

**ABILITY GROUPING IN HARARE SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
ITS EFFECT ON INSTRUCTION, LEARNING
AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study describes my experience in the research I conducted in two Harare secondary schools in which the interpretive ethnographic qualitative research methodology was used. The objective of the research was to assess the influence of ability grouping on learners, given that ability grouping is a common practice in Zimbabwean schools. In particular, this study sought to find out how this practice affected classroom instruction, learner performance and the social relationship among learners.

This study was conducted over three months at each of the schools, during which time formal interviews with teachers, administrators and learners, were conducted. These were complemented with informal conversations, where relevant comments were noted. Observation and limited participation in the two schools were also employed as means of collecting data. Analysis of documents was also done to supply more data about the practice and how it was implemented.

As customary with qualitative research, I, as the researcher, was the instrument for data collection. Data were analysed by identifying themes which emerged from the statements of the respondents, and interpretation was done using the mechanism of thick description of what the respondents said and did during the interviews and observation, and what the documents had to say about this practice.

I, as researcher, concluded from this study that ability grouping had a negative effect on classroom instruction for the low ability groups, since teachers tended not to prepare thoroughly for them. There was also a tendency among high ability groups to look down upon the low ability groups and to stigmatise them as "those who do not want to learn." Naturally this created a counter reaction from the low ability groups, making social relationships between members of the groups sour. I, as researcher, recommend a re-examination of this practice by the schools, with a view to either discontinue it or to work out mechanisms to remove the negative factors.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my immediate family and all the special people in my life past and present:

My wife, Clara Chipu, my daughters, Tendai, Tichafara, Nyaradzai Tarukwasha, and Ruzivo Emerina, my sons, Chenjerai Musafiri (Junior) and Shungu Masimba;

my late parents, Robert Enos, Hlamba Tarukwasha (Nee Mahosi), and step-mother Dumisani (Nee Maposa);

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and last but not least, my wife, Clara, who gave me unwavering support, and urged me on, throughout the period of my studies.

THE KEY TERMS OF THIS THESIS ARE:

Ability grouping

Instruction

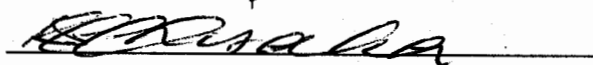
Learning

Social stratification

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DECLARATION

I declare that, **ABILITY GROUPING IN HARARE SECONDARY SCHOOLS : ITS EFFECT ON INSTRUCTION, LEARNING AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION**, is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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CHAPTER ONE

PURPOSE, MOTIVATION AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1.1 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to investigate the possible effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification in Harare secondary schools. Ability grouping in Harare, Zimbabwe, is a practice whereby pupils are arranged in groups of equal performance and achievement in classroom practice.

In this study, my targets were to examine the effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification, for the following reasons:

- to investigate the rationale given by the schools for this practice, with reference to how these impacted on lesson preparation, delivery and treatment of pupils of different abilities in general;
- to investigate how the practice influenced the performances of pupils in different ability groups, with reference to the rationales that were given for its existence;
- to find out how it impacted on values and attitudes of segregation in the didactical environments of the schools where it (ability grouping) was practised in Harare.

There is nothing in the Zimbabwe Government Educational Policy statements that mandates the practice of ability grouping. The Educational Policy objectives enunciated in 1982 (Mutumbuka, 1982) actually discourage stratification of pupils and uneven distribution of learning opportunities among pupils. However, the Government allows a great deal of autonomy among the schools, and this explains why some schools practise ability grouping while others do not.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY AND ITS MOTIVATION

1.2.1 Background

The subject of ability grouping of pupils in primary and secondary schools has been the focus of debate and investigation in a number of countries around the world, notably, the United States of America, Britain and the Caribbean region, as is indicated by the studies of Oakes (1982), Bowles and Gintis (1982), Richardson and Fergus (1993), Kutnick and Thomas (1990), Sorensen and Hallinan (1986), among others. Having been involved in both primary and secondary school education as a teacher, and primary and secondary school teacher education as a lecturer and a College principal, I have been exposed to various theories of school and classroom practice.

My interest has been particularly drawn to the schools' organisation of pupils according to ability. In Harare, where I taught at two schools, one, a Group A school, and the other, a Group B school, between 1981 and 1984, some classes were

streamed, while others had mixed abilities. The Group A schools in Zimbabwe are those which were formerly for whites only and are found in the areas inhabited by people of average and above average economic means, which are also known as low density suburbs. Since Zimbabwe became independent from colonial rule in 1980, these suburbs have become inhabited by black, Asian and white people of average and above average economic means. But children from families of below average economic means are also enrolled at these schools, particularly children of domestic workers, whose parents live in workers' cottages which are on the premises of the employers.

The Group B schools are those that were for blacks only before 1980, and they are located in formerly black residential areas, which have come to be known as high density suburbs in the present years. These suburbs now have a mixture of residents of below average economic means and those of average economic means.

In the Group A school in Harare, where I taught for one year in 1981, assignment of pupils to ability classes was done on a termly and yearly basis. The system allowed for vertical mobility, with pupils moving up into upper streams and down into lower streams on a yearly or termly basis, based on their grade achievement in classroom exercises and tests. The teacher's recommendations that so-and-so should move up or down, were also considered in the assignment of pupils who were already placed in higher streams to ability classes. A number of pupils who were already placed in higher streams, tended to be motivated to move up to further higher streams. In most cases of the very bottom of the streams, no meaningful movement

seemed to take place at all.

1.2.2 Motivation

This experience motivated me to read more on the subject of ability grouping in later years, in order to develop a deeper understanding of the principles involved. I was particularly keen to understand why it was that at this Group A school, where I once taught, the vast majority of pupils in lower streams were black. Some questions which came into my mind were: what are the criteria used in placement of pupils to ability classes. Are the criteria used neutral with reference to race, colour or social class? But at that point, literature pertaining to the subject was very scarce in Zimbabwe.

At the Group B school, where I taught during the early eighties, the situation was different from that at the Group A school in a number of respects. First, assignment of pupils to ability classes was largely done on the basis of perceived ability in given subjects. For instance, if a child had an aptitude for science subjects, that child would be placed in science classes, and the rest in arts oriented classes. The assumption of teachers and the school in general was that science was a more difficult learning area than were the humanities and languages. Secondly, assignment to ability classes was done only once when the children enrolled for their first year in secondary education. This meant that children assigned to a high ability class (science, in this case) would remain in that class for the rest of the four-year secondary school course, whether they performed well or not. The same applied to

those placed in low ability classes (arts classes in this case). Thirdly, those placed in low ability classes, were also allowed to do general science, which was considered easier than the highly academic physics and chemistry subjects offered to high ability classes.

I made two observations about the outcome of this practice at the Group B school. First, there appeared to be generally low morale among pupils in the low ability classes, which bordered on decrease in motivation. Meanwhile, there was high morale among high ability pupils already placed in the upper streams. It was not clear to me whether this could have been due to the practice of ability grouping. Secondly, the general grade achievement of the high and low ability classes across the curriculum appeared to have very little difference. At the time, I was not aware of the debate going on elsewhere on the subject of ability grouping and, therefore, I did not do any action research to develop a more informed insight into these issues.

It was while at the University of Zimbabwe, studying for a Master's degree, between 1995 and 1996, that I stumbled upon the debate on ability grouping. My experiences in the two secondary schools were re-lived, and I began to read more on the subject. Consequently I decided to do a study of ability grouping in schools.

The reading of the debate took me to a number of conceptual analyses as well as some research findings on the practice of ability grouping. What interested me most were view points which stated that the social status of the child had a bearing on its academic performance and achievement (Ezewu, 1983; Marjoribanks, 1986;

Carpenter & Darmody, 1989; Oakes, 1982; Meijnen, 1991; among others). This information led me to ponder over my experiences at the two secondary schools where I had taught. I began to wonder whether these view points could apply to the situation at those schools, regarding the racial and social class compositions of the ability classes of the two schools.

In this (current) study, I also became interested in the view point that ability grouping was meant to enable "teachers to tailor instruction to the ability level of their students" (Hallinan, 1994: 79). The question that came to my mind was whether teachers at the two schools actually lived to the expectation that is stated by Hallinan. I could not recall how teachers at the two schools addressed that expectation, hence I felt the need to do a study to develop an insight into how schools which practise this system go about it.

Another issue raised on the practice of ability grouping that aroused my interest was the argument that the permanent assignment of a pupil to a low ability class could permanently destroy that child and that ability grouping "increases the achievement gap between" low ability and high ability pupils (Cahan, Linchevski, Ygra and Danziger, 1996:30). My experiences at the two schools did not throw much light on this claim, partly because I did not have these questions in mind while I was at these schools and, therefore, I could not recall how the situation was, with reference to these claims. I then assumed that the intended goal of all educators was to create conditions that would maximize the learning opportunities for all pupils. If claims were being made that the very prevalent didactical practice of ability grouping created

and increased gaps in achievement between high and low ability classes, then any educator would have to pause and ask questions about this practice. The educator has to pause to ask questions whether it is true that the strategy of ability grouping is not achieving the intended goal of facilitating increased learning opportunities for all pupils. If an educator is not bothered by claims that his/her instructional strategies may not actually be facilitating learning among all learners, then that educator is not in the field to accomplish the intended goal of education.

The following observations by Good and Brophy (1991:384-385) further aroused my interest to carry out this study. These observations were:

1. teachers "dislike teaching low-ability classes";
2. teachers "spend less time preparing" for low ability classes;
3. teachers "schedule less varied, interesting and challenging activities for low-ability classes";
4. ability grouping creates "undesirable peer structures";
5. students in low ability classes "resent their low status and tend to respond defensively by refusing to commit themselves seriously to academic achievement goals and by deriding classmates who do";
6. committed teachers attached to low ability classes "find it difficult to establish effective learning environments in the low ability classes, "because of the resistance they are likely to encounter there"; and
7. ability grouping tends to minimize social equity, since it minimizes contact between students of different abilities.

My interest had been further aroused by noticing that there was a school of thought that countered these view points. Such counter view points are, for example, that ability grouping "permits teachers to tailor instruction to the ability level of their students" and "to promote cognitive development" (Hallinan, 1994:79). In terms of learning, Rennie (1986), also believes ability grouping benefits both slow and faster learners as it is designed to suit each group's pace of learning. Other theorists who hold similar views are Dimmock (1995) and Ediger (1995), among others.

The outline of the Zimbabwe Government's Educational policy objectives, also influenced my interest in this study.

The educational policy objectives of the Zimbabwe government centred on egalitarian principles. These objectives were stated as follows:

- the creation of an education process that evenly distributes resources among learners;
- the creation of an education process that evenly distributes learning opportunities among learners;
- the provision of a curriculum that teaches about the one-ness of citizens and not their division;
- the provision of an education system without social stratification. (Mutumbuka, 1982).

These policy objectives were formulated by the new government that came into power

following the demise of colonialism in Zimbabwe in 1980. The colonial government and the cultural system it created were known to be oppressive towards the majority of blacks. In particular, its education system was elitist, and it mainly catered for the interests of the minority white citizens.

It was also well known that some schools did not change the traditions they inherited from the colonial social order. Ability grouping was one of such traditions. My interest was raised when I compared the educational policy objectives of the new government, and the apparent contradiction the cultures of ability grouping in some of the Harare secondary schools appeared to present. Questions that came to my mind were: was it correct to assume that the culture of ability grouping in Harare secondary schools had been inherited from the colonial traditions? Was it possible that the cultures of ability grouping in Harare secondary schools could embrace the egalitarian principles of the new post-independence social philosophy? Were the Harare schools aware of the debate going on elsewhere in the world about the pros and cons of the culture of ability grouping?

By this study, taking into account the interest raised in the above situations, I hoped to develop deeper perceptions on how the practice of ability grouping worked, and what effect it had on instruction, learning and social stratification in Harare schools. This was particularly so, after a quantitative study I had done earlier in Harare (Chisaka, 1996), had produced inconclusive findings, since it did not examine details such as lesson preparation for, and presentation to, different ability classes, lesson observation and detailed interviews of participants.

1.3 STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

As indicated above, there are two schools of thought which offer conflicting interpretations on the effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification. One school presents ability grouping as an "organisational strategy" used "to address academic deficiencies among ... students" in some schools (Richardson and Fergus, 1993:70). This school states that ability grouping "is meant to promote cognitive development" and that "it is not designed to influence or modify students' social or emotional growth" (Hallinan, 1994:79). The school also argues that, if ability grouping "operated according to theory, students at all ability levels and from all backgrounds would learn more in tracked (ability grouped) classes than in untracked (mixed ability) ones" (Hallinan, 1994:80).

The other school holds that ability grouping is more than just an organisational instructional strategy. This school argues that ability grouping is a practice that is "embedded in cultural and political contexts, replete with good intentions, bad intentions, and messy human decision making" (Oakes, 1994:85). The school holds that ability grouping is "connected to a deeply held conviction that schools are expected to contribute to a wide array of goals, only some of which are strictly cognitive" (Oakes, 1994:86). It further postulates that ability grouping plays a "sorting function", whereby "efficient workers" are created out of low ability classes for the capitalist system (Oakes, 1994:86). On didactical matters, Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) although they belong to the first school, give an argument that supports the second school, that ability grouping "provides fewer opportunities for

learning than whole class instruction" and that "high ability groups provide more opportunities for learning than lower ability groups" (Sorensen and Hallinan 1986:539). This school further argues that ability grouping damages the self-esteem of pupils in low ability groups (White, 1990; Lingard, 1994).

It is in view of these conflicting claims that a problem arises as to which of these schools provides reliable information on the effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification. The problem which this study sought to tackle may, therefore, be stated thus:

What effect does ability grouping have on instruction, learning and social stratification in Harare secondary schools?

1.4 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aims of this study were to assess the effect of ability grouping in the following areas:

1. effect of ability grouping on the instruction of different ability groups;
2. effect of ability grouping on the learning motivation of different ability groups;
3. the amount of preparation undertaken by teachers for the teaching of different ability groups;
4. the extent to which children of different ability groups interacted socially;
5. the reasons administrators and teachers had for practising ability grouping.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The questions this study sought answers to were:

1. What rationale do the schools give for using ability grouping in their didactical culture?
2. How do teachers relate to their different ability classes?
3. What do the learners think of their peers in lower or higher ability classes, and how do they feel about their situation?

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In Harare, only one study was known to have been done so far on the subject of ability grouping. This one study has been done through a quantitative research method. It was my belief as researcher that a qualitative research study of the interpretive ethnographic paradigm could complement the findings of the former study. The quantitative method has its own weaknesses such as its inability to probe "questions related to the way in which actors in the educational system understand power relations, conflicts, and contradictions inherent in schooling" (Dzvimbo, 1994:200). The qualitative study has the capacity to tackle these social relational problems.

Therefore, my first consideration as researcher was my belief that the qualitative, ethnographic approach would be able to probe broad-based didactic dynamics relating to school and classroom instructional and learning strategies, and socio-cultural practices which this study was about, and which the quantitative method may be ill-equipped to handle (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1992; Bartlett, 1994). Qualitative research methodology, in my view, would allow me to analyse and interpret intentions, attitudes, values and beliefs, against the background of the day-to-day going-on at the schools of this study. In my view, this would develop deeper and richer insights in the operation of the system of ability grouping.

A gap has also been identified with reference to the location of the bulk of studies done on the subject. Most of the studies have been done outside Zimbabwe, and their findings may not strictly apply to the Hararean situation. Here, the dialectical notion that no two situations are alike, applies. It was considered desirable that a study be done in Harare and results compared with those found elsewhere in order to determine whether the view points of various theorists testify either to the positivity or negativity of ability grouping with reference to instruction, learning and social stratification.

The survey of literature had also revealed that the proponents of ability grouping had not convincingly provided evidence that ability grouping benefited both high and low ability groups. The benefits of the practice are mainly convincing on the side of high ability groups with respect to its postulation by proponents. Within the same context, the critics of ability grouping have concentrated more on the influence of the broader socio-economic dynamics on ability grouping at the expense of the cultural dynamics of the school itself, the dynamics of which may operate autonomously from the broader social ones. This study focused on the didactical cultural dynamics of the school itself and how this impacted on ability grouping principles and practice.

This study was also considered to be important in the sense that it could create interest among researchers and classroom practitioners to engage in more critical reflection and debate on the practice of ability grouping in Harare.

Last, but not least, it was hoped that the study could provide curriculum developers and planners in Zimbabwe with information to support their decisions for or against the practice of ability grouping.

1.7 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study was limited to a case study of two Harare secondary schools, One Group A and one Group B. The reason for choosing these two types of school was based on the assumption that the location of these two types in the low density areas (for

Group A) and high density areas (for Group B), was likely to present two separate experiences in the mode of operation of the practice of ability grouping.

The study was also confined to ability grouping seen through the lens of the History subject. This was because I, as researcher was trained to teach History. When I taught at Teachers Colleges, History was my discipline as well. Therefore I, as researcher, would be better suited with a study where History would be the main focus.

Although the study was limited to two schools and to the subject of History, it was hoped that it would provide significant insights into the operation of the practice of ability grouping and the effect it could have on instruction, learning and social stratification.

1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The focus of data collection was limited to interviews, observation and document study, which included a study of performance patterns of 'O' level ability classes over a period of five years (in the case of the Group B school) and four years (for the Group A school). This meant that some methods of data collection such as questionnaires, experiments, detailed historical study, were excluded from this study. That could be a limitation of this study, but, as Borg and Gall (1989) and Nherera (1999) argue, interviews and observation are the main focus of qualitative study, which was the methodology of the study. Therefore, the exclusion of the above methods would not invalidate the findings of this study.

This study was also limited to two schools, which could sound too small a sample. But, as Lancy (1993) and Nherera (1999) suggest, qualitative study does not rely on the size of sample upon which to generalise the research findings. The main concern was a story to tell, based on perceptions gained in the case study of the two schools. The perceptions were meant for the notice of interested parties, and were documented

to reflect a particular practice at a particular time in the history of Zimbabwean education.

1.9 DEFINITION OF TERMS AND CONSTRUCTS

The following were the operational definitions of terms and constructs as given in this study.

1. **Ability grouping:** This refers to the assignment of pupils to classes that are perceived to be of homogeneous levels of academic performance and achievement. This leads to some classes being regarded as high-ability and others as low-ability classes.
2. **Streaming:** This concept was used as a synonym of the concept "ability grouping"; American scholars generally call this tracking. This however, refers to the assignment of learners to the subjects in which they are expected to do well. Decisions on this are usually based on the results of diagnostic and prognostic tests taken by learners prior to placement.
3. **High ability group/class:** A group of school pupils who are perceived to be top performers and achievers. Some schools often tie to this school subjects that are perceived to be difficult such as Science and Mathematics. Hence this also takes the form of streaming.
4. **Low ability group/class:** A group of school pupils who are perceived to be slow learners and at the bottom of academic performance and achievement. Often those learners are given "soft" subjects perceived to be at their level of learning ability.
5. **Group A School:** This refers to the former whites - only schools of the period before 1980. These are presently located in residential areas of average and above average economic means, the so-called low-density suburbs.

6. **Group B School:** This refers to the former blacks-only schools of the period before 1980. These are presently located in areas largely populated by people of below average economic means, and are described as the high-density residential areas.

1.10 EXPLANATION OF THESIS FORMAT

This thesis is made up of a total of six chapters. Chapters 2,3,4, 5 and 6 have each an introduction, discussion and analysis of its content and a short summary.

1.10.1 Chapter 1 : Purpose, Motivation and Scope of the Study

This chapter gives the background to the study and its motivation, the statement of the problem, aims of the research, its significance, research questions, the delimitation and limitations of the study and definition of terms of the study.

1.10.2 Chapter 2 : Review of Related Literature

This chapter examines the existing literature on the subject of ability grouping in some detail. It looks at conceptual descriptions as well as research findings and identifies possible gaps in knowledge in them. It examines findings of research and conceptual descriptions on the subject of ability grouping, with reference to Zimbabwe and experience outside Zimbabwe. It attempts to show why this present study was necessary to carry out and how it could contribute to the wealth of knowledge that already exists on the subject.

1.10.3 Chapter 3: Methodological Procedures and Perspectives

In this chapter, the methods and design of the study are presented, analysed and justified. It explains and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the qualitative methods, as they refer to this study, with particular emphasis on the interpretive ethnographic paradigm, which was the main method of this study.

1.10.4 Chapter 4 : Data Presentation and Analysis

In this chapter, the data of the study are presented in four parts. Namely: Part 1 - Background Information; Part II - Document Analysis; Part III: Teachers' and pupils' Perceptions; Part IV: Summary.

1.10.5 Chapter 5: Interpretation of Data

This chapter provides an interpretation of the data presented in Chapter 4. This is where I present my own perceptions of the cultural situation that I studied.

1.10.6 Chapter 6 : Summary, Conclusions, Implications and Possibilities for Further Research

This is the last chapter of the thesis. It provides summary, conclusions, implications and possibilities for further research.

1.11 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I started with a statement that explained the purpose of this study. I also defined the concept, "ability grouping" as it applied to Harare secondary schools. I then moved on to give the background to the study and its motivation. Here, I briefly examined the views of two schools of thought on the subject of ability grouping. I further suggested that these views could be used to carry out an investigation of the practice of ability grouping in Harare secondary schools.

Following the background to the study and what motivated it, I then went on to formulate the statement of the problem of the study. From the statement of the problem, I developed three aims of this study. Three research questions were also formulated, which corresponded to the three aims of the study.

In this Chapter, the significance of the study was also given. Five considerations were given as forming the basis of the study. These were the methodology of ethnography, which would give broad-based insights into the didactical culture of

ability grouping; the fact that very little research on the subject has been done in Zimbabwe; the gaps that have been revealed in the literature surveyed; the fact that the study could create interest among other researchers; and the possibility of the study supplying useful information to curriculum developers and planners in their decision-making in Zimbabwe.

The Chapter also stated the delimitation of the study, as well as its limitations. Significant terms and constructs were also defined. Last but not least, this chapter also outlined the format of the thesis as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I explored the conceptual analysis as well as research findings made on the subject of ability grouping, or streaming, or tracking, as it was described in different parts of the world at the time of the research. In Western countries, including the United States of America, many researchers and educationists have carried out studies and made conceptual analyses of the practice of ability grouping. The concern over this practice has been with the Western world as far back as the 1960's (Harris, 1960; Abadzi, 1984; Cooper, 1975; Kulik and Kulik, 1982; Rogoff in Carpenter and Western, 1986). In Zimbabwe, some conceptual analysis has been made by a few classroom practitioners in the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's (Harris, 1975; Griffiths, 1977; Watyoka, 1977; Makunde, 1986; Gwarinda, 1995). As recent as the mid-1990's, a study was done to determine how ability grouping relates to social stratification in Harare secondary schools (Chisaka, 1996).

2.2 THE MEANING OF ABILITY GROUPING

There appears to be little controversy on what constitutes ability grouping, although differences do exist on factors that are taken into account when pupils are assigned to classes according to their abilities.

Harris (1960:223) defines ability grouping as a system of schooling whereby students are brought together "on criteria of likeness or homogeneity." A more specific definition of the practice of ability grouping is given by Oakes (1985:3), who describes it as a system whereby students are either "classified as fast, average, or slow learners on the basis of their scores on achievement or ability tests," or whereby pupils "are classified according to what seems most appropriate to their future lives."

Hallinan (1994) extends the definition further, when in her description, she also gives the purpose of the stratification. She defines the practice, which she calls tracking, as "the practice of assigning students to instructional groups on the basis of ability," and that this system is used as "an organisational practice ... to facilitate instruction and to increase learning" (Hallinan, 1994:79).

Richardson and Fergus (1993) state the purpose of ability grouping in their definition which describes it as "the method of assigning students to separate classrooms, so that children of a particular age and grade who function similarly in learning achievement and capability are placed together for instruction" (Richardson and Fergus, 1993:70).

Cahan, Linchevski, Ygra and Danziger (1996), also define ability-grouping as "any organizational scheme aimed at decreasing the heterogeneity of the learning group" (Cahan, *et al*, 1996:29).

Cohen and Manion (1981), define ability grouping as an academic practice whereby pupils' capacities and attainment are placed into categories of backward, average and quick learners. This definition assumes that it is possible to classify human abilities into these three categories.

Generally, definitions of what constitutes ability-grouping by Griffiths (1977), Kelly in Entwistle (1990), seem to share the same view. Therefore, there is agreement that ability grouping is a practice whereby pupils are placed in groups of similar learning achievement and capability, and that the expressed intention is to achieve maximum instructional benefits for all groups.

However, the unanswered questions are whether ability grouping:

1. achieves its intended goal in terms of maximisation of learning achievement for all groups (upper and lower groups); or

2. creates "undesirable" outcomes such as segregation, with the result that inequalities emerge in the distribution of educational or didactic benefits.

2.3 VIEWS EXPRESSING SUPPORT FOR THE PRACTICE OF ABILITY GROUPING

Theories abound on the good didactic outcomes of the practice of ability grouping. Rennie (1986) contends that ability grouping has a constructive impact on pupil learning, and advances the following arguments in support of his viewpoint:

1. ability grouping assists the slow learner in the sense that it removes unmanageable competition offered by the fast learner, and gives the slow learner the opportunity to compete with peers of his/her own ability;
2. the faster learner is not slowed down in his/her progress by the slower learner.

Rennie's contention is supported by Hallinan (1994:79), who observes that, "the theory of tracking argues that tracking permits teachers to tailor instruction to the ability level of their students," and that therefore, "tracking is meant to promote cognitive development: it is not designed to influence or modify students' social or emotional growth," as the critics of the practice assume. Hallinan argues that ability grouping is a strategy used to maximise learning opportunities and that if "tracking operated according to theory, students at all ability levels and from all backgrounds would learn more in tracked classes than in untracked ones" (Hallinan, 1994:80).

What Rennie (1986) and Hallinan (1994) highlight, are the perspectives of the proponents of ability grouping. However, these two, do not shed light on whether the rationale for ability grouping is backed up by research on classroom practice. They do not show whether the intended goal of maximising learning opportunities for all categories has been achieved or not, in real classroom practice.

Rennie (1986) and Hallinan (1994), simply dismiss the effect ability grouping may have on attitudes or the emotional growth of the pupils. Hallinan argues that ability grouping is not meant to "influence or modify students' social or emotional growth" (Hallinan, 1994:79). And yet, it could be argued, rightly, that, any human decision and action can never be expected not to impact on the emotions and general lives of those for whom they are intended. Human beings think, feel and react to situations that they are exposed to. Pupils who are grouped according to their abilities, are human beings, therefore one would expect them to have or develop attitudes and values about the situation of ability grouping to which they are exposed.

What Rennie (1986) and Hallinan (1994) fail to do, is to explain how ability grouping is, or can be done in such a way that it does not create undesirable emotions in the affected pupils. Or, how it has been done elsewhere in such a way that such emotions have not arisen.

Therefore, the arguments of Rennie (1986) and Hallinan (1994), do not shed light on the effect of ability grouping on the emotional development of the child (the affective dimension) in its practical implementation. Their arguments anticipate the emotional effect, but then dismiss this, since it is not the intended effect of ability grouping.

However, Sorensen and Hallinan (1986:539) found in their study that ability grouping "provides fewer opportunities for learning than whole class instruction" and that "high ability groups provide more opportunities for learning than lower ability groups". It is then surprising that, although Hallinan and Sorensen made this finding, in Hallinan (1994), Hallinan sees ability grouping as a sound didactical practice.

Cahan, *et al* (1996:29), among the proponents of ability grouping, argue that the "main justification for using ability grouping is the need to adapt content, level, pace and teaching methods to students who function at varied levels." This postulation or rationale for ability grouping by these authors seems to be the main contention of its proponents. For example, Harris (1960), Richardson & Fergus (1993), Gomm (1995), Grambo (1997), Lando and Schneider (1997), Ramsay and Richards (1997),

Tomlinson (1993), Webb (1985), Ediger (1995), Dimmock (1995), in their various ways, argue that ability grouping has perceivable didactic benefits as against mixed ability grouping. Some of these theorists have argued that ability grouping is meant to ensure that every pupil is given the opportunity to learn according to his/her ability. Ediger (1995:136) has even gone further to argue that, his " vision for public schools and all pupils is to have each achieve as much as possible " and that no "pupils should be sacrificed so that a given segment of the school population benefits therefrom."

The argument of Cahan, *et al* (1996) is similar to that of Hallinan (1994), which concentrates on what the intentions are, neglecting commenting on the actual effect in practice. The questions that are begging answers from this view-point are: Do both teachers and pupils live up to the expectations of its proponents? Do the teachers, in practice, "adapt content, level, pace and teaching methods to students who function at varied levels"? (Cahan, *et al*, 1996). It was hoped that this case study of Harare secondary schools that practised ability grouping would attempt to answer some of these questions.

The fact that so many proponents had argued for the good intentions of ability grouping, made one not to simply dismiss their views as mere conjectures. It was necessary to put them to test, particularly in an environment like Harare, where the practice of ability grouping has not been seriously interrogated.

Most proponents of ability grouping (as shown above), do not ascribe any ulterior motives to the practice. However, there are some of them who imply such motives in their arguments. Tomlinson (1993), Webb (1985), Feldhusen, Van Tassel-Baska and Seeley (1989) and Robinson (1990) are proponents who fall into this category.

Arguing against the idea of replacing ability grouping with mixed ability arrangements, Tomlinson (1993:178), has postulated that high ability learners "... are the group for whom instructional expectations would likely fall in heterogeneous settings."

What Tomlinson (1993) is implying, by inference, is that mixed ability arrangements benefit the low ability pupils more than they do the high ability pupils. His support for the practice of ability grouping, therefore, appears to be one that favours the interests and needs of the high ability at the expense of the low ability pupils. Yet, one wonders why the high ability pupils would experience a fall in their performance, since the instructional strategy of extension work could be employed by the teacher to cater for faster learners in a heterogeneous arrangement. In this strategy, teachers normally give more work to the faster learners, so that they can keep their fast pace of work.

Therefore Tomlinson's argument in favour of ability grouping leaves a grey area on the debate of the merits and demerits of the practice.

Other proponents of ability grouping have also argued that heterogeneous grouping has the tendency of making higher ability pupils assume the role of teachers rather than learners. And because of this tendency, it (heterogeneous arrangement) tends to decrease learning benefits for the high ability pupils (Webb, 1985; Feldhusen et al, 1989). Robinson (1990) shares this view as well, since he argues that, heterogeneous grouping jeopardizes peer acceptance or proper pupil socialisation. This is because, he argues, higher ability pupils would be playing the role of task master or teacher, while the lower ability pupils play the role of followers.

By inference, the arguments of Webb (1985), Feldhusen et al (1989) and Robinson (1990), imply that ability grouping is desirable because it provides an opportunity for equitable distribution of the development of both leadership and followership qualities among both high and low ability pupils. However, this perspective appears to imply that in mixed ability arrangements, teachers abdicate their responsibilities to the high ability pupils.

These arguments, on the surface, appear to support the interests of both categories of ability. But, in essence, they may be protecting the interests of only one category, that is, the high ability pupils. In other words, Webb (1985), Feldhusen et al (1989)

and Robinson (1990), are saying that heterogenous grouping is a burden to the high ability pupils and, therefore, should be avoided.

My study, therefore, among other aims, sought to develop insights into how teachers handled the two categories of ability, with a view to verifying the perceptions that ability grouping creates a situation where teachers do not abdicate their responsibilities to the high ability pupils.

Some of the proponents of ability grouping have given views that tend to support the notion that it is natural for human beings to congregate in groups of similar interests and ability. Lando and Schneider (1997) and Ramsay and Richards (1997), have observed that, even if children were put in a mixed ability group, they would always form their own groups according to ability. Grambo (1997:20) has gone further to argue that if you put "an assertive personality" together with "a shy personality, ... the shy child will let the assertive child take over." Grambo therefore argues that the assertive children should be grouped together and the shy ones on their own, so that the shy children would not be disadvantaged. Here, Grambo appears to equate shyness to slowness, and yet shyness does not mean slowness. A shy pupil may not participate actively in class, but this does not necessarily retard the performance of the child in overall learning activities.

The proponents of ability-grouping, in their arguments, have raised a number of issues that seem to reveal some gaps in their characterisation of the didactical outcomes of the practice. The first issue is about the assumption that when you group levels of competition in their proper categories (high competition and low competition separately), this equation would facilitate more learning and better instruction for all pupils. Yet there are findings that show that co-operative learning among pupils of different abilities can didactically benefit both low and high ability performers and that ability grouping decreases learning for low ability groups (Kutnick and Thomas, 1990; Sorensen and Hallinan, 1986; White, 1990; Datta and Singh 1994; Huber, 1995; Martinez, 1996; Lingard, 1994; Stuart, 1994; Boschee, 1996; Kelly, 1974). It therefore became one of the tasks of this study to develop an insight into whether

ability grouping gives the same opportunities for instruction and learning in the different ability classes in Harare as suggested by its proponents. It is also important to note that most of the researches refer to situations outside Zimbabwe. A determination on whether the same observations would apply to a Zimbabwean educational environment, with reference to Harare, was deemed pedagogically necessary.

However, the theories that support the practice of ability grouping have been widely refuted by the school of thought which sees the practice as being didactically incorrect. The following section examined the views of theorists who operate within this school of thought.

2.4 VIEWS OF THE CRITICS OF THE PRACTICE OF ABILITY GROUPING

In the 1950's and 1960's, ability grouping was supported on the grounds that it put pupils together "on criteria of likeness or homogeneity" (Harris, 1960:223). It was characterised as homogeneous grouping. The argument was that abilities of pupils differed between fast and slow learners (Harris, 1960; Harris, 1975). The proponents of homogeneous grouping (ability grouping) felt that it would not be fair to mix abilities in one class as this would disadvantage both fast and slow learners. The slow learners would pull down the fast learners while the latter would subject the former to a competitive environment in which they could not cope with.

There were arguments in the 1980's and 1990's as presented in section 2.3 which share similar view-points as those presented in the first paragraph (above). These are arguments advanced by Webb (1985), Tomlinson (1993), Feldhusen et al (1989), Grambo (1997), among others.

