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## STUDENT LEARNING, CHILDHOOD & VOICES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Harvesting the crops of ability grouping practice in schools from the field of literature

Muhammad Zubair<sup>1</sup>, Ambreen Alam<sup>1</sup> and Samir Dukmak<sup>2\*</sup>

**Abstract:** Students of diverse abilities tend to be divided into groups that advocate academic homogeneity. Ability grouping practice is embedded within the contemporary hyper-accountability culture in education that has shifted the focus of the teaching community from promoting academic attainment in pupils to being highly ranked in the market-based education system. To maintain an ascending position and avoid “punitive measures, schools adopt stratification according to the pupils” academic abilities. Ability grouping strategy is commonplace in countries like the United States of America (USA), Canada, New Zealand, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Australia, but the intensity of this practice is unfavourable. This study aims to visit the scholarly work of the authors of the western world to comprehend the history and the advances in the ability grouping practice. The collected data from several studies endorse that ability grouping leads educational establishments to inculcate diverse educational experiences and opportunities for learners. Thus, dividing learners into academic groups contributes to broadening the socio-economic gap.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Muhammad Zubair is a senior lecture in London school of Technology in Birmingham. He is in his last year of professional Doctorate from the university of Wolverhampton. His interest lies in leadership, theory and practice, curriculum and assessment, policy makers influence on education policy and Equal opportunities in education settings. Zubair has experience of teaching in secondary schools and higher education in the UK as well as in the UAE. He passionately thinks about education reforms that can alter students’ academic outcomes and increase employability. He also takes firm stand on the phenomenon that leadership in education needs to be aligned with the local culture, norms and values of the region.

Ambreen Alam has worked in education for 27 years in the UK and UAE. She is in her final years of a Professional Doctorate from the University of Wolverhampton, UK. Ambreen’s interest lies in leadership, curriculum, reflection on practice, school policies, equal opportunities, feedback and teaching pedagogies. Ambreen is exploring the domain of ability grouping practice in her current role with the MINISTRY OF EDUCATION UAE, cycle three school. She is passionate about altering national policies that harmonize with the potential of the learners.

Samir Jabra Dukmak is an associate professor of special education at Al Ain University in the United Arab Emirates since September 2002. He participated in the Development of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of which he chaired for two years (2014-2016). Currently, Dr. Dukmak is the director of two programs: The Special Education and the Applied Psychology since September 2021. Dr. Dukmak published several research papers in the field of special education and he taught tens of courses in both special education and psychology. His research interests include inclusion, assessment, teaching and learning, parents stress, behavior problems and others.



**Subjects: Classroom Practice; Educational Psychology; Education Studies; Middle School Education; School Psychology**

**Keywords: ability grouping; streaming; stratifying; setting; inequality**

## 1 Introduction

The concept of ability grouping practice has been seen for decades. In the nineteenth century, when mass education and the free schooling system developed in the UK, those refusing the ideology of educating working-class people devised a means of segregation on ability bases, consequently stratifying pupils according to their abilities, which became a tradition (Gillard, 2008). Sir William Henry Hadow, chairing various Government Consultative Committees on education, proposed 'the distribution of pupils on their academic potential in his 1931 Hadow report. This report suggests that "children below the age of 11 should be "classified" according to their "natural gifts and abilities" (Hadow report, 1931, p.7).

Similarly, in the USA, at the end of the 19th century, when immigrants began to embark on US borders, the tradition of ability grouping practice became pervasive (Ainsworth, 2013). However, in New Zealand, ability grouping practice was embedded into the education system after The Thomas Report 1944, a government document. With these historical contexts, ability grouping practice is not a new phenomenon. Many scholars, such as Boaler et al. (2000), Gamoran (1986) and Marks (2014), argue that dividing pupils into groups, academically or socially, is fracturing UK's society. McGillicuddy and Devine (2018) add that international test schemes, like PISA, are the reasons for stratifying pupils, which is not exiting the education landscape. Various terminologies in this literature have been used for ability grouping practice. For this reason, the following are the definition from 2014) Millennium Cohort study:

"Streaming is a form of "grouping between and within classes by the general ability for most or all lessons". (p.572)

The setting is "grouping from different classes by the ability for certain subjects only, and pupils may be taught in different ability groups for different subjects". (p.572)

The other important term used in ability grouping practice is mixed ability grouping which is defined as:

Mixed ability grouping is when pupils of mixed abilities are placed in one classroom for all the lessons (Baker, 2018).

It is evident that much research has been carried out in ability grouping practice using various research tools; therefore, the authors aim to delve into the ability grouping phenomenon from an international perspective. This article aims to utilize this knowledge to study the challenges and dilemmas of stratifying pupils in a local setting in the UAE, where the knowledge economy is in the infancy stage. Ability grouping practice tradition is prevalent in the UAE state-maintained school, and the research community has not examined this avenue. For this reason, the research questions are:

- (1) What are the various dynamics of ability grouping practice?
- (2) Does ability grouping practice lead to an inequitable practice?
- (3) Is mixed ability grouping a solution to ability grouping practice?

## 2 Method

Delving into the phenomenon of ability grouping practice, this literature review analyses 83 various studies from 1964 to 2020. The authors of this paper believe that the domain understudied

enhances when it is rooted robustly with the seeding of the previous literature. Comparing the existing literature allows the scholars of this study to construct a firm understanding of the phenomenon. Most of the scholarly work is taken from UK-based studies because the authors acknowledge that stratifying pupils into ability groups has been a highly debatable issue in several countries, mainly the UK. The other reason to explore the avenue of ability grouping practice in the UK was the experiences of the scholars who have recorded the incidents in their teaching practice when employed in English schools in Britain. To determine the overall practice of ability grouping, the authors of this review, however belonging to the interpretivist tradition, aim to explore qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research on ability grouping practice, considering that it will provide the allowances to broaden the horizon on the under-discussion phenomenon. Several decades-old studies, such as Jackson (1964), have been briefly visited to highlight that ability grouping practice has been contentious for decades.

