was prevalent among the data collected was the children’s awareness of structured ability grouping as a practice in the classroom. Participants were asked if they believed children were aware of the different ability groups in the classroom. Of the 37 respondents who had implemented structured ability grouping in the classroom, 64% of them believed the children were aware of the different ability groups (n=24).

![Pie chart showing children's awareness of structured ability grouping in the class.]

*Figure 5. Children’s awareness of structured ability grouping in the class.*

The children’s awareness of the different ability groups seemed to be dependent on their age and class level. Participants who taught junior classes implied that younger children seemed to be oblivious to the groups. These participants stated:

“I have junior infants, so they are too young to realise”.

“I have an infant class so the children aren’t as aware, but you could definitely see more of a link in the older classes”.

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Responses that emerged from senior teachers indicated that as children get older, groupings become more obvious. These participants stated:

“My experience with older classes is these groups are deemed clever and not clever”.

“I have found that with older classes you would often hear phrases such as ‘oh that’s the smart group’ used”.

“Children in older classes especially begin to see the ‘better’ groups in the class as they can tell if things are harder or easier”.

Some teachers identified strategies they have used in attempt to disguise the groups:

“Even though ability groups are labelled by colours (red, yellow etc) children in lower groups often questioned why they are put in blue (lowest group for example) and they want to be in a different group”.

“I’ve tried different group names and pretended to randomly select students, but they do know themselves who’s very good at something in the class”.

“Children of an older age are definitely aware even if you call the group by a colour or code name”.

In a case study conducted by McGillicuddy & Devine (2020), it was recognised by teachers that structured ability grouping in the classroom can create “ability-related awareness” among students (p.8). When ability groups were used there was a heightened sense of the children’s own ability and that of their peers (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020).

4.3.2 Impact of Structured Ability Grouping on Children

Of the 37 respondents, 73% agreed that there is a link between structured ability grouping and a child’s self-esteem and confidence (n=27).
Figure 6. Perceived correlation between structured ability grouping and self-esteem/confidence.

When participants were asked if they believed there was a correlation between ability grouping and children’s self-esteem/confidence the following negative implications were reported:

“The children are very aware of what group they are in and this leads to teasing and low confidence”.

“Often students in the lower ability group experience problems with their confidence and self-esteem because they feel incapable in comparison to some of their classmates. This is particularly noticeable in the students that consistently try their best and deliver good academic performances but are just not yet meeting the standards of the higher ability group. Comments made about other groups and lack of motivation because they’re not in the ‘good group’.”
“The children in the weaker ability groups tend to say that they struggle in that subject and say that they aren’t good at it”.

“Often children with very low academic test scores lack self-esteem”.

Most research that has been carried out on structured ability grouping mirrored these responses. Research carried out by McGillicuddy (2013) linked a range of emotions to the awareness of being part of a particular ability group. Emotions associated with being part of a high ability group included pride, confidence and happiness. Emotions associated with being part of a low ability group included sadness, shame and upset. This research also suggested that these emotions in turn could have a positive or negative impact on self-esteem and self-concept depending on which group the child is placed in. Research carried out by Craig, et al. (2019) suggested a worrying self-confidence gap between children in high ability groups and low ability groups.

Contrastingly, some of the participants referred to structured ability grouping having a positive impact on the children’s confidence/self-esteem. These claims were not mirrored in the literature. Such responses included:

“All the children are happy in their groups. They answer freely and don’t worry about making mistakes”.

“In my experience, children are more comfortable working with those of similar abilities”.

“In my experience most seem happy working with children who are at their level”.

Of the 37 respondents, 57% believed that structured ability grouping can have an influence on a child's attitude/behaviour towards learning (n=21).
Some teachers identified a negative link between structured ability grouping and attitude/behaviour toward learning. Some of those responses included:

“Sometimes students in the lower ability group tend to act out in class. This is potentially down to their awareness and/or frustration that their strengths do not match those of some of their classmates and are not considered to be as “successful” in terms of academics”.  

“If a child is perceived as low achieving, they will internalise that and Perform as such. I find that a small percentage of the children can find it quite embarrassing when they realise they’re in a lower ability group and may act out”.  

“Occasionally, this “acting out” from those in the lower ability group comes from those students that fall into the typical “mis behaving” kind”.
Other responses identified a positive link between structured ability grouping and attitude/behaviour towards learning. The following was stated:

“Some children exhibit a growth in confidence when they are able to complete the work that is set out for them”.

“From my experience children work better when in their groups as they are challenged at their own level of learning and are more capable and involved in the learning”.