However, a number of theorists over the years have advanced ideas that try to show the negative effects of ability grouping to instruction and learning. Among these are theorists such as Bowles and Gintis (1982), Abadzi (1984), Kelly (1990), Good and Brophy (1991), Cummings (1982), Kutnick and Thomas (1990), White (1990), Huber

(1995), Martinez (1996), Lingard (1994), Stuart (1994), Terwel, Herfs, Mertens & Perrenet (1994), Boschee (1996), Kelly (1974), and Reid (1978), Gwarinda (1995).

Gwarinda (1995) has suggested that ability grouping has more disadvantages than advantages. The disadvantages he identified are as follows:

- that ability grouping can encourage elitism, "whereby the faster learners become a special group which might be better favoured by the teacher, receiving more social rewards and privileges";
- that the teacher is likely to "ignore or write-off the slower groups as good-for-nothing";
- that factionalism based on feelings of superiority and inferiority is likely to arise between ability groups, and this is likely to destroy the spirit of pupils helping each other (Gwarinda, 1995:67).

Bowles and Gintis (1982) have suggested that ability grouping does not benefit the low ability groups, because the latter's classes are "more characterized by alienation, distance and passiveness" than those in high ability classes, and that the low ability pupils express "more negative attitudes about themselves and their futures" (Bowles and Gintis, 1982:197).

If the above perceptions of Gwarinda (1995), Bowles and Gintis (1982) are correct, then it means that ability grouping may be only benefiting the high ability pupils in terms of learning opportunities, and not the low ability pupils.

The observations of Gwarinda (1995), and Bowles and Gintis (1982) are supported by Sorensen and Hallinan (1986), although the latter are proponents of ability grouping. These have found in their study that ability grouping provides fewer learning opportunities for low ability pupils than it does for high ability pupils (Sorensen and Hallinan, 1986).

The perceptions of Gwarinda and Bowles and Gintis are also supported in one form or another by a number of other theorists. One of these is Abadzi (1984) who argued that ability grouping creates "lower self-concept, lower achievement motivation, high incidence of juvenile delinquency ..." (Abadzi, 1984:287).

Kelly, another critic of this practice, argues that ability-grouping creates a sense of failure and rejection to those put in lower streams, and acceptance and praise to those put in upper streams, and that, "... far from catering for differences of ability," streaming "creates such differences itself" (Kelly, 1975:7-8).

What Kelly is saying here, is that, in spite of the intentions of tailoring instruction to the levels of abilities (Hallinan, 1994), what pertains on the ground is the very opposite. Because of the feeling of rejection, low ability pupils tend to decrease in their performance, thus increasing the gaps in achievement between the high and low ability pupils. This suggests that instructional intentions are not enough to rely upon. It is necessary to look at the likely outcome of a didactical decision. In this case, the affective dimension has to be taken into account, as it would also have an impact on classroom practice.

Good and Brophy, among the critics, have gone further to enumerate the negative effects of ability grouping in their statement that:

... teachers dislike teaching low-ability classes ... spend less time preparing (for low ability classes) ... (teachers) schedule less varied, interesting, and challenging activities for low-ability classes ... (that students in low-ability classes) resent their low status and tend to respond defensively by refusing to commit themselves seriously to academic achievement goals and by deriding classmates who do ... (that committed teachers attached to low ability classes) find it difficult to establish effective learning environments ... because of the defeatism, alienation, and flat-out resistance they are likely to encounter there ... (and that low ability pupils who may) want to learn and accomplish as much as they can have a difficult time doing so because their classmates are likely to deride their efforts and because instructional continuity in these classes is often disrupted ... (Good and Brophy, 1991:385).

A number of issues are being raised by Good and Brophy (1991) about the effects of ability grouping on instruction and learning.

The first issue they raise with ability grouping is that it has the effect of making teachers dislike teaching low ability pupils. This suggests that teachers in general, are not motivated to teach the low ability pupils but would be motivated to teach high ability pupils. Therefore, this practice creates a situation whereby teachers make preferences on who to give their best instructional attention.

Second, Good and Brophy (1991), also suggest that the negative affective influence which ability grouping has on teachers, also rubs-off to low ability pupils themselves. This is because the low ability pupils "resent their low status and ... respond defensively by refusing to commit themselves seriously to academic achievement goals ..." (Good and Brophy, 1991:385). The argument of these theorists is that, instead of motivating the low ability pupils to learn in a situation where they are in the same ability classroom environment, these pupils become negative and resist instruction and learning.

Third, Good and Brophy (1991), also suggest that, ability grouping has the effect of making teachers prepare less instructional activities for the low ability than they do for the high ability pupils. This means that it may not just be a question of low ability pupils resenting their low status, but moreso because of their resentment of the low quality instructional activities prepared for them by their teachers.

The fourth issue Good and Brophy (1991) bring out, is that of a deliberate effort by the low ability pupils to influence each other not to commit themselves to academic work. This is done through deriding those who may want to commit themselves to their academic work. What this suggests is that ability grouping may have the effect of making low ability pupils conscious of themselves as a less privileged social group. The group then deliberately resists its treatment by those it perceives as the perpetrators of its underprivileged status (that is, the teachers and their instruction).

In this sense, ability grouping, therefore, has the effect of not only stratifying pupils, but also developing 'social group' consciousness among them.

Cahan, Linchevski, Ygra and Danziger (1996) also argue that ability grouping tends to increase the gap of achievement between low and high ability groups. Other theorists like Sorensen and Hallinan (1986:540) also contend that ability grouping "is not neutral with respect to inequality of educational opportunity," since what is taught in grouped classes is not equal in quantity and quality.

What Cahan *et al* (1996) say, is corroborated by the observations of Kelly (1975) and Good and Brophy (1991), regarding the effect of ability grouping on increasing the gap in achievement between high and low ability pupils. Their arguments contradict those of the proponents of the practice. However, one of the proponents of the practice, Hallinan in Sorensen and Hallinan (1986), confirms the view points of its critics in her admission of the fact that the practice of ability grouping provides fewer opportunities for low ability pupils. Hallinan in Sorensen and Hallinan (1986:540) argues that ability grouping "is not neutral with respect to inequality of educational opportunity".

It should be noted that, although Hallinan (1994) submits that the intension of ability grouping is not to create unequal opportunities, she, however acknowledges that in reality, what happens on the ground has the opposite effect. This admission has tended to strengthen the arguments of the critics of ability grouping. One such critic is Oakes (1985:3), who identifies the negative effects of ability grouping as follows:

(that grouping labels pupils) as being of a certain type - high ability, low achieving, slow, average ... (that) these groups are not equally valued in the school ... (that) individual students in these groups come to be defined by others - both adults and their peers - in terms of these group types ... (and that therefore) a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high achieving person, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many, good ... (while) the low-achieving groups come to be called slow, below average

What Oakes (1985) rejects about ability grouping here, is its effect on labelling and stigmatisation of those placed in low-ability classes. The high ability pupils, she says, are given labels that present them in good light, while those of the low ability are given labels that present them in bad light. Oakes' (1985) emphasis is on values and attitudes that develop within a school cultural setting as a result of ability grouping.

Critics of ability grouping also argue that the practice is based on an archaic notion of intelligence. This notion takes intelligence as "a fixed and unchangeable level of general ability" (Kelly, 1974; 72), or assumes that "the child's ability is measurable, and remains fairly constant over time" (Reid, 1978:124).

But the arguments of Kelly (1974) and Reid (1978) assume that the grouping of pupils into their ability categories is a one-off exercise. Their arguments do not take into account those practices of grouping that allow for vertical mobility of the high and low ability pupils on a termly or yearly basis which operate in some schools in Harare, Zimbabwe (Chisaka, 1996). These are the practices that allow pupils to be moved to higher or lower groups, depending on their performances. Such a practice cannot be said to assume that ability is fixed or "remains fairly constant over time". These arguments can only be sustained if they are referring to a practice of ability grouping that does not accommodate mobility of pupils between high and low ability groups.

The arguments of the critics of ability grouping seem to be strong on the effect this practice is perceived to have on low ability pupils. Their arguments could be summarised as follows:

1. ability grouping labels pupils as being of high learning ability and of low learning ability and this tends to affect the self-esteem of the child, and hence results in raising the motivation of those labelled as having high learning ability and decreasing the motivation of those labelled as having of low learning ability;

2. grouping pupils according to ability creates a sense of failure and rejection among the low ability groups and a sense of success and acceptance among the high ability groups;
3. ability grouping adversely affects the motivation of, and preparation by, teachers for the low ability classes, since less time is spent in preparing lessons for these classes, and since lesson activities are not as challenging as those found in high ability classes. Therefore, in terms of quantity and quality of learning opportunities, the high ability groups are granted more than the low ability groups;
4. grouping pupils according to ability creates gaps in achievement between the low and high ability groups instead of catering for their differences (Kelly, 1975);
5. ability grouping is based on an unscientific understanding that intelligence is a fixed trait, while in reality intelligence is relative and conditions can be created that can either enhance or decrease its development.

These critics, however, seem to be more concerned with the effects of the practice on low ability classes rather than on high ability classes. Perhaps the same criticism can be made against some of the proponents of the practice, namely, that they are mainly concerned with the positive benefits the practice has for the high ability classes more than they are concerned with the negative effects it has on low ability classes. Some of the proponents like Ediger (1995:138) have argued, as mentioned above, that no "pupils should be sacrificed so that a given segment... benefits therefrom," meaning that high achievers' opportunities should not be impeded by attempts to create equity between them and low achievers. But some of the proponents have said something about the benefits of the practice to low ability groups, in some direct and indirect references. The direct references seem to be arguments by Grambo (1997) that low ability pupils would benefit didactically when they learn alone, since they would not be dwarfed by the domination of the high

Their findings were as follows:

- (a) high ability pupils, whom they called gifted children, preferred non-co-operative learning, while low ability pupils preferred it;
- (b) boys displayed more positive attitudes towards co-operative learning than girls.

This study appears to have focused more on attitudes than on the material effect of co-operative learning.

Lando and Schneider (1997) conducted a study on homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping in Toronto (Canada). They used the qualitative research design through the instrumentation of participant observation. Their main focus was to investigate the "intellectual contributions and Mutual Support among Developmentally Advanced children in homogeneous and Heterogeneous work/discussion Groups (Lando and Schneider, 1997:44).

They found that high ability pupils (whom they called advanced children) "tended to congregate among themselves" (Lando and Schneider, 1997:44). They concluded that this proved that the high ability pupils would naturally want to work among themselves and not to be mixed with low ability pupils. However, their findings are silent on whether the low ability pupils displayed a similar tendency.

The findings by Lando et al (1997) do not explain clearly a number of issues. First, their focus seems to be on the "natural" tendency of pupils to group according to ability. But then, they do not tell whether there have been efforts by the schools or teachers to influence pupils, through teaching values and benefits of co-operative learning across ability levels, and whether these efforts were frustrated by the "natural" tendencies they refer to. Secondly, they do not tell the kind of behaviour that was exhibited by the low ability groupings - whether the behaviour of high ability pupils could have been influenced by a similar "tendency" on the part of the low ability pupils, or whether there could have existed a material and/or social situation

that created this "natural" tendency. Thirdly, Lando *et al* (1997), appear to be focusing on the attitudinal aspect of the high ability pupils and do not expose the reader to the material learning setting and its outcome. Therefore, their study leaves quite some gaps that raise questions about the value of the practice of mixed ability grouping, as well as its opposite (ability grouping), which they support.

Beach (1995) conducted an action research with tenth grade pupils in a suburban high school in the United States of America. He investigated how pupils' academic culture influenced their responses to English narratives. To do this, he collected two regular and two advanced classes, that is, two low ability and two high ability classes. He gave them an assignment to write a story on the topic, "I go along". He said the pupils responded with "open ended free writing responses to the story" (Beach, 1995:92). His pupils also wrote "description of various groups in the school, their attitudes toward the ability grouping system, and their beliefs in their cultural models" (Beach, 1995:92-93).

Of interest to my study were the findings of Beach (1995) on pupils' perceptions that reflected their self-image as low or as high ability pupils. These were some of the extracts from his study.

I used to be in gifted and talented, and then I thought I was a freak. Now I realize it's okay to be smart. I wish I could be in honors now, but I have to get As and Bs to get into honors class (Beach, 1995:93).

The above response gives the impression that this pupil appreciated being classified as talented and viewed ability grouping as something positive. It appears that the practice had motivated him/her to strive for greater achievement. This supports Hallinan's view that ability grouping is meant to increase learning and not to decrease it (Hallinan, 1994).

However, the above pupil's statement that he now realises that "its okay to be smart", suggests the existence of labelling behaviour in the culture of his/her school. This would support Oakes' view that ability grouping creates a culture of labelling. It also

suggests that some children are embarrassed by being placed in the so-called high ability class ("then I thought I was a freak"). (Remember she/he thought she/he was a "freak" when she/he was in the "gifted and talented" class! That was before she/he realised that "it's okay to be smart"!).

In another response by Beach's pupils, the following view was expressed:

I would rather be in a regular class because I'm not really smart enough for honors class (Beach, 1995:93).

This response suggests that some pupils developed a low self-concept and accepted the labels that placed them in low ability classes where their academic performances would not be compared with that of high ability learners. It also suggests that labelling existed at this school as a culture, since this pupil is talking about not being "smart enough for honors class" (Beach, 1995:93).

Yet another of Beach's pupils had the following to say:

I'm glad they have high potential classes because I wouldn't want to drag anyone back because of my rate of learning (Beach, 1995:93).

Here again, this pupil's perception suggests that some pupils believed that separation of the high and low ability pupils was used to accommodate learners' different and varied paces of learning. This supports the view points of Cahan *et al* (1996), whose argument is that, ability grouping is meant to accommodate "... level, pace and teaching methods to students who function at varied levels" (Cahan *et al*, 1996:29).

However, one of Beach's pupils supports inferences I made above about the existence of a labelling culture at the school. This pupil had the following to say:

I used to be in honors classes and when I switched to regular classes, my teacher was not as nice and treated me and others like us as stupid and as failures (Beach, 1995:93).

What the above pupil says, suggests that ability grouping at Beach's school allowed for mobility of pupils between the high and low ability classes. Yet, it also suggests that the low ability pupils were subjected to negative treatment like labelling. This pupil says his/her teacher treated him/her and his/her classmates as "stupid and failures".

The findings of Beach (1995) as shown above, do confirm the viewpoints of some of the critics of ability grouping (Good and Brophy, 1991; Oakes, 1985). These have expressed the view that ability grouping has the effect of making teachers dislike teaching the low ability pupils (Good and Brophy, 1991). They have also said high and low ability pupils are not equally valued by their teachers, and that ability grouping creates a culture of labelling (Oakes, 1985).

It is statements like those of pupils in Beach's study that call for further investigation, in order to develop more insights about the effects of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification.

Sorensen and Hallinan (1986), carried out a study to determine the "effect of ability grouping on reading achievement" in Northern Californian schools. They used a quantitative method of study. It was a longitudinal study of pupils in 48 classes of elementary schools. These were 10 fourth grades, 12 fifth grades, 10 sixth grades and 11 combined grades. The study was done in both all blacks and mixed race schools. Only pupils in these grades were targeted for this study. Their findings were as follows:

- ability grouping provided "fewer opportunities for learning than whole class instruction but greater utilization of those opportunities";
- high ability groups provided "more opportunities for learning than lower ability groups";
- "small homogeneous ability groups facilitate learning more than larger, more homogeneous groups";

- in terms of time spent on instruction, the grouped pupils received "less instruction" or were "taught less" than the ungrouped pupils";
- the grouped pupils, therefore, were found to "have fewer opportunities for learning" than their ungrouped counterparts. (Sorensen and Hallinan, 1986:539).

By inference, the two observations made by Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) imply that both high and low ability pupils were exposed to fewer learning opportunities as a result of the practice of streaming. Their observations also show that ability grouping provided more learning opportunities for high ability pupils than it did for low ability pupils. The only positive thing mentioned in their observation is that, although ability grouping provided fewer learning opportunities, it, however, provided "greater utilization of those opportunities" (Sorensen et al, 1986:539). It is not clear how the "greater utilisation" of the fewer opportunities was achieved, and which group achieved that utility. It is also not clear what these opportunities were.

Troyna (1992) did a case study on ability grouping as it related to English, Mathematics and Science at Jayleigh School in Britain. The study was conducted in 1988. The school was multi-racial and catered for pupils of ages 11 to 16. The methodology was quantitative and it revealed the following results:

1. in all the three subjects, the Asian children (considered of low ability) were over-represented in the lower ability classes and under-represented in upper streams;
2. in all the three subjects, white children (considered of high ability) were over represented in upper streams and under represented in lower streams;
3. that ethnicity assumed "more importance than merit" in the system of ability grouping at Jayleigh, and that probably class and ethnicity combined in the determination of who goes where between upper and lower streams.

The emphasis of Troyna's study was on the social effect of ability grouping, and perhaps its major weakness is that it did not explore the didactical effect of this grouping. The second point is that Troyna did not pay attention to the language dimension, since English appears to be a second language for Asian communities, wherever they are found.

Lingard (1994) conducted an experimental study on ability grouping, with control groups that were mixed, in a British setting. His findings were as follows.

1. The low attainers in low ability classes made reasonable gains in literacy achievement.
2. The "more individual help and attention the (low attainer) students received must, however, have more than compensated for the negative Kudos attached to withdrawal" (1994:187).

But in spite of his findings, which appear to support the value of ability grouping on the didactic side, Lingard (1994:186) goes on to argue that "the ... segregation of certain students to provide them with intensive daily, individual help is unacceptably socially divisive and highly damaging to their self-esteem." It would seem that Lingard is more influenced by his ideological perceptions than the empirical findings of his study. Qualitative study would have been very useful as a supplement to such an experimental study.

The empirical studies reported above were all done outside Zimbabwe, and indeed, outside Africa. There is, however, one known study done by Chisaka (1996) in Harare secondary schools. This study was a quantitative research that mainly examined the relationship between ability grouping and social stratification. But, although its findings included some insights into didactical effects of ability grouping, its focus was on the social stratification effects. The study was done in 15 of the 60 state secondary schools in Harare. The findings were as follows:

1. children from families of average and above average economic means tended to be over-represented in high ability classes and under-represented in low ability classes;
2. children from families of below average economic means tended to be over-represented in the low ability classes and under-represented in high ability classes;
3. teachers tended to be more motivated when instructing high ability classes than low ability classes;
4. low ability pupils tended to be less interested in learning than high ability pupils;
5. the majority of teachers and pupils supported the practice of ability grouping, although they were aware of its negative impact on low ability pupils;
6. National Examination results of 'O' Level History pupils, surveyed over a period of five years (1990-1994), showed that pupils in high ability classes have been doing better than those in low ability classes, and that invariably, low ability pupils left school without the required 5 'O' level passes in the 5 year period.

The study by Chisaka (1996) has one major weakness, mainly, that it focused on a limited aspect of ability grouping, its effect on social stratification. It did not examine the didactical side in detail, in terms of teacher preparation and delivery, pupil participation in lessons and a detailed study of the patterns of assessment and results, based on pupil achievement in class assignments and tests. The study did not examine in detail, concerns on the motivational, emotional and attitudinal effect of the practice on both teachers and pupils. It would appear that, if an ethnographic study had been done, richer insights into the culture of ability grouping and the effects it has on all stakeholders would have been developed.

2.6 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRACTICE OF ABILITY GROUPING

Two views are of concern under this section. The first is the view that looks at ability grouping in its relationship with the broader social dynamics. The second is the view that examines ability grouping in its relationship with the social dynamics of school practice.

Those who see ability-grouping as being influenced by social forces outside the school environment, look at the socio-economic background of the child as being either a factor in the school's process of grading pupils into ability-classes, or as a factor in child -achievement in the ability classes (Paterson, 1991; Connell, 1997; Cohen and Lotan 1995; Chava, 1980; Apple, 1982). Ezewu (1983) believes that the social status of the child affects his/her performance. Other theorists who believe that children who come from economically deprived backgrounds tend to perform poorly due to these backgrounds, and that those from the rich backgrounds perform better because of their social backgrounds, are Marjoribanks (1986), Carpenter and Darmody (1989), Meijnen (1991), Kapambwe (1980), Shavit (1989), Lacey (1984), Wiegand (1983), among others. Wiegand (1983:213), has argued that, in Latin America, "education has been the social tool for class differentiation," and ability grouping assists this process.

Rogoff in Carpenter and Western (1986) shares this view. Oakes and Guiton (1995) and Bowles and Gintis in Oakes (1982) have also argued that "school structures and processes (such as ability grouping), contribute to societal inequalities" (Bowles and Gintis in Oakes, 1982:197).

But, in views expressed above, it appears there is a difference in the perceived role of ability grouping in the broader social processes. One view seems to take education to be a tool of social stratification, particularly through the school practice of ability grouping. Yet the second argument sees the practice of ability grouping as being merely a contributory factor to the broader processes of social stratification.

Therefore, one would be left with the question as to which of the two roles ability grouping actually plays. If ability grouping is a tool of social stratification, then the implication is that, it is actually an extension of the broader process of social stratification, and, therefore is inseparable from the broader socio-economic dynamics. This would suggest that the school consciously processes social stratification through the practice of ability grouping. The issue is how sustainable can this argument be in an empirical study? Oakes (1994:85), states that ability grouping is a practice that is "embedded in cultural and political contexts, replete with good intention, bad intention, and messy human decision making" (Oakes, 1994:85). However, it was not within the scope of this study to delve into an examination of such broad-based viewpoints. Mine was to focus on the school setting itself, and to examine its own social dynamics.

There is a probability that ability grouping may not be used to consciously process the broader social classes as claimed, but that it may be a mere coincidence that its outcome results in the maintenance of the status quo of social classes. What Deci and Ryan (1994) have identified as factors enhancing or decreasing the achievement of the child in ability classes appear to be supporting this view. They argue, for instance, that the support for autonomy that the child is availed to at home may have an impact on the child's achievement. They observe that, children of the rich tend to receive a great amount of support from their parents in the form of material and emotional motivation, which result in them displaying (at school) "greater internalized motivation" and end up being "rated by teachers as being more competent and better adjusted" (Deci & Ryan, 1994:10). Where parents are poor and lack material means to motivate their school-going children, the result may be that their children may display the qualities of decreased internalized motivation, hence teachers may rate them as being "less competent" and "un-adjusted". The end-result of all this could be the placement of children of the highly educated and well-to-do in upper streams and those of the less educated, and low income parents, in lower streams, thereby reproducing social stratification by default rather than by design. These are some of the assumptions which need verification through qualitative research but which are outside the scope of this study.

more crucial role in creating social stratification than society itself. Implied in his argument, is that the didactical dynamics of ability grouping are independent of the processes in society and has its own underlying influences. Gamoran and Berends (1987) seem to share this view, since they argue that ability grouping creates its own social stratification within the setting of the school society. Another theorist who shares this view is Cummings (1982), who argues that an educational culture can be different from the general culture of the society in which it exists. He, for instance, observes that, in a capitalist society like that of Japan, one would assume that the culture of education would be characterized by attitudes and values of inequity, and yet this is not the case. He argues that education practice in Japan has remained egalitarian, in spite of the state authorities' suggestion that ability grouping be introduced, and that the schools have resisted ability grouping on the grounds that "tracking could end up with lower-class and minority-group children being permanently assigned to low-ability tracks" (Cummings, 1982:24). According to Cummings (1982:25), Japanese schools have developed a didactical cultural dynamic that is based on the following goals:

to develop children with pure and rich hearts; to build up strong and healthy bodies; to promote the spirit of curiosity and intellectual achievement; to encourage the will to endure in whatever is attempted; and to help each child to understand how his strengths complement those of his classmates.

According to Cummings, the goals stated above, represent the culmination of a culture that is purely dictated by didactical considerations.

The views expressed by Pallas (1994), Gamoran and Berends (1987), and Cummings (1982), offer some interesting perceptions. The colonial era in Zimbabwe, once again, gave some experiences that tend to corroborate the above mentioned authors' views. These theorists argue that, a school or education in general, develops a culture that is autonomous from that of society. They also argue that the education sector can resist impositions from the state, and adopt its own policies that go counter to those of the state. Mission schools during the colonial era in particular, tended to

offer a curriculum that often went against the ideology of the state. In the contemporary Zimbabwe, some ideas such as the introduction of the concept of 'Education with Production' and a syllabus in Political Economy, actually fell by the wayside, due to resistance from some interest groups, who included the organized Teaching Profession itself. This means that schools themselves could resist cultural influences from the broader society, in preference of their own 'home grown' cultures.

Yet another theorist who sees the school as an autonomous institution that creates its own culture on the basis of didactical practice, is Mehan (1992). He argues that, the school is not simply a "transmission belt, conveying the sons and daughters of the working class straight into working class jobs or, worse yet, no jobs," but that it (the school) is a "relatively autonomous" institution, which responds "to community interests and practical circumstances that are not automatically related to the economic demands of capitalism" (Mehan, 1992:16). He identifies the didactical dynamics governing school life as "ethnicity, educational histories, family-school relation, and peer associations" (1992:15-16).

What Mehan appears to be saying, is that, although the school has to respond to the needs of society, and may have influences therefrom, it (the school) has the capacity to set its own rules independently of the broader community.

However, there appears to be contradictions in Mehan's arguments. If the school responds "to community interests and practical circumstances," it cannot be said to act independently of the interests or aspirations of society.

Moreover, it is debatable how far a school, as a single entity, could resist outside cultural pressures, unless its own culture is part of a broader educational practice. Since the school is part of a broader educational environment which includes other schools, it is socially and academically inconceivable that it can live in isolation, culturally.

What appears not very clear in the theory that suggests that ability grouping may not be a deliberate sorting mechanism to create social classes, but rather a product of didactical dynamics, and practical circumstances, are the independent didactical variables implied by this theory.

The study by Chisaka (1996), also produced some insights into theories concerning the relationship between ability grouping and social stratification.

In the study stated above, seven out of 15 secondary schools sampled for investigation, were Group A schools. These were schools located in residential areas inhabited by people of average to above average economic means. The other eight Group B type schools, were located in areas inhabited by a majority of people who belonged to the social category of below average economic means.

The study mentioned above (Chisaka, 1996), found that, in the seven Group A schools, the majority of pupils in the high ability groups were from families of average to above average economic means. Conversely, the majority of pupils in low ability classes at these schools, came from families of below average economic means.

It was also noted that the Group A schools enrolled pupils from residential areas dominated by people of below average economic means, and children of domestic workers, who lived in the workers' houses in the areas where these schools were situated. The children of those below average economic means, came from these categories of families.

In the eight remaining Group B schools, the study (Chisaka, 1996), found that the majorities in both high and low ability classes came from families of below average economic means. However, among children from average to above average economic means who were enrolled at these schools, the following situation obtained. The majority of children from families of average to above average economic means were found in high ability classes. Conversely, a minority of children from families of

average to above average economic means were found in low ability classes.

The inference drawn by Chisaka (1996) from the above situation at the Group B schools, was that the family background of the child had an influence on the performance that led to him/her being assigned to a particular ability group.

The other inference drawn by Chisaka (1996) was that ability grouping tended to disadvantage children from families of below average economic means. These children tended to end up in low ability classes, when they wrote a screening test for that purpose with those from families of above average economic means.

However, observations made above about the colonial situation in Zimbabwe, tend to contradict Chisaka's inferences above (Chisaka, 1996). In the colonial situation, children from families of below average economic means could be found dominating the high ability classes. Probably this was due to the fact that, entry to secondary education then was very competitive, and fewer children from black families reached secondary school level than is the case in the post-independence era. During the colonial era, it was the best pupils from both categories of family background, who had access to secondary education in Zimbabwe.

In post-independence Zimbabwe, there is a policy of automatic promotion to the first secondary school level, from the last class of primary education, whether the result is a pass or fail at that level. It means, therefore, that a large number of pupils move into secondary level, even though they may not be ready to cope with this higher level of academic achievement.

The movement of large numbers of pupils into secondary level education, has also been facilitated by the introduction of heavy government subsidies in secondary education fees. These resulted in cheaper and affordable school fees for those of below average economic means in the post-independence era.

It is the above developments that have tended to increase the number of pupils of mediocre calibre in Zimbabwe's secondary schools. Most of these come from poor economic backgrounds. This may, therefore, partly explain the phenomenon of low ability classes being dominated by children from families of below average economic means.

However, the concern of this study on what effect ability grouping has on social stratification, is didactical, and not on the social background of the child, per se. There has not been known debate on whether, if conducive didactical conditions permit, a child from a poor social background could overcome his/her social deprivation and compete at the same level with those from privileged social backgrounds. In my study, it was my hope that insights in this direction could be developed, since the focus was on didactics. It was the hope in this study that the social background of the child would only be one of the categories to shed light on the didactical cultures themselves. Was it possible, for example, that a majority of children from above average economic backgrounds, could find themselves placed in a low social status in a didactical culture? Or, would their social background also have a role to play in the scheme of didactical culture?

It was, therefore, my belief as researcher, that a study using the qualitative, interpretive ethnographic method, could reveal didactical variables that could make it possible for a school to achieve cultural autonomy from the broader society, in terms of instruction and learning.

2.7 ZIMBABWE GOVERNMENT EDUCATIONAL POLICY OBJECTIVES

This study was done, after looking at the Educational policy objectives of the Government of Zimbabwe. The policy objectives of Education in Zimbabwe, as stated in 1982 (Mutumbuka, 1982), were as follows:

1. to create an education process that evenly distributes resources among learners;

2. to create an education process that evenly distributes learning opportunities among learners;
3. to offer a curriculum that teaches the one-ness of citizens and not their division;
4. to provide an education system without social stratification.

The above objectives represent values of egalitarianism, particularly the last two.

However, the first two were of great interest to me, in respect of what effect ability grouping could possibly have on instruction and learning. The concept "ability grouping" itself conjured up an idea of unevenness. Several questions came to my mind when that concept was visited by me, as researcher. One question was: Does ability grouping necessarily imply the existence of unequal distribution of instructional and learning resources among pupils of different abilities? Another question was: Could ability grouping offer learning opportunities to all pupils under conditions of social stratification? Yet another question was: Did the teaching of one-ness of citizens accommodate the concept of unity in diversity, with reference to a curriculum that was based on the culture of ability grouping?

These questions were at the back of my mind when I formulated the three research questions of my study. The Zimbabwe Government's educational policy objectives also played a part in motivating me to carry out this research. The reading of the debate on the culture of ability grouping, further highlighted my interest in this culture. The theories of its proponents which stated that it was meant to tailor instruction to the level of pupil's abilities (Hallinan, 1994; Cahan *et al*, 1996), in particular, aroused my interest to investigate the qualities that could shed more insights into why it was such a popular didactical culture in Harare secondary schools.

2.8 WHAT THE SURVEY OF LITERATURE REVEALED

The survey of literature in this chapter revealed a number of missing links in theories that relate to the practice of ability grouping.

First and foremost was the need to establish the criteria used to assign pupils to ability classes. Opinions here seemed to differ on whether the criterion used was social-class-neutral and, therefore, purely didactical. Secondly, there seemed to be divergence of views on whether didactics pre-cludes factors that impinge on society as a whole.

The third missing link that this survey revealed was that the proponents of ability-grouping have not clearly and convincingly articulated the reasons for their support of the practice. In particular, the proponents have not been able to provide a clear balance sheet of the didactical benefits of the practice to both the low and high ability pupils, particularly clear indications of how low ability groups derive both material and emotional dividends from the practice. This calls for more empirical studies to be done to throw more light on the dynamics of this practice. It was felt that there was need to develop greater insight into the kind of learning opportunities that the practice of ability grouping created for all learners, be they in high or low ability classes. The main contention of the proponents of the practice is that the intention in assigning pupils to ability groups, is to tailor instruction to the ability levels of the pupils. But whether this is what happens on the ground or not, is an issue which needs further interrogation

The question of what happens on the ground in the practice of ability grouping, becomes even more relevant in the light of what some of its proponents found in an empirical study. These proponents, Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) found that ability grouping created fewer learning opportunities for all pupils as compared to whole class arrangements. Yet the same proponents would continue to vouch for its value, pedagogically.

Yet another problem that arose from the views of the proponents of ability grouping in the empirical study of Sorensen and Hallinan (1986), was their failure to reconcile the negatives and positives they identified in that study. On the one hand, they found that ability grouping offered fewer learning opportunities for all pupils. And yet, on the other hand, they said it provided fewer learning opportunities for lower ability pupils, while it offered more learning opportunities for higher ability pupils. It, therefore, becomes very difficult to tell which is which in this scenario. They did not identify what these learning opportunities were, either.

Another problem created by the findings of Sorensen and Hallinan (1986), is that, on the one hand, they say ability grouping provided fewer learning opportunities than whole class instruction. On the other hand, they also said it provided greater utilisation of the same opportunities than whole class instruction. The question then arises, what is one to make of the value of this practice, and how is the balance between the two reached? Yet another question was, what is meant by greater "utilisation," and how was this done by the high ability pupils?

Sorensen and Hallinan (1986), also indicated that they found in their study, that ability grouping provided more learning opportunities for high ability pupils than it did for low ability pupils. Presumably, what they are saying is that, although fewer opportunities for learning were provided by ability grouping to all pupils, the fewer learning opportunities mainly benefitted the high ability pupils within this arrangement. What is also puzzling is how they could see value in a system that provided fewer learning opportunities for some of the pupils, who are normally in the majority in the practice of ability grouping.

These contradictory observations by Sorensen and Hallinan (1986) call for further investigations into what effect ability grouping really has on instruction and learning. The use of interpretive ethnography was believed to provide tools that would shed more insights into this debate.

Other proponents of ability grouping have suggested that, it is natural for human beings to be categorized according to their abilities (Lando *et al*, 1997). They say that, even if the school tries to mix up pupils of different abilities, they (the pupils) would re-group themselves into high and low ability clusters within the same class. This view appears to support the practice of ability grouping on ideological rather than didactical basis. Because, as argued by other theorists, ability is not really a fixed trait (Kelly, 1974; Reid, 1978). A study like mine, which focused on didactical issues, rather than ideological assumptions, was likely to develop insights into didactical considerations taken into account in the practice of ability grouping. However, the perceptions of Lando *et al* (1997), were kept in mind during my own study, as they could have been a tip of the iceberg in the possible external influences on the schools' cultures of ability grouping.

Therefore, the gaps that appear to exist in the theories and empirical findings on the practice of ability grouping, on the part of its proponents, are largely that of conceptualization. First, it is not very clear what the didactical advantages are to all pupils in this practice. Secondly, the pedagogical reasons to support the practice are not well elucidated. Thirdly, the didactical dynamics of the school environment that nurture the culture of ability grouping do not appear to have been given adequate attention in the proponents' ideas. These were some areas my study sought to look into.