Google Scholar is the central database for searching the scholarly landscape from where the crops of ability grouping are harvested. Authors found this engine more easily accessible, which does not require a university login and allows for preserving citations. Authors have not set any objective to mindfully adhere to a specific journal or publisher so that various dimensions of ability grouping can be delved into. This has made the scope of the research widen. The key terms used in the google search engine were ability grouping practice, setting, streaming and mixed ability. The term “streaming” carries double meanings (related to the media industry); thus, the authors focused mainly on the ability grouping practice’ to acquire explicit material.

Similarly, during the search of databases, some of the literature on the surface was related to ability grouping practice in the context of student’s special needs, which was later cropped out. The rationality behind this decision was to compose literature within the boundaries of mainstream schooling and avoid navigation into a diverse avenue of special needs. Most of the wealth of literature is scholarly article-based; however, limiting to peer-reviewed literature was not the goal of the scholars. Book chapters, scholarly articles, blogs, and government documents were visited to portray an overall picture of segregating learners in schools according to their academic potential.

This literature review does not intend to execute a chronological review of the research on ability grouping practice. It merely aims at exploring inquiries of the scholars who have investigated various aspects of ability grouping practice in schools. The notion behind this approach is to obtain extensive rather than intensive data. Setting an aim to unfold a range of facets to the phenomenon underlines the authors’ ambition to comprehend the ability to group practice in depth. These analyses and findings will allow the authors to conduct further empirical research using various tools. To get an insight into the historical bearings of ability grouping practice, decades-old studies were explored. Similarly, for the latest account of the dynamics of segregating pupils in schools, the most recent studies were analyzed from 2013 to 2019 (see Table 1).

Out of 83 sources, 34 journals were visited to weave golden stitches in this literature review. Similarly, 21 books, two forums, 14 reports, 1 PhD Dissertation and 1 Master’s Thesis were delved into. Authors mainly used books to draw the context of future study in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The knowledge economy of the UAE is at an infancy stage; therefore, authors acquire support from books to briefly provide insight into where they intend to conduct empirical research. Since the landscape of under-discussion phenomena is rich with the latest scholarly contribution, the authors decided to focus on the most updated studies. The authors visited 48 journal articles, twenty-one book chapters, seven reports, three theses of Master and PhD level, two forums and one blog (see Appendix).

### **2.1 Ability grouping practice**

Ability grouping practice is also a result of the subjectivity of the teachers or headteachers, who are believed to be experts in knowing their pupils’ capabilities and thus assigning them to various

**Table 1. Articles and books included in the review**

<b>Articles</b>	<b>No.</b>
New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies	1
British Educational Research Journal	4
International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy	1
Online article	1
Oxford Review of Education	3
Children and Society	1
Academic Research in Educational Sciences	1
Curriculum Journal	1
Research Papers in Education	1
Cambridge Journal of Education	2
International Journal of Educational Research	2
Teaching and Teacher Education	2
Sociology of Education	1
Educational Review	1
Children Geographics	1
American Educational Research Journal	1
The social psychology of Education	1
Educational Research	1
Journal of Public economics	1
Education Finance and Policy	1
Instructional research	1
Economics of Education Review	1
Culture and society	1
British Journal of Educational Studies	1
International Journal of Primary, elementary and early years education	2
Gifted Education Quarterly	1
Educational Management Administration and Leadership	1
Educate-Special Issue	1
Educational Leadership Journal of the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development	1
Educational Psychologist	1
Journal for Research in Mathematics Education	1
Journal of Labour Economics	1
Urban Review	1
Theory into practice	2
<b>From 34 Journals</b>	<b>44 Articles</b>

sets and streams (Jackson, 1964; Taylor et al., 2018). The tools to assign pupils into diverse groups demand objectivity, which may be the prior performance of pupils. Besides, classifying pupils into a range of groups and agreeing with that ability grouping decisions are based on the social class of the pupils, which Jackson describes as a discriminatory practice (Jackson, 1964). Research emphasizes that the allocation of sets depends on the subjectivity of teachers and headteachers and academic progress (Muijs & Dunne, 2010). The other dilemma is that assigning sets to pupils depends on various tests, assessments, teachers' judgements and transitional documents from each phase of the critical stages (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). There is a harmony between Jackson

(1964) (Five decades old) and L. Archer et al. (2018) (Latest), confirming that low-ability groups comprise working-class families while high-ability groups comprise pupils from privileged groups. For this reason, in the section below, high and low-ability groups, allocation and misallocation grouping practice, and teachers' roles will be highlighted using Bourdieu's theory briefly.

A wealth of studies by reputed scholars point out that dividing pupils into various academic groups benefits high-ability learners of schools (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Pupils in high-ability groups prosper academically and develop confident personalities (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). Higgins et al. (2015) claim that ability grouping practice does not substantially impact pupils' outcomes; however, some studies acknowledge a few small-scale benefits of ability grouping on high-ability pupils. These authors show their concerns over low-performing streams, which are further falling back.

The outcomes of Archer et al.'s (2018) study identified that pupils in high-ability groups feel proud of their status and are least considerate about segregating pupils as an unfavourable practice. Similarly, pupils from the lower sets admit that the pupils in the top sets are the best. L. Archer et al. (2018) have undergone a large study showing that high-ability groups comprise pupils from middle-class and white families. This may be interpreted that the real victims of lower ability grouping are pupils from low socioeconomic status and diverse ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, extensive literature concerns that pupils of the low-ability groups do not enjoy academic stratification (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017). Many investigations, such as Hallam and Parsons (2012), highlight that dividing pupils into ability groups is prevalent in England; therefore, the attainment gap is widening. It is comprehensible that the inequality gap may only stretch further when the allocation of pupils into various ability groups is based on the "race, ethnicity and socioeconomic background of the pupils" (Worthy, 2010, p.273). This means that the findings of Jackson's (1964) study are valid even after five decades because pupils from working-class families, primarily boys and ethnic minorities, represent low-ability groups in the modern education system as well (Taylor et al., 2018).