“In my experience children are more enthusiastic about learning when they are able to engage with the work at a level that is suited to them”.

4.3.3 Classroom Organisation

When participants were asked about the classroom organisation strategies for coping with a wide range of abilities the following was reported on power hour:

“Power hour sessions in class are useful so children aren’t being withdrawn all the time”.

“The children love getting into their groups for Power Hours. I think being confident in their groups enhances learning and explanations in small groups is easier. Children also ask each other questions”.

“I think structured ability grouping for power hour three days a week is beneficial to all children, the higher achievers can move at a quicker pace and the weaker children can get more guidance and support”.

Many participants referenced “power hour” as a useful practice in the primary classroom which involves ability grouping. This is an initiative that was developed to assist class teachers in coping with the wide range of pupil abilities in the one classroom. Learning support teachers work in conjunction with the class teacher to devise an intensive literacy
programme for one hour per day for one school term. The class is divided into four stations, pupils move from station to station to work their way through the programme (DES, 2009). Another strategy that was mentioned by participants for coping with a range of abilities in the classroom was differentiation in a mixed ability setting. Responses relating to differentiation included:

“Teachers can personalise learning objectives for certain students. They can expect more/less from particular students”.

“Differentiation works best for me as it allows the children to stay in mixed ability groups and the teacher can alter content, support, tasks and questions to suit the child”.

These claims support those of the Department of Education which recommend differentiation as a practice to improve learning outcomes (DES, 2009). Gregory (1986) emphasises that differentiation is an important skill for teachers to master when teaching in a mixed ability setting. However, Ireson and Hallam (1999) recognise the difficulty of “providing appropriate work for pupils of high and low ability in the same class” (p. 351).

Of the 42 participants that took part in the questionnaire 45% of them felt that their teacher training during college did not appropriately equip them with knowledge on differentiation practices.
4.3.4 Teacher’s Preference

Of the 42 participants 57% believed that structured ability grouping should be implemented for literacy and numeracy (n=24), 27% did not believe it should be implemented (n=12) and 14% were unsure (n=6).

Figure 9. Participant’s preference for ability grouping.
Participants identified several advantages of structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy in the classroom. One of the most prevalent advantages identified by participants was how grouping children by ability can assist the teacher in managing the class and coping with a diverse range of abilities. The following was stated:

“I think in terms of managing the class it is easier to organise the children into ability groups”.

“Mixed ability groups would be the ideal however in a realistic world same ability groups are easier for the teacher to plan and prep for”.

“Grouping children by ability means that less pressure is put on the teacher”.

“Structured ability grouping makes it easier for the teacher to plan and teach lessons”.

Oakes (1985) argued that grouping children by ability makes the teacher’s job easier when faced with the task of teaching a large group of children with varying abilities. Evidence from research with teachers supports the claim that grouping students by ability is an effective way for teachers to meet the needs of their students (Wright-Castro, Ramirez, & Duran, 2003).

Another advantage that emerged from the data was how ability grouping can allow time for additional support to be given to struggling students. The following was stated:

“You can spend more time with the children who are struggling and work with them as a group”.

“Stronger students are kept busy and focused while the weaker students get that extra bit of support and guidance required to help them progress academically”.

“With structured ability grouping the running of the class is more flexible and there is no more confinement to “teaching to the middle””.

“You can then spend time with the children who need it extra support”.


“Smaller groups also allow the teacher to work with the children individually and get a closer look at their abilities as an individual”.

Teachers can use structured ability grouping to adapt instruction to suit individual needs and to provide additional support to children that are struggling while higher ability children work independently (McGillicuddy, 2013). This can maintain motivation and interest among higher ability children as they are less likely to become bored if allowed to work individually when they understand a concept (Slavin, 1990).

Another advantage that emerged from the data was how structured ability grouping can improve the quality of teaching and learning and allow children to progress at a level that it suited to them. The following was stated:

“For literacy and numeracy, it is important that the children are working at a level that suits them, if they are reading a level that is too easy, they’ll become bored and if it’s too hard they’ll get disinterested if they can’t understand it”.

“The children are working with children at their own level so they may not be intimidated by children who are doing more difficult work”.

“Children can learn at an appropriate pace and are more engaged in the challenge” and “children in lower ability groups don’t feel pressured or worried when something is too difficult or advanced for them. Children who are in higher based ability groups are challenged and continue and to progress in their learning”.