On the part of the critics of ability grouping, they seemed to mainly concentrate on the effect of the practice on emotional/affective dimensions (attitude formation) and perhaps very little on the actual instructional and learning processes, that included teacher preparation and delivery, on the one hand and the learning styles, strategies, learner preferences and their practical experiences, on the other. This, according to me, was one of the missing links to be investigated by my study.

Most of the sources surveyed also revealed missing links regarding the contribution of both teachers and learners in the development of either positive or negative attitudes that develop among pupils in the practice of ability grouping.

It is also pertinent to note that there was more conceptual work on this subject than empirical research and this means that there is need for more empirical studies to be done in order to develop greater insights into the practice of ability grouping.

Yet another missing link noted in this survey is the limited nature of either the conceptual or empirical findings on this practice in Zimbabwe. It was my belief that the Zimbabwean experiences, with reference to Harare, could reveal more insights into this practice, and consequently further enhance the debate on ability grouping.

On the question of how ability grouping created social stratification, there were not enough conceptual and research ideas on the possibility of didactical stratification drawing its strength purely from school culture. The dominant view seemed to be that ability grouping led to a reproduction of the stratification in society at large. It, therefore, appeared that more research was needed to go beyond what appeared to be a repetition of the conceptions of the theory of social conflict, in order to develop richer insights into the school culture of ability grouping.

The theory which states that schools can develop a didactic culture that is free of the influence of the broader society (Cummings, 1982; Pallas, 1994) did not show clearly how this happens either.

The above missing links were used here as the major motivating factors in this study, and, more particularly the assumptions that little known research has been done in Zimbabwe on this subject and that most (if not all) of this research had been quantitative. Therefore, a qualitative study could further enhance the debate.

2.9 SUMMARY

This chapter sought to explore the ideas and findings of educational researchers on the subject of ability grouping. In the process, it sought to compare what the literature says about ability grouping, with the experience of Zimbabwean secondary schools in Harare.

The first task was to define the concept, “ability grouping”. It was found that most definitions of this concept agreed on what it entails.

The second task was to explore ideas that support the theory and practice of ability grouping. This exploration was done to develop insights into what its proponents considered to be its strengths and weaknesses.

This Chapter also examined the views of the critics of the practice of ability grouping. The focus was on what they considered to be objectionable about the practice. The strengths and weaknesses of the views of the critics were also analysed and discussed.

Empirical findings were also examined on the practice of ability grouping in this Chapter. The purpose was to establish what the researchers found as its strengths and weaknesses and how they reached those conclusions. This was meant to make feelers on the validity and viability of my own study.

The theories on how ability grouping related to social stratification were also visited in this Chapter. The focus was on how the school environment created its own social structure from its didactical culture.

The findings on the literature surveyed in this chapter were then summarised under the section, “what the survey of literature revealed.”

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES AND PERSPECTIVES

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Ability grouping has been the subject of debate for a long time now, stretching from the 1960's, up to the present times (Harris, 1960; Oakes, 1982; Hallinan, 1994). Educationists have debated the pros and cons of this academic culture, but the debate goes on.

The concerns with ability grouping have centred on the following questions:

What are the rationales of this practice? Does it increase or decrease learning? Do schools which practice ability grouping distribute resources equally? Does it create equal learning opportunities for all ability groups? What is its effect on attitudes, feelings and values of all who are involved in it?

Educationists and all stakeholders in education may raise these questions, because they are concerned about the learning and instructional situation created by ability grouping. They are concerned because the purpose of education is to create opportunities for learners to acquire knowledge and skills, which they would need to sustain their lives in the world of work (Nyerere, 1968).

In this Chapter, I presented the procedures I used to investigate the practice of ability grouping at two Harare secondary schools. In this study, I chose the interpretive ethnographic design of the qualitative research methodology. My reason for this was that I wanted to investigate the views and concerns of the people who participated in the practice of ability grouping from different perspectives, namely administrators, teachers and learners. This microcosm of academic cultural setting of ability grouping, has its own traditions, its own principles and rules and its own values. This is an intact culture in its own right. The best way to understand it is to listen to the people who live it, to live among them and observe their actions, and where possible participate in their activities. This kind of data cannot be collected by mailing questionnaires to a representative sample and counting positive and negative responses to questions based on theoretical frameworks that guide the researcher.

3.2 THE METHOD OF STUDY

In my interpretive ethnographic research design, I used the concept, 'interpretive', to qualify my research design, in order to distinguish it from other ethnographic designs, such as 'narrative', to emphasise the approach I adopted. My approach was not to simply narrate the stories told to me by the participants, the events that I saw, and what I read in documents. My approach was to analyse the data of my study in a descriptive manner, and then produce a comprehensive interpretation of that data against existing theories on ability grouping. This comprehensive interpretation of data, was based on the thick description of what was observed, and sensed during the fieldwork, as suggested by Wolcott (1987) and Vakalisa (1995). I, as researcher,

gave a detailed description of what administrators, teachers, and learners said about their experiences with the culture of ability grouping. I gave a thick description of how the participants interpreted the culture of ability grouping. I also gave some descriptions of the performance of learners of different abilities in essay assignments, mid-year tests, and a historical picture of that performance. In addition, I gave a description of the social background of learners in different ability classes, using personal files of these pupils that were kept in administration offices. Furthermore, I examined and analysed the Zimbabwe Government Educational policy objectives as well as the History syllabi aims and objectives. The schemes and records of work of the teachers were also analysed and findings described in detail.

The descriptive presentation, which was done in Chapter Four of this study, was accompanied by preliminary analysis which guided probing where respondents' statements needed to be clarified. This was then followed by a comprehensive interpretive analysis in Chapter Five of the study. This interpretive analysis of data, what Borman (1986) calls the *etic* perspective, represented my own views about the cultural situation as I had understood it. It represented the meanings I gave to these cultural situations from my own perspective as an outsider. This stage of my data interpretation was distinguishable from the descriptive analysis and presentation in Chapter Four. In the descriptive analysis, I confined myself to presenting data as I found it, with a little interpretation to explain concepts and categories. This is what Borman (1986) calls the *emic* or insiders' perspective. The presentations in Chapters Four and Five took the following formats:

In Chapter Four, Part I, I presented and analysed the background information of the participants. For the administrators and teachers, I gave their pseudonyms, their academic and professional qualifications, their teaching experiences, and their areas of responsibility. The names of the classes and the learners who participated in the study from these classes, were also given, and they were also pseudonyms.

In Part II of Chapter Four, I analysed and presented the document data of my study. In Part III, I presented and analysed the administrators' and teachers' views of the effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification. This also included government policy and each school's rationale for ability grouping. In Part IV, I presented and analysed the learners' views on the effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification. In part V, I presented and analysed the data of the lesson observations which I had undertaken.

In Chapter Five, I presented my interpretive analysis of the data of this study. This was where I attempted to give my own meanings to the data of my study, which I presented in Chapter Four. This is the chapter that presented my *etic* perspective. In Chapter Six, I then summarised my findings and reflected on implications and possibilities for further research.

3.3 RATIONALE FOR SELECTION OF THE METHOD

The ethnographic methodology was chosen for this study, because it enabled me to investigate the intact culture of ability grouping in its "natural setting during a

prolonged period of time by collecting ... observational data" (Leedy, 1997:159). It was chosen because of its unique qualities in probing cultural behaviour, values and traditions.

My first work in the study of ability grouping, took the form of quantitative research (Chisaka, 1996). In this study, I chose to use a different approach - a qualitative research methodology. I was not satisfied in my first work that the methodology I used gave me a detailed picture of the culture of ability grouping, because that methodology did not give insights to the cultural dimension of the practice. The qualitative methodology provided me with an opportunity to develop insights to the cultural dimensions of this practice (Bartlett, 1994; Kelchtermans, Vandenberghe and Schratz, 1994).

Qualitative researchers believe that aspects of life, such as the school organisation, "are central to understanding human" behaviour and culture in general (Jacob, 1988:17). Schools, according to Erickson (1993), constitute a socio-cultural system. Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (1990), say that, qualitative enquiry seeks to:

interpret human actions, institutions, events, customs ... and in so doing construct a 'reading', or portrayal, of what is being studied (Ary et al, 1990: 449).

My interest was to develop a deeper insight in the culture of ability grouping, which qualitative research could facilitate. My study sought to examine what effect ability grouping, as a didactical culture, had on instruction, learning and social stratification.

The chosen qualitative research design, interpretive ethnography, enabled me as researcher, to enter the settings of the two schools, spend a fairly long time (three months) with the administrators, teachers and learners, observing their daily routines, attending lessons, taking notes, and interviewing them. Curriculum documents such as the History syllabi and schemes and records of work of the teachers, were also studied. I, as researcher, also studied the assignments of pupils in the form of essays, the mid-year examination scripts for the tests written in mid-July 1999, and the personal files of the pupils that were kept in the offices of the administrators of the two schools. I also had time to study the Educational Policy objectives of the Government of Zimbabwe, in order to see how they related to the cultural situations at the two schools. The other information that I also became interested in were the documents that gave a history of the performance of the different ability classes in the final examination sittings. These documents were made available to me by the administrators of the schools.

The area of culture is a complex one to study. Human beings enter into relationships that are characterised by harmony, conflict, rules, traditions, values and beliefs. What they tell you who they are and what they believe in, may not always agree with what you see as the observer. This is because human beings are capable of hiding their feelings to strangers, when they feel that the stranger should not know the inside of their cultural settings.

The ethnographic approach requires the researcher to spend a fairly long time at the site of the study, precisely to overcome the problems of gaining access to information

highlighted in the above paragraph. Such behavioural traits as educational "power relations, conflicts, and contradictions inherent in schooling" (Dzvimbo, 1994:200), could only be reasonably understood through a prolonged stay at the two sites of my study. The culture of ability grouping itself is a complex phenomenon. The very concept, "ability grouping" conjures up an image of stratification. But the questions then arise: Does stratification imply the existence of conflict? Does it imply the existence of inequality? Can harmony exist in the context of stratification? Can there be one culture under conditions of stratification?

These questions needed careful scrutiny of the cultural settings of the two schools of my study. This careful scrutiny could be best achieved through the interpretive ethnographic paradigm that calls for/requires prolonged stay in the field of study.

The interpretive ethnographic research paradigm allowed me as researcher to explore the cultural settings through direct interaction with the actors of the settings - coming to know them, becoming known and trusted by them, observing their daily routines, interviewing them and studying documents (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). This allowed me to gradually gain the "insider's" perspective of these settings, although I had to remain cognisant of my mission to reflect on what I was seeing and hearing (Boostrom, 1994). What this meant, was that, while I interacted with the participants at the site of my study, I remained alert to what I was looking for - the views and concerns of the respondents on ability grouping. I recorded the goings-on of the two school communities, either in the audio-tape, or by taking notes during the happenings or soon after the happenings. I tried to make sure that nothing missed my

eye and ear.

The interpretive ethnographic paradigm assisted me, as researcher, to develop deeper insights into the workings of ability grouping as a human system, uncovering some hidden going-on of this human cultural system (Fetterman and Pitman, 1986). The paradigm, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1992:195) suggest, allowed me to develop an understanding of the culture I was investigating, because of its principle that, "closeness to, if not participation in, the reality being studied" was the best way to create knowledge of a cultural situation. My attraction to this paradigm, in other words, was its capacity to develop theory from the grassroots or from the 'ground'. I did not go to the sites of my study armed with a theory to prove or disprove. I had read theories about ability grouping before I started my investigations. But this was for the purpose of developing insights about this culture in situations other than those of my study. My approach was to investigate the culture of ability grouping at the sites of study with no preconceptions. I was only armed with three research questions shown on pages 11 and 12.

3.4 DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE OF THE STUDY

This study was done in the Harare Province of Zimbabwe (See map, page 249, Figure 1 under Appendices). Harare is identified both as an urban centre and an administrative province in its own right. It is also the capital city of Zimbabwe. There are 10 provinces in Zimbabwe (including Bulawayo, which also serves as an urban centre and an administrative province). Harare borders three of these

provinces, namely, Mashonaland East, Mashonaland West, and Mashonaland Central, which are in the Northern part of the country ((See map, page 249, Appendix 1). The majority of Harare's residents are Shona speaking, but the medium of instruction in its schools (both primary and secondary) is English.

The study was conducted in two schools, one a Group A and the other a Group B secondary school. The Group A school is situated in the North Western and the Group B in the Western side of the city (See map, page 249, Appendix 1). These schools were given pseudonyms in this study, in order to conceal their identity as is recommended by Nyawaranda (1998) and Florio - Ruane (1989). The Group A school was given the name Brickhill, and the Group B school, Chikomo. Brickhill school is located in a low density suburban area, which is inhabited by people of above average economic means, but also enrolls pupils from families who live in areas of sub-economic means. Chikomo school is located in a high density residential area, which is populated by a majority of people of sub-economic means.

During the colonial era, which lasted from 1890 to 1980, the low density suburbs were inhabited by whites only. After 1980, many of the blacks of above average economic means joined the whites in the low density areas, but because of the high cost of housing, a substantial number of this category of blacks remain in the high density residential areas.

3.5 ENTRY INTO THE SITE

My entry into the two schools was initially facilitated by a letter of permission to research, granted to me by the Department of Education (See Appendix 6, page 254), after a letter had been written to the Department on my behalf by the Chairman of the Department of Teacher Education of the University of Zimbabwe where I work (See Appendix 5, page 253). When permission was granted by the Department of Education, I then proceeded to the two schools to personally negotiate entry into the two schools. The first point of call in these negotiations were the heads of the schools. Once they granted me permission to do my study, and since I had informed them that my teaching subject was History, they referred me to their History Departments where through the heads of departments, I negotiated with the teachers and pupils to allow me to interview them, to observe their lessons and schemes and records of work. At Chikomo secondary school, all those I approached accepted to participate in the study. However, at Brickhill secondary school, although I did not face a refusal to participate from teachers, initially, one of the teachers decided to pull out after participating for three weeks. His reason was that he wanted to have adequate time to prepare his classes for the end of year final examinations. I did not face any resistance to entering these "sites" (except for the reported withdrawal) as Lancy (1993) cautions it sometimes happens.

3.6 POPULATION

The population of this study constituted the 'O' level History teachers, pupils and the administrators of the two schools. I chose to work with a small number of informants at each of the two schools, as recommended by Wolcott (1987), for a study of this nature. At Brickhill, I worked with four teachers, and at Chikomo with five. The administrators in both schools were also interviewed. At Chikomo, the headmaster and his second deputy, participated. At Brickhill, the Acting head and senior mistress participated. The pseudonyms of teachers and the administrators are given on Tables 3 and 4 in Chapter Four. On the part of pupils, I chose two high and two low ability classes for lesson observations at Chikomo - Form IV North One and IV North Five in the afternoon session, and IV South One and IV South Five in the morning session. These sessions swapped places mid-way through the term. Each of these classes had an average of 40 pupils. At Brickhill High School, I chose IV One and IV Five for lesson observations. Each had also an average of 40 pupils. The idea was to "move inside the classroom" of both the high and low ability pupils, and to "see it as do the members of the class" (Boostrom, 1994: 61), in order to develop an indepth understanding of how ability grouping worked and how it influenced the behaviour, attitudes and feelings of the pupils and their teachers. I, however, remained conscious of the caution given by Boostrom (1994: 61), that "moving inside is not the same as losing one's identity", but that one has to remain "a reflective interpreter" (Boostrom, 1994:61).

3.7 SAMPLING

In this study, I used purposeful or purposive sampling. This implies that the sampling procedures were not random (Patton, 1990; Borg and Gall, 1989; Lancy, 1993). I targeted only those people who would supply me with reliable information on ability grouping as it affected them, the so-called rich informants. The administrator, teacher and pupil participants had to be solicited and they voluntarily entered into the arrangements for participation in the study. All the participants had been assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and giving the schools pseudonyms was one of the precautions taken to ensure that my bargain with the participants was upheld. The following table shows the number of interviewees in each of the two schools, and the categories they represented.

Table 1: Interviewees from the Two Schools

INTERVIEWEES	BRICKHILL	CHIKOMO
Administrators	2	2
Teachers	3	4
Low ability learners	5	10
High ability learners	5	10
TOTAL	15	26

As already indicated above, the two schools of the case study were Brickhill and Chikomo. The reason for doing this research at these two schools, had to do with their social environments and the backgrounds of their cultures. Brickhill is situated in a residential area of families of average and above average economic means, while Chikomo is in a residential area of families of below average economic means. It

was my belief as researcher, that such diverse social backgrounds would likely present equally diverse didactic cultural situations, hence the need to include both settings in the study sample.

The qualitative interviews produce volumes of data and had I carried out my study in more than two schools and interviewed more than 41 participants, it would have been difficult to complete the study in the available time.

At Brickhill, I worked with three teachers who were taking Form IV History classes. These were the teachers whom I requested to participate as respondents in my project and to allow me to observe their classes. These were the teachers taking this History level of secondary education at the school, and they had experiences of teaching ability grouped pupils ranging from seven to 18 years.

The History subject was chosen as a medium of this study, for two reasons. First, I as researcher, had trained to teach History in my first University studies. I therefore felt more at home in carrying out my research through the “prism” of a discipline that I knew best. Second, the study would have taken much longer had I chosen to involve other disciplines, and yet unlimited time was not on my side. Moreover, it would have been more expensive to do so, and my financial resources were limited.

At the same school (Brickhill), the administrators were among my respondents, and were also interviewed several times.

On the part of pupils, I chose to work with five pupils from each of the two streams - the highest and the lowest in Form IV (IV One and IV Five).

At Chikomo, I worked with four History teachers who handled form four classes. The Headmaster and Acting Second Deputy Head were also respondents at Chikomo. They were interviewed several times. On the part of pupils, I worked with 10 of them from two low ability, and 10 from two high ability classes.

3.8 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Customary to the qualitative ethnographic research paradigm, I, as researcher was the instrument of data collection (Borman, 1986; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Robinson, 1993; Moris and Copestake, 1993).

The advantage of researcher as instrument is that, he/she experiences the phenomenon under study, first hand (Lancy, 1993) and, therefore, can develop a much deeper insight into it. I as researcher, employed the following data collection methods:

- Interviews;
- Observations;
- Analysis of documents.

These methods or techniques of collecting data and how they were used in the study are discussed in detail below.

3.8.1 Interviews

The interviews have been deemed to be very important by qualitative researchers in three respects namely that they:

- give background information on participants;
- assist the researcher to gain access to information that cannot be accessed through observations, for example, feelings and intentions;
- assist in identifying other sources of evidence not available in observations (Yin, 1986; Nyawaranda, 1998).

In this research formal and informal interviews were used. The groups that were interviewed included school administrators (principals), teachers, and learners from the different ability classes. Short interview guides were used for the formal interviews, and informal interviews took the form of conversation with different participants at different times as opportunity presented itself.

The formal interviews revolved around three broad questions for each category of interviewees. The rest was probing and seeking clarification on the responses of participants. The following table shows the interview guide that was used.

Table 2 : Interview Guide

ADMINISTRATORS	TEACHERS	PUPILS/LEARNERS
1. Why have you found it necessary to assign your pupils to ability classes?	1. Why have you found it necessary to assign your pupils to ability classes?	1. How has your assignment to a high ability class affected your learning?
2. Is streaming a government or school policy?	2. What have been your experiences in handling ability grouped pupils?	2. How has your assignment to a low ability class affected your learning?
3. How is streaming done in your school?	3. Does streaming at this school allow for free interaction between high and low ability pupils?	3. Does streaming allow for free social interaction between you and your peers in the other streams?

It should be noted that effectively only two questions were asked from learners, namely; 1 and 3 from learners in high ability classes, and 2 and 3 from learners in low ability classes.

It was important to keep the number of questions to a minimum and to state them as broadly as possible in order to leave the talking to the respondents, and to avoid imposing the researcher's own views and/or language on the respondent. This allowed the respondent time and space to express his/her views, using his/her own language. By language here is not necessarily meant a language different from that used by me, as researcher, but the language that is not restricted by the jargon of educational theory. Only if this has been achieved successfully can one claim that the findings of one's study have emerged from the data. However, where respondents were not articulate in the language in which the research was conducted (English),

I as researcher allowed them to express themselves in their home language, and thereafter I translated their responses into English, for easy analysis later.

All respondents gave me as researcher permission to record the interviews by means of an audio-tape recorder. I as researcher also made detailed field notes of the interviews. This was essential considering the technology's notoriety of failing its users at the most critical times. Detailed field notes also eased the strain of trying to figure out what participants were saying during the transcription of audio-tapes, in cases where some words sounded inaudible when the tapes were played.

Interviewing is a time-consuming and labour-intensive method of collecting data. Since the questions asked are designed to stimulate spontaneous uninhibited responses, it often happens that participants skirt around the issues at stake. The researcher has to capture as much as possible of what each participant/respondent says to answer the question, and does not have time to sift the more pertinent statements during the interview. Where audio-taping of interviews has been done, as was the case in my study, an even more laborious task of transcribing the recordings awaits the researcher at the end of interviewing. It is precisely because of this that interviewing, as a data collecting technique does not allow for large samples of interviewees.

I as researcher in this study, covered a substantial number of interviewees because I was on study leave from my place of employment, and therefore, I was able to spend three months at each one of the two schools that were identified for this study.

3.8.2 Observations

Observations may be described as participant or non-participant observations (Wolcott, 1987; Denzin, 1978). In this study, non-participant observation was used to a greater extent. However, some element of participant observer status was adopted when I as researcher undertook to mark some History test scripts to assess the performance of learners from the high and low ability classes. By so doing, I as researcher placed myself in the position of the teacher, and therefore I had first hand experience of how it felt to mark the work of high and low ability learners.

The participant observer status, of course, could not be adopted as far as learners were concerned. I as researcher, could not for example, sit in the class among learners and experience how it felt to be a learner in either the high or low ability class. As pointed out by Wolcott (1987), it is impossible to place oneself in the situation within which one is clearly an outsider. For example, a University lecturer posing as a learner in a Form 4 (Grade 11) History class, as the case would have been if I as researcher had tried to be a participant observer from the students' perspective, would have been absurd, to say the least.

During observation, I as researcher noted down how the different ability groups learned, their levels of participation in the lesson and their eagerness (motivation) to participate in learning activities. I as researcher also tried to assess the teachers' instructional strategies, and the extent to which teachers appeared to have prepared the lessons they were presenting to each ability group and how they responded to

learners' questions and/or answers and requests during the lessons, in the different ability classes.

During class observations, I as researcher made detailed field notes of what I saw, felt or sensed and heard. Some pertinent issues from these notes were later used in following up interviews and informal conversations with either the teachers or pupils, depending on the nature of each issue. For example, if the teacher seemed to have exclusively used expository methods of teaching in a particular lesson, I as researcher would later ask him/her why he/she had done so. If learners seemed to have been unwilling to answer the teacher's questions, I would later ask the learner participants in that class why they had not answered the teacher's questions during the lesson. In other words, the perceptions I as researcher had during lesson observations were later used to further draw data from the participants through the process of interviewing. This way, I as researcher, tried to verify my own perceptions of classroom activities and procedures from the participants, and thereby endeavoured to validate some of the data as I was collecting it.

3.8.3 Document Analysis

Interviewing and observing participants in any given situation does not give one a full picture of all that goes into the making of the culture under investigation (Eisner, 1991). Documents such as syllabi, textbooks, work-books, preparation books, teacher made tests, mark sheets, copies of learners' end of term reports, personal files of learners, minutes of staff meetings, circulars to teachers et cetera, fill in the gaps that

may be left open by interviews and observations, or these may enlighten the researcher on some issues that remain puzzling to him/her despite his/her observations and interviews.

From the analysis of documents the researcher may also pick up some aspects he/she would like to verify with participants through formal or informal interviews (conversations). If, for example, I as the researcher noticed that teachers gave high ability learners a different test to that given to low ability learners, I tried to raise this issue during an interview with the teacher concerned to find out why this was necessary. This would help me as the researcher to minimise the danger of imposing my own interpretation on what I would have found in the documents.

For this research, I as researcher analysed the following documents: school syllabi and other curriculum documents issued by the Zimbabwe Department of Education, records of previous years' national examination results, teacher made tests, and students' personal records kept by the schools.

Using different data collecting techniques (interviews, observations, analysis of documents) and different sources of data (administrators, teachers and learners) is a form of triangulation which according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) adds to the trustworthiness of data, which to some extent addresses questions of validity and reliability demanded of scientific research. Lincoln and Guba (1985:283) maintain that:

Triangulation of data is crucially important in naturalistic studies. As the study unfolds and

particular pieces of information come to light, steps should be taken to validate each against at least one other source (for example, a second interview) and/or a second method (for example, an observation in addition to an interview). No single item of information (unless coming from an elite and unimpeachable source) should ever be given serious consideration unless it can be triangulated.

McMillan and Schumacher (1997:520) support this point of view and also point out that, "To find regularities in the data, the researcher compares different sources, situations, and methods to see whether the same pattern keeps recurring."

By the time I as researcher officially exited the site of study (the two schools) I had massive data, collected by the various methods, and from various sources. My task was now to analyse the data and try to give meaning to them in so far as they related to ability grouping in Harare secondary schools. In other words, I as researcher had to analyse and interpret my data.

Note that I say "officially" exited the site of study. This is because during analysis of data, I as researcher had to go back to the field to verify the data that I had found during the process of analysing the transcripts of interviews and the field notes I had made during field work. In addition, once the analysis had been done and data had been interpreted, I as researcher had to go back to present these to the participants to give them the opportunity to assess whether I as researcher had represented them well in my interpretation.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In preparation for, and during the study, I took into consideration the ethics of research. In my negotiations with the respondents for participation in this study, I assured them that their real names would not be revealed in the final report, but that pseudonyms, where necessary, would be used. Furthermore, in my negotiation with the participants to audio-tape my interviews with them, I assured them that they were free to instruct me to stop the audio-tape recording any time, should they feel that the information they were about to give was sensitive. I also promised to show them my analysis of data in order to allow them to see if what they had told me was represented in my analysis and whether I had captured and interpreted them well. I also verbally assured the participants/respondents that, should they wish to withdraw as participants, they were free to do so any time.

In the interviews themselves, the power dynamics of the interviewer and interviewee (Limerick et al, 1996) had to be taken care of. I, as researcher, had to try to tone down the power relationships by ensuring that I did not behave like somebody who was more knowledgeable than the participants. I assured the participants that I had come to learn about the nature and effects of ability grouping from them, and was not there to impose my own ideas on the subject upon them.

When I was introduced to the teachers I was to work with, I sought their opinions on when and where we could meet to work out parameters of how we were going to proceed. I assured them verbally, that the information they were going to supply to

me was going to be treated confidentially. I made an undertaking that, should I need to check any information with a third party, for example, information such as a claim that the school was experiencing textbook shortages, I would first consult the participant to find out if he/she would not mind such third party involvement.

All the participants granted me their consent to audio-tape the interviews while also making field-notes of their responses.

3.10 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Although analysis and interpretation of data are often taken as one process, Wolcott (1994) differentiates between analysis and interpretation of ethnographic research data. He contends that analysis involves a careful and systematic way of identifying key factors and relationships among the phenomena under investigation. It tends to be cautiously "scientific" in its endeavour to be loyal to, and restricted by observational data. Interpretation on the other hand, seeks to make sense of the data by reaching out "... for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis" (Wolcott, 1994:10-11). He continues to say that these terms are not mutually exclusive since there is no line of demarcation that marks the end of analysis and the beginning of interpretation in the presentation of data. He further points out that both analysis and interpretation rest on description (thick description) which is a third aspect of the presentation of qualitative research data. According to Wolcott (1994:36), "Description is the fulcrum, the pivotal base on which all hangs." My analysis and

interpretation of data took a typical ethnographic approach. As Bogdan and Biklen (1982) would put it, I as researcher organised my data by putting it into manageable themes or categories, identifying what was important to note, what was learned and what I could tell my readers about what I had found. I followed Wolcott's (1994) advice in trying to maintain the important distinction between analysis of data on the one hand, and interpretation of data on the other. I also applied the technique of thick description, using participants' own words whenever possible, and trying to describe the situation as was found at the sites as vividly as it was possible to do so.

3.10.1 Analysis of Data

Analysis of data was done at two levels. While the research was in progress, data were analysed continuously to determine the main themes that emerged from them. This gave me as researcher the opportunity to verify with the participants if the analysis was indeed portraying their views during the interviews and conversations, or it was correct interpretation of what had been observed, while still on the site. In a way, this satisfied the need for member checking, which is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985:314) as: "... the most crucial technique for establishing credibility." These authors go on to say that:

Member checking is both informal and formal, and it occurs continuously. Many opportunities for member checks arise daily in the course of the investigation. A summary of an interview can be "played back" to the person who provided it for reaction, the output of one interview can be "played" for another respondent who can be asked to comment; insights gleaned from one group can be tested with another. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:14).

The preliminary analysis assisted me to identify what Bogdan and Biklen (1982) called context codes at an early stage. In this study, I called these recurring themes. The second level of data analysis was after site exit. This was the level Fox (1969) calls "Manifest level" analysis, to denote presentation of data in its raw form. At this level, I transcribed all the responses of the participants that I had not transcribed in the preliminary stages, and all the details of my observations (including observations obtained from analysis of documents).

At this stage of data analysis, I had to transcribe all the audio-tapes of my interviews and conversations, and organise the data under identified themes. These, together with my field notes, were typed, to make it easier for me to identify the common themes that emerged from my study. I had to use a pencil to mark out these emerging themes (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982).

These themes in my study, to some extent, represented what Bogdan and Biklen (1982) call setting/context codes. My activity codes (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982) were captured in my samples of notes on lesson observations and document analysis.

My data analysis stage also employed to some extent what Vakalisa (1995) describes as "thick description." A thick description of data, according to Vakalisa (1995) is one that gives detailed information on the researcher's informants and the programme under investigation. In my study, I gave some details of the teacher participants' backgrounds - their qualifications and experiences in Part I of Chapter Four. In Part II of Chapter Four, I also presented some thick description of how the participants

defined the culture of ability grouping, their experiences with this culture and how they saw its effect on instruction, learning and social interaction among learners. What was observed in lessons and analysis of documents was also given a fair amount of description here.

Vakalisa (1995:125) describes the strategy of quotation and descriptions of data at this stage as "the essential ingredients of qualitative inquiry", because this would allow the reader to empathise with the cultural situation that was studied. Therefore, thick descriptions of the findings, according to Vakalisa (1995) would make it possible to achieve "thick interpretation." My quotations and thick description of my data in this study, enabled me to show the basis upon which I made my assertions about the culture of ability grouping in Harare secondary schools. Since my assertions were based on the data that I had collected from the site of my study, I can make a claim that my interpretation was based on my shared experiences with the respondents in this study.

3.10.2 **Interpretation of data**

The interpretation of my data was done in Chapter Five of this study. Interpretation as described by Meloy (1993) is a process by which the researcher tries to make sense of his/her data. Wolcott as cited by Vakalisa (1995:126) agrees with Meloy when he defines interpretation as a "... threshold in thinking and writing at which the researcher transcends factual data and continuous analyses and begins to probe into what is to be made of them."

In this study, my interpretation of the data I had collected took three forms suggested by Vakalisa (1995). These three forms were:

- to infer meanings, "not necessarily spelt in the data";
- to link my data with what the documents studied said;
- to give meaning of what "I personally made of the data, my own perceptions of the situation that I had observed" (Vakalisa, 1995:127).

3.11 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

In the qualitative research methodology, the researcher him/herself is the instrument of data collection and analysis. This increases the element of subjectivity, and hence the possibility of unreliability of such research work. This is particularly so when it comes to the interpretation of the findings, where the researcher imposes his/her own meanings (Boostrom, 1994). However, Boostrom (1994) argues that, to be an instrument and researcher at the same time, does not necessarily render one less reflective. Britzman (1995:229) also argues that validity and reliability in research is a question of belief. He says that:

(it) is a belief and expectation that the ethnographer is capable of producing truth from the experience of being there (and that, belief itself) is the great original.

Moreover, Coffey also argues that "reflexivity and authorship, combine ... to enhance the authority of accounts" (Coffey, 1996:69).

The point being made here is that, in our daily lives, we reflect on our behaviour, our actions, and our attitudes. We make inferences on these, and people accept or reject the inferences, basing their views on whether the inferences are based on a neat organization of events or facts, and are plausible. We all reflect on things that interact with our senses.

Ethnographic research rejects the claim that “truth can be (only) discovered by applying the method of the natural sciences” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1992: 195). Human beings cannot be confined to laboratories like objects, and be made to behave in a particular way, in order to verify some behaviour they display under controlled situations. Human life is dynamic, and the ethnographic approach, which demands proximity to the human phenomenon of study, offers great scope for analysis and interpretation of human behaviour. Moreover, as Glesne (1989) says, the ethnographer does not try to change the lives of people he/she is studying, but studies them in their ‘natural’ environment. The ethnographer’s analysis and interpretation, therefore, should be based on that ‘natural’ situation as it reflects itself to him/her.

The reliability of ethnographic study is found in its open admission that it accommodates subjectivity - in that sense, it prepares the reader to look for possible biases that might interfere with reasonable interpretation of data. Its premise is that validity or “rightness of method (is) the relation between practices and purpose” (Gitlin, Siegel, and Boru, 1989: 251). Moreover, as Gitlin *et al*, point out, educative “research does not claim to remove bias and produce objective accounts of reality (but it is) explicitly political and asks actors to acknowledge prejudgments and

critically to assess them” (Gitlin *et al*, 1989: 251). Human settings such as schools and classrooms are social constructs, and, as such, they cannot be devoid of values and beliefs (Florio-Ruane, 1993). In the same vein, analysis and interpretation is a social behavioural process, and cannot be separated from beliefs and values of the person engaged in it. The ethnographer cannot just describe a social situation in order to avoid imposing his own meanings, so that he achieves objectivity (or validity). He/she has to be cognisant of the nature of ethnographic research, that is, that it is “oriented to cultural interpretation” (Wolcott, 1987: 39). Abstraction is a characteristic of human behaviour, and, therefore, one can legitimately argue that knowledge created through abstraction is valid in its own right. Interpretation belongs to the process of abstraction and, therefore, it is a valid process of creating knowledge.