Archer et al.'s (2018) study also establishes that pupils of the lower sets do not hold a complementary view about ability grouping practice. They show low esteem and desire to move to the higher sets. The acceptability of their research findings may become authenticated by looking at the method used by L. Archer et al. (2018). Undoubtedly, Archer et al.'s (2018) study has provided insight to advance the understanding of the phenomenon of ability grouping practice through examining the pupils (year 7) from 94 schools in England. The online survey was administered, and 12,164 pupils responded. The pupils were asked about their experiences and perceptions of setting and mixed-ability classes.

While interpreting the data of their study, L. Archer et al. (2018) conclude that setting and streaming practice is viewed as a "technology of social production" (p.136), which confirm Bourdieu's theory. This study also highlights pupils affirming their own and others' placements in a set, using the word "deserving allocation" grounded in naturally differing abilities. Therefore, the defenders of ability grouping practice (teachers) thus believe that they match their pedagogies and instructions according to the perceived abilities of the pupils (Towers et al., 2019).

## **2.2 Fluidity in moving sets**

Assigning pupils to the sets and/or streams is a mysterious phenomenon (L. Archer et al., 2018). Authors who have studied pupils' attainment have also vocalized this concern. For instance, assigning pupils to various academic streams is not done effectively, and pupils mismatch the assigned sets or tracks (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017). In the same context, pupils do not move the ability groups regardless of progress (Dunne et al., 2011). The term "static" is also used when scholars elaborate on the opportunity of the movement to and from the diverse academic groups (Taylor et al., 2018). Furthermore, it is believed that the frozen opportunities for movement occur

because of the variation in materials used in the curriculum and the pace at which it is covered. These two factors substantially impact the progress made by the pupils (Boaler et al., 2000).

Teachers show reservations about the embedment of ability grouping practice because they confirm the non-existence of fluidity in moving sets and groups (Anthony & Hunter, 2017). This way, the school management and teaching faculty overly estimate the movement between the ability groups (McGillcuddy & Devine, 2018). Even though moving to higher sets may offer an excellent incentive for low and middle-set pupils, lack of movement is a significant limitation of the ability grouping practice (Dunne et al., 2011). This confirms that movement restrictions in the sets also reflect the ideology that children have a fixed mindset (Marks, 2013).

### **2.3 Double disadvantaged—academic progress and prosperity**

The term double disadvantaged has been used for the low-ability groups of pupils belonging to the low socioeconomic background (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017). Already bearing low socioeconomic status and being allocated to low-ability groups negatively impact pupils' performances (Francis et al., 2019). Pupils' academic progress and prosperity significantly depend on an allocated teacher, so pupils' academic outcome is firmly bonded to the quality of teaching (Coe et al., 2014). This phenomenon may be perceived as; teaching experience, subject knowledge and teachers' qualifications contributing to pupils' achievements and performances (Francis et al., 2019). Teachers having low expectations from a low-ability group of pupils is a widespread precept verified by Papay and Kraft (2014). Therefore, the quality of teaching offered to low-ability groups is controversial (Francis et al., 2019). Even though teachers' teaching experience is associated with pupils' academic attainments (Rockoff et al., 2011), schools often assign less qualified teachers to low-stream groups (Sims, 2017). Literature shows that teachers professionally develop themselves during the first five years of their career, and teaching experience adds quality to the academic achievements of pupils (especially in maths) (Papay & Kraft, 2014; Sass et al., 2014). Low-ability groups are assigned less experienced and non-subject-specialist teachers, contrary to high-ability groups with efficient, experienced and subject-specialist teachers (Kelly, 2004).

It is essential to underline teachers' characteristics because teachers' quality impact the pedagogies offered to the pupils and is likely to develop the expectations (Mazenod et al., 2018). Other than the fundamental issues briefly outlined above, low-ability grouping pupils also experience frequent changes in their teaching faculty (Boaler et al., 2000). The inconsistent practice of allocating diverse teaching teams needs significant review. The low-ability pupils require more support which may be provided through the equal distribution of public resources (experienced teachers) (Francis et al., 2019). Hence facilitating the high-ability group of pupils with quality public resource "consciously or unconsciously" lead to "social inequality via the education system" (Francis et al., 2019, p.185). This means that the current educational system of England incentivizes high-ability groups with or without intentions, disregarding low-ability groups' academic needs (Francis et al., 2019).

Shifting this discourse on teachers' perspectives on ability grouping practice is necessary. Teachers prefer to teach high stream/sets, which is well supported by Kelly (2004), who believes teachers gain more satisfaction when teaching high ability sets. Furthermore, teaching high-ability students is a rewarding and well-recognized act in the perception of high-ability teaching faculty (Francis et al., 2019).

Referring to Francis et al. (2019)' study, the authors intend to highlight the research method used in this section. This will allow us to measure their findings. Francis et al. (2019) have used a mixed method of research. They used individual interviews with the students and teachers from the quantitative strand, whereas, from the qualitative method, the authors used focus groups with students only. One hundred thirty-nine schools participated in this research study; 587 teachers responded to the survey from 126 schools. It was a two-year study following the group of year 7 (11 to 12 years old pupils) until the end-of-year 8 (12 to 13 years old pupils). The authors clarify

that pupils were followed for only English and Maths as these subjects show the school's performance.

During their study, Francis et al. (2019) identified an aspect not derived from prior studies. The authors have found that the low-ability pupils showed “frustration” and “complained” about receiving different treatment and “being patronized” (p.190, 191). It may be interpreted that the education system marginalizes low-ability groups of pupils.