According to the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (1994), teachers can find it difficult to strike an appropriate balance for high and low ability children in a mixed ability setting. This can often leave high ability children feeling bored and disinterested and low ability children feeling overwhelmed with the workload. literature
on structured ability grouping combined with data from this research suggest that grouping children by ability may be an effective way to achieve this balance.

Although a considerable number of advantages emerged from the data, participants also identified some disadvantages associated with grouping children by ability. One of the disadvantages identified was how ability groups can sometimes hinder a child’s progress. The following responses were recorded:

“structured ability grouping can have the potential to keep a student within a certain level. Inhibiting them from learning opportunities that they could benefit from and keeping them at an ability level they could advance from”.

“Children come to view their ability as “fixed” and are less likely to be motivated or to try a challenging task. For children in lower ability groups, they are not exposed to tasks of a more difficult standard”.

“Some children may be held back due to their grouping”.

Research suggests that movement between ability groups tends to be infrequent meaning that children tend to remain in the same ability group throughout their entire schooling. If conducted ineffectively, structured ability grouping could potentially limit children’s educational opportunities as they may not be given the chance to access academic content at an appropriate level (Ball, 1981).

Another disadvantage identified by participants was the lack of collaborative learning that stems from ability grouping. The following was reported:

“They are not exposed to thoughts, opinions and responses of children of other abilities which can benefit them”.

“for lower ability children especially, there is a lack of exposure to hearing fluency in reading or hearing how somebody uses problem solving strategies in maths”.
“I think lesser able children benefit from being with higher achievers, it challenges them”.

“They aren’t getting the chance to learn from their peers and to see how they work which means there is not much space for peer learning”.

According to the Irish Primary School Curriculum collaborative learning should feature in the learning process. It states that collaborative work “will reflect the different personalities and particular abilities of other members of the group and make for an interactive exchange that will help to broaden and deepen individual children’s understanding” (NCCA, 1999). Children are stimulated by the ideas and opinions of others including those of differing abilities to their own.

An additional disadvantage that was identified by participants was the difficulty of organising children into ability groups. The following was stated:

“Sometimes there may be some children that don’t fit into any ability group, so they end up being in a group that’s too tough or not difficult enough for them”.

“If using standardised testing to group the children, a child may be placed in the wrong group”.

“Teachers may not think to change the groups throughout the year”.

“Teachers can treat groups as homogenous - thinking all children in a particular group are the same”.

Research conducted by Dunne et al., (2007) revealed that often children are assigned their group at the beginning of the year and their position is rarely revisited throughout the year. This means that if a child was placed in the wrong group or if an appropriate group does not exist for them, they will most likely remain in the group they were initially assigned.
The final disadvantage that emerged regularly in the data collected was how children can often feel as though they have a fixed ability based on the group they have been assigned. Some responses relating to this issue included:

“Some children don’t push themselves further in structured ability grouping as they believe they can only go as far as their ability group”.

“Sometimes children who are in a higher ability group feel they don’t need to work in a subject as they think they’ll automatically be good at it. On the other end, a child who is in a lower ability group may not work at it as they think they’ll never improve so what’s the point”.

“From my experience children in the lower based groups don’t try as hard because they feel like they are inferior and can’t grow to their potential”.

According to McGillicuddy, (2013) structured 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” (p. 4). Consequently, children’s acceptance of their ability being fixed has potential to be extremely damaging.

4.4 Conclusion

Participants were asked if they had anything to add on the topic of ability grouping. Many participants took this opportunity to express that although they did not feel that structured ability grouping was the ideal practice for meeting the needs of their students, they recognised its practical elements. The following was reported:

“Sometimes teaching colleges don’t prepare us for the real-life world of teaching. I would love to use mixed ability groups at all times but unfortunately this is not always possible when dealing with 30 children”.
“I agree it isn’t always ideal for children to be grouped by ability but without structured ability grouping I don’t believe high ability or low ability children would be able to reach their full potential”.

“I think in general the class should be taught altogether as the children will all learn from each other but for literacy and numeracy structured ability grouping is more realistic”.

There were advantages as disadvantages identified with structured ability grouping as a pedagogical practice which provided a significant insight to the experiences and perspectives of structured ability grouping in the primary classroom. Many of the findings of this research were reflected in the literature reviewed in chapter 2. However, some gaps were identified which warrant further investigation into the area of structured ability grouping. This will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will present an overview of the key findings as well as recommendations and suggestions for further research. This study set out to investigate Irish primary teacher’s perspectives on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy. Following this study, I have gained invaluable insight into the experiences and perspectives of primary teachers across several schools on the practice of structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy.