Ethnographers believe in their own assessment criteria for reliability and validity of data, although this may be contested by critics of ethnography as an attempt to copy the scientific methodology. The means of ensuring validity and reliability in this study included actions described below.

- **Prolonged research engagement.** This involved a long stay (three months) at the site of the study and making “persistent observation to provide sufficient scope and depth to observations” (Ary *et al*, 1990: 449; Lincoln and Guba, 1985);
- **Member checking.** This process involved the submission of the analysis and interpretations made by me as researcher to the respondents for them to

validate or comment on them (Ary *et al*, 1990; Robinson, 1993);

- **Thick description of data** (Wolcott, 1987). This entailed detailed descriptions of raw data and provision of background information of the informants accompanied by analysis;
- **Triangulation**. This was achieved through using a multiple approach to the collection of data- interviewing, observation, document analysis, which Moris and Copestake (1993) and Chikombah, Chivore, Maravanyika, Nyagura and Sibanda (1999) say increases “the reliability of overall findings” (Chikombah *et al*, 1999:47).

In my study, I tried to follow the above assessment criteria to my data collection and analysis as closely as possible in order to satisfy the qualitative requirement for validity and reliability. First, the period of three months that I spent in the field, collecting data, was adequate for studying an existing culture, for, I was not studying a process of change and development (Nyawaranda, 1998). Second, member checks were done throughout the period of interviews. Third, triangulation of data was achieved through the multiple data collecting methods of lesson observations, interviews, informal conversations and document study.

3.12 SUMMARY

In this Chapter, I have described and discussed the research paradigm that I used in my study, that is, interpretive ethnography. This is the design that can be employed to study phenomena in their natural environments (Borg and Gall, 1989). The

purpose of my study was to investigate the phenomenon of ability grouping and its effect on instruction, learning and social stratification among Harare's secondary school pupils.

The phenomenon that was studied was an intact culture, hence the choice of the naturalistic design (Leedy, 1997). This design was also chosen, because it gave the actors of the two settings (teachers and pupils) the opportunity to tell their experiences, feelings and opinions, in their own words, what the culture of ability grouping at their own schools, was all about. Furthermore, this research design also gave me the opportunity, not only to clarify perceptions of the actors, but also to develop and propose my own interpretations of the two cultural situations.

In this Chapter, I have also described the location of the two schools of my case study and a little of their historical and social backgrounds. I have explained that the two schools (Brickhill and Chikomo) are situated in Harare, which is the capital city of Zimbabwe, and is found in the North-east of the country (See map provided in the appendices). I have also explained that Brickhill is a group A school, and located in a low density suburban area, while Chikomo is a Group B school, and located in a high density suburban area. These two areas are largely inhabited by people of average and above average economic means (low density areas) on the one hand, and those of below-average economic means (high density areas) on the other.

I have further described and discussed the methods that, I, as the researcher and instrument of data collection, used in this study. I have explained that I used

observation, interviews, and document analysis. I have described and discussed the procedures of analysis and interpretation of data, and explained how this was done in this study, and how I endeavoured to base my interpretation on my shared experiences with the participants in the study. I have concluded this chapter with a discussion of the concepts of validity and reliability in qualitative research, and I have explained how I endeavoured to satisfy those standards.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Three, I presented the methodology of this study, that is, interpretive ethnography. As mentioned in that Chapter, I used interviews as the major data collecting method, and complemented this with lesson observation, informal conversations and document study. The document study comprised analysis and interpretation of the Zimbabwe Government Educational objectives, the 'O' level History syllabi, schemes and records of work of the participant teachers, pupils' essays, and past 'O' level results of high and low ability classes.

It was also mentioned in Chapter Three, that this study focused on a detailed investigation of the culture of ability grouping of two secondary schools in Harare, given pseudonyms, Brickhill and Chikomo.

In this Chapter, I have presented and analysed the data I collected. The presentation and analysis of data was done in four parts, namely, Part I: Background Information of the participants; Part II: Document Analysis; Part III: Administrators', Teachers', pupils' views of the effect of the practice of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification; Part IV: Summary.

PART I:

4.2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS

The two schools chosen for this study, the pupils and the teachers who participated were all given pseudonyms in order to conceal their identities for purposes of confidentiality (Florio-Ruane, 1989; Nyawaranda, 1998). The Group A school was given the pseudonym, Brickhill, while the Group B school was given the pseudonym, Chikomo. At the time of the research, both schools had been practising ability grouping for more than two decades. Therefore, they were chosen for the reason that they have had a long history of the culture of ability grouping.

Table 3: Brickhill Secondary School: Background information to administrator and teacher participants

Participant Teacher (Pseudonyms)	Academic Qualifications	Professional Qualifications	Teaching Experience	Responsibilities /Ability Classes
Mr Chimbudzi	B.A. (General)	Graduate Certificate in Education	23 years	Acting Head
Mrs Mhlanga	B.A. (General)	Graduate Certificate in Education	16 years	Senior Mistress
Mrs Mbeva	-	Certificate in Education	13 years	Form 4 ² , 4 ⁴
Mrs Tsigo	B.A. (General)	-	7 years	Form 4 ⁵
Mrs Juru	B.A. (General)	Graduate Certificate in Education	18 years	Form 4 ¹

In a typical Zimbabwean secondary school, there are four administrators, the School Head (who heads the school), the Deputy Head, and two Senior Teachers (who assist the administration, looking after the affairs/interests of male and female pupils).

Table 4: Chikomo Secondary School: Background information to administrator and teacher participants

Participant Teacher (Pseudonyms)	Academic Qualifications	Professional Qualifications	Teaching Experience	Responsibilities /Ability Classes
Mr Makanika	B.A. Degree (UNISA)	Certificate in Education	29 years	Headmaster
Mr Magara	-	Certificate in Education	24 years	Acting Second Deputy Head
Mr Vagoni	B.A. (General)	Graduate Certificate in Education	9 years	Form 4N ¹ & 4N ⁵
Mrs Mufumi		Certificate in Education	13 years	Form 4S ⁵
Mrs Chibande		Certificate in Education (Malawi)	30 years	Form 4S ¹
Miss Matsvuku	B.A. (General)	-	8 years	Form 4S ² & 4S ⁶

Pupil Participants:

At Chikomo, there were 16 Form Four streams. The size of Chikomo's enrolment was more than twice that of Brickhill. Each of the 16 streams had an average of 40 pupils. However, just like at Brickhill, not all pupils had registered to write History

examinations at the end of the year although all pupils were required to attend History lessons. This was done to maintain discipline at the school, since the administration feared that, if pupils were allowed to leave the classroom when a subject they were not registered to write examinations in was being taught, there could be chaos. This was different from what pertained at Brickhill, where pupils who were not History candidates, were allowed to leave the classrooms at the time History lessons started.

At Chikomo, 20 pupils were selected for participation in this study, five from each of the four streams targeted for this study. The streams targeted for this study were, Form Four South One (4S¹), Form Four South Five (4S⁵), Form Four North One (4N¹) and Form Four North five (4N⁵). The reason for selecting four streams at Chikomo, and not two as was done at Brickhill was because Chikomo had an Ordinary level (Form Four) enrolment that was more than twice that of Brickhill. Chikomo had 16 Form Four streams, while Brickhill had five form four streams. The 16 Chikomo streams were divided into two sessions of equal numbers, given Geographical names, North and South. Each of these sessions had eight streams. This was done so that all groups could do lessons inside four walls, since there was a shortage of classrooms.

Eight streams would have their lessons from 7.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. The remaining eight streams would start their lessons in the open ground at about 10.30 a.m. and finish at about 5.00 p.m. They would move into the classrooms at about 12.00 noon. Half-way through the school term (which is approximately four months), the sessions would swop times for their lessons.

The high ability class in the North Division (Session) was North One (N¹), and in the South Division, South One (S¹). The rest of the streams were South 2 to South 8, and North 2 to North 8.

Mr Makanika, explained that, at Chikomo, they only streamed the top 40 pupils in each of the North and South divisions. In one year, the top 40 pupils in their screening tests for streaming would go to N¹, and the second best 40 would go to S¹. In the following year, the best 40 pupils would go to S¹, and the second best, would go to N¹. He said this was done in order to prevent a situation whereby teachers and pupils would see one particular stream as being always the highest ability class. It was difficult however, for me, as researcher, to see the logic of this argument.

Mr Makanika further explained that, after selecting the top 80 pupils for North One and South One, the average and below average pupils would then be assigned to any of the seven classes in South and North divisions, respectively, in a random manner. In other words, N² to N⁸, and S² to S⁸, were mixed ability classes, comprising the low and average ability pupils. The reason for this, according to Mr Makanika, was for the school to ensure that the school would have pupils who could pass 'O' level examinations at the end of the four year secondary school course. His second Deputy Headmaster, Mr Magara, was clearer in his explanation of this arrangement. He explained that, in selecting the top two classes:

... we look at specific subjects because these two top classes are the classes which do the challenging subjects, which are Physical Science as well as Literature in English on top of the other subjects ... because... these two top classes (4N¹ and 4S¹)

are the classes on which we bank on when it comes to results. Otherwise, the rest is made up of mediocre to poor students whom we just have to entertain and at least give them the basis of education...

Mr Magara further argued that there were people who had an aptitude in Science subjects and others who had an aptitude in Arts subjects. This distinction was also found among pupils. He said, since knowledge of Science was in demand for purposes of economic development in the country (Zimbabwe), it was imperative that talent in Science be identified and developed among pupils. He supported the practice of ability grouping by arguing that:

... we just have to accept that in life ... people are classified ... (hence) these two top classes ... are the classes on which we bank on ... (for) results.

On why they called their classes N^1 , N^2 , N^3 or S^1 , S^2 , S^3 , and so on, Mr Makanika said this was done to conceal from pupils the fact that there was streaming, so that this would not discourage those put in lower streams. He said that the distinction that was made public to the pupils was that between classes that were taking Physical Science and Literature in English, in addition to other subjects, on the one hand, and those taking all other subjects, except the above two subjects, on the other. However, he admitted that pupils would become aware in time, that they were streamed, on the basis of the above subject criterion.

Since only $4N^1$ and $4S^1$ were the only classes considered high ability and the rest ($4N^2$ to $4N^8$ and $4S^2$ to $4S^8$) were considered to be mixed ability classes (and in practice, were actually treated as one block of low ability pupils, as would be seen later in this

presentation), I selected 4N⁵ and 4S⁵, for convenience of movement. The other reason for the choice of their classes had to do with the participant teachers. The teachers who had agreed to participate in this study, were those taking 4N¹, 4S¹, 4N⁵ and 4S⁵. One of these teachers, Miss Matsvuku, was also taking 4S² and 4S⁶, which I chose for the purpose of widening the scope of the lesson observations, but not for the purpose of interviews. My reasoning was that, if all classes below 4N¹ and 4S¹, were a mixture of low and average ability, or all treated as low ability, then it wouldn't matter which ones I would work with, since they were of the same ability, anyway.

Curriculum Vitae of Administrators and teachers at Brickhill and Chikomo:

Mr Chimbudzi:

Mr Chimbudzi had been in the teaching field for 23 years. He was above 45 years of age. He had been teaching at Brickhill for more than 10 years. He was educated at the University of Rhodesia (now University of Zimbabwe) where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (General) in 1975.

In Zimbabwe, a degree without either a Post-graduate Certificate in Education or any other professional qualification would not make one be put in the category of a qualified teacher. Hence Mr Chimbudzi had to secure a professional teaching certificate for him to be considered a qualified teacher. Therefore, in the late 1970's, Mr Chimbudzi enrolled with the University of Rhodesia to do a Post-Graduate

Certificate in Education. This was a one year part-time course, which he successfully completed in 1978.

Before he became an administrator, Mr Chimbudzi had been a full-time Geography and History teacher. At the time of this research, Mr Chimbudzi was the Acting Head but was also teaching Geography to some form four classes at Brickhill school, on a part-time basis.

Mrs Mhlanga:

Mrs Mhlanga was above 45 years of age. Her academic qualifications were a Bachelor of Arts degree, and her professional qualification was a Post Graduate Certificate in Education. Both had been obtained at the University of Zimbabwe. At the time of this research, Mrs Mhlanga had a teaching experience of 16 years behind her, 7 years at Brickhill, and the rest at two other schools. She was a Shona and English teacher. At the time of this research, Mrs Mhlanga was both the Senior Mistress and Acting Deputy Head at Brickhill school.

Mrs Mbeva:

Mrs Mbeva had a Certificate in Education. She had no degree, but was studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Communication Studies with the Zimbabwe Open University at the time of this research. She had obtained her secondary Certificate in Education at the Gweru Teachers' College in Zimbabwe in 1985. She

had specialised in History and English in her teacher training course. She had been teaching at Brickhill for the 8 years of her 13 years teaching experience. At this school, among the classes she was teaching, were forms 4² and 4⁴.

Mrs Mbeva's form four classes did not participate in interviews. I used these classes for my lesson observations-only, since I wanted to broaden my perceptions on how teachers at the school handled their ability grouped pupils, and how the pupils were learning in these classes. Mrs Mbeva was in her early forties.

Mrs Tsigo:

Mrs Tsigo was in her late thirties. She had a bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Zimbabwe, in which she had specialised in Economic History. She had no professional teaching qualifications but was in the process of enrolling with the University of Zimbabwe for a Post-Graduate Certificate in Education at the time of this research.

Mrs Tsigo had been teaching 'O' level History for 7 years at Brickhill at the time of this research. She was the History teacher for form 4⁵ at the time of the research. Although she did not have a teaching qualification, the Acting Head, Mr Chimbudzi, said that the school was satisfied that she was able to teach, since, in her University studies, she took an education course. He said that the 7 years she had spent at Brickhill had shown that she was a capable teacher. In my discussions with her, she was the only one among the participants at the school (Brickhill), who expressed

reservations about the value of ability grouping to learning, even though she had no teaching qualifications.

Mrs Juru:

Mrs Juru was in her late forties. She had a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education from the University of Rhodesia. She had 18 years of teaching experience behind her, 15 of which were at Brickhill. She found the practice of ability grouping already in place at this school (Brickhill).

Mrs Juru was a History and English specialist. In History, one of the 'O' level classes she was teaching was form 4¹, a high ability stream, from where I selected five of the 10 pupil participants at this school (Brickhill).

Mr Makanika:

Mr Makanika was in his mid fifties. He had been teaching for 29 years, the last 10 of which were at Chikomo, including the time of this research. After passing his Ordinary Level Certificate, he had trained to be a teacher at Gweru Teachers College in the late 1960's, where he graduated with a Certificate in Education (secondary). He then enrolled with the University of South Africa (UNISA) and attained a Bachelor of Arts degree, specialising in History. He had been Deputy Head at Chikomo for four years and Head for six years at the time of this research.

Mr Magara:

Mr Magara was in his early fifties. He had a Certificate in Education from Gweru Teachers College, and had specialised in teaching Mathematics. He had 24 years of teaching experience behind him, 18 of which were at Chikomo. He was the longest serving member of staff at Chikomo. He was also the substantive Senior Master, and Acting Second Deputy Headmaster at the time of this research.

Mr Vagoni:

Mr Vagoni was in his late thirties and had been teaching at Chikomo for 9 years at the time of this research. Mr Vagoni had a Bachelor of Arts (General) and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education from the University of Zimbabwe. He had specialised in Teaching History and Geography. Among his History classes were, Form Four North One (4N¹) and Form Four North Five (4N⁵), from where 10 of my 20 participant pupils came. He was Head of the History Department.

Mrs Mufumi:

Mrs Mufumi had a Certificate in Education from Gweru Teachers' College. She was in her late thirties, and had been teaching at Chikomo for 13 years at the time of this research. She was a History and English specialist. She was the History teacher for Form Four South Five (4S⁵), from where five of my participant pupils came.

Mrs Chibande:

Mrs Chibande had a Certificate in Education from a College in Malawi and specialised in the teaching of History. She had been teaching for 30 years, 15 of which were at Chikomo. She was in her late fifties. One of her History classes was Form Four South One (4S¹), from where five of my pupil participants came.

Miss Matsvuku:

Miss Matsvuku was in her mid-thirties. Miss Matsvuku had a Bachelor of Arts (General) degree from the University of Zimbabwe. At the time of this research, she was seeking a place at the University of Zimbabwe to enrol for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. In her Bachelor of Arts degree, she had majored in History. She had been teaching for 8 years at Chikomo at the time of this research. She was taking Forms 4S² and 4S⁶ in History, which formed the sample for my lesson observations.

The Headmaster of the school, Mr Makanika, said she (Miss Matsvuku) was one of the school's best History teachers, although she didn't have a teaching qualification.

Brickhill Pupil Participants: Form 4¹ : All the Information given here was true and correct, with the exception of the names of the pupils, which were pseudo.

John:

John was 17 years of age at the time of this research. His primary education had been at a multi-racial school, which was slightly over 500 metres from Brickhill. He had started school at the age of six.

John's parents owned a house in the low density area where Brickhill was situated. The father was a secondary school headmaster, and the mother, a nurse.

Rosemary:

Rosemary was 17 years of age. She had done her primary education at the same school as John (above), but came from a different residential area, which adjoined John's residential area.

Her father was a manager of a branch of the Standard Chartered Bank of Zimbabwe (Ltd). Her mother was a Public Prosecutor in the Zimbabwe Judiciary.

Peter:

Peter was aged 18. His primary education had been completed in Bindura, a town which is 70 km north of Harare. His father had died three years earlier, at the time of this research. The father was a Minister of Religion. His mother was a Headmistress of a secondary school in Harare. The mother and the late father owned a flat near the central business area of Harare.

James:

James was 17 years of age. He had done his primary education in a school located in a Southern high density residential area of Harare. His father was a foreman with a big Construction Company in Harare. The mother was a housewife.

Clara:

Clara was 18 years of age, having started her primary education at the age of 7, in a high density-located primary school. Her father had moved from a high density residential house into a low density

residential house, about 200m from Brickhill High school, about four years earlier, at the time of this research. Clara's father owned a Supermarket Store, located in a Western High density residential area of Harare. Her mother was a Company Secretary.

Brickhill Pupil Participants: Form 4⁵.

Irene:

Irene was 18 years old. She had done her primary education in the rural areas. Her father was a gardener, working for a couple that had a house very close to Brickhill. She lived with her father in the worker's cottage at her father's employers' house. Her mother lived in the rural areas tilling the land.

Emily:

Emily was 18 years of age. She had done her primary education in a western high density suburban area of Harare. Emily's father was a primary school teacher and the mother was a housewife.

Caroline:

Caroline was aged 19 years of age. She had started her primary education at the age of 8. She belonged to a single parent family run by the mother. The mother was a self-employed person, doing a hawking business in second hand clothes and some foodstuffs. Caroline and her mother lived in a high density suburban area, bordering the low density suburb of Brickhill.

Robert:

Robert was aged 18. His parents were peasant farmers in a rural area very close to Harare where he had done his primary education. Robert lived with his brother who was a houseminder in the suburban area of Brickhill. His brother helped the parents to pay school fees for Robert.

Silas:

Silas was aged 18 years of age at the time of this research. He had been orphaned when he was in the second year of his secondary education (Form Two or Grade 9). His parents were both domestic workers (the father a gardener, and the mother, a babyminder), and died within six months of each other in 1997. He (Silas) had then been adopted by a Church organization, which was paying for his school fees. Silas lived with his maternal uncle who was a construction worker with a Harare company.

Chikomo Pupil Participants: Form 4S'

Ruzivo:

Ruzivo was 18 years of age, and had done her primary education in the Chikomo high density residential area. Her father was a school clerk at Chikomo, and the mother was a primary school teacher in the Chikomo suburban area, where they lived.

Tarukwasha:

Tarukwasha was 17 years of age, and had done her primary education in the Chikomo area. The father owned a fleet of 12 -seater commuter taxis, and the mother was a primary school Headmistress. They lived in the Chikomo residential area.

Shungu:

Shungu was 19 years of age. His primary education was at a school which was located in the neighbourhood of Chikomo residential area. His residential area was Makoto, and it was a high density suburban area. His father was a secondary school teacher at Chikomo, and the mother was a nurse at the local clinic.

Robson:

Robson was the son of two priests of the Apostolic Faith Christian Church. The father and mother were running two different churches, but within the same religious denomination.

Robson was 18 years of age, had done his primary education in the Chikomo residential area, where he lived.

Jameson:

Jameson was aged 19 years. He had done his primary education at a school in the Chikomo residential area where he lived. His father was working as a taxi driver, and his mother was working as house minder for a couple that lived in the same residential area.

Chikomo Pupil Participants: Form 4S⁵

Lovemore:

Lovemore was aged 18 years. He had done his primary education in a high density residential area that bordered Chikomo high density area, where he lived with his parents. His father was a second hand clothes hawker, and the mother was a hawker in vegetables and fruits.

Aaron:

Aaron was 18 years of age, and had done his primary education in the Chikomo residential area, where he lived with his parents. His parents were both hawkers, selling vegetables.

Teddy:

Teddy was a son of peasant farmers, who lived in the Mashonaland Central Province of Harare. He lived in the Chikomo residential area with his elder brother, who was a bus conductor with a local bus company.

Teddy was 19 years of age at the time of this research. He had done his primary education in his parents' rural residential area (Mashonaland Central Province).

Margaret:

Margaret was 18 years of age. She had done her primary education in a rural area in Malawi, where her parents originated from. Her father was a general labourer in the National Railways of Zimbabwe Company, and the mother was a housewife. She and her parents lived in the Chikomo residential area.

Janet:

Janet was the daughter of a school clerk, and her mother was a housewife. She and her parents lived in the Chikomo residential area. She was aged 18 years, and she had done her primary education in the Chikomo area.

Chikomo Pupil Participants: Form 4N¹

Chipo:

Chipo was aged 17 years. She had done her primary education in the Chikomo area at a primary school close to Chikomo secondary school. Her father was a primary school teacher and the mother was a school bursar. They lived in the residential area in the neighbourhood of Chikomo suburb.

Getrude:

Getrude was 17 years of age. She had done her primary education at a school in a low density area, very close to Chikomo residential area. She and her parents lived in that low density residential area. The father was a manager of a bus company and the mother was a receptionist at the same company. She said her parents sent her to a secondary school in the high density area because they said it was the nearest to their home.

Loveness:

Loveness was 18 years old. She had done her primary education in the rural areas. Her parents were peasant farmers. She lived in the Chikomo residential area with her elder brother and his wife. The brother was a bank teller while the wife was a school clerk and the brother paid her school fees.

Elijah:

Elijah was aged 18 years. He had done his primary education in the Chikomo area where he and his parents lived. His father owned a building company while the mother was managing a small family supermarket in the Chikomo area.

Jacob:

Jacob was aged 19 years. He had done his primary education in the rural areas where his parents were both primary school teachers. When the parents transferred to Harare to teach at a primary school in the Chikomo area, Jacob moved with them. They all lived in this residential area.

Chikomo Pupil Participants: Form 4N⁵.

Cribert:

Cribert was 19 years old. He had done his primary education in the Chikomo area. He and his parents lived in this area. His father was a clerk at a primary school in the Chikomo residential area and the mother was a vegetable vendor.

Mark:

Mark was 20 years old. He had been educated at a primary school in the Chikomo area where he lived with his mother, maternal grandfather and grandmother. He said he didn't know his father since the mother had told him that his father had disowned him. The mother was unemployed and his maternal grandparents who were vegetable vendors were responsible for his education.

Tendai:

Tendai was 17 years old. He had done his primary education in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, situated on the southern tip of the country. His father was a school caretaker and the mother a hawker, selling second hand goods. At the time of this research, Tendai and his parents lived in the Chikomo area, where the father was a caretaker of a secondary school.

Mary:

Mary was 17 years of age. She had done her primary education at a school in the locality of Chikomo where she and her parents lived. Her father was a messenger at the local Post Office, and the mother was a vegetable vendor.

Cecilia:

Cecilia was 18 years of age. She had done her primary education in the rural areas where her parents lived as peasant farmers. For secondary education, she moved to Harare where her elder sister and her husband secured her a school place at Chikomo secondary school. The sister and her husband paid Cecilia's school fees. Cecilia's brother-in-law was a primary school Headmaster, while the sister was a telephone receptionist at an Insurance Company in the Harare City Centre. They lived in the Chikomo residential area.

For the rest of the members of forms 4¹, 4⁵ (Brickhill) and Forms 4N¹ and 4N⁵ (Chikomo), I as researcher, looked at their personal files which were kept in the administration offices. In these files, I checked the occupations of parents or guardians of pupils for each of the four ability classes above. The records for Forms S¹ and S⁵ had been mixed up with various other streams, and the clerks could not make these available to me, despite the several efforts I made to secure them.

The study of the personal files of the pupils produced a picture that was similar to the one obtained in interviews with the 30 pupils who participated in this study. At Brickhill, the four pupil participants in Form 4¹ were from family backgrounds of average to above average economic means. Only James

came from a family background of below average economic means. But his articulation of the culture of ability grouping was not different from that of the other four participants from this class.

In Form 4⁵ at the same school, four of the five participants came from family backgrounds of below average economic means. Only Emily came from a family background of average economic means.

At Chikomo, the four participants in Form 4S¹ were from family backgrounds of average economic means, but Jamesson came from a background of below average economic means.

All the participants in Form 4S⁵, came from family backgrounds of below average economic means.

With reference to Form 4N¹, four participants came from family backgrounds of average to above average economic means. Only Loveness came from a background of below average economic means.

The participants in Form 4N⁵, could all be said to have come from backgrounds of below average economic means, since even Cecilia came from a peasant background, although she was living with the family of a Headmaster, her brother-in-law.

In Zimbabwe, occupations such as that of clerks, messengers, general labourers, vendors or hawkers, drivers, are low paying in terms of income, and the families in these categories have below average economic means. The teachers and their heads, managers, lawyers, medical practitioners, fall in the category of families of average economic means. Gwarinda (1985) categorized these as working class and middle class, respectively. These earn incomes that are above Zimbabwe dollars 10 000 per month. Those in the above average range earn incomes above Z\$40 000 per month.

Using the above categories, the majority of pupil participants in this study in the high ability classes at both schools (4¹, 4S¹, 4N¹), came from families of average to above average economic means. Conversely, the majority of those pupil participants in low ability classes (4⁵, 4S⁵, 4N⁵), came from

families of below average economic means.

In the study of pupils' personal files, a similar trend was observed at Brickhill. Sixty-one percent of the pupils in Form 4¹ (Brickhill), came from families of average to above average economic means and 39% came from those of below average economic means. In Form 4⁵, 67% of the pupils came from family backgrounds of below average economic means, while 33% came from family backgrounds of average to above average economic means.

However, at Chikomo, the picture was not exactly the same as that at Brickhill. In Form 4N¹, 35% came from backgrounds of average to above average economic means, while 65% came from backgrounds of below average economic means. In Form 4N⁵, 22% came from families of average to above average economic means, while 78% came from backgrounds of below average economic means (See Table 8, below).

Table 5: Social background of pupils

School	Stream	Above average economic means	Average economic means	Below average economic means	Totals
Brickhill	4 ¹	9	14	15	38
	4 ⁵	5	6	22	33
Chikomo	4N ¹	4	10	26	40
	4N ⁵	2	6	29	37

What could be said about the scenario in Table 5 (above), is that, there was a preponderance of pupils of average to above average economic backgrounds to be more represented in the high ability class and less represented in the low ability class. And the converse was also true of the representation of pupils from families of below average economic means in the two ability classes.

It should also be understood that the high density residential areas like Chikomo, were dominated by people of below average economic means and, therefore, their population dominance would impact on their children's dominance at the schools in the neighbourhood. Most of the parents of average to above average economic means in Harare sent their children to schools located in the low density residential areas.

Why heads and teachers who participated in the study were chosen:

With reference to Heads and teachers who participated in this research, their choice was made on three grounds. The heads and their deputies were critical in the provision of information on policy and the rationales of the cultures of the schools. The second ground was that the teachers had to be persuaded to participate in this study. Therefore, I had to rely on those who were willing to participate. Thirdly, I had to look at the qualifications and experiences of the teachers with the culture of ability grouping. The longer their experiences were, the more reliable their perceptions of the culture of ability grouping would be. As could be seen in their profiles above, the shortest experience at both schools for these teachers was seven years, and the longest, 18 years.

PART II

4.3 DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The information targeted for data analysis in this study was on the Zimbabwe

Government Educational policy statements, syllabi aims and objectives, scheme objectives, performance of learners in essay assignments, learners' 1999 mid-year examination performance, past 'O' level examination performance, and the social or family background of learners found in their personal files.

4.3.1 Zimbabwe Government Educational Objectives

The Educational objectives of the Government of Zimbabwe, were not found in the Constitution that was in existence at the time of this research. But, they existed in the form of policy statements issued by the Ministry of Education in 1982. The then Minister of Education, Dzingai Mutumbuka (1982) stated these objectives as follows:-

- the Government wanted to create an education process that evenly distributes resources among learners;
- the Government wanted to create an education process that evenly distributes learning opportunities among learners;
- to provide a curriculum that teaches the one-ness of citizens and not their division;
- to provide an education system without social stratification.

(Mutumbuka, 1982).

The above objectives expressed egalitarian values of education. Such concepts as "even distribution", "one-ness of citizens" and non-social stratification, are values of egalitarianism, often found in socialist ideology (Gwarinda, 1985; Ndunguru, 1976; Plamenatz, 1984; Curtis and Boulwood, 1977). These policy objectives were

articulated soon after Zimbabwe achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1980. The support the Zimbabwe liberation movements (which now formed the government of independent Zimbabwe) got from socialist countries could have contributed to the adoption of these egalitarian values (Martin and Johnson, 1981; Gwarinda, 1985). However, the values of oppression and exploitation associated with the previous colonial social order could have also played a role in influencing the thinking of Government in articulating its egalitarian educational values in order to negate colonial values.

The Government educational objectives, as stated in 1982 by Dzingai Mutumbuka, were contradicted by the very concept and practice of ability grouping. The concept and practice of ability grouping in Harare secondary schools, did not appear to derive authority and reference from any Government policy objectives.

4.3.2 Teachers' schemes and records of work

The two schools had what they called, schemes-cum-plans. These were the forms of teacher preparation for instruction that combined a broad plan for a school term (about four months in length) and plans for daily lessons. An example of such a plan is found in the appendices 3 and 4.

At Brickhill school, all the three participant teachers did not state objectives in their schemes-cum-plans. The teachers said they were not informed by the Head of the History Department that they should have them. This would imply that these teachers

had not been exposed to the need for such objectives in their college training. This left me wondering as to how teaching plans could be constructed without a purpose, for a purpose is what actually constitutes a plan.

When I, as researcher, asked the question: why the teachers did not have objectives in their plans? What the three teachers said was best captured in Mbeva's response.

I used to state my objectives. But this is how we do it in the History Department. Because I had noticed that there was a big difference between the way I used to scheme at my former school, and the way they do it here. She (Head of Department) pointed out that she had never been informed of such methodology, whereby we have objectives ... and accordingly, there was no way I could dispute the Head of Department ... I had had to follow suit, but knowing very well that I needed to state my objectives.

When the Head of Department was approached, she produced the format of the plan (scheme-cum-plan) which had no objectives. The format provided was as follows:

Week- ending	Topic	Work Planned	Teaching Methods, aids, sources	Exercises Given	Comments

The Head of Department, Mrs Gora, confirmed what the three participants in my study had said, namely, that she was not aware that objectives were needed in a scheme-cum-plan. She did not see the need for them, anyway.

The Acting Headmaster, Mr Chimbudzi, indicated to me that the school's departments were given a standard format of a scheme-cum-plan to follow. When I asked for it, Mr Chimbudzi gave me a plan similar to that which I had already been given by the History Head of Department. It became clear to me that the school as a whole, did not have an idea of the purpose of objectives. I pondered as to what teaching and learning was all about at this school, if teachers were not guided by objectives of what they wanted to achieve.

Methods of instructional delivery

In their schemes-cum-plans, Mrs Mbeva, Mrs Tsigo and Mrs Juru had only two methods of lesson delivery. These were discussion and exposition. They each had one scheme-cum-plan for all ability groups. There was no differentiation between work planned for the high ability and work planned for the low ability pupils. There was no indication of the methods appropriate to each ability group.

In the lesson evaluation, there were only indications that a particular class was not doing well, and, therefore, needed to improve its performance. There were no indications that pupils were given individual attention to cater for their individual differences. The tendency was to focus on the whole class, which meant that performance evaluation or assessment was collective based, rather than individual-based.

At Chikomo, the general practice in their schemes-cum-plans was very much the same as that of the three participants at Brickhill. The only exception was that unlike at Brickhill, the participants at Chikomo had objectives for each lesson planned. Some of these objectives were:

- Pupils should be able to extract meaningful and useful information.
- Explain how the Unification of Germany influenced events in Europe.
- Give reasons why the First World War was fought in 1914.

(Matsvuku : Scheme-cum-plan).

All the objectives were meant to accommodate pupils in both high and low ability classes. There was no differentiation of which objectives were appropriate for which group. Neither were they tailored to accommodate the different levels of ability.

4.3.3 Essays of learners in high and low ability classes

Essays formed part of my document collection for analysis of various artifacts related to the culture of ability grouping. I read through essays of the classes from where pupil participants came.

4.3.3.1 Form Four Five (4⁵) Essays: Brickhill

I read through the History essays of this class and analysed language competence, comprehension of questions and general style of writing. The questions mostly

demanded the ability to recall information. They were not the type of questions that called for critical analysis of historical data. When asked why they (teachers) did not give varied topics to allow the different abilities to display their capabilities, the answer given was that those pupils were not capable of critical thinking. Narratives were considered to be easier for them.

Thirty-one pupils in this class had registered to write History examinations at the end of 1999 although the total number of pupils in this class was 41. The other 10 pupils had decided not to write History examinations. The school gave the pupils this discretion.

My findings were as follows:

- the English language of these pupils was very poor. It was very difficult to even understand or follow what they were writing about. There was no comprehension of the questions at all;
- 3 essays had been given to this class between January and July 1999. Only 4 pupils out of the 31, passed the essays, with just over 50% of the marks. When I checked the personal files of the 4 pupils in the administration office, I found out that 3 of them came from a family background of average economic means, while the fourth came from a family background of below average economic means;
- the language competence of the 4 pupils was average and what they wrote could be comprehended easily.