#### **2.4 Ability grouping and inequalities**

Archer et al. (2018) developed a connection between ability grouping practice and Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, a French sociologist and philosopher. Bourdieu has given many classical theories and is known for his social scientific work. Archer et al. s (2018) study concludes Bourdieu's study with distinct views of high-ability and low-ability pupils. In their study, high-ability pupils believe that dividing themselves into academically segregated groups is a good practice, but the low-ability pupils have an opposing view. The authors emphasize that the pupils view in their study aligns with Bourdieu's belief that our society reproduces the dominant group's culture. Through ability grouping, thus, the UK's education system reproduces the “social and cultural hierarchies and power relation” (p.135). L. Archer et al. (2018) underline the perception of white parents who favour streaming and setting in schools contrary to the ethnic minority parents.

The substantiality of Archer et al. s study lies in the two dimensions - data-driven and theoretically woven. To administer the online survey, these authors used a large sample of 12,935 students in year seven from 94 secondary schools in England in 2015/16. This study also used individual and group interviews with 33 students aged 7 and 8. Their findings have allowed the scholars to rule out that mixed-ability teaching and learning is a beneficial and equitable approach that needs the stakeholders consideration. In this review, grouping types are addressed as ability grouping practice since no matter what kind of grouping is embedded in education institutes; its impacts are the same. Ability grouping practice of all types—setting, streaming and within-class grouping—reflects social segregation in the society where low-income families' children are overly represented in low academic abilities groups and economically affluent children in high academic groups. Ability grouping further impacts learners' routes to further and higher education opportunities and employment prospects. Pierre Bourdieu's theory underpins the phenomenon that the leading cause of society's imbalance and inequality stems from education s well. This provides precise patterns to the society engraved with a hierarchical class system.

Similarly, a mixed-method research project by Hallam and Parson focused on streaming in the whole UK in 2008. It was a Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), and the members participated in four surveys. Five thousand three hundred sixty-four teachers from 3981 schools were interviewed on streaming practice. The study reported the outcomes of MCS where 19,000 children were followed who were born in the years 2000 and 2001. It was an extensive project in which 8800 families from England, 2000 from Wales, 1600 from Scotland and 1300 from Northern Ireland participated. The scholars studied the number of family demographics and presented that streaming in schools contributes to the social divide in society. Static opportunities to move from one stream to another were recorded; therefore, the assigned stream (which happened at the foundation stage, detected in this project) continues with students (Hallam & Parsons, 2012). This study also supports Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

The social inequalities function through schools regarding ability grouping practice (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017). They highlight that politicians and policymakers call it a “gifted and talented” scheme, again supporting Bourdieu and Passerons' ideology of the “Aristocratism of talent” (1977/2000, p.202). 2017) recent study echo with a more decades-old study by Welner and Burris (2006), who believe that the embedment of ability grouping practice is a way to maintain high-quality teaching or learning for high-ability groups of society. Through streaming and setting, schools provide society with the best education opportunities (L. Archer et al., 2018). Therefore, the notion



of 'equal opportunity for all and inculcating "social justice" is challenging for the schools in England. This unveils that schools accept the phenomenon of social reproduction, which Bourdieu identified as causing invisible wounds (Sennett & Cobb, 1993) to double disadvantaged groups of society (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017). Such evidence on ability grouping practice may gain from an unorthodox approach of mixed ability grouping practice, briefly examined below.

### **2.5 Mixed ability grouping**

Literature highlights a rise in mixed-ability grouping practice in 1960, but the philosophy of mixed-ability grouping was not underpinned effectively (Bailey & Bridges, 1983). For this reason, the practice of dividing pupils was never brought to a halt (Stewart, 2013). Additionally, the ability grouping practice is prevalent in English secondary schools (L. Archer et al., 2018), and its adoption in primary schools is reported (Parsons & Hallam, 2014). The education department did not decline even the advocacy of ability grouping for Education (DfE, 2015). This demonstrates that the idea of ceasing ability grouping practice was never made "foreign and forbidden" as there are strong assumptions of the various stakeholders (Welner & Burris, 2006, p.90). Teachers do not advocate mixed-ability teaching because it may confront them with a range of challenges in differentiation (Watanabe, 2007). Holt (2004) views this concern of teachers and explains that teaching professionals not defending mixed-ability teaching are not well prepared to embed the concept of innovation in their lessons.

The leading cause for mixed-ability grouping not earning popularity among teachers is managing the behaviour of low-ability pupils (L. Archer et al., 2018). Similarly, the headteachers, parents and students do not perceive mixed ability as a favourable policy (Yonezawa & Jones, 2000). Teachers disapprove of mixed-ability grouping to avoid the "contamination" of bad behaviour, learning and teaching pace (L. Archer et al., 2018, p.123). However, to teach effectively in mixed ability grouping, dependency on teachers' skills is a core desire (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Many empirical studies suggest that low-ability pupils' achievements are recorded in mixed-ability classes without affecting the performance of the high-ability pupils (Saleh et al., 2005). Decades of research contradict Saleh et al. (2005). For instance, there is an argument brought to the surface that since low-ability pupils are slow learners; therefore, a mixed-ability approach may negatively impact high-ability pupils' learning time (Webb, 1980, 1991). Similarly, Webb's rationale does not stand the counterargument of Johnson et al. (1980), who give credit to high-ability pupils supporting low-ability, which genuinely develops the sophisticated reasoning strategies of high-ability groups.

Low-ability pupils may enjoy a heterogeneous (mixed ability) learning environment because the facility to understand the concept of their peers is a vital tool for the low-ability groups (Murphy et al., 2017). Discussing the concepts with their high-ability peers may bridge the knowledge gap for the less able pupils and accelerate their academic performance. This way, the misconceptions of the low-ability learners may be corrected when they are offered the opportunity to learn with their high-ability peers (Murphy et al., 2017). Studies have recognized that pupils not understanding the concept in a homogenous setting may lose attention and involve the teachers in dealing with behavioural issues (Eder & Felmlee, 1984).