5.2 Summary of Findings

i. Most teachers that participated in the questionnaire stated that they had experience with structured ability grouping (88% (n=37)). These were teachers from all primary school settings (all-boys schools, all-girls schools and co-educational schools). Ability groups for literacy and numeracy were predominantly based on standardised test results (55% (n=20)). However, other influential factors were considered when assigning students to groups such as class test results (16% (n=6)) and samples of students’ work (16% (n=12)). In most cases, structured ability grouping was implemented as part of a whole school initiative (60% (n=22)).

ii. The study found that most teachers believed that children are aware of structured ability grouping in the classroom (65% (n=24)). Awareness was largely dependent on the age and class level of the children. Some believed that this awareness could have a negative impact on the children’s self-esteem and confidence as the child may feel like a failure if they are assigned to the “bad” group. Others perceived awareness of structured ability grouping as have no such impact. They believed that it can be
beneficial for children to work at a level that is suitable for them which in turn, can contribute positively to their self-esteem and confidence.

iii. Participant’s identified different ways that structured ability grouping can impact behaviour and attitudes towards learning overall. Some stated that if children are assigned to a low ability group, they may deem themselves as weak and internalise this causing them to act out. Others stated that being part of an ability group that is appropriate for their level can maximise learning as children become enthusiastic about learning when they are able to participate in lessons and understand the content being taught.

iv. Participants identified alternative strategies for coping with a wide range of abilities in the classroom that did not involve grouping children by ability. These strategies included the implementation of “power hour” and differentiation. 45% of participants (n=19) claimed that their teacher training did not appropriately equip them with knowledge on differentiation.

v. Most teachers believed that structured ability grouping should be used for literacy and numeracy at primary level (57% (n=24)). The study revealed perceived advantages and disadvantages of structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy in the primary classroom. Some of the advantages identified were ease of teaching, opportunity to offer additional support to struggling students and improved quality of teaching due to the teacher being able to pitch content at an appropriate level. Some disadvantages identified by participants included the potential for ability groups to hinder children’s progress, lack of collaborative learning, the rigidness of groups that may not account for every child and the potential for children to believe their ability is fixed based on the group they are assigned to.
5.3 Recommendations

i. While some research suggests that structured ability grouping can raise educational attainment, there is an extensive amount of research to suggest that grouping children in this way can have negative effects on children which seem to outweigh the benefits. However, most teachers agreed that structured ability grouping should be implemented for literacy and numeracy. Therefore, it is recommended that the use of mixed-ability grouping is considered for instruction as much as possible with occasional use of structured ability groups where necessary.

ii. Participants expressed their concerns about coping with a diverse range of abilities relating to literacy and numeracy in the classroom when structured ability grouping is not implemented. Research has identified many disadvantages of structured ability grouping, however most participants agreed that it should be implemented for literacy and numeracy in the primary classroom. Perhaps the reason why so many participants believed that it should be implemented is because it may easier for them to manage their students differing abilities when they are grouped in such a way. Therefore, more support could be provided to teachers in the form of withdrawal time for children with additional needs and “power hour” so that teachers can work with smaller groups for lessons.

iii. With regards to initial teacher education, participants identified having limited knowledge on grouping practices. 87% of participants claimed that they did not receive appropriate knowledge on grouping practices during initial teacher education (n=37). Therefore, it is recommended that teacher education programmes provide an objective overview of structured ability grouping with reference to relevant literature highlighting the potential impact grouping students by ability can have on the child.
iv. With regards to professional development, participants identified a lack of courses on ability grouping practices. Therefore, it is recommended that continued professional development courses are made available to teachers so that they can gather information on theory, policy and practice and make an informed opinion on structured ability grouping for literacy and numeracy in the primary classroom.

5.4 Conclusion

Both the literature examined, and the data collected as part of this study suggest that continued research is needed on the area of ability grouping at primary level (Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Kulik & Kulik, 1982). Dracup (2014) claims that research conclusions from studies relating to structured ability grouping are not entirely objective. I experienced this first-hand during the data collection process as contrasting perspectives emerged from participants. It is hoped that continued research on the topic will inform educators about which practice is conducive for teaching literacy and numeracy, structured ability grouping or mixed ability grouping.
References


grouping for literacy and numeracy in DEIS primary schools in Ireland. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.