When the class teacher, Mrs Tsigo, was asked for a comment on the above result, she indicated that she did not expect these pupils to do better than the performance reflected above.

When Mrs Tsigo was asked about her criteria of assessment of the essays, she said it was impressionistic, and she admitted that poor language normally influenced her to mark down pupils' work, as "it would be difficult to understand what they were writing" (Tsigo, 1999).

When asked whether there were any mechanisms to assist pupils to write better essays, she responded as follows:

I always take it that my pupils have been trained to write compositions at Grade 7, Form I, Form II, and even Form III. I therefore do not spend time on that ... they already know. Anyway, there is no time to do that (train them to write essays), because I can't finish the syllabus.

What should be also noted is that, although the respondents believed that the narrative type of questions were easier for this so-called low ability group of learners, the latter still could not cope with this type of questions (that is, the narrative), as was shown in the learners' poor essay performance. The respondents did not have in place any remedial measures, such as coaching them to answer questions, because they wanted to "finish" their syllabi (Tsigo: Brickhill).

4.3.3.2 Form Four One (4¹) Essays: Brickhill

In this class, there were 42 pupils altogether, but only 28 were History pupils. The remaining 14 had opted out of writing examinations in the History subject although they attended History lessons. This was their choice since they were not compelled to attend the lessons of the subject they were not to write examinations in.

Between January and July 1999, this class of 28 pupils had been given 4 essays to write. Fourteen pupils passed their essays in this class. Six of these pupils had an average of 80% pass, and the remaining 8, had averages that ranged from 50% to 70%. Of those scoring averages below 50%, 8 were in the range 40% to 49%. Six of them had averages below 20%.

The essays of those in the ranges 50% to 80%, showed satisfactory to very good language competency. They all displayed understanding of the questions. The essays of those in the ranges 40% to 49%, showed poor language competency but comprehension of the questions was fairly satisfactory.

The six pupils who scored averages below 20% wrote very poor essays and displayed poor language skills. It was difficult to follow what they were trying to say. When I checked their personal files in the administration office, I found out that all the six pupils came from family backgrounds of below average economic means.

When the teacher was asked to comment on the placement of the six poor pupils in a class that was designated as "high ability class", she was initially reluctant to do so. She later obliged, but on condition that I did not reveal the source of my information. I assured her that, since I would give her and the school, pseudonyms, her information would be treated confidentially.

Mrs Juru then revealed that, there were times when pupils with low ability would be put in high ability classes, at the request of the parent, if the latter was a well known person of average or above average economic means, or a civic or political figure. She said that her guess was that this could have been the case with the six poor performers in her class. The Acting Headmaster, Mr Chimbudzi, confirmed that the school sometimes assigned pupils of low ability to high ability groups because of pressure from prominent parents.

When I went back to Mrs Juru, to tell her that my checking of the personal files of pupils revealed that the six poor performers in her class, were from poor family backgrounds, and not from rich family backgrounds, as she had believed could be the case, her response was that she was not sure what could have happened.

Mrs Juru also said that, generally, the satisfactory to good performance that I found out in this class was what she and her colleagues always expected from this class. She also indicated that her marking criterion was impressionistic. She also said she did not train her pupils to write essays, as they already knew how to do it from earlier classes.

This group of the so-called high ability learners were given the same type of essay topics that demanded mere recall of facts, as was the case with their counterparts in low ability classes. No assignments were given to promote co-operative learning such as group tasks that are suggested by Elmore (1995) and Dimmock (1995). This approach in essay assignments appeared to conceive knowledge as "discrete sets of facts which students are expected to memorise and periodically recall" (Dimmock, 1995:6) There was no discrimination as to which group would be given what type of task.

Themes emerging from Brickhill essays:

The themes that emerged from the analysis of essays at this school were as follows:

- the majority of pupils in the low ability classes were not doing well in their essays, hence their performance was characterized by mediocrity. The theme here was mediocre performance of pupils in the low ability class (paragraph 4.3.3.1);
- the teacher was not worried about the poor performance of pupils in the low ability class (4⁵). She did not expect them to do better than the mediocre performance that I found them displaying. The theme here was the effect of teacher expectations on the performance of the so-called low ability pupils;
- the assessment of pupils was impressionistic (paragraphs 4.3.3.1 and 4.3.3.2). The theme was impressionistic marking or assessment;
- there was no assistance in the techniques of writing essays;

- the pupils in the high ability class (Form 4¹) were doing very well, on average, in their essays. The theme here was good performance of pupils in the high ability class;
- the teachers were not surprised by the satisfactory to good performance of pupils in the high ability class. They expected this group of pupils to perform at this level (paragraph 4.3.3.2). The theme here was effect of teacher expectations on the performance of pupils in the high ability class;
- ability grouping at Brickhill was probably not strictly based on academic performance of pupils as some poor performers could be assigned to high ability groups on the strength of the status of the parents (paragraph 4.3.3.2). The theme here was the possible effect of the social status of pupils' parents on assignment of pupils to ability classes;
- there was only one type of essay questions given to both high and low ability groups. This was the type that focused on narration of historical events. There were no questions that demanded critical thinking. There were no tasks that promoted co-operative learning such as group assignments.

4.3.3.3 Form Four South One (4S¹) Essays: Chikomo

Thirty-six pupils were registered to write History examinations in this class. My analysis of these pupils' essays revealed the following information:

- three pupils in this class had mark averages that were above 80%;

- 28 out of the 36 pupils, passed their essays with mark averages ranging from 50% to 70%;
- only 5 pupils failed their averaged essays, with marks below 50%.
- one pupil's work was particularly poor. His name was Guru (a pseudonym). He was not a member of the pupils participating in interviews of this study but I had to draw attention to him because of his poor performance in class. He had no comprehension of questions asked. His language expression was below average. My consultation of the pupils' personal files, revealed that Guru was from a family background that was of below average economic means. The father was a general labourer (a messenger/sweeper), and the mother was a vendor. When asked what this pupil was doing in a class designated as high ability class, Mrs Chibande, the class teacher, said she herself was also puzzled by this. However, she said that it always happened at her school that some pupils of low ability are placed in high ability classes and conversely some of those of high ability are placed in low ability classes. She blamed the Grade 7 results for sometimes misleading the teachers to believe that a pupil was a good performer when in fact he/she was not. She said in the Grade 7 examinations, pupils were only required to sit for multiple choice objective tests. There was not much writing in those examinations, hence when some pupils came to secondary school level, they found writing an essay a difficult task. This could have been the case with Guru, said Mrs Chibande.

When consulted on this issue of Guru, by me as researcher, Mr Makanika, the

Headmaster, corroborated the story of Mrs Chibande;

- the essays of the remaining 35 pupils were easy to read. They showed satisfactory to good comprehension of the questions. The essays of the 31 pupils who passed their two averaged marks, were well organized, with appropriate arrangement of answers and good paragraphing;
- as was the case at Brickhill, the essays mostly demanded the skill to recall information. These were also the only form of assignment given both high and low ability groups;
- when asked the criteria of assessment of essays used, Mrs Chibande said she based her assessment on impressions of whether the question was answered or not, or whether ideas were developed or not;
- Mrs Chibande said she always expected good results from this class, since it was a high ability class.

4.3.3.4 Form Four South Five (4S⁵) Essays: Chikomo

Between May and July 1999, this class had been given 4 essay assignments. There were 43 pupils in this class altogether.

- Only 2 candidates passed their essays on average: one got 52%, and the other 53% on average;
- Comprehension of issues in these essays, except for the 2 candidates, was almost non-existent and their English expression was below average;
- The criterion used in the assessment of essay performance in this class was

also impressionistic;

- The teacher, Miss Mufumi, said that she was surprised that there were these two passes in this class;
- The teachers of the low ability groups did not have anything put in place for remedial teaching to improve the performance and achievement of pupils in those groups. Their pre-occupation was to complete their syllabi even if these pupils were not achieving anything in learning.

Miss Mufumi, one of the teachers in low ability groups, said that she did not expect to record any pass in essays, let alone in an examination in her low ability class.

Themes emerging from Chikomo essays:

The themes that emerged from the analysis of essays at this school were as follows:

- good performance by pupils in the high ability class (4S¹) and very poor performance by pupils in the low ability class (4S⁵);
- teachers expected poor performance by pupils in the low ability classes, but good performance by pupils in the high ability classes;
- teachers used an impressionistic criteria in assessment of performance in essays;
- no diagnostic or remedial teaching/learning was in place to assist the slow learners;

- there was no variety of questions to cater for different abilities or interests of pupils.

I, as researcher, chose to examine the essays of the two ability classes of my study at Brickhill, and only two of the four classes of my study at Chikomo because, given the time of three months I had, I believed this would give reasonable insights into how ability grouping affected performance in this area of didactics. I did not feel it was necessary to do this with Forms 4N¹ and 4N⁵, since I had done 50% of the 4 classes.

4.3.4 Mid-year examination results of learners in high and low ability classes

I, as researcher, analysed the results of the mid-year examination scripts of the streamed pupils, which were written in July 1999. This was done at both schools (Brickhill and Chikomo).

At both Brickhill and Chikomo, the examination questions demanded narrative answers. All the pupils had to do was to memorise historical information and produce it in their answers.

The high ability streams at both schools, did very well in the examinations. In Form 4¹ (Brickhill), 19 pupils (which was 68% of the class), passed their mid-year examinations. Six of those who failed were in the redeemable range of 40% to 49%. The low ability class (4⁵), performed very poorly. None of the 31 History pupils

passed the examinations. Twenty (65% of the class) of these scored less than 10% of the marks. Only 3 were in the range 30 to 39%.

At Chikomo, 20 pupils wrote their History examinations in Form 4S¹. Seven pupils passed their examinations with marks above 50%. This was 35% of the total candidates. Eight pupils (40% of the class) were in the redeemable range of 40 to 49%, in the opinion of the teacher, Mrs Chibande. None scored less than 20%.

When Mrs Chibande was asked to comment on whether the above performance could be said to be that of a high ability class, she said she was disappointed with the Form 4S¹ mid-year examination results. She said she had expected 70% of the class to pass. She said several reasons could be given to explain why this class performed poorly, and yet it was a high ability class. However, she gave only two. One reason could be that the pupils did not read much in their preparation of the examinations. The second reason could be that the questions were too difficult for the pupils.

However, Form Four North One (4N¹) did very well (see Table below). They had a 78% pass rate.

When Mr Vagoni (4N¹ teacher) was asked to comment on the difference in performance between the two high ability classes (4S¹ and 4N¹), he explained as follows:

... (Form) 4N¹ is the class in our school (Vagonis' emphasis). It is the highest ability (class). 4S¹ are the second best, they are not the best.

Further discussions with Mr Vagoni, Mrs Chibande, Mr Makanika (Head), and Mr Magara (Second Deputy Head), revealed the following information:

- the school (Chikomo) used Grade 7 (primary school) results to assign pupils to ability classes. Those with the highest passes at Grade 7 level, were placed in the top class of 40 pupils. The second best 40 pupils would go into the second best class;
- at this school, the designation of classes was rotated as best and second best, once every year. For example, in 1997, the school's best class was Form 4N¹, and the second best was Form 4S¹. In 1998 the best class was Form 4S¹, while the second best was Form 4N¹. In 1999, the best class was Form 4N¹, and the second best was Form 4S¹. This practice, they said, then explained the discrepancy in performance of the two.

Form Four South Five (4S⁵) and Form 4N⁵, both low ability classes, performed very poorly, especially Form 4N⁵, where all pupils failed their mid-year examination with all scoring marks below 20%. This was a 100% failure rate. Form 4S⁵ had a failure rate of 81% (See Table 6 below).

Table 6 History Mid-year examination performance patterns for Brickhill and Chikomo Schools

School	Stream	Performance patterns as percentages (%)						Total number of pupils
		0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50 and above	
Brickhill	4 ¹	-	-	1	2	6	19	28
	4 ⁵	20	7	1	3	-	-	31
Chikomo	4S ¹	-	-	1	4	8	7	20
	4N ¹	-	-	-	3	5	29	37
	4S ⁵	10	4	-	2	1	4	21
	4N ⁵	18	5	-	-	-	-	23

When asked to comment on the poor performance of Forms 4S⁵ and 4N⁵, Mr Vagoni and Mrs Mufumi (the class teachers) said they were even surprised that 4 pupils in Form 4S⁵ passed their mid-year examinations. They said because 4S⁵ and 4N⁵ pupils were playful and never serious with their work, they didn't expect anyone in those classes to pass.

Themes emerging from mid-year examination results:

- satisfactory to good performance of pupils in high ability groups and mediocre to very poor performance of pupils in the low ability groups;
- teachers being driven by their preconceived notions of pupils' performance based on ability grouping (self-fulfilling prophecy);

- changing of names of the highest and second highest ability classes every year;
- at both schools, the mid-year examinations were not used neither to promote nor to demote pupils to the next class. They were simply used to measure the potential of learners to pass their final 'O' level examinations at the end of the year. In other words the screening that was done using the Grade Seven Primary School results, when those pupils were starting their secondary education, was the only justification given for ability grouping.

4.3.5 'O' Level examination results

I analysed past 'O' level examination results at both schools. At Brickhill, results for 1991, 1993, 1994 and 1995 were made available to me. I had requested for results from 1994 to 1998 but the Acting Head of the school was unable to secure results for 1996, 1997 and 1998. The reason he gave was that these had not been analysed by the school and therefore they could not be made available to me. However, at Chikomo, I secured the results for years 1994 to 1998. These results are reflected on Tables 7 and 8 below.

Table 7 Brickhill: 'O' Level Exam Results (Number of pupils who passed) 1991: 1993: 1994: 1995

* Year	Number of Subjects passed	Form 4 ¹	Form 4 ²	Form 4 ³	Form 4 ⁴	Form 4 ⁵
1991	5 or more at Grade C or better	32 out of 41 (78%)	17 out of 41 (42%)	9 out of 37 (24%)	1 out of 21(5%)	0 out of 22 (0%)
1993	5 or more at Grade C or better	32 out of 35 (91%)	27 out of 41 (66%)	2 out of 40 (5%)	0 out of 33 (0%)	**---
1994	5 or more at Grade C or better	34 out of 40 (85%)	9 out of 40 (23%)	5 out of 40 (13%)	2 out of 30 (7%)	** ---
1995	5 or more at Grade C or better	34 out of 43 (79%)	15 out of 35 (43%)	4 out of 40 (10%)	0 out of 29 (0%)	1 out of 26 (4%)

Table 8: Chikomo 'O' Level Exam results (Number of pupils who passed): 1994 - 1998

Year	Number of subjects passed	4S ¹	4N ¹	4S ⁵	4N ⁵
1994	5 or more at Grade C or better	10 out of 40 (25%)	14 out of 36 (39%)	1 out of 29 (3%)	0 out of 29 (0%)
1995	5 or more, at Grade C or better	17 out of 35 (49%)	2 out of 30 (7%)	0 out of 28 (0%)	0 out of 28 (0%)
1996	5 or more, at Grade C or better	13 out of 40 (33%)	23 out of 36 (64%)	0 out of 35 (0%)	2 out of 34 (6%)
1997	5 or more, at Grade C or better	25 out of 39 (64%)	13 out of 38 (34%)	0 out of 28 (0%)	0 out of 42 (0%)
1998	5 or more, at Grade C or better	23 out of 37 (62%)	11 out of 37 (30%)	1 out of 30 (3%)	3 out of 32 (9%)

The results in Table 7 (above) showed that the Form Four One classes had the highest percentage pass rate among the five streams. Form Four Two had the second highest pass rate on average. Forms 4⁴ and 4⁵, had the lowest pass rate.

This Table (Table 7), told a history which depicted pupils in the high ability classes (4¹ and 4²) as tending to always obtaining the highest pass rate and pupils in the low ability classes, the lowest pass rate.

In Table 8, similar trends to those of Table 7, were reflected. However, the percentage pass rate of Chikomo's high ability classes was lower than that of Brickhill's high ability classes. When I asked the Headmaster, Mr Makanika, why Chikomo's pupils in the high ability classes had the above low passing rates, his response was as follows.

- He said, among pupils in the high ability classes, some who would have been rated as high ability at the time of assignment to the classes, proved to be average or mediocre performers in the course of time. But the school kept them in the high ability classes in order not to discourage them by demoting them to low ability classes.
- However, he said, it had always been the case that more pupils passed in high than in low ability classes.
- In 1994, their top pupils were assigned to Form 4N¹, while their second best was assigned to Form 4S¹.
- In 1995, the best group was assigned to 4S¹ and the second best, to 4N¹.

- They did the same (alternating assignment of pupils to N¹ and S¹) in the years 1996 to 1999.

The Headmaster (Mr Makanika), said this alternating strategy was a permanent feature of their streaming practice. He said that they did this to avoid a situation whereby one class was always treated as the best and, therefore, given all the attention.

Themes emerging from the history of 'O' level results:

- At Brickhill, passing rate of high ability classes (4¹) very high over the years.
- At Brickhill, passing rate of the second best ability groups, mediocre but higher than that of low ability classes (Table 7).
- At Brickhill, the lowest ability classes always failing to record passes in some years, and only recording 1 or 2 in others (Table 7).
- At Chikomo, performance of high ability classes was mediocre but more favourable compared to that of the low ability classes (Table 8).
- At Chikomo, performance of low ability classes, very, very poor, with the low ability classes recording no passes at all in some years (Table 8).
- At Chikomo, the criterion of assigning pupils to ability classes not foolproof since Grade 7 results used for this purpose could be misleading (Makanika).
- At Chikomo, names given to the high ability classes always changed.

PART III:

4.4 ADMINISTRATORS', TEACHERS' AND LEARNERS' VIEWS ON THE FUNCTION OF ABILITY GROUPING AND ITS EFFECTS ON INSTRUCTION, LEARNING, AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Under this section, I synthesised my data into four broad themes, as follows.

- What were the origins of the cultures of ability grouping at the two sites of my study? - To determine whether these emerged from the schools' principles and practices or were sourced from Government policy.
- What the rationales were? - To investigate the principles behind the practices.
- What effect ability grouping had on instruction and learning? - The instructional effect of ability grouping.
- What effect ability grouping had on social stratification? - The discriminatory or segregative effect of ability grouping.

Each of the above broad themes were discussed under two or more sub-themes or categories, as shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9: Themes emerging from data analysis

Themes	Origins of Ability Grouping	Rationales for Ability Grouping	Effect on Instruction and Learning	Effect on Social Stratification
Sub-themes	1. Originating from the schools	1. Accommodating preferences of teachers	1. Lesson preparation and presentation	1. Labelling Stigmatization
	2. Existed over two decades	2. Accommodating subject aptitudes	2. Teacher absenteeism and late- coming	
		3. Accommodating pace of work of pupils participation	3. Inability to stimulate active pupils' participation	2. Segregation
		4. To motivate teachers	4. Motivation of teachers and learners	3. Discriminatory treatment
		5. Accommodating syllabi completion	5. Lack of recognition of individual effort	4. Language of instruction
			6. Discriminatory treatment of pupils	
			7. Language of instruction as a factor	

A table representation of analysis of data collected from interviews with administrators and teachers.

4.4.1 Views on the origin of ability grouping at Brickhill and Chikomo

At both Brickhill and Chikomo, administrators said that, they were not sure when exactly their cultures of ability grouping started, and what the reasons were for initiating these cultures. They were only aware that the practices of ability grouping pre-dated Zimbabwe's independence from colonialism, which came in 1980. In other

words, the practices of ability grouping at the two schools were more than two decades old.

However, the administrators of the two schools were aware that there was no Government policy that required the schools to assign pupils to classes according to ability. Each of the Heads of the two schools said that these practices originated from the schools themselves. However, most secondary schools in Harare practised the culture of ability grouping, and, because of this, they said, the impression created to the public eye could be that this practice owed its origin from Government policy.

Mr Makanika, the Headmaster of Chikomo, had the following to say about this:

Ability grouping at this school is not a government policy.
This is a school policy.

Mr Chimbudzi, the Acting Headmaster of Brickhill quipped, when he said his school did not even know that the Government existed, in terms of policy directives. He suggested that his school was autonomous in terms of policy formulation at the school level. In this context, he said:

I don't think Government has got a role (in ability grouping), because we do it at school level You can say it's school policy of streaming. But generally, most schools do stream. So, generally, it might end up being (seen) as government policy, but I have never heard the Ministry of Education say, 'you must stream, or do this or that'.

On the question of when the practices of ability grouping came into existence at both schools, both heads were not sure. But, they said the cultures of ability grouping at their schools had been in existence for over two decades. Mr Makanika said:

I don't know when ability grouping started at this school. When I came here as Deputy Headmaster, more than ten years ago, it was already here. My guess is it started with the opening of the school more than twenty years ago.

Mr Chimbudzi said the culture of ability grouping at Brickhill was inherited from the colonial social order.

We just inherited it from the white community. This was a white-only school. When it became a multi racial school in 1980, streaming was already in place here.

The cultures of ability grouping were not, therefore, imposed by the post-independence government in Zimbabwe. However, there was no information available to me as to whether the pre-independence Governments had policy objectives that required ability grouping as a didactical practice.

4.4.2 Rationales for the cultures of ability grouping at Brickhill and Chikomo Secondary Schools

Although the administrators of the two schools were not aware of when and why the practices of ability grouping started at their schools, they, however, had their own rationales for this culture. These, they said they conceptualised to justify their inheritance of the cultures. They said that, in continuing with these cultures, they took into account the interests of the different ability grouped pupils, the preferences of the teachers, the subject aptitudes of the pupils, and the requirement to complete the syllabi so that the pupils passed their examinations at the end of their Ordinary level course (a four-year course). However, in our conversations, several dimensions

of this practice came to light. There was an impression created that the preferences of teachers to teach homogeneous classes was more important than that of the pupils.

Teachers' Preferences

At Brickhill, the desire of the teachers to teach homogeneous classes came out loudly in my discussions with the administrators. The Acting Headmaster, Mr Chimbudzi said that the teachers' preferences were important if they were to be motivated in order to produce results in their instructional endeavours. Assigning pupils to ability classes was the only way teachers could complete their syllabi with the fast learners, so that the latter could be ready for their examinations. There was no other mechanism for the fast learners to move at their own pace and complete the syllabus, other than separating them from the slow learners (the low ability pupils).

Teachers want to teach pupils of almost equal abilities and then they will have to cover their syllabus with the upper classes in the stipulated time, because they grab fast ... whilst (for) those third, fourth and fifth classes (who) don't catch up very easily ... you try by all means to move slowly (Chimbudzi: Brickhill).

Teacher preference was indirectly alluded to at Chikomo by the Acting Second Deputy Headmaster, Mr Magara, when he said:

... to be honest, we just have to accept that in life ... people are classified ... because to be sincere, these two top classes (4N¹ and 4S¹) are the classes on which we bank on when it comes to results. Otherwise the rest is made up of mediocre to poor students whom we just have to entertain and at least give them the basics of education.

At both schools, however, there was a mixture of teacher preferences and the perceived interests of the high ability pupils to move at their own faster pace so that they could complete their syllabi.

Accommodating learning pace of the learners

What appeared to be paramount to the administrators of both schools, besides accommodating the preferences of teachers to teach homogeneous classes, was the pace of the high ability pupils. The administrators felt that these pupils should be separated from the low ability pupils, so that they (high ability pupils) would not be slowed down or "disturbed by pupils who have discipline problems" (Mhlanga: Brickhill). The general feeling of the administrators of the two schools was that the low ability pupils caused problems of discipline, since they were not interested in learning. Mrs Mhlanga's view that ability grouping was accepted at her school, because it was meant to: "avoid the pupils who are above average being disturbed by pupils who have discipline problems," gave the impression that low ability pupils were seen as discipline problems. This perception of the low ability pupils as discipline problems, meant that ability grouping was in the interest of the high ability pupils, and not that of the low ability pupils. This perception by Mhlanga of Brickhill, was backed up by Magara of Chikomo, when he said the low ability pupils were, "... mediocre to poor students whom we just have to entertain ..."

However, Magara did not completely rule out the low ability pupils from the educational process through ability grouping, since he said his school wanted to "at least give them (low ability pupils), the basis of education". The same impression

was given by Mr Chimbudzi, who said the practice allowed for the accommodation of the low ability pupils, through adopting a slower pace of instruction (See Chimbudzi, above, in this section).

Accommodating preferences of teachers

The rationales implied that ability grouping, accommodated preference of teachers, were more clearly articulated at Brickhill secondary school. The Acting Headmaster, Mr Chimbudzi, said that ability grouping was practised at his school, because the teachers preferred to teach pupils who were grouped in homogeneous classes. The reason given for this preference, was that, the teachers wanted to accommodate the pace of work of the high ability pupils. Yet, this working pace of the high ability pupils was tied to the completion of the syllabi within the "stipulated time" (Chimbudzi: Brickhill), so that these pupils could pass their examinations. Furthermore, Mrs Mhlanga said that Brickhill's teachers concentrated their efforts on the high ability class because they had "hope that, that particular class is capable of making it everyday" (Mrs Mhlanga: Brickhill).

Mrs Mhlanga, said that, at Brickhill, ability grouping was meant to motivate both the pupils in the high ability class and the teachers. She said pupils in the low ability class were not interested in school, and this tended to demotivate the teachers. Therefore to motivate the teachers to teach, the school had to separate the high ability pupils from their low ability counterparts, so that the teachers had some groups to look forward to teach.

Ability grouping is meant to avoid the pupils who are above average being disturbed by pupils who have discipline problems. It's also an attempt to motivate teachers, in the sense that, when they go to that class (high ability), they have hope that, that particular class is capable of making it everyday ... (Mrs Mhlanga: Brickhill)

The school (Brickhill), appeared to have given up on pupils in the low ability classes, since according to the teachers, these pupils lacked self-motivation. At Chikomo, too, there was an indirect reference to this belief that teachers were more motivated when instructing pupils in the high low ability classes. The following suggestions created this impression:

... to be sincere, these two top classes (4N¹ and 4S¹) are the classes on which we bank on when it comes to results. Otherwise the rest is made up of mediocre to poor students whom we just have to entertain and at least give them the basics of education. (Magara: Chikomo).

Therefore, even at Chikomo, ability grouping was viewed as a way or strategy of lifting up the spirits of the teachers, because they banked on them for good results.

Accommodating learners' aptitudes in special school subjects

At both schools, one of the rationales for ability grouping was to accommodate aptitudes of pupils in some school subjects that were believed to be too difficult for the so-called low ability groups.

Both heads believed that some pupils were endowed with the aptitude of Science subjects, while others were endowed with those of Arts subjects. However, they also both believed that, between Science and Arts subjects, the former were more difficult

than the latter, and therefore the more difficult ones could only be tackled by pupils who were academically strong. These were identified as the pupils in the high ability classes. Mr Chimbudzi had this to say on the subject:

(Ability grouping) is also meant for them (high ability pupils) to do certain subjects which are regarded as most difficult, like Physics and Chemistry ... so they will need someone who is academically strong

The arrangement at both Brickhill and Chikomo was that, in addition to the subjects taken by all pupils at the schools, pupils in the high ability classes at Brickhill would take Physics and Chemistry, while at Chikomo, they would take Physics, Chemistry and Literature in English. So, for Chikomo, Literature in English was considered to be as difficult as the two Science subjects above, and therefore was offered only to the high ability classes. For Chikomo, these subjects were not only difficult, but also challenging for the high ability pupils.

We do it (ability grouping) to try to give the best stream some challenging subjects, that is the sciences. They are a few who do take Physics, Chemistry and Literature in English ... those are the two subjects they do that are not done by the rest of the other streams (Mr Makanika:Chikomo).

Mr Magara (Chikomo) confirmed Mr Makanika's suggestions, when he said:

... We look at specific subjects, because these two top classes are the classes which do the challenging subjects, which are Physical Science (Physics and Chemistry) as well as Literature, on top of the other subjects

Therefore, at both Brickhill and Chikomo secondary schools, the rationales for ability grouping were given as:

- to accommodate the preferences of teachers;
- to accommodate the different subject offerings;
- to accommodate differential treatment of the different ability classes by teachers;
- to accommodate interests of pupils in different ability groups.

The way the rationales at both schools were articulated gave the impression that these schools were influenced by what Fox (1983:151) calls the "transfer theory which treats knowledge as a commodity to be transferred from one vessel to another." The teachers believed they knew what was good for each group of learners and that their preferences were in the best interest of all learners.

4.4.3 Perspectives of participants on the effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification and my own observations and experiences

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) argue that the open-endedness of qualitative research questions is meant to create an understanding "in considerable detail (on how participants) think and how they come to develop the perspectives they hold" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982:2).

My own questions in this study, were meant to produce a detailed picture of how all the teacher participants saw the effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning, and social stratification of learners.

In my interviews with all the participants, themes such as effect of ability grouping on lesson presentation, motivation of both teachers and pupils, labelling, stereotyping and stigmatisation, emerged.

Lesson preparation and presentation

The administrators at both schools believed that teachers did not prepare adequately for the pupils in low ability classes. They believed that the teachers prepared less work for the pupils in the low ability classes than for those in high ability classes, in spite of the fact that administrators encouraged them to prepare more work for pupils in low ability classes than they did for those in high ability classes. Mr Makanika noted that:

... teachers give more written work to 'A' (high ability) classes, than to 'B' classes We tell them that things should be the opposite, but they insist that low stream pupils write a lot of rubbish.

In the opinion of Mrs Mhlanga, the Senior Mistress of Brickhill, in spite of advise to take the opposite approach,

teachers don't prepare much for the lower streams ... they don't research much for these streams ... But with the upper streams, they really work, they really research.

Some of the teachers also said that some of their colleagues did not prepare adequately for the low ability classes, but did so for the high ability classes. They were, however, not prepared to directly implicate themselves in the implied neglect of adequate lesson preparation for the low ability pupils. Here is what one teacher had to say about this:

... if a teacher is given a low ability class, they go there not prepared. Normally we teachers neglect the low ability class, because we simply say, 'well, those dull students' ...(Tsigo: Brickhill).

The above view, gave the impression that, the teachers did not prepare adequately for the low ability classes, because they (teachers) had already written them off as "good-for-nothing", as Gwarinda (1995) would put it.

In the teaching of such an abstract discipline as History, one would assume that teachers would make every effort to use a variety of methods to make learning meaningful, especially to pupils in low ability classes. Teaching through the use of pictures, diagrams and maps (Garvey and Krug, 1985), could have been useful to achieve better conceptualisation of historical issues in low ability groups. This was clearly lacking at both schools. This approach was absent in the lesson preparations of the teacher participants at both schools. In all their lesson preparations, the teacher participants at both schools, did not accommodate varieties of History teaching methods such as document study, textbook study, simulation and drama, and project work (Garvey and Krug, 1985), which could have been used to explore learners' preferences and interests, especially in low ability groups. Although the

learners in high ability groups had the perception that teachers prepared more for them than for those in low ability classes, teaching strategies that would suit this group such as projects, were not accommodated in the teachers' lesson preparations.

Pupils in high and low ability classes at both schools corroborated the above opinions on lesson preparations by their teachers. The pupils in high ability groups believed teachers prepared more for them than they did for the pupils in low ability classes.

Here are some excerpts from pupils in high ability class from both schools.

Teachers have to be attentive, because us being the cream of the school, we need perfection in their teaching methods. So, they really have to scheme before they teach us (John: High ability pupil, Brickhill).

Since we are the best class in the school, teachers expect us to produce better results end of the year. So, when they come here, they put maximum effort for us to produce better results (Ruzivo: Chikomo High ability pupil: 4S¹).

It makes them research more so that they can teach us in order for us to get good results (Rosemary: Brickhill high ability pupil).

Well, I think teachers are performing at their best level, because ... when you come to N¹, you don't just expect to give us notes - you expect to answer our questions well. Normally, you also have to ask questions. It's not like we don't know the events that took place sometime back ... the teacher is supposed to be ready, so as to answer the questions that we are going to ask So, sometimes I think the teachers just come ready, knowing that N¹ (are) going to throw a bombshell ... (Chipo: Chikomo: 4N¹).

While John and Rosemary at Brickhill and the 10 high ability participants at Chikomo (Ruzivo, Tarukwasha, Shungu, Robson, James, Chipo, Gertrude, Loveness, Elijah, Jacob), believed their being placed in high ability classes in itself, motivated the

teachers to prepare well for their lessons, the other three high ability participants at Brickhill had a different view. Peter, James and Clara, believed that the teachers neglected the pupils in high ability classes at Brickhill, because they (teachers) assumed that this calibre of pupils did not always need the teachers' presence for them to work. They said the teachers assumed that the pupils in high ability classes could work on their own, and therefore these teachers sometimes "bunked" the lessons of the pupils in high ability classes.

I think that 4¹ is a very intelligent class. So they (teachers) tend to bunk other lessons, because they think we are too intelligent ... they find it not necessary to come all the time (Peter: Brickhill).

I think the teachers take things for granted and then just don't put more effort in teaching us. So we end up not knowing anything at all (James: Brickhill).

Well, some of the teachers assume that we are so intelligent that they don't have to come for lessons. Most of them bunk lessons terribly, and those that come for difficult subjects, they don't explain much ... they just assume you are very intelligent, you can read on your own (Clara: Brickhill).

When John and Rosemary were asked to comment on what their three classmates had said about teachers sometimes "bunking" the lessons of the high ability classes at Brickhill, they confirmed that this was sometimes the case. However, John and Rosemary did not share the view that at the times their teachers came for the lessons, they (teachers), did not "put effort in teaching" them as suggested by James.

My own observations, however, confirmed the opinions of John and Rosemary. I confirmed that at Brickhill, the lack of lesson preparedness among teachers was quite

prevalent. It took the form of absenteeism and late coming to both the so-called high and low ability classes.

At Brickhill, the tendency was that, teachers missed so many lessons that they were time-tabled to teach. I ended up taking these pupils for interviews, whenever a teacher did not turn up for his/her lesson. Sometimes the excuses given were that, they (teachers), had forgotten that they had a lesson or they were busy doing something else, like marking pupils' assignments.

In my conversations with the Acting Headmaster, Mr Chimbudzi, I asked him whether his school had any problems about teacher absenteeism from lessons. His response was that, such a phenomenon was not experienced at Brickhill. When I, as researcher, indicated to him that some of his pupils had suggested that some teachers often stayed away from their lessons, Mr Chimbudzi said that he was not aware of these happenings. He admitted that such things could, probably happen once in a while, as it was human for people to be truant, but insisted that, if it did, it was not a common occurrence.