The wealth of research highlights ability grouping practice as immensely fracturing since it gives learners an identity in school (Youdell, 2006). Though dividing learners into sets, streams, and tracking is harmful, this currency does not fluctuate globally.

Various research studies show that students' overall self-esteem is negatively affected in the low-attaining group (Higgins et al., 2015). The lower-attaining learners understand the academic division and their accommodation in a hierarchically lower group, thus acknowledging their incompetent intellectual abilities. This lowers their self-esteem and motivation to study (Hamilton & O'hara, 2011). In the 21st century, students' voice has become pivotal because modern learners are expected to be independent learners craving their learning. Therefore, their

views on mixed-ability learning and allocating to different ability groups cannot be traced aside. Knowingly mixed-ability learning is common in non-core subjects, but setting and streaming are standard practices in compulsory subjects.

An extensive ongoing project—Best practice and grouping students—examines students' educational outcomes in a homogeneous and heterogeneously structured learning environment. This project aims to study 126 schools using a setting in English and Mathematics in secondary schools and 13 schools using mixed-ability learning in Mathematics and English. The authors of this literature review find the analyses of the above-mentioned ongoing project's pilot study. Eight secondary schools were examined following heterogeneous teaching and learning practices in English and Mathematics. The pilot study sampled year seven students aged 11 and 12, followed by qualitative analysis. Group discussions and interviews with 89 students were administered. This study unveils students' views on mixed-ability learning according to low, medium, and high-ability learners. Though the schools were following mixed ability teaching and learning thus, in order to understand learners' academic level and their Key Stage, two results were visited to divide the sampled population into low, medium, and high categories. The study highlights that low-attaining learners find a mixed-ability environment compelling, as it helps them to take inspiration and help from their peers of high academic capabilities.

In contrast to their views, few medium and high-ability learners consider mixed-ability teaching to hold them back. The students who were the proponents of mixed-ability teaching in medium and high-attaining groups see their mixed learning environment through the lens of equity and promote inclusive practice. These findings emphasize that 21st-century teachers need skills to be effective facilitators, ushering learners according to their academic needs (Tereshchenko et al., 2019).

In mixed-ability classes, students can showcase their individually distinct characteristics. Such classes have students who may imagine new ideas, innovate, solve complex problems using their different levels of cognitive capabilities, develop thinking dynamics and gain knowledge from several different perspectives (Djurayeva, 2021). Many decades have seen the advocacy of mixed-ability grouping. However, acknowledging the real practical challenges for teachers has been denying homogeneously grouped teaching. To lay the practice of mixed-ability teaching, teachers must explore various teaching strategies according to the subject aim to instruct (Sands & Kerry, 2020).

Similarly, to facilitate students with exceptional cognitive abilities, teachers must be prepared to offer the students learning opportunities that match their academic levels and are sufficiently challenging. The teaching faculty must believe that each student has different appearance, needs, and academic abilities. Therefore, the prevalence of serving students with differentiated material in one lesson needs to be perceived as viable (Tomlinson, 2012). The feasibility of teaching in a mixed-ability environment may happen when teachers begin to appreciate that every student is characterized by their upbringing, cultural, socioeconomic status, or faith-oriented factors. These factors play a significant role in developing their identity and attitudes (Wragg, 1990).

A study by Boaler, William and Brown produced neutral impacts of mixed-ability learning. This study sampled six London secondary schools to examine teaching mathematics in homogeneous groups in the exhibit. The researchers employed 120 hours of lesson observations, in-depth interviews with 72 students of year nine that lasted 30 minutes, and a questionnaire given to 1000 students. The criteria used to choose schools were based on the characteristics of teaching Mathematics following mixed ability grouping practice in year seven. However, these dynamics shift as the learners progress to year eight and advance further. One of the schools divides learners into separate groups at the beginning of the year (Boaler et al., 2000).

Similarly, three others decided to stratify the learners into ability-based sets at the beginning of year nine. The remaining two schools continue mixed ability grouping until the final year of schooling. No sharp difference was recorded when set, and mixed ability groups were reported. However, during the interview with the selected students in year nine, it was recorded that either the interviewees wanted to return to a homogeneously arranged learning environment or else designed to move sets. These students admit that clustering into ability groups has withdrawn their interest in Mathematics and changed their attitude (Boaler et al., 2000).

Fertilizing the seed of teaching students in mixed-ability classes have great potential, provided the teachers will use the pedagogies that cater to mixed-ability learners. Teachers must train the learners to become self-regulatory agents in their learning journey (Bremner, 2008). While embedding the culture of mixed-ability teaching, the teachers must endorse that every learner has diversified weaknesses and strengths and develops at different rates (Ireson & Hallam, 2001). In this context, teachers must acclimate themselves with the skills and attitudes to be mere facilitators in the class and allow the learners to control their learning process independently (Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Harlen & Malcolm, 1997).

### 3 Discussion

Ability grouping practice has many facets; therefore, it is contentious. The scholarly contribution highlights those mitigating unfair educational opportunities has been an agenda for politicians in England (Gazeley, 2018). English schools are subject to inconsistent educational policies (Ball, 2017). The demand for the need to develop an education system that allows disadvantaged but capable youth to access reputable universities is growing. This phenomenon carries substantial significance since it has a long-lasting impact on learners.

The authors of this literature resonate with Devine (2013), who elaborates that to compete for the international comparative tests' race (which advocates neoliberal ideology), the policymakers devise the strategy of ability grouping practice. Neoliberalism symbolizes that markets are the priority over the government, even though the significant impact of neoliberal policies has widened the inequalities gap in the form of ability grouping practice (Rodrik, 2017). Leading academic scholars like Boaler, Hallam and Curie believe that schools in the UK are held back because of social pressure (Cornelia, 2011). Further, (2014) conclude that stratifying pupils into ability grouping has become an arguable issue.