Appendices

Appendix A: information Letter for Participants

Dear Teacher,

I am writing to you to ask for your help with a study I am conducting as part of my Professional Master of Education (Primary Teaching) degree at Marino Institute of Education. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Meadhbh Ní Dhuinn, who can be contacted at: Meadhbh.NiDhuinn@mie.ie

Research Aim

The aim of this research is to uncover primary teachers’ perspectives on ability grouping for literacy and numeracy. Results of the study will be presented as part of a postgraduate thesis.

Participation Requirements

As part of this study, participants will be asked to answer a self-reporting survey relating to ability grouping for literacy and numeracy at primary level. Participants will be asked to answer multiple choice questions (15), open ended questions (6) and indicate their position on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (3). The estimated time for completion of this survey is 15 minutes. You are under no obligation to answer any questions, if you come to a question you do not wish to answer, simply skip it. You are welcome to discontinue participation in the study at any time, should you wish to do so.

Data Analysis and Storage

My supervisor and I will be the only people that have access to the responses. All information provided is considered strictly confidential. Participants names will not be taken at any stage throughout the research to ensure absolute anonymity. There will be no way to identify who
gave which responses. Data will be stored in my home and destroyed after thirteen months following the dissertation submission date.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. Should you have questions regarding the study, please contact myself (bdavittpm19@momail.mie.ie) or my supervisor by email. 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. 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 for your assistance in this research.

Yours sincerely,

Bláthnáid Davitt.
Appendix B: Consent Form

An Investigation into Irish Primary Teacher’s Perspectives on Structured Ability Grouping for Literacy and Numeracy.

Please tick the correct box

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Signature of Participant: _______________________________________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix C: Questionnaire

1. How many years have you been teaching?
   a. 0 – 5
   b. 6 – 10
   c. 11 – 15
   d. 16 – 20
   e. 21 +

2. What college was your teaching qualification awarded from?
   a. St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra
   b. Marino Institute of Education, Dublin
   c. Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at NUI Maynooth, Kildare
   d. Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
   e. Hibernia College, Dublin
   f. Church of Ireland College of Education, Dublin
   g. Other

3. What type of school are you currently teaching in?
   a. Co-educational school
   b. All-girls school
   c. All-boys school
4. Are you teaching in a DEIS school?
   a. Yes
   b. No

5. What class do you currently teach?
   a. Junior infants
   b. Senior infants
   c. 1st class
   d. 2nd class
   e. 3rd class
   f. 4th class
   g. 5th class

6. Does your class feature a wide range of abilities in terms of literacy?
   a. Yes
   b. No

7. Does your class feature a wide range of abilities in terms of numeracy?
   c. Yes
   d. No

8. Have you ever implemented ability grouping for literacy or numeracy in your classroom?
   a. Yes
9. Was the implementation of ability grouping for literacy/numeracy...
   a. An individual choice
   b. A whole school initiative

10. How were the student’s abilities in literacy/numeracy determined for grouping?
    a. Standardised tests results
    b. Class tests results
    c. Samples of student's work
    d. Other

11. Have you experienced a child moving down to a lower ability group?
    a. Yes
    b. No

12. Have you experienced a child moving up to a higher ability group?
    a. Yes
    b. No

13. From your experience, do you think that children are aware of the different levels of
    ability grouping in the class?
    a. Yes
    b. No
c. Not sure

14. From your experience, do you think there is a link between ability grouping and a child's self-esteem/confidence?
   a. Yes
      Explain
   b. No
      Explain

15. From your experience, do you believe ability grouping has any influence on a child's attitude/behaviour towards learning?
   a. Yes
      Explain
   b. No
      Explain
   c. Not sure

16. Teachers receive adequate training/education in teaching literacy and numeracy in a mixed ability setting.
   a. Strongly agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree not disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly disagree
17. There is a link between achievement in literacy and numeracy and socioeconomic background.
   a. Strongly agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly disagree

18. Grouping children by ability is an efficient way to organise learning in the classroom.
   a. Strongly agree
   b. Agree
   c. Neither agree nor disagree
   d. Disagree
   e. Strongly disagree

19. What do you think is the best way to cope with a diverse range of abilities in terms of literacy and numeracy in the primary classroom?

20. Do you feel your teacher training during college equipped you appropriately with knowledge on differentiation?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Not sure
21. Could you identify any advantages you think are associated with grouping children by ability for literacy and numeracy at primary level?

22. Could you identify any disadvantages you think are associated with grouping children by ability for literacy and numeracy at primary level?

23. Do you think ability grouping should be implemented for literacy and numeracy at primary level?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Not sure

24. Have you anything else to add on the topic of ability grouping in the primary classroom?