Teacher absenteeism and late-coming

In the lessons that were observed at Brickhill, the following characteristics were observed:

The lessons for both high and low ability classes started between 10 and 15 minutes late - lessons would be taught for between 20 and 25 minutes, when these should have

been 40 minute lessons. At Brickhill, teacher participants often absented themselves from their lessons. This was not the case at Chikomo. At Chikomo, the lessons were handled almost in the same manner as at Brickhill. The only difference was that, the teachers at Chikomo, unlike those at Brickhill, did not stay away from their lessons with pupils, during the period of my study at their school. However, when tea break was over at both schools, I often heard some teachers remark, "Now I must prepare myself for the nightmare with that class (low ability class)." This could imply that teachers at Chikomo could have absented themselves from low ability class lessons in my absence as the researcher. Perhaps teachers at Chikomo were more sensitive to my presence as researcher than those at Brickhill, hence the possibility that they made an effort not to "bunk" lessons during the time of my research there. The above remark appear to support my conjecture.

At both Brickhill and Chikomo, pupils in low ability classes told stories of teachers absenting themselves from their classes' lessons very often. They said their teachers thought they were useless and therefore they (teachers) should not waste their time coming for lessons all the time. The following is what some of these pupils said about this issue:

... some of the teachers do not come to take their lessons with us. They come for only a few lessons in a term. This is especially so with the Mathematics teacher (Mark: Chikomo).

I feel uncomfortable to be in 4N⁵... I can say I don't deserve to be in 4N⁵ because the pupils (here) are not that competitive in their work, and also teachers do not attend to some of the subjects at the time they are supposed to come... (Cecilia: Chikomo).

... the teachers we are given sometimes don't come to our lessons. They just say, because we are 4S⁵, therefore we are dull, and therefore there is no use wasting their time coming to us (Irene:Brickhill).

These teachers do not always make an effort to come to teach us. They absent themselves from our lessons, but they do not do the same in 4¹. So, how do they expect us to do well when they do not come to teach us? (Robert:Brickhill).

As already discussed under "effect of ability grouping on lesson preparation and presentation", my own observation tended to contradict Robert's views (above). Robert believed that teachers did not absent themselves from the lessons of pupils in high ability classes, and yet Peter and Clara (Brickhill: in high ability class) on page 192, said teachers were also "bunking" their lessons, which agreed with my own observation.

With reference to Chikomo, my stay at that school during the period of my study, did not corroborate the opinions of Mark and Ceicilia, that teachers failed to turn up for some of their lessons. Not in a single day did the teacher participants fail to attend to their pupils' lessons during that period. However, the remarks by teachers, which reflected reluctance to go to a lesson of pupils in low ability classes, such as, "now I must prepare myself for the nightmare with that class" (remarks that I overheard from different teachers when they had to go to a low ability class), could suggest that it was possible that such teachers could absent themselves from lessons they considered to be nightmares in the absence of an outsider like myself.

Inability of teachers to stimulate active pupil-participation

There was a tendency by the teachers to simply give lectures, instead of engaging pupils in a variety of activities to cater for different abilities. The lessons were either focused on teacher talk, or a few question and answer sessions, or dictation of notes (in the case of low ability classes). There was very little pupil activity. More pupils participated in the question-and-answer sessions in the high than in the low ability classes. There was a tendency by teachers to concentrate on asking questions to the same 2, 3, or 4 pupils, again and again in the so-called low ability classes. The rest of the class would just be passengers in the lesson.

No teaching media were used - the lessons tended to be very abstract. Even topics like, "The Course of the Second World War", which would need a map, were taught without such teaching media. One teacher participant, Mrs Juru (Brickhill) would always chide the pupils for being lazy, the moment she entered the classroom for Form Four One, a high ability class. Later in our discussions, she indicated that, the reason she was always angry with this class, was because the pupils did not want to take History seriously, as they believed that they were Science and not Arts pupils.

Motivation of teachers and learners

Some of the participants said that, just going into a low ability classroom itself demotivated them. The feeling that they were coming from a high ability class, going to a low ability class demotivated them. Here is what one teacher had to say about

this:

Streaming affects the teacher's attitude... teaching poor classes affects us, teachers, in the sense that when you enter the (low ability) class, you cannot help but feel the difference, knowing fully well that the class you are going to is not the same as class one (Miss Matsvuku: Chikomo).

There was also a suggestion from the participants that ability grouping affected attitudes of pupils in the low ability classes in a negative way. It tended to demotivate them and to make them lose confidence in themselves as capable learners.

Here is what Miss Matsvuku had to say about this:

Streaming affects the ... attitude of the children as well, sometimes manners... sometimes children look at themselves as not having the same potential as their counterparts in the good classes.... (Miss Matsvuku : Chikomo).

Other teachers felt that what demotivated them when teaching low ability classes, were the inadequate resources, such as textbooks. They said that, because of shortage of textbooks, it was easier to teach the high ability than the low ability classes. With the high ability classes the teacher could simply dictate notes to them, while the same approach could frustrate the low ability classes who would need concrete materials to make them understand concepts. In this context, Mrs Juru (Brickhill) said:

I find that, because of unavailability of resources (such as textbooks), teaching the lower streams becomes a nightmare. With upper streams, I can just dictate notes, but if I do this to lower streams, it won't work, they would not understand concepts....

When I indicated to Mrs Juru that in my interviews with the pupils in the low ability classes, they gave me the impression that the shortage of textbooks only affected

them, and not the pupils in high ability classes, she said this was partly true, as some of her colleagues favoured the pupils in high ability classes in terms of allocation of textbooks. However, she said, not all teachers did this, and certainly not herself, as she tried to make all classes share books, regardless of which group they belonged to.

Some of the participants believed that, assigning pupils to ability classes, affected their motivation to learn. The pupils in high ability classes would be motivated to learn because of the high status of their classes, while pupils in the low ability classes would be demotivated because of the low status of their classes. Two of the teachers had this to say about this:

... the low ability pupils have found that they are not capable enough, as a result, they resort to playing rather than being serious with their school work... (Mrs Mufumi: Chikomo);

... the cream... are generally encouraged by the class they belong to. They are more motivated than their counterparts in poor classes (Mrs Chibande :Chikomo);

The pupils in high ability groups indicated that, their assignment to these groups motivated them to work hard as they were aware of the expectations on their high status groups (See excerpts from John:Brickhill; Ruzivo: Chikomo; Rosemary: Brickhill; and Chipu:Chikomo, page, 143).

Lack of recognition of individual pupils efforts

Some of the pupils in low ability classes felt that assigning them to these classes had

had the effect of demotivating them in their learning pursuits. This was due to failure on the part of teachers to recognise their (pupils)' individual efforts. This is what some of them had to say about this:

... the teachers have no respect for pupils in 4⁵. They don't give us the opportunity to show them what we are capable of doing, because they already have a low opinion of us. (Robert : Form 4⁵: Brickhill).

... when I think of the way teachers treat me, because I am in 4⁵, I feel hurt, and it demoralises me. This is because, even when I make an effort, it is not recognised, because teachers already think of me as a student of no ability, because of the class I am in. (Silas : Form 4⁵: Brickhill).

... our teachers think we are useless. They look at the whole class (whole class' performance), and say all of us are poor. But I work very hard. The teachers still think my work is useless. (Aaron: 4N⁵ : Chikomo).

... the teachers only judge the class and not the person (pupil) when they say we are poor. (Janet : 4S⁵: Chikomo).

Pupils in low ability classes at both schools, believed that, the moment one was placed in a low ability group/class, one would know that teachers would not treat him/her nicely, thereafter. It was like being condemned to be permanent failure.

However, in my observations, as already shown above, the treatment of pupils in high and low ability classes by teachers at Brickhill was not very different, for the following reasons:

1. teachers did not "bunk" the lessons of the pupils in low ability classes only, but also those of pupils in high ability classes;
2. the method of lesson delivery were the same for all ability groups, that is teacher talk, 'question-and-answer' sessions, and 'notes-dictation'. However, dictation of notes was done to low ability classes more often than to high ability classes.
3. teachers had one scheme of work and one lesson plan that covered work for pupils in both the high and low ability classes.

At Chikomo, the lessons were handled almost in the same manner as at Brickhill. The only difference was that, the teachers at Chikomo, unlike those at Brickhill, did not stay away from their lessons with pupils during the period of my study at their school. Administrators and teachers at both schools, however, made observations that supported the opinions of pupils in low ability classes, that, the fact of being placed in a low ability class had had the effect of demotivating the pupils in their learning pursuits. This is what some of them had to say about this:

... those who are in the lower forms think they are neglected, and hence they behave in such a way that you won't understand them....
(Mr Chimbudzi: Brickhill).

... children (in the low ability classes) look at themselves as not having the same potential as their counterparts in the good classes....
(Miss Matsvuku:Chikomo).

... the cream... are generally encouraged by the class they are in ... than their counterparts in poor classes.... (Mrs Chibande: Chikomo).

Therefore, although I as researcher could not clearly notice the differentiated treatment of the different ability classes by the teachers, there appeared to be a general consensus among participants in all categories that assigning pupils to low ability classes had the effect of demotivating them in their learning endeavours.

Labelling/Stigmatisation as a factor in instruction, learning and social stratification

At both schools, no participant appeared to have consciously labelled or stigmatised pupils in low ability classes. The labelling or stigmatisation was detected in the language used by the participants during the interviewing sessions. The following are some of the statements which reflected stigmatisation or labelling of pupils in low ability classes by some participants:

... those who are in the lower forms think they are neglected and hence they behave in such a way that you won't understand them (Mr Chimbudzi: Brickhill).

... the teacher is negatively motivated when he is going to a dull class (Mr Makanika: Chikomo).

... teaching poor classes affects us teachers... (Miss Matsvuku: Chikomo).

... well, those dull students... (Mrs Tsigo: Brickhill).

... our 'A' streams... are a better group... But... the other streams, particularly the form 4S⁴... those are a problem, because they seem not to mature ... and apart from that, they don't like school ... (Mrs Mbeva: Brickhill).

... (the low ability classes are) made up of mediocre to poor students, whom we just have to entertain ... (emphasis mine) (Mr Magara: Chikomo).

... I think ability grouping causes separation because us in the upper classes tend to shun other lower classes... (emphasis mine) (Rosemary : Brickhill).

... (ability grouping) affect our relations, because students in 4¹ are shy from being seen playing with students from lower classes (emphasis mine) (Peter: Brickhill).

... other pupils in the lower classes (emphasis mine) feel that they are subordinated and they feel out of place... (Elijah: Chikomo).

Pupils in the low ability classes were conscious of the existence of the language of stigmatisation, taunting or contempt towards themselves, at both schools. The following is what some of them had to say about this:

... the teachers always taunt us, saying we are dunderheads. Sometimes some of these teachers spend the whole lesson scolding and taunting us. These are some of the things we are not happy with (Lovemore : Brickhill).

... some teachers openly say to us, "you are dunderheads". And this tends to affect our feelings. It makes us feel useless (Emily:Brickhill).

... I feel very pained to be in form 4S⁵, because teachers do not treat us well in this class. Sometimes they come for lessons, but do not teach us. They come and sit there in front, scolding and harassing us, saying we are dull... (Janet: Chikomo).

... they (high ability pupils) laugh at us, saying we have a poor performance, and they don't even want to play with us, because we have a poor performance (Lovemore: Chikomo).

Therefore, at both schools, there was a tendency by administrators, teachers and pupils in the so-called high ability classes, to use language that reflected stigmatisation, or contempt, or labelling or taunting of pupils in low ability classes. Pupils in the low ability classes, however, gave the impression that this stigmatising/labelling/ contemptuous language was part and parcel of the culture of ability grouping at the two schools, as is reflected in the excerpts of pupils in low ability classes, above.

Segregation as a factor in social stratification

The pupils in the high ability classes at both Brickhill and Chikomo believed that ability grouping had had the effect of segregating them from their schoolmates in the low ability classes. They said some of them found it difficult to associate with the pupils in low ability classes, partly because they themselves (pupils in high ability classes) felt they were superior to the pupils in low ability classes. They found it difficult to associate with the pupils in low ability classes, partly because those in low ability classes themselves felt inferior. The following are some of the responses which reflected this observation:

I think ability grouping causes separation because us in the upper classes tend to shun other lower classes...
(Rosemary:Brickhill).

It affects our relations, because students in 4¹ are shy from being seen playing with students from the lower classes. So, I don't think it allows free interaction
(Peter: Brickhill).

us, "now, we are going to the real school children" meaning that we are not real school children. When we meet the upper stream pupils, they say to us, "you are dunderheads, the teachers say so, and they hate you for it." That make(s) us hate some of the subjects (Aaron: Chikomo).

The opinion expressed by Aaron appeared to imply that teachers at Chikomo were part of the culture that not only stigmatised pupils in low ability classes, but they were also contributing to the souring of relations between the two groups of learners, making it difficult for the two groups to relate to each other well.

Discriminatory treatment of pupils as a factor in instruction, learning and social stratification

At Brickhill, the pupils in low ability classes claimed that in high ability classes, each pupil was issued with a textbook, but in Form 4⁵ and other low ability classes, they were made to share between 5 and 10 textbooks in a class of about 40 pupils. They saw this as discrimination against them and denial of equitable distribution of learning opportunities. The following is what some of the learners in the low ability groups said about this:

... what happens is that, teachers have gone to the extent of denying us adequate reading books. 4S¹ are given adequate books, at least one per student. But we are made to share 5 or 10 books in a class of more than 40 pupils. Sometimes the books we are given are torn, whereas, those given to 4¹ are not at all (Caroline: Brickhill).

Our main problem at our mid-year exams is that we will be behind in our note-making, and because of this

fact, we end up not doing very well in our mid-year exams. And yet, it is the mid-year exams they use to further stream us. How are we expected to do well in our exams when we are not given enough books, so that we can make our notes from them? (Robert : Brickhill).

The situation at Chikomo was different. Here the school had photocopied all the important textbooks and had given each pupil in all groups, a copy. Hence this problem of inequitable distribution of textbooks did not exist at Chikomo.

When the Acting Headmaster of Brickhill Mr Chimbudzi was asked to comment on the claim by the pupils in low ability classes, that they were discriminated against in textbook distribution, his response was that he was not aware that this was happening, and asked me to encourage the pupils in low ability classes participating in my study to approach him. I however, found this difficult to do, since my position was not to interfere with the goings-on at the school, but to take note of the cultural situations at the two schools.

However, at Chikomo, discriminatory treatment of pupils in low ability classes by teachers was said to be related to frequent manual punishments said to have been meted out to these pupils. These pupils claimed that the teachers had the tendencies of meting out manual punishment to them for making noise in class, and that this resulted in them losing out in learning time. They claimed that, when a few of their classmates made a noise in class before the teachers arrived for their lessons with them, the teachers would send the whole class for manual punishment. They said that this happened many times within a term. When the pupils in the high ability classes

made a noise in class, these pupils claimed, the teachers would not send them for manual punishment, but would simply caution them. One of the pupils, Mark (Form 4N⁵), articulated this experience as follows:

... there are times when we miss lessons, because we will be on punishment, the whole class. Sometimes the whole term will be spent on one subject, because, for the rest of the term, we will be on punishment for making noise in class. Yet the other classes (high ability) also make noise, but they are not sent for punishment.

Other participants in the low ability classes at Chikomo also claimed their teachers punished them for failing exercises or tests, or for failing to write good notes, even though the teachers had not guided them on how they should do them. Cribert (Form 4N⁵, Chikomo) expressed his views as follows:

in some lessons, we are just given notes which are not discussed. At other times, we are just given a topic and told to write notes, without (being) told how to do it. They then mark them, and if we fail, we are sent for punishment.

These pupils viewed the behaviour of their teachers as meaning that their teachers did not have the concern for their welfare or their learning. They believed that the teachers were neglecting their (pupils) interests and needs as learners.

The pupils also claimed that, sometimes teachers spent too much time scolding them instead of teaching them. Janet (4S⁵:Chikomo) said:

I feel very pained to be in Form 4S⁵, because teachers do not treat us well in this class. Sometimes they come for lessons, but do not

teach us. They come and sit there in front, scolding and harassing us.

This was the kind of behaviour by some of the teachers, which the pupils said showed them that the teachers did not care about them. If they cared about them, they would treat them in the same manner as they treated pupils in the high ability classes, they argued.

Language of instruction as a factor in instruction, learning and social stratification

Learners at the secondary school level in Zimbabwe are taught in English, which is a foreign language to most learners/pupils. Hence the majority of pupils lack proficiency in English. As a result, most of the pupils in the low ability classes at both schools, could not express themselves well in English, which was the language of instruction.

In follow-up discussions, the teachers contended that language could have been a factor in the screening that was done in order to assign pupils to ability classes. The following remarks were made by teachers in this regard:

If Shona was used to group pupils into streams, perhaps some pupils here (4S²) will be in 4S¹ or 4N¹, because they are able to contribute intelligently in Shona. But by so doing (using Shona), one is not saying the lesson is to be conducted in Shona. But perhaps one will be giving Shona examples, examples they are familiar with (Miss Matsvuku: Chikomo).

Miss Matsvuku said that, if educational policy was to be changed to allow pupils to learn in their first language, Shona, all or most pupils could understand concepts better, and they wouldn't have the same difficulties as they were having then. She strongly believed that, most pupils who were in low ability classes would be categorized as high ability, should the pupils' home language be used as a medium of instruction.

Mrs Tsigo (Brickhill), corroborated this view in the following statement:

they (pupils in low ability classes) tend to understand more when you use Shona, than when you use English. But, it doesn't help them when they are writing their essays.

Mrs Mbeva (Brickhill), also shared the same view, when she said:

I think if the teaching of low ability students was to be in Shona, I think it would change their performance. Because one (of the problems of pupils in the low ability classes) is language
....

Some of the teachers, though, argued that, ability had nothing to do with language. They believed that, it was the poor attitudes of the pupils towards school that affected their performance, and not their language inabilities (Mr Vagoni, Chikomo; Mrs Juru, Brickhill)

My own observations and experience in interviews with pupils in both groups tended to confirm the views of Miss Matsvuku, Chikomo, Mrs Tsigo (Brickhill) and Mrs Mbeva (Brickhill), about the English language as having been a factor in ability grouping. My experience was that, most of the learner respondents from the so-

called high ability classes in this study, had no difficulty in expressing themselves in English during my interviews with them. They articulated themselves well through the medium of English. However, the story was different with most learner respondents from the so-called low ability classes. They had difficulties in expressing themselves in English. When I rephrased the same questions in their home language, which was Shona, most of them expressed themselves very well, and explained their views in a very clear and coherent manner.

PART IV

SUMMARY

In this Chapter, I presented the background information of the participants, the administrators, teachers and pupils. This included their Curriculum Vitae.

After presenting the background information of the participants, I then proceeded to present and analyse the data from the documents of my study. This was followed by a presentation and analysis of the Zimbabwe Government Educational objectives, the rationales for the practice of ability grouping at the two sites of my study, the administrators', teachers' and pupils' views on the effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification, as well as my own observations of the goings-on at the two schools in relation to what the respondents/participants had said and done.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETATION OF DATA

"If I lived twenty more years and was able to work, how I should have to modify the **Origin**, and how much the views on all points will have to be modified! Well it is a beginning, and that is something..." (Charles Darwin, as cited by Wolcott, 1990).

Charles Darwin's words above, summarise my perceptions about my own study and the interpretation therein. To me, it is a beginning. I raised questions more than I attempted to answer them. I hope I have aroused more interest in the subject of ability grouping than had hitherto existed. In my mind, more questions now exist than at the beginning of this project. As Wolcott (1990) says, "social research is both a process and a product".

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter, I presented my own perceptions and inferences on the data of my study. This is the stage of interpretation of data, that, according to Meloy as cited by Vakalisa (1995:126), transcends "factual data and cautious analyses and ... probe into what is to be made of them". It was in this chapter, where I brought in my own perceptions of the culture of ability grouping at the two sites of my study. It was in this chapter, that I developed my own interpretation of the underlying meanings of the rationales for the culture, what its effect was on instruction, learning and social

stratification.

In my interpretation, I made reference to the Zimbabwe Government policy objectives on Education, and how the culture of ability grouping at the two schools impacted on those objectives.

I trusted that all the participants did their best to tell me their experiences and perceptions of ability grouping as they lived it. I also tried to confine my own perceptions to the experiences of this study. Any references to situations outside these experiences were only restricted to perceptions which indicated that such situations impacted on the didactical cultures of the two schools that formed the site of my study.

PART I

5.2 CONTRAVENTION OF THE ZIMBABWE GOVERNMENT EDUCATIONAL POLICY OBJECTIVES BY ABILITY GROUPING

According to the Zimbabwe Government Educational Policy, education should be directed towards realising the following objectives:

1. an education process that evenly distributes resources among the learners;
2. an education process that evenly distributes learning opportunities among the learners;
3. a curriculum that teaches the one-ness of citizens and not their division;

4. the provision of an education system without social stratification.

The fact that knowledge and abilities are stratified in the didactical cultures of the two schools, Brickhill and Chikomo Secondary Schools, meant that objective 4 (above) had not been achieved. In fact, it simply meant that it had been directly contravened or ignored.

Objectives 1 and 2 were also contravened or ignored by the very action of practising ability grouping. This is further clarified by the responses of participants to the questions on the rationale of ability grouping, effect of ability grouping on instruction, learning and social stratification. These showed the existence of inequity in provision or distribution of learning opportunities at the two schools.

Objective 3 had also been negated, since the cultures of the two schools cannot, by their very nature, promote one-ness of the members of the schools' communities.

The inference to be drawn from the above observations, is that there is a conflict between the cultures of the two schools and the National Educational Policy objectives of the Zimbabwe Government. However, since the Zimbabwe society is itself stratified along the lines of those who are of average, above average and below average economic means, it can be argued that, there is no contradiction between the two schools' didactical cultures and those of the broader society. What the two schools practise didactically, may be said to be an extended reflection of the broader social order. What this seems to portray is that, although policy intentions could be

resisted by those who are supposed to implement them, it may be difficult to resist the influence of the broader cultural experiences by policy implementers.

The task of this study was not, however, to examine how broad cultural practices of the Harare society related to the cultural practices of the two schools. The task was to examine the cultures of the two schools, with reference to ability grouping, and how these impacted on instruction, learning and social stratification at the didactical level. Reference was only made to National Educational Policy, because all schools in Zimbabwe, including Harare, are governed by that policy. Therefore, this was meant to develop some insights into the extent to which schools could develop cultural practices that were independent of the dictates of central policy expectations.

This study, therefore, shows that, the didactical cultural practices of the two schools, grew and were nurtured by these two schools, and, therefore, did not owe their origin to national policy expectations (See paragraph 4.4.1).

PART II

5.3 EFFECT OF ABILITY GROUPING ON INSTRUCTION, LEARNING AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

The five rationales that I identified for ability grouping at Brickhill and the two at Chikomo secondary schools (Paragraph 4.4.2), made me to come up with the following perceptions:

5.3.1 Underlying the rationale that, ability grouping was done “to avoid delaying and disturbing fast learners”, was the assumption that the *fastness* or *slowness* of pupils could be judged on the basis of a one-off test given by the school (emphasis, mine). This was particularly more so for Chikomo school, which did not have a mechanism to move pupils between ability classes during the course of the year or at end of each year. Even at Brickhill, although in theory, the practice accommodated vertical mobility of pupils between ability classes, in practice, very few pupils were promoted or demoted into either of the ability classes at the school.

This assumption meant that the two schools based their criteria for determining the pace of learning of the pupils on their primary educational results. The schools did not put in place their own instructional programmes that would provide criteria for this kind of measurement of ability. It meant these secondary schools had faith in the measurement of ability that was used at Grade 7 level by the primary schools.

In this context, my perception was that, this rationale was loaded with values and attitudes that assumed human ability to be a fixed trait of behaviour. This assumption at the two schools, confirmed the validity of the criticism of Kelly (1974:72), that, ability grouping is based on the old notion that intelligence is “a fixed and unchangeable level of general ability”. The two schools’ assumption also validated Reid’s inference that ability grouping is based on a belief that “the child’s ability is measurable, and remains fairly constant over time” (Reid, 1978:124).

Furthermore, the assumptions of the two schools that, the slow learners would disturb the fast learners, was loaded with values of prejudice towards the former group of pupils. My perception was that, this implied prejudice suggested that, the schools looked at the pupils in low ability classes as a burden to them, rather than a challenge in the sphere of instruction. A rationale like this could not encourage teachers to design constructive instructional strategies. Rather, it tended to justify their lack of initiative to develop instructional strategies that would motivate pupils in low ability classes to learn. It tended to encourage neglect of pupils in the low ability classes.

5.3.2 The rationale that stated that ability grouping was meant to accommodate school subjects taken by learners, once again, created the impression that the two schools defined ability as a fixed trait of behaviour. The problem with this assumption is that the schools believed that the learners could not improve their performance or achievement across the curriculum, given the time and opportunity to do so (See paragraph 4.4.2). It also implied that aptitude in natural sciences and English Literature was the only indication of intellectual ability, and pupils who lacked this were of low learning ability.

The assumption was that, once a learner had displayed an aptitude in a Science subject, or Literature in English, such a learner would do well in any school subject. Conversely, any learner who did not have an aptitude in Science, would not do well in the rest of the subjects. Such an assumption is unscientific, because a scientific assumption would take phenomena (including human behavioural traits) to be dynamic, or to be in a constant state of motion. Such an assumption did not allow

for learning conditions to be created that would allow for change in learning achievement. It only allowed for conditions that would confirm and make permanent a behavioural trait that would have been manifested by a learner under given conditions. The argument by Kelly (1975), that ability grouping does not cater for differences, but actually creates such differences itself, appeared to be validated by this rationale of ability grouping for Brickhill Secondary School. This assumption that Science and Literature were challenging subjects which could only be taken by pupils in high ability classes, disregarded the possibility of pupils in low ability classes having an interest and developing an aptitude in them, given the opportunity to do so.

- 5.3.3 The rationale that stated that ability grouping was meant to satisfy the preference of teachers to handle homogeneous classes, gave the impression that, at Brickhill, instruction and learning were teacher-friendly, and, not necessarily pupil-friendly. This approach to learning resembled the classical philosophical approach, which imposed society's categories of what constituted learning and knowledge (Ndunguru, 1976; Curtis and Boultwod 1977). This approach assumed that the schools knew what was best for learners, and hence its imposition of the division on what was to be taught to the children of the rulers, those of ordinary people and those of slaves (Ndunguru, 1976; Curtis *et al* 1977).

The rationale which was stated as, "to motivate the teachers" (Paragraph 4.4.2), implied the assumption was that, if pupils were not assigned to classes according to ability, the teachers would not have the urge to work hard. This assumption defeats

the purpose of instruction. It implied that teachers were freed from the obligation to create motivating instructional strategies. The onus was now put on the group of pupils to create a motivating environment for teachers to develop the mood to work hard. It was not the pupils who mattered in the scheme of pedagogy here, but the teachers' interests and needs.

5.3.4 The rationale stated as “to avoid discipline problems and disturbing fast learners”, was loaded with an assumption that a particular group of pupils had a natural tendency of indiscipline. It was an assumption that was loaded with values that stereotyped the learners. The inference here was that the low ability pupils had a tendency of undisciplined behaviour. It also meant that, undisciplined behaviour was associated with ability and not with any other didactical conditions. It meant the schools exonerated themselves of any responsibility in the indiscipline of the low ability pupils. Such conditions as lack of activity by pupils, perhaps being caused by teacher negligence, as a possible cause of indiscipline, was being discounted here, it would appear.

The above perceptions were based on the impressions created by the way the teachers and administrators stated their rationales for the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools. Their rationales did not create the impression that ability grouping was meant to create equitable opportunities for conditions of learning for all ability groups. Rather, they created the impression that it was meant to protect the high ability pupils from conditions that would inhibit their opportunities for learning. The

pupils in low ability classes were being portrayed in these rationales as forces that inhibited learning, including demotivating instruction. In fact, these rationales appeared to portray the pedagogy of ability grouping at the two schools in bad light. Furthermore, these rationales validated the contention of the critics of ability grouping that it is not meant to tailor instruction and its content to the level of pupils, but that it is based on values that uphold élitism and deliberate discrimination against the less privileged in school situations (Bowles and Gintis, 1982; Kelly, 1990; Good and Brophy, 1991; Kutnick and Thomas, 1990; among others).

Of the two schools, it was at Chikomo where the values of élitism and discrimination against the so-called low ability pupils, were stronger (See paragraph 4.4.2). This was where ideas that pupils in the low ability classes could not handle Science and Literature subjects were suggested more strongly than at Brickhill. This is also the school where only two classes out of 16, were classified as the cream, and 14 classes treated as one bunch of low ability (although in theory they were supposed to be mixed average to low ability groups).

However, the same values existed at Brickhill, although they were not expressed as strongly as at Chikomo.

A rationale is actually a statement of justification. According to Hallinan (1994), the rationale for ability grouping was to tailor instruction and learning to the ability level of learners, and not to disadvantage any of the groups of learners. In the cases of Brickhill and Chikomo schools, it does not appear this was the basis of their

rationales for ability grouping. Hallinan (1994) also argued that, if ability grouping were to operate according to theory, pupils at all levels of ability would benefit from increased learning. However, in the cases of Brickhill and Chikomo schools, both the theory and practice advanced by Hallinan did not exist.

It is, therefore, possible that, had the rationales for ability grouping at these two schools been in agreement with that of Hallinan, the story of this study could be different.

PART III

5.4 INTERPRETATION OF EMERGING THEMES RELATED TO THE EFFECT OF ABILITY GROUPING ON INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING

The recurring themes that came out of the analysis of data in this study as possible effects on instruction and learning, with regards to ability grouping, were as indicated below. However, some of the themes such as the language of instruction factor, came up from my interaction with respondents and my own observation. Some of the statements relating to such themes could be directly attributed to ability grouping while others could be indirectly connected to it.

- lesson preparation and presentation;
- teacher absenteeism and late-coming;
- learners' motivation and teachers' failure to stimulate active pupil-participation;

- teachers' failure to recognise individual pupils' effort;
- discriminatory treatment of pupils as a factor in instruction and learning;
- examination performance;
- language of instruction as a factor in instruction and learning.

My interpretation of the cultural situations of ability grouping at the two schools, with reference to the effect they had on the above behavioural traits, are given below.

- Lesson preparation and presentation

The data in this study shows that, ability grouping at the two schools had the effect of making teachers prepare more for high ability and less for low ability pupils (Paragraphs 4.4.2 and 4.5.1). This was what the administrators and teachers said themselves. However, my own perceptions gave a slightly different picture.

When I studied the schemes and records of work of the teachers at both schools, I found that there were no different schemes and records for high and low ability classes. They had one scheme for all abilities. The Form Four schemes in History, for an example, at Brickhill, were for all streams, from Form Four One (4¹) to Form Four Five (4⁵). At Chikomo, a teacher taking Forms 4N¹ to 4N³, had one scheme of work for all the three, even though these were different abilities.

Therefore, there was no physical evidence, in terms of the existence of work planned,

to show that more work was planned for the high ability than for the low ability pupils. My perception was that more work and less work prepared for high and low ability pupils, respectively, could be inferred in a more subtle manner as follows:

- In terms of the self-motivation of pupils in the high ability classes

The self-motivation of this category of pupils created more activities in lessons, since many of them could ask and answer questions. The end result of all this was that teachers would be compelled to give more in terms of supplying responses or answers to the class, and, therefore, the pupils covered a lot of ground in their learning activities (Chimbudzi, Makanika, Paragraphs 4.4.2 and 4.4.3).

- In terms of lack of self-motivation of pupils in the low ability classes

The absence of self-motivation in the low ability classes, meant that there was very little activity in terms of pupil participation in the short sessions of class discussions. There was very little feedback from the pupils, in terms of asking or answering questions. The lessons ended up being teacher dominated - the teachers would just use the telling or lecture method. In this context, the low ability pupils did not benefit much, since there were no activities in class that showed they were learning, by virtue of feedback (See paragraph 4.6).

My perception, therefore, was that there was deficient instructional preparation

because the teachers did not have a variety of activities in lessons for the different ability groups. They used one strategy for all groups, which appeared to work for the high ability, but did not work for the low ability classes. In this sense, therefore, it could be argued that ability grouping at the two schools, had the effect of making teachers neglect preparing appropriate instructional and learning activities for pupils in the low ability classes. However, it could also be argued that the culture of ability grouping at the two schools, also affected pupils in the high ability classes negatively, because teachers did not really prepare appropriate instructional strategies for them either. The increased learning this category of pupils benefited from appeared to be largely due to their own self-motivation, which in turn increased the motivation of the teachers, since one of the rationales was to motivate the teachers (paragraph 4.3.2.2).

Teacher absenteeism and late coming

At Brickhill, it was found that teachers absented themselves from some lessons of pupils in both high and low ability classes. They also tended to always come late for lessons of both groups. Therefore, my perception was that this teacher tendency could not be blamed on ability grouping, since it affected all groups of ability. Perhaps this could be blamed on lack of professional ethics on the part of the teachers.

At this school, the teachers did not seem to take their duties seriously. The administrators themselves appeared to be lax in their supervisory roles as they professed ignorance to this teacher tendency when I discussed this issue with them.

Absenteeism of teachers from, and late-coming to, the lessons they were supposed to give affected both high and low ability classes at Brickhill and could therefore not be attributed to ability grouping. However, this tendency appeared to have affected the pupils in low ability classes more negatively than the other groups. This was because, leaving pupils in low ability classes unattended deprived them of the individual or special assistance that is usually used to justify the practice of ability grouping.

At Chikomo school, although the low ability pupils claimed that the teachers sometimes neglected attending their lessons, during the one term I spent at the school, none of the participant teachers absented themselves from their lessons. However, the evidence of this negligence came in another form. When tea break time was over, I often over-heard some teachers remarking, “now, I must prepare myself for the nightmare with that class” (referring to a low ability class)(See paragraph 4.4.3).