The account above supports the phenomenon of many tensions in implementing ability grouping practice. The teaching aspect, such as curriculum, pedagogy, expectations, and expertise of teachers teaching diverse abilities, has no uniformity (Kelly, 2004). However, scholars like (2012) and Francis, Archer, et al. (2017) underline a strong relationship between the allocation of academic groups and socioeconomic background. This has widened the socioeconomic gap in society; therefore, the government has paid attention to reducing social inequality (Francis & Wong, 2013). For instance, many initiatives have been introduced to recognize the achievements of those young people from working-class backgrounds and the development of career routes via reputable universities (Perry & Francis, 2010). It is believed that more need to be done, which Ball (2010) proposes as school-based initiatives may significantly reduce inequalities.

This literature highlights that since 1960 there has been a debate about allocating pupils to various academic groups depending on teachers' judgements (Marks, 2014). Knowing that ability grouping practice also affects students' outcomes (Higgins et al., 2015) is necessary. This phenomenon is well supported by Carter and Welner (2013), who believe that providing more legitimate learning opportunities is a culture that must be embedded to bridge the educational inequality gap. The rationality behind reducing educational inequalities needs no introduction, and it is a well-known phenomenon that bridging the educational gap may advocate social mobility (Crawford et al., 2017); primarily when ethnic minorities and low socioeconomic groups are overly represented in low-ability groups (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017).

The restrictions or the allowances of entry to higher education are aligned with economic stability (Social mobility and child poverty commission, 2014). For this sake, schools are responsible for offering chances of educational opportunities to all so that the pupils' later life opportunities may not be negatively impacted (Gazeley, 2018). Uneven experiences of the pupils (especially in the low sets) **lower** their self-esteem and may cause early dropouts (Bergeron, 2016). These pupils' exiting schools' registers (education) appear on the unemployment register, crime register, court register, welfare register, rehabilitation register and sometimes death register (Welch, 1990). Even though Welch's belief is several decades old, schools in England continue to offer inequalities of opportunities calling it a response to pupils' excellence and broadening the attainment gap (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017).

It may also be the expectations of society that school grouping practice remains existent (Holt, 2004). In this context, however, Ball (2010) notes that schools cannot address the inequality problem (which may be one cause of lowering pupils' self-esteem), and they cannot implement prevention-related measures in an isolated manner. He further explains that schools as public institutes may remedy this critical societal problem of inequality. Ball emphasizes that educational policies worsen societal inequalities and states that "educational policy is misdirected and misleading". (2010, p.13). He interpreted that, on the one hand, policymakers pressure to raise pupils' achievements; however, on the other hand, they expect the achievement gap to be bridged. For the former, schools implement biased ways (referring to ability grouping practice and gifted and Talented programmes) (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000) that truly represents privileged remain privileged—a very dominant group-driven strategy (L. Archer et al., 2018). There is an ongoing debate on the intention to close achievement gaps through innovative ideas and early school interventions (Perry & Francis, 2010).

This work identifies the practical objection to advocating the ability grouping practice launched in 1931 after Hadow's report in England and mass migration in the USA. The adherence to setting and streaming claims that allocating pupils into groups "remains unabashed"; however, there is authentic evidence that it is "problematic, inequitable and detrimental for most learners" (L. Archer et al., 2018, p.120). For this purpose, the embedment of ability grouping practice is a controversial issue debated by scholarly enterprises. Holt (2004), for instance, underlines that pupils' learning opportunities are associated with their social class, ethnicity, race and abilities, restricting them from accessing curricula taught by specialized teachers and experiencing diverse teaching pedagogies. The scholarly work in this literature underlines that the continuous use of ability grouping practice in schools worldwide may intensify educational inequalities (Ainsworth, 2013). Many national surveys indicate that diversifying pupils into various streams disadvantages the low-ability group (Francis, Archer, et al., 2017). Eminent social scientist Steven Ball says schools may resolve the issue of inculcating inequalities by stratifying pupils into academically allocated groups (Ball, 2010). However, the culture of school competitiveness in the market is the kind of known restrictions that limit the schools' capacity to offer interventions (Trigg-Smith, 2011). These views highlight the rationale of prolonged controversy on ability grouping practice in schools to date.

Having said this, the authors of this literature review propose to undertake empirical research that may uproot the ideologies of the teaching professionals in clustering pupils into various academic groups in the United Arab Emirates' education system, which is deemed to resemble the US educational framework. The scholarly contribution to ability grouping practice in the Middle East is scarce. The authors have developed substantial knowledge from western literature and their scholars' perspectives and further desire to uncoil middle eastern ideology on ability grouping practice. As mentioned above, this literature review is designed to conduct empirical research in one of the Middle Eastern countries—the UAE. In the following section, an outlook of the UAE and the dynamics of its education are briefed.

### **3.1 The education system in the UAE**

Britons have been protecting the Gulf region since 1820; however, their Laissez-faire approach allowed independence to each state (Hawley, 1971; Smith, 2004). Until the end of 1971, when

Briton left, the area was known as the Trucial states, currently known as the United Arab Emirates (Smith, 2004). These states are semi-autonomous and appeared on a world map on the second of December 1971.

The Middle East and North Africa are described as the MENA region, which includes nineteen countries. United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the MENA countries with prevalent education crises. This region is known for relying on such an education system which restricts the youth from acquiring much-desired employability skills (Arezki et al., 2019). Like other MENA region countries, the UAE education system is confronting crises like students dropping out, the slight gender gap, curriculum, leadership and pedagogies. To some extent, the non-provision of appropriate premises and teaching resources are also the complex inequalities of the UAE education system and wide-spread throughout the region (UNICEF, 2015).

### **3.2 UAE's education system in the past**

After a decade, in 1950, the discovery of oil brought prosperity, and the education system of the Gulf region experienced a new wave of development. Though many schools surfaced in the region of the UAE even in those days, unfortunately, the trend of acquiring education was still limited to the significantly advantaged population (Kippels & Ridge, 2019).

The shift from the pearl industry to oil transformed the UAE remarkably, and in 1971 the establishment of the UAE established a ministry of education to regulate the education system in the country (Ridge, 2014). In 1979, MOE began its efforts to prepare the national curriculum, and by 1985 it was introduced in the country (Kippels & Ridge, 2019).

The UAE is currently confronted with the complexities of providing a quality education system that develops innovative and competitive skills in its citizens (Thorne, 2011). Therefore, the United Arab Emirates is borrowing renowned foreign education policies to embed an influential culture of teaching and learning in their country (Matsumoto, 2019). Their overall education structure is pegged with US education constructs, from where dividing learners into various streams is prevalent (Hopkyns, 2017).

## **4 Conclusion**

This literature review has visited multiple international studies where the fundamental aspects of the ability grouping practice are essential to the education framework (see [Appendix](#)). Whether it is setting or streaming (ability grouping), this practice is the appreciation of social hierarchies. Various Authors have criticized the academic segregation method that reflects pupils' age-related outcomes. Ethically, they only receive intervention to be placed in lower sets that lack the movement's fluidity. On the other hand, the dominant groups of English society do not merely feel proud to be in high sets and also favour ability grouping practice. This seems like a spiral continuing as social reproduction and social inequalities. Delving into the range of studies also underlines that the debatable issue of ability grouping practice is crucial; however, some studies offer mixed ability grouping as a remedy. This literature review has achieved the aim of the authors to gain an extensive understanding of the ability grouping practice in schools. This data will assist the authors of this study in unfolding ability grouping practice in a country (UAE) distinct from where (UK, USA, New Zealand) this literary work has been acquired. The investigated aspects of ability grouping practice have navigated the researchers to conduct further research while having a compatible understanding of the phenomenon.

Further, this knowledge may critically analyze the ability grouping practice in the UAE. Ability grouping practice is an explored phenomenon in the UAE, where the authors currently have employment-based contractual commitments. Thus, future empirical research on this domain will bridge the gap and will be a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge economy in the region.

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## Appendix

NO	Author name & Year	Journal Title	Method	Sample	Country of Origin
1	Anthony and Hunter (2017)	New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies	Survey	102 mathematics support teachers	New Zealand
2	L. Archer et al. (2018)	British Educational Research Journal	Survey, Individual and group Interviews,	12,178 Year 7 (age 11/12) students	UK
3	Bailey and Bridges (1983)	Book	-	-	UK
4	Baker (2018)	Master's degree Project	Literature review	Articles, books etc.	USA
5	Ball (2010)	International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy	Literature Review	Article, Books etc.	UK
6	Ball (2017)	Book	-	-	UK
7	Bergeron (2016)	PhD Dissertation	Qualitative methodology	Conceptual research	USA
8	Boaler et al. (2013)	British Educational Research Journal	Questionnaires Observation	First two years of a 4-year longitudinal study a cohort of 943 students, interviews with 72 students and approximately 120 hours of classroom observation,	UK
9	Boaler et al. (2000)	British Educational Research Journal	Questionnaires Observation	First two years of a 4-year longitudinal study a cohort of 943 students, interviews with 72 students and approximately 120 hours of classroom observation,	UK
10	Bourdieu (1973)	Book	-	-	UK
11	Bourdieu (1995)	Book	-	-	UK
12	Bourdieu (2002)	Book	-	-	UK
13	Bourdieu and Passeron (1977/2000)	Book	-	-	UK
14	Carter and Welner (2013)	Book	-	-	USA

(Continued)

NO	Author name & Year	Journal Title	Method	Sample	Country of Origin
15	Clifton and Cook (2012)	Report	Literature Review	Article, Books etc.	UK
16	Coe et al. (2014)	Book	-	-	UK
17	Cornelia (2011)	Online article	Literature Review	Articles, books etc.	UK
18	Crawford et al. (2017)	Oxford Review of Education	Quantitative methodology Statistical analysis	Longitudinal study 460,653 pupils from the cohort born in 1990-1991	UK
19	Devine and Luttrell (2013)	Children and Society	Literature Review	Articles, books etc.	USA
20	DfE (2015)	Government report	-	-	UK
21	DfES (2005)	Government report	-	-	UK
22	Djurayeva (2021)	Academic Research in Educational Sciences	Literature review	Article, Books etc.	Uzbekistan
23	Dunne et al. (2011)	Curriculum Journal	Case studies Observation Interviews	13 Schools— both primary and secondary	UK
24	Eder and Felmlee (1984)	Book	-	-	USA
25	Francis and Wong (2013)	Research gate	Literature Review	Articles, books etc.	UK
26	Francis et al. (2019)	Research Papers in Education	Group discussions and individual interviews	89 students aged 11/12 (Year 7) from eight secondary schools	UK
27	Francis, Archer, et al. (2017)	Cambridge Journal of Education	Literature Review	Articles, books etc.	UK
28	Francis, Archer, et al. (2017)	International journal of educational research	Literature Review	data are drawn from a large-scale mixed-methods project, 'Best Practice in Grouping Students	UK
29	Francis et al. (2019)	Teaching and teacher education	Observations Surveys Interviews	139 Secondary schools in England 11-13 years old students.	UK
30	Galton and Moon (2018)	Book	-	-	USA