Remarks like the one above could be interpreted to mean one of two scenarios. It could mean that, although the teachers might have dreaded instructional times with the low ability pupils, they never-the-less attended all their lessons with these pupils. It could also be inferred to mean that, this was a confirmation of the claims of pupils in the low ability class that at times teachers deliberately absented themselves from the lessons with pupils in the low ability classes (Paragraph 4.4.3). Probably, these teachers did not want to stay away from their lessons while I, a visitor carrying out a study, was present. However, I had no reason to doubt what pupils in the low

ability classes claimed in the light of remarks made by teachers themselves in the following extracts:

... The teacher is negatively motivated when he is going to a dull class (Paragraph 4.4.3 : Mr Makanika, Head, Chikomo).

... Teaching poor classes affects teachers in the sense that, when you enter the class, you cannot help but feel the difference, knowing fully well, perhaps, that the class you are going to, is not the same as class one. (Paragraph 4.4.3 : Miss Matsvuku : Chikomo).

The pupils in high ability classes at Chikomo, however, never made the claim that teachers absented themselves from their lessons. In fact, the statements of teachers showed that they were always looking forward to lessons with this category of pupils.

My overall perceptions, therefore, were that, at Brickhill, ability grouping was not responsible for teachers' negligence of duty with respect to their failure to turn up in class for the lessons they were supposed to give. This appeared to be a problem of professional ethics. However, with respect to Chikomo, ability grouping appeared to have had an effect on the negligence of duty by teachers, since this only affected lessons of pupils in the low ability classes.

In my literature review, there was no direct reference to the effect of ability grouping on teacher attendance to their teaching duties. The closest reference to this was the argument by Oakes (1985) that high and low ability pupils were not equally valued in the culture of ability grouping.

- Pupils' motivation and teachers' failure to stimulate active pupil-participation

In this study, ability grouping was found to have had a positive effect in terms of the motivation of pupils in high ability classes. This category of pupils was found to be positively motivated, largely due to their perceptions that their teachers had high expectations of them (Paragraph 4.4.3). My own perception was that, this motivation of pupils in high ability classes was not due to any superior instructional strategies put in place for them by the teachers. These were clearly not available. The motivation was driven by the knowledge that both teachers and administrators expected the best performance from pupils placed in high ability classes.

The pupils in high ability classes were motivated by such descriptions of them as being "fast learners", "above average" performers, being "academically strong", "top classes", being called, "A classes", pupils who "responded when they were asked questions", "the best class in school", "the cream of the school" (Paragraph 4.4.3). This motivation of the pupils in high ability classes was done at the expense of the pupils in low ability classes. The pupils in high ability classes were also motivated by their perceptions that the teachers researched more for their instruction of high ability than for the low ability classes (Paragraph 4.4.3).

In my study of the teachers' schemes and records of work, there was no evidence that teachers researched more for the high than for the low ability classes. It appeared the perception of both teachers and pupils that more research was done for the high than for the low ability classes was more imaginary than real. What appeared to be

happening was that, because of the self-motivation of the pupils in high ability classes (reflected in motivated class participation), teachers ended up covering more of the material planned for all groups, than they did with pupils in low ability classes. This scenario, therefore, means that, the positive effect which ability grouping had on the pupils in high ability classes at both schools, was really due to attitudes of the pupils about themselves, on the one hand, and the attitudes of teachers towards these pupils on the other.

Yet, with respect to its effect on the pupils in low ability classes, ability grouping at both schools, had the effect of demotivating them (Paragraph 4.4.3). What appeared to demotivate the pupils in low ability classes at both schools was a combination of the negative attitudes of teachers to these pupils, their stereotyping of the pupils, and their neglect to attend to all the lessons of the pupils in low ability classes. The teachers at both schools stereotyped the pupils in low ability classes in the following descriptions: "dull class", "poor class," "lower forms," "pupils who do not respond to instruction," "dunderheads" (paragraph 4.4.3: Mr Makarika, Miss Matsvuku; Chikomo; Mrs Mhlanga, Mrs Tsigo, Mrs Juru, Brickhill).

It is difficult to imagine how pupils who are called such unpleasant names could be motivated to learn under such situations. Good and Brophy (1991), have also observed how the pupils in low ability classes, to show their displeasure with the low status ascribed to them, "respond defensively by refusing to commit themselves seriously to academic achievement goals" (Good and Brophy, 1991:385). The pupils in low ability classes felt and believed that no good performance was expected from

them by their teachers, and, therefore, they did not summon up any effort to work hard.

There was a tendency of teachers at both schools to use one lesson delivery approach, that is the lecture or telling method. There was no effort to use a variety of approaches in order to stimulate pupil-participation in lessons in both high and low ability classes. Even the lively participation of pupils in high ability classes were not as a result of imaginative varieties of approaches by the teachers. This was a result of the pupils' own self-motivation to answer or ask questions in the question-and-answer sessions.

My perception, therefore, was that the inability of teachers to stimulate active pupil participation was not as a result of ability grouping, since this teacher inability characterised all ability groups. However, ability grouping became a factor in this due to the fact that the teacher inability to create such a learning environment affected the pupils in low ability classes more negatively than their counterparts in high ability classes, since those in low ability classes lacked self-motivation because of the atmosphere of stigmatisation that demoralised them.

Therefore, my findings did not support the views of Good and Brophy (1991), which asserted that teachers scheduled more varied, interesting and challenging learning activities for pupils in high ability classes than they did for the low ability classes. Teachers in this study simply did the minimum of the work expected of them in both the high ability and low ability streams.

- Teachers' failure to recognize individual pupil's effort

Another problem that appeared to emerge from this scenario, was that the culture of ability grouping at the two schools did not look at the individual efforts of the pupils. It looked at the effort of the group. This tended to destroy individual motivation of pupils who may have had the potential to excel in the low ability classes. Conversely, though, the cultures appeared to have had the opposite effect on individual pupils who were assigned to high ability classes. The slow learners in this group tended to be motivated to work hard, due to the environment they were placed in, since teachers had high expectations from high ability classes, and not individual pupils.

This theme emerged from the pupil respondents and could be indirectly attributed to ability grouping.

- Discriminatory treatment of pupils as a factor in instruction

My perceptions regarding the above recurring theme, was that, ability grouping had had the effect of creating unequal educational opportunities to the different ability groups. The pupils in high ability groups were given more instructional attention than those in low ability groups. The Headmaster of Chikomo, Mr Makanika, confirmed this when he said:

... teachers give more written work to 'A' classes (high ability classes) than to 'B' class (low ability classes)...
We tell them that things should be the opposite, but

they insist that low stream pupils write a lot of rubbish
(Mr Mekanika : Chikomo).

One of the teacher participants had further confirmed
this in the following remarks:

... Normally, we teachers neglect the low ability class,
because (we) simply say, "well, those dull students
(Mrs Tsigu: Brickhill).

The pupils in low ability classes at Brickhill have claimed that their teachers made them to share very few textbooks between them, whereas pupils in high ability classes were allocated a textbook each (Caroline and Robert : Brickhill). It was difficult to fault this pupil perception of ability grouping given the rationale for ability grouping provided by the administrators (Mr Chimbudzi: Brickhill; Mrs Mhlanga: Brickhill; Mr Magara and Mr Mekanika: Chikomo). Ability grouping was said to have been done to achieve the following:

- "(to complete syllabus) with the upper classes in the stipulated time" (Mr Chimbudzi: Brickhill). This implied that it was not a priority for the schools to complete syllabi with the "lower streams", and yet completion of syllabi was a pre-requisite to pass examinations. This means that it did not matter whether "the lower class" pupils passed their examinations or not.
- "(the) mediocre to poor students (were there for the schools) to entertain... (and just) at least give them the basics of education" (Mr Magara: Chikomo).
One could not see anything in common between a group that was meant to do serious work at school and the other which was just to be entertained. It sounds like two groups with separate curricula.

Statements like these made me to infer that ability grouping at the two schools, influenced the behaviour and values that favoured better instruction for pupils in high ability classes than was directed to pupils in low ability groups. My findings in this regard confirmed the views of Sorensen and Hallinan (1986:540), that ability grouping "is not neutral with respect to inequality of educational opportunity."

- Test and examination performance

The mid-year examinations written in July 1999, produced results that were similar to those of the ordinary assignments given to the pupils in high and low ability classes. At Brickhill, Form 4¹ scored a 68% pass in History, and the other 21% of the pupils in the class (6 pupils), were within the passing range of 41 to 49% (Paragraph 4.3.4, Table 6). This was in spite of the fact that their teacher, Mrs Juru, was always complaining that these pupils were not giving their best in History, because they thought of themselves as a Science class. This was also in spite of the fact that their teacher stayed away from a good number of their lessons. During the whole term I did my studies at this school, Mrs Juru did not attend to 8 of the form 4¹ lessons, out of a possible number of 60 lessons for the term.

The above findings would tend to confirm my observations earlier in this Chapter, that the high ability pupils did well because of their self-motivation and the expectations of the school that they were "capable of making it" at the end of the day (Mr Mrs Mhlanga: paragraph 4.4.3).

With reference to Form 4^s (a low ability class) at Brickhill (Table 6, paragraph 4.3.4), not a single pupil out of the 31 who wrote the mid-year examination, passed. All of them scored marks below 40%. This was in spite of the fact that their teacher, Mrs Tsigo, was never absent from her lessons during the period of my study.

This result of the History mid-year examinations for Form 4^s, gave me the impression that the teachers' expectations that this group of pupils would not make it at the end of the day, may have had the effect of demotivating them. Some samples of the mid-year examination answer sheets showed that the pupils could not even answer questions.

With reference to Chikomo, a similar picture to that of Brickhill, was portrayed (Table 6, Paragraph 4.3.4). The highest ability class, Form 4N¹ had a 78% pass rate out of 37 pupils who wrote the History mid-year examinations. Thirty-five percent in the second best class (Form 4S¹) passed. Forty percent in 4S¹ were in the redeemable range of 40 to 49%.

In the two low ability classes, 4N^s and 4S^s, the picture is also similar to that of 4^s at Brickhill, particularly for 4N^s. In Form 4N^s, all the 23 pupils who wrote the History mid-year examination scored less than 20%. In Form 4S^s, 76% of the pupils scored less than 40%, with 67% of these scoring less than 20% of the marks.

These mid-year examinations at the two schools reflected cultures that catered for the needs of the few, and neglected the needs of the majority. These were cultures that

wasted massive human resources. At Brickhill, only two Form Four classes were considered to be the only ones that could make it at the end of the day. These were Forms 4¹ and 4². This would imply that only two fifths (2/5) of the ordinary level classes were given the best attention, going by the culture of the school. Three fifths of these classes were neglected.

At Chikomo, the picture was even gloomier. Out of the 16 Form Four classes, only two (4N¹ and 4S¹) were given the best attention. This was one eighth (1/8) of the Ordinary Level classes. Seven eighths (7/8) of these were neglected.

Past 'O' level examinations at the two schools, tended to confirm the perceptions given above about the effect of motivation and expectations in the culture of ability grouping (See Tables 7 and 8).

At Brickhill, in the years 1991, 1993, 1994 and 1995 (Table 7), the story told here, was one where 4¹ scored a minimum pass rate of 78% and a maximum of 91%. Form 4², the second highest ability class, scored a minimum pass rate of 23%, and a maximum of 66%.

In the case of the three low ability classes, 4³, 4⁴ and 4⁵, the pictures told a different story. Form 4³ had a minimum pass rate of 5% and a maximum of 24%. Form 4⁴ had a minimum pass rate of 0% and a maximum of 7%. Form 4⁵ had a minimum of 0% and a maximum of 4%.

The above information portrayed the culture of ability grouping at Brickhill as one that was governed by the prophecy of self-fulfilment. The teachers had said, in their submissions in my interviews with them, that the top two ability classes were the ones they banked on to produce good results. They also said that they did not expect anything good to come out of the results of the low ability classes. Table 7 confirmed their expectations. But then, these expectations were not just a coincidence in the culture of ability grouping at this school. Behind them were practical experiences that reflected negligence, stereotyping and stigmatisation of the low ability classes and active encouragement of the pupils in high ability classes. Behind them (expectations) were also the feeling and attitudes of the pupils in high ability classes that they had to produce good results since they had to prove that they were the cream, the most intelligent pupils at the school. Behind the expectations was also the feeling and attitude of the pupils in low ability classes that, nothing good was expected to come from them, and that no effort made by individuals in their groups would be recognised by their teachers.

It would appear, therefore, that the teachers at Brickhill, had made up their minds that only the pupils in high ability classes would make it at the end of the day. They had made up their minds that the pupils in low ability classes would not make it. Since this was the case, why then bother to give serious attention to the pupils in low ability classes, who were a 'write-off', anyway. To say this is a self-fulfilling prophecy would not be far from the truth, given this kind of picture.

With reference to Chikomo, the picture given in Table 8 was similar, if not worse than that of Brickhill (Table 7). From 1994 through to 1998, Form 4S¹ had the lowest passing rate of 25 % and the highest of 64 %. Form 4N¹ had the lowest of 7 % and the highest of 64 %. Form 4S⁵ had 0 % pass rate in three years (1995 to 1997) and had the highest of 3 % in two years (1994 and 1998). Form 4N¹ also had 0 % pass rate in 1994, 1995, and 1997. In 1996, only 2 pupils out of 34 (6 %) passed, while in 1998, only 3 pupils out of 32 (9 %) passed their 'O' levels (Table 8).

My perception here was the same as that for Brickhill. The scenario at Chikomo also represented the existence of a prophecy of self-fulfilment, for the same reasons I gave in the case of Brickhill. The pupils in low ability classes at both Brickhill and Chikomo were conscious of the existence of this self-fulfilment prophecy of their schools, as shown by the following sentiments:

The teachers have no respect for 4⁵. They don't give us the opportunity to show them what we are capable of doing, because they already have a low opinion on us.
(Robert: Brickhill).

... Knowledge comes from learning So, if no learning is taking place, how can one be knowledgeable? How can they call us dunderheads when they don't teach us?
(Silas: Brickhill).

The cultures of ability grouping at the two schools, did not recognise individual effort. They recognised group effort, and, therefore, sacrificed individual needs for group needs. The following extract from pupils in a low ability class supported this perception.

When I think of the way teachers treat me, because I am in Form 4^s, I feel hurt, and it demoralises me. This is because, even when I make an effort, it is not recognized, because teachers already think of me as a student of no ability, because of the class I am in.
(Silas: Brickhill).

The self-fulfilment prophecy appears to thrive best where it makes a reference to a group than to an individual pupil in a didactical situation. This is precisely because, it is more difficult to neglect an individual than it is to neglect a group. The neglect of an individual may be interpreted as a personal dislike of a pupil by teachers, whereas that of a group may be seen as one representing a professional evaluation of pupils' performances. This is probably why it was easier for teachers to express their feelings about the hopelessness of the pupils in low ability classes at both schools.

My own perception that the cultures of ability grouping at Brickhill and Chikomo schools were based on the prophecy of self-fulfilment is corroborated by the critics of this practice in my literature review. The findings of Bowles and Gintis (1982), Abadzi (1984), Good and Brophy (1991), Cahana, et al (1996), Oakes (1985), Reid (1978) and Kelly (1974), point in this direction. Their arguments that ability grouping is based on a belief that the child's ability is a fixed behavioural trait (Kelly, 1974; Reid, 1978), implied the existence of a self-fulfilment prophecy in the practice.

- Language of instruction as a factor in instruction and learning

My study also stumbled upon the issue of language of instruction at the two schools as having had a possible effect on ability grouping. In Zimbabwe, learners at the

secondary school level are instructed in the medium of the English language. This language is foreign to most learners at this level in Zimbabwe, hence most of them lack proficiency in this language.

My findings were that, while most pupils in high ability classes could express themselves very well in the English language, the majority of pupils in the low ability classes had difficulties in expressing themselves in this language. They had difficulties in understanding the questions I asked them in English. When I rephrased the same questions in their home language, Shona, they readily understood the questions, and provided responses that articulated their opinions of ability grouping very clearly.

In my follow-up interviews with teacher participants, my observations about the difficulties the pupils in low ability classes found in expressing themselves in the English language were confirmed (Miss Matsvuku, Chikomo; Mrs Tsigo, Brickhill; Mrs Mbeva, Brickhill).

My perception, therefore, was that, the English language, which was used as a medium of instruction, could have had the effect of distorting the concept of "ability" at both Brickhill and Chikomo schools. My own analysis of the personal files of pupils in high and low ability classes at Brickhill revealed that, the majority of pupils in the former classes were from family backgrounds of average to above average economic means, while those in the latter groups were from family backgrounds of below average economic means. At Chikomo, while both high and low ability classes

had the majority of pupils from below average economic means, the largest percentage of pupils from family backgrounds of average to above average economic means were found in high ability classes.

In Zimbabwe in general, and Harare in particular, English is spoken alongside home languages such as Shona and Ndebele in homes of people of average to above average economic means. People in this category are usually those in professional jobs such as teaching, medicine, law, or have businesses that make it possible for them to access information media such as television and videos, that are usually in the medium of English. Their children are therefore exposed to the English language at home and at school. The same situation is rare in homes of people of below average economic means. In these homes, information media such as television and videos, are not readily available. In most cases there is usually just one language spoken in the home, that is, the home language, Shona or Ndebele. Therefore pupils from these homes mainly encounter English at school.

My inference, therefore was that it was partly the above different family backgrounds with reference to access to English language, that disadvantaged the majority of pupils in low ability classes when their abilities were measured through the medium of the English language. The participant teachers (Miss Matsvuku; Chikomo; Mrs TSigo, Mrs Mbeva: Brickhill) themselves expressed the feeling that if the home language were to be used as a medium of instruction in their schools, the majority of pupils in the so-called low ability classes would find themselves assessed as pupils in high ability levels, since they would be able to articulate and express their concepts better.

My own effort to make them express their views in Shona during our interviews confirmed this perception.

My own inference here, support the earlier observations I made in Chapter Two, in respect to Troyna's (1992) failure to take into account the English language factor in the poor performance of children of Asian origin compared to the better performance of their counterparts whose first language was English, at Jayleigh school in Britain.

PART IV

5.5 INTERPRETATION OF EMERGING THEMES RELATED TO THE EFFECT OF ABILITY GROUPING ON SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Analysis of data in this study showed that ability grouping did encourage social stratification among pupils in high ability classes and those from low ability classes.

This was on the following sub-themes which emerged from the statements of respondents and document analysis.

- social background as a factor;
- stigmatisation/labelling as a factor
- segregation as a factor;
- discriminatory treatment of pupil by teachers as a factor
- language of instruction as a factor in social stratification.

- Social background as a factor

In this study, I stumbled upon data that showed that the social background of the child may have an influence on ability grouping at the two schools, Brickhill and Chikomo. My inference was that ability grouping did not have a direct influence on the social background of the child, but the tendency was that the children who came from family backgrounds of average to above average economic means were predominantly found in high ability classes, while those from backgrounds of below average economic means were predominantly found in low ability classes.

In my view, this scenario calls for a serious examination of the practice on the part of the schools. Continuing with this practice in the face of such a situation would imply that the schools would want to perpetuate a situation whereby high ability classes become identified with social privilege while their low ability counterparts are associated with social underprivilege. It would mean supporting the extension of the inequalities of society into the education system. This may particularly become the case when teachers concentrate their instructional attention on the high ability classes at the expense of the low ability classes as the case was at Chikomo in particular. The rationales of the two schools appeared to support my perception on this issue, and particularly statements such as:

... to be honest, we just have to accept that in life ... people are classified ... because to be sincere, these two top classes (4N¹ and 4S¹) are the classes on which we bank when it comes to results. Otherwise the rest is made up of mediocre to poor students whom we just have to entertain and at least give them the basics of education (Mr Magara: Chikomo).

This perception of mine is further reinforced when the administrator respondents made statements to the effect that:

... teachers give more work to 'A' classes than to 'B' classes... (because teachers) insist that low stream pupils write a lot of rubbish (Mr Makanika : Chikomo).

... teachers don't prepare much for the lower streams... they don't research much for these streams... But with the upper streams, they really work, they really research (Mrs Mhlanga).

When the bulk of pupils who are assigned to low ability classes come from underprivileged family backgrounds, and they become disadvantaged instructionally at school in the manner reflected above, then ability grouping becomes a factor in their social backgrounds, since it would tend to reproduce their social deprivation at the academic level. Paterson (1991), Connell (1997), Cohen and Lotan (1995), Chava (1980), Apple (1982), have also cautioned about the possibility of ability grouping reproducing the social conditions of the child in didactical situations.

- Stigmatisation as a factor in social stratification

The data of this study showed that ability grouping at both Brickhill and Chikomo had created a culture of stigmatisation. The administrators, teachers and pupils in high ability classes described pupils in low ability classes in a language that portrayed them as pupils who had discipline problems, pupils of lower esteem, pupils whose behaviour could not be understood, (Mr Chimbudzi:Brickhill; Mr Makanika: Chikomo; Miss Matsvuku:Chikomo; Mrs Tsigo: Brickhill; Rosemary and Peter : Brickhill; Elijah: Chikomo). The pupils in the low ability classes confirmed the

existence of the language of stigmatisation at the two schools.

The stigmatisation of pupils in low ability classes had the effect of lowering their self-esteem. What appeared to make the situation worse was the fact that this culture of stigmatisation was encouraged by teachers.

Any language that promotes stigmatisation of one group by the other encourages discriminatory behaviour, and it was not surprising therefore that relations between pupils of different abilities at these schools were soured.

Oakes (1985) argues that ability grouping has a stigmatisation effect, since it describes pupils as being of a certain type.

In this study, Oakes' perception was found to be valid. At both schools, the pupils in high ability groups were described in positive terms such as follows:

- "top classes"
 - "A streams"
 - "the cream"
- (Mr Makanika: Chikomo; Miss Mufumi: Chikomo; Mrs Mhlanga: Brickhill; Mr Magara: Chikomo).

Pupils in low ability classes were described in negative terms such as follows:

- "pupils who have discipline problems"
 - "B classes"
 - "low stream pupils"
- (Mr Magara and Mr Makanika: Chikomo; Mrs Mhlanga and Mrs Tsigo: Brickhill).

Such descriptions are bound to raise emotional feelings among the pupils. The feelings of pupils in high ability classes are bound to be pleasant and evoking a sense of pride and achievement, due to such descriptions. But then those of pupils in low ability classes are bound to evoke resentment and a sense of failure or hopelessness. This became particularly so when fellow pupils in high ability classes described their counterparts in the low ability classes in negative terms such as "those lower classes" (Rosemary, Peter: Brickhill; Elijah: Chikomo).

Such negative descriptions are likely to cause antagonism between the describers and those being described. These descriptions tended to make those described in such negative terms to react emotionally and this soured the relations not only between these groups themselves, but also between pupils in low ability classes and their teachers (paragraph 4.4.3).

It appeared the teachers played an instigating role in creating sour relations between ability groups at both schools. The language of administrators and teachers was loaded with feelings and values of rejection towards pupils in low ability groups. This was the kind of language that made one believe that teachers could not conceal their feelings to both pupils in high and low ability groups. The claims by pupils in low ability groups that their teachers neglected them, and the admission by the teachers that they tended to neglect pupils in low ability groups, implied that the pupils in these groups could read this behaviour of teachers as a clear testimony of their rejection by these schools.

- Segregation as a factor

The very concept "ability grouping", implies separation of pupils into two groups of supposedly different abilities. This therefore subsumes segregation.

In this study, separating pupils into high and low ability groups had created a situation of antagonism between the two groups. The two groups at both schools confirmed that they found it difficult to mix socially because they already feel that they had nothing in common with each other, or they (pupils in high ability groups) felt shy to be seen with those from low ability groups (Rosemary; Peter: Brickhill; Elijah: Chikomo).

Feeling shy to be associated with somebody or a group implied that one felt that one was of a superior status to the other. This meant that pupils at the two schools did not take ability grouping as a strategy to enhance the learning of pupils through instruction of homogeneous groups, but as a design to create status groups.

The teacher participants themselves used a language in describing ability groups, which had undertones of encouraging segregation. When giving justification for the practice of ability grouping, the teacher and administrator participants gave the impression that they did this (ability grouping) because they believed the pupils in low ability groups were not disciplined and so should be placed in their own groups. These participants also implied (in their statements) that those pupils placed in high ability groups were disciplined and therefore should be separated from the less

disciplined pupils. Statements like, "ability grouping is meant to avoid the pupils who are above average being disturbed by pupils who have discipline problems ..." (Mrs Mhlanga:Brickhill) gave me this impression. The reason given here appeared to say, the problem of discipline was typical of one group as against the other. It sounds like it was being suggested that the pupils in low ability groups had a natural tendency to be undisciplined. Who, among the pupils in high ability classes would like to be associated with a group described in such a rogue language, one may ask? To me, the culture of segregation at the two schools had strong antagonistic tones.

The pupils in low ability classes themselves expressed this feeling of antagonism towards their counterparts in high ability classes and the teachers in the following manner:

... some teachers openly say to us, "you are dunderheads" and this tends to affect our feelings... (Emily: Brickhill).

... the teachers always taunt us, saying we are dunderheads.... These are some of the things we are not happy with (Lovemore:Brickhill).

... we don't mix easily because they (pupils in high ability classes) just see us as dunderheads, even outside the classroom. They look down on us even in sports (Caroline:Brickhill).

... they (pupils in high ability classes) laugh at us, saying we have a poor performance, and they don't even want to play with us, because we have a poor performance (Lovemore:Chikomo).

My view is that, once ability grouping is based on the kind of rationales that these schools had, which clearly discriminated against pupils in low ability classes, the antagonism or sour relations reflected above could not be avoided. If the rationales

were focused on the desire to assist pupils to work at their own pace, then probably more positive ethics could have been nurtured among the different ability groups, and between the teachers and pupils in low ability groups. Probably the existence of antagonism at these schools had more to do with the professional ethics of the administrators and teachers than it had with ability grouping itself. However, Lingard's (1994:186) argument that, "the... segregation of certain students to provide them with intensive daily, individual help is unacceptably socially divisive and highly damaging to their self-esteem", appears to dismiss altogether any ethics or morality in the practice of ability grouping, however well-intentioned it may be. Moreover, Oakes (1985) rejects ability grouping because, however we may like it, the practice labels pupils as being of a particular type. Furthermore, Good and Brophy (1991) argue that ability grouping is unacceptable because in this practice, there is a tendency for teachers to dislike teaching low ability classes.

In this study, my perceptions were that the behaviour of teachers at the two schools, and what they said during my interviews with them, clearly showed that they tended to dislike teaching pupils in low ability classes, thus confirming the views of Good and Brophy (1991).

- Discriminatory pupil treatment by teachers as a factor in social stratification

In this study, pupils in low ability classes claimed that teachers did not treat them in the same way as they treated pupils in high ability classes. At Brickhill the discriminatory treatment against pupils in low ability classes was said to have taken

the form of inequitable distribution of textbooks, with the so-called low ability pupils saying they were made to share these while there was no sharing among pupils in high ability classes. At Chikomo, the discriminatory treatment was said to have taken the form of manual punishments meted out to the pupils in low ability classes during times when they should have been learning. It was claimed by the pupils in low ability classes that these punishments were for making a noise in class, but that when pupils in high ability classes also made a noise in class, they were simply cautioned and went on with their lessons.

Although I did not personally witness pupils in low ability classes being sent away for punishment, I trusted that the respondents in low ability classes were reflecting their experiences as they lived them. In the face of rationales that implied their neglect by teachers, and that implied these pupils were treated by their teachers as subjects of entertainment (Mr Magara : Chikomo) and not serious learning, but learning to just give them the "basics of education" (Mr Magara: Chikomo), I had no reason to doubt the pupils' claims about the said discriminatory treatment. Moreover at Chikomo, the following responses by the participants, further confirmed the possibility of the low ability pupils being objects of discriminatory treatment:

... teachers give more work to 'A' classes than to 'B' classes.... (Mr Mekanika : Chikomo).

... teaching poor classes affects us teachers, in the sense that when you enter the (low ability) class, you cannot help but feel the difference, knowing fully well that the class you are going to is not the same as class one (a high ability class) (Miss Matsvuku:Chikomo).

At Brickhill, the Acting Headmaster did not deny that some teachers could have distributed inadequate textbooks to pupils in low ability classes, while giving every pupil a textbook each in the high ability classes. Moreover, statements by some teachers and administrators below tended to confirm the possibility of discriminatory treatment by the teachers against pupils in low ability classes:

... ability grouping is meant to avoid the pupils who are above average being disturbed by pupils (in low ability classes) who have discipline problems (Mrs Mhlanga:Brickhill).

In the light of the above analysis, my inference was that ability grouping at both schools had the effect of creating a culture of discriminatory treatment of pupils by teachers. This inference found support in arguments by some theorists such as that ability grouping "is not neutral with respect to inequality of educational opportunity" (Sorensen and Hallinan, 1986:540). Oakes (1985:3), also argues that ability groups are "not equally valued in the school." Although most critics of ability grouping, whose views were discussed in Chapter Two of this study, do not clearly show how the discriminatory treatment of ability groups manifest itself, in this study, it was shown that it either took the form of unequal distribution of learning materials such as textbooks, or the unequal distribution of rewards and punishment of ability grouped pupils.

- Language of instruction as a factor in social stratification

All the critics of ability grouping whose views were examined in Chapter Two, did not identify language of instruction as a factor in social stratification. However, in

this study, data were stumbled upon that created an impression that the English language, which was used as the medium of instruction at the two schools, could have been a factor in social stratification at these schools.

At both schools, it was acknowledged that teachers used a combination of English and Shona when teaching the pupils in low ability classes, but did not do so when teaching those in high ability classes (Miss Matsvuku: Chikomo; Mrs Mbeva and Mrs Tsigo: Brickhill). The fact that the teacher found it necessary to do code switching in low ability groups and not in high ability groups suggest a realisation that these two groups were unequal in terms of their mastery of the English language. This, of course, cannot be attributed to ability grouping. What this means is that the English language mastery has the effect of emphasizing the existence of the two strata of the learners.

In Zimbabwe, the ability to speak English is associated with learnedness or education. Conversely, the inability to speak English is associated with lack of education. Therefore, the groups that were associated with English language competence would tend to be seen as superior groups to those associated with lack of competence in the language. It is this perception which made me to infer that language instruction, and therefore competence in its use by pupils could have played a role in the social stratification of pupils at the two schools.

PART V

5.6 SUMMARY

This Chapter represented the 'etic' stage of my data presentation and analysis. This as stated earlier, represents my intuitive and speculative interpretation of what the data meant to me as researcher. I as the researcher in this case, looked at the data against the background of the literature I reviewed on ability grouping, as well as the principles of education the Government of Zimbabwe and I as an educator uphold.

Contrary to the theory referred to earlier on, that ability grouping benefits both learners in high and low ability classes, the findings of this research point to the fact that neither the pupils in high ability classes nor low ability classes benefited from ability grouping as was practised in the two schools which formed the sample for this study. The only benefit, probably, the learners in high ability classes got, was the self-motivation to learn, which was as a result of the status of their classes. Actually the findings of this study support the school of thought which argues that ability grouping disadvantages pupils in low ability groups. Statements of learners in paragraph 4.4.3 were testimony to this: they were stigmatised, labelled, taunted and laughed at, as pupils with discipline problems, "dunderheads", "not real school children", supplied with fewer books that were old and torn, and teachers also expressed how depressing it was to have to go to the classes of pupils who were designated as low ability, and regarded the times for these pupils' lessons as a nightmare. In short, pupils assigned to the so-called low ability classes, were actually

assigned to perpetual failure. Infact the remark of one of the administrators that, "... the rest is made up of mediocre to poor students whom we just have to entertain and at least give them the basics of education" (Mr Magara: Chikomo), says it all. Ability grouping at the two schools did not give the pupils in the so called low ability classes the additional assistance and remedial teaching that is implied by those who argue that grouping pupils according to learning paces is meant to benefit all groups of learners.

The unexpected findings in this study were those of the apparent neglect of pupils in high ability classes as well by teachers who did not turn up in class for the lessons they were supposed to give at one of the schools, and the possibility of the language of instruction as a factor in this practice. From my perspective as a researcher, the neglect of pupils in high ability classes by their teachers at Brickhill had more to do with the lack of professionalism among the teachers than it had to do with ability grouping. Apparently according to these teachers, it was a waste of time to teach the pupils in low ability classes because pupils in those classes were incapable of learning anything, and it was not necessary to teach the pupils in high ability groups because they could learn on their own, anyway. Then one would ask, why do children go to school at all? This was a betrayal of the trust learners, parents, government, tax payers and indeed the country as a whole, had in the schooling system. The fact that the school administrators appeared to be unaware of this neglect of duty was even more disturbing.

The unexpected finding of the language of instruction as a possible factor of ability grouping, was stumbled upon during interviews with pupils in low ability classes and the teachers, and during my reading of pupils' assignments and mid-year examination answer scripts. What was disturbing was that, inspite of the teachers' awareness of this inhibiting factor on learners' progress in learning, the teachers did not deem it necessary to take up this matter with the relevant authorities, with a view to influencing policy to move in the direction of making it a pre-requisite to use the pupils' home language as a medium of instruction. One would have expected this initiative from educators, who should have the interests of all learners at heart.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Creswell as cited by Leedy (1997) has defined ethnography as a method of qualitative enquiry whereby "the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting during a prolonged period of time by collecting, primarily observational data" (Leedy, 1997:159).

The target of this study was the didactical cultures of ability grouping at two Harare secondary schools, one situated in an area inhabited by people of average to above average economic means, and the other in one inhabited by people, largely of below average economic means.

My initial assumption was that, since these two schools operated in two distinct social environments, their cultures of ability grouping could possibly reflect the social environments within which they existed.

In this study, ability grouping was treated as an intact didactical culture, complete with a history, traditions, beliefs, attitudes and values. The method used was interpretive ethnography, and the study was done in the "natural setting" of the

culture, as Creswell as cited by Leedy (1997) and Ary *et al* (1990), said should be the case in this paradigm.

In this study, I did not simply describe the cultural situation of ability grouping, but I also gave a comprehensive interpretation of my data, by means of thick descriptions of the cultural situation, as suggested by Wolcott (1987) and Vakalisa (1995). I, therefore, made an effort to distinguish between the 'emic' presentation, in which I tried as much as possible to reflect the perspectives of the participants and their natural environments, in other words, the insider's view of the situations, and the 'etic' presentation, which represented my own interpretation of that culture as an outsider (Borman, 1986). Chapter Four represented my 'emic' presentation, while Chapter Five represented the 'etic' presentation or perspective.

The period of this study was three months, which is about a whole school term in Zimbabwe.