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NO	Author name & Year	Journal Title	Method	Sample	Country of Origin
31	Gamoran (1986)	Sociology of education	Literature review	Articles, books etc.	USA
32	Gazeley (2018)	Educational Review	Observation, Questionnaire, Research report (2 years pilot program)	Teachers Students	UK
33	Gillard (2008)	Book	-	-	UK
34	Gillborn and Youdell (2000)	Book	-	-	UK
35	Hadow report (1931)	Government Report	-	-	UK
36	Hallam and Parsons (2012)	British educational research journal	Literature review	Based on 8875 children in the Millennium Cohort Study.	UK
37	Hawley (1971)	Book	-	-	UK
38	Higgins et al. (2015)	Book	-	-	UK
39	Holt (2004)	Children Geographies	Case study	School	UK
40	Hopkyns (2017)	PhD Study	Qualitative study Questionnaire Focus group with	A questionnaire with thirty-five students Focus group with five students.	UAE
41	Ireson and Hallam (1999)	Oxford review of education	Literature review	Articles, books etc.	UK
42	Ireson and Hallam (2001)	Book	-	-	UK
43	Jackson's (1964)	Book	-	-	UK
44	Johnson et al. (1980)	American Educational Research Journal,	Observation	45 First grade children	USA
45	Kelly (2004)	Social Psychology of Education	Government documents	National database	USA
46	Kippels and Ridge (2019)	Book Ch3: Innovation and Transformation.	-	-	UAE
47	Marks (2013)	Forum: for promoting 3–19 comprehensive education	Case study Observation Questionnaire	284 students Eight teachers	UK

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NO	Author name & Year	Journal Title	Method	Sample	Country of Origin
48	Marks (2014)	Forum: For promoting 3-19 comprehensive education	Case study Observation Questionnaire	2 Primary schools Two hundred eighty-four students Aged 8-11 years. Teachers	UK
49	Matsumoto (2019)	International Journal of Educational Reform	Literature review	Articles, Books etc.	UAE
50	Mazenod et al. (2018)	Cambridge Journal of Education	Mixed method Questionnaire	126 schools Teachers and students	UK
51	McGillcuddy and Devine (2018)	Teaching and teacher education	Mixed method Survey Questionnaire Case study	One yearlong study 1781 Questionnaires	Ireland
52	Muijs and Dunne (2010)	Educational Research	Online survey Government documents	12 Local Authorities. 100 Secondary schools National dataset	UK
53	Murphy et al. (2017)	Contemporary educational psychology	A yearlong classroom-based intervention. Small group student discussions	Four teachers and their 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> -grade students.	USA
54	Papay and Kraft (2014)	Journal of public economics	Government data	Student data from 2001-2009	USA
55	Parsons and Hallam's (2014)	Oxford review of education	Literature review Data Archive	Data from the longitudinal Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) 19,000 children in the UK	UK
56	Perry and Francis (2010)	Research Gate	Literature review	Articles, books, government reports etc.	UK
57	Ridge (2014)	Book	-	-	USA
58	Rockoff et al. (2011)	Education Finance and Policy	Online Survey	602 new elementary and middle school math teachers,	USA
59	Saleh et al. (2005)	Instructional Science	Observation	104 boys 9-10 years old. Elementary school in Kuwait.	Netherlands

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NO	Author name & Year	Journal Title	Method	Sample	Country of Origin
60	Sands and Kerry (2020)	Book	-	-	USA
61	Sass et al. (2014)	Economics of Education Review	Literature review	six value-added models	USA
62	Sennett and Cobb (1993)	Book	-	-	USA
63	Sims (2017)	IOE Blog	Blog	Government documents	UK
64	Smith (2004)	Book	-	-	UK
65	Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014)	Elitist Britain	Report	Government documents	UK
66	Stewart (2013)	TES Global Ltd	Literature Review	Articles, Newspaper etc.	UK
67	Becky Taylor, Becky Francis, Louise Archer, Jeremy Hodgen, David Pepper, Antonina Tereshchenko & Mary-Claire Travers 2016	Culture and Society	data from the pilot and recruitment phases of a large-scale study	English secondary schools	UK
68	Becky Taylor, Becky Francis, Nicole Craig, Louise Archer, Jeremy Hodgen, Anna Mazonod, Antonina Tereshchenko & David Pepper (2018)	British journal of educational studies	survey and interview	126 English secondary schools	UK
69	Towers et al. (2019)	International journal of primary, elementary, and early years' education	Mixed method, Questionnaire, Semi-structured interviews	Primary school teachers and senior leaders	UK
70	Thorne (2011)	Educational Management Administration & Leadership,	Case study	One school	UAE
71	Tomlinson (2012)	Educational leadership: journal of the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development	Literature review	Articles, Books etc	USA

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NO	Author name & Year	Journal Title	Method	Sample	Country of Origin
72	Towers et al. (2019)	International journal of primary, elementary, and early years' education	Mixed methods approach Questionnaire Survey Semi-structured interviews	Teachers and senior leaders in three English primary schools.	UK
73	Romy Alexandra Claire Trigg-Smith (2011)	Educate-Special issue	Literature Review	Articles, books etc.	UK
74	UNICEF (2015)	Report	-	-	Jordan
75	Vogl and Preckel (2014)	Gifted child quarterly	Longitudinal study	99 "statistical twins from the fifth grade to the sixth grade.	Germany
76	Watanabe (2007)	Teachers college record	Field notes, group meetings and interviews	Eleven teacher inquiry group meetings and two interviews with each of the six teachers	USA
77	Webb (1980)	Educational Psychologist	Observation	Classrooms	USA
78	Webb (1991)	Journal for Research in Mathematics Education	Observation	Classrooms	USA
79	Welch (1990)	Journal of labour economics	Government Documents	Censuses, 1940-80	USA
80	Welner and Burris (2006)	Theory into practice	Case study	One	USA
81	Worthy (2010)	Urban Rev	Questionnaire	25 sixth-grade teachers	UK
82	Yonezawa and Jones (2000)	Theory into practice	Student focus group	12 schools	USA
83	Hamilton and O'hara (2011)	Teaching and teacher education	Focus group and Survey	32 Local authorities' Headteachers and 1000 survey primary school children	UK