This study sought to investigate what effect the culture of ability grouping had on instruction, learning and social stratification at the didactical level.

The data of this study was collected in the following ways:

- interviews and informal conversations (the main method);
- lesson observations;
- document analysis.

The participants in this study were the 4 school administrators, 7 'O' level History teachers, 10 Form Four 'O' Level History pupils at Brickhill (5 in high ability, and 5 in low ability classes), and 20 pupils at Chikomo (10 from low ability and 10 from high ability groups).

The documents analysed were, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture Policy papers, the History syllabi, the schemes and records of work of the teachers, personal files of the pupils, the essays of the pupils, mid-year examination answer sheets, and records of past 'O' level examination results of the pupils.

In this study, I do not claim to have answers to the problems that emerged in the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools. What I have produced, as Vakalisa (1995) suggests, is a record that future researchers on the subject could consult. It is also a record that teachers, administrators and policy makers, interested in the subject of ability grouping could consult.

What I present in this Chapter is a summary of what I saw, heard, and the impressions that I created out of the culture of ability grouping during the conduct of this study. To sum up, in the words of Vakalisa, "This is my own reconstruction of what I heard and saw as I was conducting this research" (Vakalisa, 1995:241).

6.2 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

6.2.1 Government Educational Policy objectives

The Zimbabwe Government has educational policy objectives. These were enunciated at the time of independence in 1980. In their articulation by the then Minister of Education, Dzingai Mutumbuka (1982), they are as follows:

1. to achieve an education process that evenly distributes resources among the learners;
2. to achieve an education process that evenly distributes learning opportunities among the learners;
3. to create a curriculum that teaches about one-ness of citizens and not their division;
4. to facilitate a provision of an education system without social stratification.

These educational objectives were formulated at a time when the Government of Zimbabwe had, in principle, adopted the ideology of socialism. It could, therefore, be argued that, since that ideology was dropped in 1990, in preference for a free enterprise economy, those egalitarian educational objectives fell away with their socialist ideology as well.

The reason why these issues are raised, has to do with the nature of ability grouping as a cultural practice. Ability grouping, by its very sound, implies stratification according to learning achievement and/or performance. By that definition, therefore,

it would suggest that such a practice negates the principles of egalitarianism that appear to be the cornerstone of the socialist ideology as reflected in the policy objectives above.

However, two issues would be important to bring out to address that question here. The first is that the two schools of this study are state institutions. All state institutions in Zimbabwe operate under an Act of Parliament or under regulations promulgated by the responsible Ministry. Since the Ministry had policy objectives as stated above, it would be expected that the schools would operate within the parameters of those policy objectives. The two schools' didactical cultures did not operate within the parameters of those policy objectives, by the very nature of the existence of the practice of ability grouping. This, therefore, suggests that these didactical cultures had no reference to the broader national expectations as represented by the said educational policy. They were purely 'home grown' at these schools.

But it should also be understood that these schools pre-dated the government that came into existence in 1980. And, therefore, it means that they continued with their didactical cultures that existed before 1980.

Secondly, even if it may be argued that, the national educational objectives stated above are no longer compatible with the new thrust of developing a society based on the principles of free enterprise (as opposed to central control of activities), the fact remains that those policies have not been changed up to the time of this study.

The point being raised here is that, the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools of this study, had no reference to national educational policy. They evolved from the needs and interests of these schools. The administrators and teachers could not say how these cultures emerged, as they found them already in existence when they came to the schools.

What the above scenario also shows is that, school cultures can exist independently of what central authority may prescribe as appropriate values and behaviour to be followed.

6.2.2 Rationales for ability grouping

In this study, five rationales were given for the practice of ability grouping. These rationales were given as follows:

1. to accommodate pupils' pace of work;
2. to accommodate subject aptitudes of learners;
3. to satisfy teachers' preferences;
4. to motivate the teachers;
5. to enable pupils in high ability classes to complete their syllabi.

Directly and indirectly, all the five rationales for ability grouping were stated in both schools of this study. These rationales meant that both schools had the following assumptions about the learners' behavioural traits.

1. That all learners were made up of two types, that is, the fast achiever and slow achiever.

That scenario in itself did not mean that the two schools assumed that learners' intelligence was fixed or unchangeable, as suggested by Kelly (1974) and Reid (1978). It suggested, at face value that the schools wanted to allow pupils to learn at their own pace of performance and achievement.

2. That all learners were made up of two types, that is, the achiever and the non-achiever. This perception contradicted the schools' assumption of the existence of fast and slow learning behavioural traits. This assumption was read in the rationales on subject aptitudes, on motivation of teachers and on discipline problems. These rationales implied permanency of learning behavioural traits in children, which is what Kelly (1974) and Reid (1978), criticised as being archaic and as being unscientific.

Rationales 2 to 5, implied the following:

- that the schools believed that pupils were naturally good in some subjects and bad in others. Or that some pupils had a natural inclination to Science subjects, while others had that inclination to Arts subjects. This rationale did not accommodate the possibility of a pupil having an inclination to both Science and Arts subjects. Neither did it accommodate the possibility of a pupil developing an interest in either Science or Arts or both, once a

conducive pedagogical environment allowed him/her to do so. This rationale assumed that behavioural traits in inclination were permanent. Hence, my perception of this rationale was that it lacked a developmental outlook or content. It was conservative and lacked pedagogical substance. It frustrated those pupils who had the potential to improve their performance and achievement in a subject they were not offered by the schools;

- that the schools had the intention to accommodate pupils' pace of work, but no intention to assist all groups to achieve learning at their own pace. This inference is based on views that were presented by the administrators in this study. In paragraph 4.4, Mr Chimbudzi of Brickhill, expressed the feeling that, ability grouping would enable pupils in high ability classes to complete their syllabi within the time given, but also gave the impression that the pupils in low ability classes would not be assisted to cover the syllabi at their own slow pace. The time that was given for both high and low ability classes to complete their syllabi, was the same - four years of Ordinary Level secondary work. This meant that the pupils in low ability classes would not complete their syllabi, and therefore that the possibility of these pupils failing was created by this situation. In the same paragraph, Mr Magara of Chikomo, was very clear that the pupils in low ability classes were considered to be a write-off, and therefore were there to be simply "entertained";
- that the schools believed the teachers could only or mainly be motivated by the existence of high ability classes, since these would make them look forward to their work. This implied that, if pupils were mixed, teachers

would not work hard. It also implied that the so-called low ability pupils were not welcome in dynamic learning environments. They had to be separated so that they would be treated to situations of demotivated instruction by the teachers. Therefore, motivated teaching was only meant for the so-called high ability and not for the so-called low ability pupils. This scenario confirmed the observations of the critics of ability grouping, that it has the effect of making teachers dislike teaching pupils in low ability classes (Good and Brophy, 1991). It confirms the theory that high and low ability classes are not treated equally (Oakes, 1985). It also confirms findings elsewhere, that these two ability groups are not offered equal learning opportunities (Sorensen et al, 1986);

- that the schools looked at pupils in low ability classes as a discipline problem, and that they disturbed pupils in high ability classes (Mrs Mhlanga: Brickhill). This rationale assumed that pupils in low ability classes were naturally a problem group. It is a rationale that precluded any effort on the part of the schools to deal with discipline problems, pedagogically. It precluded the possibility that discipline problems could be caused by lack of attention to the pupils or their neglect by the teachers, which this study proved to be true, as has been presented in Chapters 4 and 5. This rationale itself implied the existence of that neglect of the pupils, and, therefore, could be considered to be the recipe for the indiscipline of the pupils in low ability classes.

The rationales of these two schools did not create the impression that ability grouping was meant to tailor instruction to the levels of abilities, as is suggested by its

proponents (Hallinan, 1994; Cahan *et al*, 1996; among others). Rather, it was meant to protect the needs and interests of pupils in high ability classes and those of the teachers, at the expense of pupils in low ability classes. The rationales were loaded with values of discrimination and elitism.

6.2.3 Effect of ability grouping on instruction and learning

In tackling the question: What effect ability grouping had on instruction and learning, the analysis of the data of this study, produced six recurring themes. These were as follows:

- lesson preparation and presentation;
- teacher absenteeism and late coming;
- pupils' motivation and teacher failure to stimulate active pupil-participation;
- teachers' failure to recognize pupils' individual effort;
- discriminatory treatment of pupils;
- test and examination performance;
- language of instruction as a factor.

The above were categories that related to instruction and learning. The following were the findings of the study.

- Lesson preparation and presentation

At both schools, administrators and teachers said, in instructional terms, the teachers tended to prepare less for pupils in low ability and more for pupils in high ability classes. The views of pupils in low ability classes that their teachers often absented themselves from lessons with them, that they did not give them adequate notes, that they did not give them adequate textbooks, tended to confirm the inadequacy of instructional preparation and presentation for pupils in low ability classes by the teachers.

At Chikomo secondary school, there was also a feeling by pupils in low ability classes, that the frequent manual punishments meted out to them, resulting in them losing out on time for learning, was also one demonstration that there was inadequate instructional preparation for them by their teachers. At Brickhill, there was no mention of these punishments on either side.

However, I as researcher, could not see the difference in the scheme and lesson preparation of teachers for high and low ability classes. The schemes and records of work of the teachers were always the same set for both the high and low ability classes. For example, a topic on the First World War and its notes, were the same for the low and high ability classes. The method used in both classes would be the same. Therefore, it was difficult to tell in what way the high ability classes were taught more than the low ability classes.

My perception of the difference in instructional preparedness by the teachers for the two sets of abilities could, therefore, be interpreted in the following scenario:

- at Chikomo secondary school, the absence of instructional preparedness could be interpreted in terms of the frequent resort to give manual punishment to pupils in low ability classes, as this tended to rob them of valuable learning time;
- at both Chikomo and Brickhill schools, the frequent absenteeism of teachers from the lessons of pupils in low ability classes, could be interpreted as denying them adequate instructional time. However, at Brickhill, pupils in high ability classes were also bitter about teacher absenteeism and late coming to lessons. This meant that lack of professionalism on the part of teachers at Brickhill had more to do with this negligent tendency than ability grouping;
- at both schools the inadequacy of notes given to pupils in low ability classes, could be interpreted as denial of adequate learning materials;
- at Brickhill, the issuing of inadequate textbooks to the low ability classes, could also be interpreted as constituting inadequacy in instructional materials;
- the atmosphere of stigmatisation and stereotyping, at both schools, created feelings and attitudes of resignation among pupils in low ability classes, which resulted in them not participating actively in lessons. This was compounded

by the teachers' inability to stimulate pupils in low ability classes into active participation in lessons. Whereas, the atmosphere that presented pupils in high ability classes as fast, smart, intelligent learners, tended to encourage them to become active participants in lessons. It is this atmosphere to which the teachers contributed, which could also be inferred to as constituting denial of instruction and learning to pupils in both low and high ability classes, and lack of instructional preparedness on the part of teachers at both schools.

This picture (above), only confirms in a general way, what Good and Brophy (1991) said about the teacher inadequacy in their instructional preparation for pupils in low ability classes. But on the question of motivation, there is a specific reference to this, in the arguments by Bowles and Gintis that, ability grouping has the effect of making low ability groups "more characterized by alienation, distance and passiveness" than the high ability groups (Bowles and Gintis, 1982:197).

- Teacher absenteeism and late coming

In this study, I, as researcher, witnessed many cases when teachers absented themselves from their lessons with both high and low ability groups at Brickhill secondary school. Pupils in both high and low ability classes had made indications that this was the case. Pupils in low ability classes had also indicated that teachers did not absent themselves from lessons of pupils in high ability classes, although this was contradicted by some of the pupils in high ability classes.

The evidence produced by this study was that, teachers at Brickhill tended to absent themselves from lessons of both the high and low ability groups. My own perception was that at Brickhill, pupils in high ability classes could have been doing better than pupils in low ability classes in their learning, because of their own self motivation due to the status given their groups, and inspite of the neglect they suffered from some of their teachers. Conversely, pupils in low ability classes fared less well, because of a combination of teacher neglect and the demotivation they experienced due to the status given their groups.

At Chikomo secondary school, although the pupils in low ability classes claimed that teachers often absented themselves from their lessons for no good reason, I, as researcher, could not confirm this. Throughout the duration of this study, the teachers did not absent themselves from the lessons of the low ability classes. It is probable that this could have been a coincidence, or it could be that, since I was working with these teachers, they could have not wanted to behave this way in my presence. But it could also be lack of teacher diligence in reference to absence of serious instructional attention being given to the low ability groups. It is also probable that this lack of teacher diligence was with reference to the teachers' attitudes of stereotyping, stigmatizing and taunting pupils in low ability classes.

I, as researcher, also witnessed cases when teachers dreaded the moments when they were going to meet pupils in low ability classes for lessons.

All in all, the evidence produced by this study, showed that there was a lack of

teacher diligence when it came to the instruction of pupils in low ability classes, either through frequent absenteeism from lessons, or through displaying attitudes and feelings that demoralised pupils in low ability classes.

In literature review, in Chapter Two, there was no direct reference to the effect of ability grouping on teacher absenteeism. This appears to be a new revelation made by this study.

- Teachers' failure to stimulate active learner-participation

In this study, it was found that teacher expectations at both schools had an effect on the performance of ability classes. This expectation had a direct influence on both motivation of pupils in high ability classes and the demotivation of pupils in low ability classes.

Pupils in high ability classes had the perception that, their teachers saw them as intelligent, smart, fast learners, and also as the cream of the school. Therefore, the teachers expected them to perform well and to achieve. In their own submissions, pupils in high ability classes gave the impression that these teacher expectations on their performance and achievement, motivated them to work hard, so that they satisfied the expectations. It was not any superior instruction that motivated pupils in high ability classes at both schools, to work hard. It was the feeling that they were expected to perform, that motivated them. In addition to this feeling, they were encouraged by the good descriptions they were openly given, that they were smart,

fast and intelligent learners.

In this sense, ability grouping at both schools, had an emotional motivating effect on pupils in high ability classes. This evidence was provided in paragraph 4.4.3 in Chapter Four.

However, ability grouping at both schools was also found to have a demotivating effect on pupils in low ability classes, due to the same effect of expectations. From these groups, teachers expected bad performance and no achievement. This evidence is available in paragraph 4.4.3 in Chapter Four.

It was also found that there was a lack of variety of lesson activities to stimulate active pupil-participation in the lesson plans and in the classroom situation itself at both schools and in both high and low ability classes. The lively participation in the lessons of high ability classes appeared to have been a result of the self-motivation of these pupils to answer and ask questions in the question-and-answer sessions. However, the inference I made on this inability by teachers to stimulate active pupil-participation, was that it was not as a result of ability grouping since it affected all abilities. It appeared to be due to lack of work ethics on the part of teachers, or their lack of diligence. Even the claims of administrators that the teachers researched more for high ability classes than for low ability classes were not confirmed by my lesson observations and analysis of planning records.

- Teachers' failure to recognize learners' individual effort

The culture of ability grouping at both schools was also found to focus on group ability rather than individual pupil ability. It was the behavioural traits of the group that counted, and not that of the individual pupil. As a result this tended to demotivate pupils in low ability classes, since their individual efforts were not recognised, as the efforts of the group eclipsed those of the individuals. Conversely, the group recognition of efforts tended to motivate pupils in high ability classes, since any poor individual performance was ignored, as it was the overall performance of the group that mattered.

This latter finding was not directly referred to by theorists whose ideas were reviewed in Chapter Two. What is being referred to was how, as a result of their low status, pupils in low ability classes would tend to "respond defensively by refusing to commit themselves seriously to academic achievement goals" (Good and Brophy, 1991:385). It is probably, in this case, that pupils in low ability classes at Brickhill and Chikomo, resisted committing themselves seriously to their work as a response to the system's refusal to recognise individual effort by pupils in low ability classes.

- Discriminatory treatment of learners

In this study, it was found that ability grouping had the effect of making teachers at both schools treat ability groups in a discriminatory manner. The pupils in low ability classes were either allocated inadequate textbooks or were subjected to manual

punishments during times when they were supposed to be learning, or were not given adequate notes by their teachers. The same treatment was not accorded pupils in high ability classes. These were not subjected to manual punishment but would be simply cautioned for the same offence that the pupils in low ability classes were punished for. Pupils in high ability classes were also allocated a textbook each, and they would use these to compile their own notes.

- Language of instruction as a factor

The English language was the medium of instruction at both Brickhill and Chikomo secondary schools. Pupils in all ability classes were required to learn in English and write their assignments and tests in English.

The findings of this study were that, while pupils in high ability classes had no problem communicating and learning in English, pupils in low ability classes had difficulties communicating in this language. However, when this problem of communication was noted, I as researcher had to switch over to the use of the pupils' home language, which was Shona. When this was done, the pupils were able to communicate competently and with confidence and were able to articulate their feelings and experiences with the culture of ability grouping very well.

In the analysis of pupils' assignments and test scripts in this study, it was found that the pupils in low ability classes had the same difficulties in communicating their ideas in English. Their work was very poor, and they displayed lack of understanding of

questions and it was difficult to understand their answers.

However, their teachers admitted that language competency was a big factor in the poor performance of pupils in low ability classes. They expressed the belief that if Shona were to be used as a medium of instruction, these pupils' performance would improve dramatically. But in spite of the teacher's realisation that use of Shona as a medium of instruction would assist pupils in low ability classes to improve their learning performance, these teachers had done nothing to influence policy to change in this direction so that they would assist the learners concerned.

6.2.4 Effect of ability grouping on Social Stratification

The data of this study yielded insights which showed that social stratification in the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools, took the forms of segregation, stigmatisation, discriminatory treatment by teachers. Language of instruction and social background of the pupils emerged as factors that had a bearing on the culture of ability grouping, although these could not be directly attributed to this culture.

Segregation

The cultures of ability grouping at the two schools, had the effect of making pupils feel that they were two distinct groups that were identifiable by academic achievement. The 'us' and 'them' attitudes were quite apparent between pupils in high and low ability groups.

Pupils in high ability classes displayed attitudes of superiority complexes over pupils in low ability classes. However, while some pupils in low ability classes displayed attitudes of inferiority towards pupils in high ability classes, many of the pupils in low ability classes also displayed attitudes that rejected that status of inferiority.

They expressed belligerent attitudes, which also created an antagonistic impression. They expressed resentment at how they were treated. They resented being given a low status, when their individual efforts to move out of that status were being frustrated. The pupils in low ability classes expressed feelings of oppression.

In the literature review of this study, there was no direct reference to academic antagonism as a possible effect of the culture of ability grouping. However, this study revealed some insights into this phenomenon.

- Stigmatisation

At both schools, their cultures of ability grouping stigmatised pupils in low ability classes as being of low intelligence, the "worst classes", "problem" classes, groups that gave teachers a nightmare, "poor or dull classes", the "last classes", the playful groups (paragraph 4.4.3).

The high ability groups were given positive descriptions at both schools. They were described as, "very good classes", "A streams", "the cream", above average students (paragraph 4.4.3).

This study corroborated the observations by Oakes (1985), with respect to the effect of ability grouping on stigmatization.

At both Brickhill and Chikomo, pupils in low ability classes were stigmatized by both the teachers, administrators and pupils in high ability classes.

- Discriminatory treatment of pupils by teachers

In this study, it was also found that pupils in high and low ability groups were not given equal treatment by their teachers. There was a tendency of teachers to give special treatment to high ability groups and to deny the same to pupils in low ability groups. The discriminatory treatment made pupils in high ability classes feel they were a special group, while those in low ability classes felt inferior and despised. Pupils in high ability classes and the teachers labelled pupils in low ability classes, discipline problems.

- Language of instruction

Data were stumbled upon in this study, which showed that the language of instruction, English, contributed to the stratification of pupils. The pupils in high ability classes were identified as a group that was proficient in English, while those in low ability classes were seen as a group that lacked this proficiency. This had the effect of creating a superior group of pupils in language proficiency on the one hand, and the other which was inferior in the English language proficiency, on the other

hand.

- Social background of pupils

At Brickhill school, the majority of pupils in the high ability classes came from a family background of average to above average economic means. The majority in the low ability classes came from a family background of below average economic means.

This finding, however, had nothing to do with ability grouping. However, it was insightful to note that ability grouping at the two schools had the effect of assigning the majority of pupils from family backgrounds of average to above average economic means to high ability classes, and those from backgrounds of below average economic means to low ability classes. While it may be sound to argue that ability grouping at the two schools did not have a direct influence on the social background of pupils in high and low ability classes, it can also be argued that it ended up recreating the scenario of privileges in the family backgrounds at the academic level. The majority of pupils who were privileged in their homes also became privileged at school. The majority of pupils who were underprivileged at home, also became underprivileged at school. While assigning pupils to ability groups was not consciously done on the basis of the child's family background at the two schools, the coincidence in the reproduction of the family environment at the academic level made ability grouping a factor in the reproduction of social structures in didactical situations.

6.3 CONCLUSIONS

This study made me to reflect on whether, as human beings, we ever reflect seriously on our daily actions to what we believe in, and practice. It made me to wonder whether we, as human beings, have time to reflect on situations we are ushered in, or whether we simply swim along, because it is convenient to do so.

My meditation on these questions stems from what I consider to have been honest responses that I obtained from the participants in this study.

To begin with, the administrators and their teachers, gave me their rationales for ability grouping as to:

- accommodate pupils' pace of work;
- accommodate subject aptitudes of learners;
- satisfy teachers' preferences;
- motivate the teachers;
- enable pupils in high ability classes to complete their syllabi.

For a moment, when I was talking to the participants, I wondered whether it occurred to them that they were telling me that they believed in inequality, and that they were prepared to back it up by enforcing this strict stratification of pupils and knowledge. However, when it became clear to me that these were trained professionals, who had had long experience of instruction behind them, I accepted that values of social

stratification were human values, and here were people who were prepared to articulate and defend those values, no matter what other people believed or thought of them. Moreover, mine was not to influence their beliefs and professional practices, but to gain an insight into what they were doing, why they were doing it, and what effect this had on their feelings, attitudes, values and their day to day interactions.

The rationales of ability grouping at the two schools, were intended to separate what the teacher and administrator participants saw as fast and slow learners. These participants believed that learners were made of those two categories. They believed that the fast learners should be given a chance to perform at their level, just as Ediger (1995:138) believed that no "pupils should be sacrificed so that a given segment ... benefits therefrom". These participants believed that pupils in low ability classes were discipline problems. They believed that these pupils demotivated teachers, because of their behavioural traits.

However, the beliefs of these participants did not take cognisance of their own social and professional responsibilities towards pupils in low ability classes, and the feelings and needs of the latter. Their beliefs treated pupils in low ability classes as objects to be manipulated, and not subjects who had an active interest in the pedagogical scheme of their cultures. The beliefs of the participants ignored the individual abilities and efforts of the pupils in the low ability groups. They ignored and rejected the efforts of individuals in low ability groups to prove that they could achieve.

These beliefs had the effect of frustrating the individual learners in low ability groups, and engendered the development of attitudes of antagonism from the low ability groups.

The cultures of ability grouping at the two schools, did not allow mobility between the high and low ability groups. Both cultures assumed that ability was a fixed behavioural trait, although in their language they accepted the concepts, "fast" and "slow" learners. These concepts imply dynamism or mobility in learning behavioural traits, and yet in their other rationales, they implied that there was no such mobility.

The neglect of pupils in low ability classes, the absence of teacher efforts to assist them to learn, their stigmatisation, the contemptuous descriptions made of them (pupils in low ability classes), and the indifferent attitudes towards their poor performance, all point to the rejection of the concepts of "fast" and "slow" learners. They all point to the existence of a conservative culture that cherished the values of an elitist social organisation.

My conclusions were, therefore, as follows:

The first conclusion I made was that, the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools, contradicted the Zimbabwe Government Educational policy objectives. The very concept, "ability grouping", implies classifying pupils as "fast, average, or slow learners on the basis of their scores on achievement or ability tests" (Oakes, 1985:30). Once this happens, it implies that there is a stratification of pupils. Those

categorised as fast learners would be placed in a superior position, in terms of achievement. Those categorised as slow learners would be placed in an inferior position. Those who were categorised as average, would be placed in a kind of middle group, some kind of a 'middle class'.

This kind of stratification implies that treatment of these three categories of pupils would be differentiated - it would be unequal. The Government's policy objectives of the provision of a curriculum that teaches the one-ness of citizens and an education system without social stratification, were negated by the very fact of the existence of the practice of ability grouping. One could not be achieved where there is implied differences of needs and interests. It may be possible to talk of a concept of "one-ness" or "unity in diversity," but I believe this may only be possible where the diversity of interests are not stratified and a close shop, as the case was in this practice of ability grouping.

My second conclusion was that the rationales of the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools were contradictory. On the one hand, by incorporating the concepts, "fast learners" and "slow learners," they implied the existence of a dynamic system of ability grouping that allowed individual pupils to move up and down between ability groups. On the other hand, they also implied a rigid system where the individual's ability was interpreted as fixed. Such ideas in the rationales such as "avoiding delaying and disturbing the fast learners," "streaming according to subjects taken by learners," "to motivate the teachers", "to avoid discipline problems ---," implied that this practice could not allow mobility of pupils between groups. The

ideas that fast learners would be delayed or disturbed, implied that the slow learners' ability would be fixed, and that they always had a tendency to disturb others who wanted to learn. The idea of streaming according to subjects also meant that the schools had already made up their minds that one group of pupils were Science, while the other were Arts material. Here, it meant that those pupils who would take long to develop an interest and an aptitude in a subject, would be denied this opportunity.

There is also an implication in those rationales that teachers were only motivated by pupils in high ability classes. Underlying such thinking, could be the implied suggestion that the low ability groups were incapable of creating such motivation for the teachers. Also implied in this rationale, was that the low ability groups would not be the focus of instructional attention by the schools. There is an implied neglect of this group.

My third conclusion was that, the rationales of the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools were the same, although those two schools operated in separate and distinct social environments.

My fourth conclusion was that, the rationales of the two cultures, were religiously translated into practice, at both schools. There was a rigid stratification of abilities and of the subjects taken by the pupils. The teachers were motivated to teach pupils in high ability classes, but demotivated to teach pupils in low ability classes. The teachers motivated the high ability groups to work hard, through displaying their expectations for higher and better performance from these groups. Conversely, the

teachers demotivated the low ability groups, through their show of lack of confidence in these groups to achieve anything.

My fifth conclusion was that, social stratification of pupils at the two schools was promoted by the cultures of ability grouping through a variety of behavioural traits. The teachers and pupils in high ability classes, created a situation whereby the latter groups were seen as superior to the low ability groups. Pupils in high ability classes could not interact easily with pupils in low ability classes, for such reasons as:

- we "are shy from being seen playing with students from the lower classes";
- we cannot "interact with pupils in low ability classes because they feel out of place";
- because we see ourselves as the best.

(paragraph 4.4.3)

On the part of pupils in low ability classes, segregation between them and the high ability groups had been engendered by such reasons as:

- they stare at us, and think we "are just doomed to failure";
- "because they refuse (to lend us their notes) because they would like us to remain behind them, so that our label of being dunderheads would remain";
- "because they think they are better than this class";
- being placed in a low ability class, "makes the person feel he is dull" and, therefore, makes him/her feel inferior to the high ability pupils;

- because the high ability pupils "laugh at us" (paragraph 4.4.3).

Segregation in the two cultures had been compounded by stigmatisation, contempt, and taunting of pupils in low ability classes, which were said to have been promoted by the teachers and pupils in high ability classes (paragraph 4.4.3).

My sixth conclusion was that, the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools, were characterised by negativity towards pupils in low ability classes, because of the negativity of the rationales themselves. The rationales gave the teachers the opportunities to discriminate between the ability groups. They gave the teachers the excuse to neglect the low ability groups, because they did not provide the basis for individual pupil assessment, and because they made ability grouping the basis for teacher-motivation. The rationales also accommodated non-pedagogical considerations, such as the belief that it was natural, anyway, for human beings to be classified into elite and ordinary groups (Mr Magara:Chikomo). Such beliefs would not allow flexibility in the treatment of individual efforts.

My seventh, and last conclusion was that, it was difficult for me to say whether, if the rationales had positive principles, the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools would have had different values and achievement outcomes for all groups. This is because of the overwhelming evidence of the general negativity of ability grouping that was provided by the theories of its critics in Chapter Two of this study. This has been compounded by the findings of this study, which tended to corroborate the theories of the critics of ability grouping. Furthermore, this study has added

more insights into the negative attributes of the culture of ability grouping, including the rationales that contradicted those stated by its proponents in Chapter Two (Hallinan, 1994; Cahan et al, 1996).

The rationales for the cultures of ability grouping at Brickhill and Chikomo, amounted to a scenario whereby the following was happening:

- a facilitation of instruction for only pupils in high ability classes;
- an increase in learning for only the high ability groups;
- no need for adaptation of "content, level, pace and teaching methods" (Cahan, et al, 1996:29) to levels of ability, since the pupils would be assigned to subjects that they were deemed to be capable of handling.

In practice, the same methods of instructional delivery were used to high as well as the low ability groups. Therefore, the rationale given by Cahan et al (1996), was not the one used by the two schools of this study. The same content was given to all ability groups, although the high ability groups ended up covering

more ground than the low ability groups, because of the former's fast pace of work.

from their counterparts in high ability groups. The alienation from learning, meant that pupils in low ability classes could not utilise learning opportunities at their schools. Their alienation from the high ability pupils meant that attitudes of antagonism developed, thereby cultivating a culture of conflict. The fact that opportunities were not afforded to pupils in low ability classes to prove what they could achieve as individuals, meant that frustration would set in. It meant that they would not view their placement in the low ability groups as anything to do with improving their chances to learn at their own pace, but as preconceived designs by the schools to simply create an elite society. Instead of concentrating on learning activities, pupils in low ability classes would concentrate on resisting their ascribed low status. The indiscipline of this group that the teachers talked about could be an exemplification of their resistance to their ascribed low status. At the same time, their failure to achieve in lesson discussions, essay assignments, tests and examinations, and their lack of motivation, could also be a manifestation of their resistance to the way they were treated as a low status group. As they claimed themselves, what was the point in working hard, when that effort would not be recognized?

The point being raised here, is that the alienating effect of the cultures of ability grouping at the two schools, needs to be addressed.

There is probably a need to make available, a system of continuous assessment of performance across the curriculum, to provide a dynamic process of cross-fertilisation of abilities and ideas. Why not even allow pupils to nominate the group they want

to be in, and when they cannot stand the 'heat' or the 'chill' in a given class, allow them to move to another group. This kind of flexibility is unlikely to create frustration among pupils since they can move on, when they feel like doing so. They will also have a say on whether they feel they should be in a fast ability class or in one where the pace is slower, and the teacher could also assist them in making those decisions. The distinction would then be between fast track or slow track class, which can accommodate constant movement of pupils as they pick up or slow down on their pace of work and achievement. The distinction between "high" and "low" ability, tends to impose values of rigidity - it encourages the crystallisation of a belief that ability traits are fixed.

The evidence against ability grouping provided in the literature review of this study in Chapter Two is overwhelming. The findings of this study largely supported that evidence, with possibly new evidence coming up, such as the role played by language of instruction, if it is a foreign language to the learners. On the strength of the evidence provided in the literature review and in the data provided by this study, I would suggest that the two schools drop ability grouping altogether as a didactical practice, and go for mixed ability grouping. The advantages of mixed ability learning may be tabulated as follows:

1. There will be no stigmatisation of a group of pupils, although if teachers are not professional enough, they may still promote it in the mixed group.
2. Resource distribution may not be unequal since all pupils would be in one group.

3. Slow learners may benefit from interacting with and from the assistance of their peers.
4. It is likely the teacher may be compelled to develop remedial and extension work strategies in such a situation, thereby catering for the needs of all learners.

The findings about the language of instruction as a factor in pupils' performance, has made me to feel that the two schools could also address this problem. The schools could allow teachers to use the home language of the learners, alongside the official language of instruction in the so-called low ability groups since the aim in education is for pupils to learn. They could also mobilise their counterparts in other schools to persuade government to introduce a policy that allows use of home language as a medium of instruction.

Possibilities for future research

My study used interpretive ethnography, which allowed me to be both the researcher and instrument of the research project. This methodology permits researchers to give meaning to the experiences related by those they study (Vakalisa, 1995:96).

Although, I, as researcher and instrument, endeavoured to do my utmost to interpret my data, based on what my informants told me as their experiences and on my observations and documents available, there is always a possibility of faltering in any

method. Although three months were deemed adequate for a study concerned with an intact or existing culture (Nyawaranda, 1998), the possibility that more could have been discovered or found, had the study been done for a much longer period, is there. Therefore, there may be need for a similar study to be done for a much longer period and using other schools in Harare, to determine whether similar perceptions as in the present study could be arrived at.

A second possibility for further research in this area exists, precisely because, this study, as a case study, cannot be used as a basis of generalising about the situation in Harare secondary schools as a whole, let alone Zimbabwe. What may be required is to carry out a series of similar case studies, taking a longer time, in a cross-section of the 60 odd Harare state secondary schools, and perhaps a cross-section of state secondary schools in the country. What the present study did was to present two case studies where my perceptions have portrayed ability grouping as a bad academic culture for the reasons that I gave in my analysis and interpretation of the data.

A third possibility exists, with the case at schools where heterogeneous teaching is practised as a culture in Harare schools. Results would then be compared with those that have been presented with respect to the culture of ability grouping.

A fourth possibility for further research is to test whether the use of the first language of the learners does indeed have an impact on ability grouping. Results would then be compared with those of schools that use English as a medium of instruction in Zimbabwe's black dominated schools.

A fifth possibility also exists, with reference to professional ethics. Here, a study could be carried out to determine whether in schools where teachers carry out their duties diligently and honestly, pupils in all ability groups learn more than those pupils in the schools where professional ethics are lacking.

6.5 SUMMARY

In this Chapter, I summarised the findings of this study. I started by explaining that, because of the nature of ethnographic research, my purpose was not to influence the cultures of the two schools of my study, but to study them in their natural environments. However, I also explained that, it was my duty as an ethnographer, to give my own interpretations of the cultures I studied in the manner I did.

I then proceeded to give a summary of my findings, using the data presented in Chapter Four and the interpretation I gave in Chapter Five of this study. My summary was followed with conclusions that were derived from my overall findings, inferences and perceptions that I developed from the study.

This Chapter was then wrapped up with indications of implications and possibilities for further research on this subject of ability grouping in Harare.

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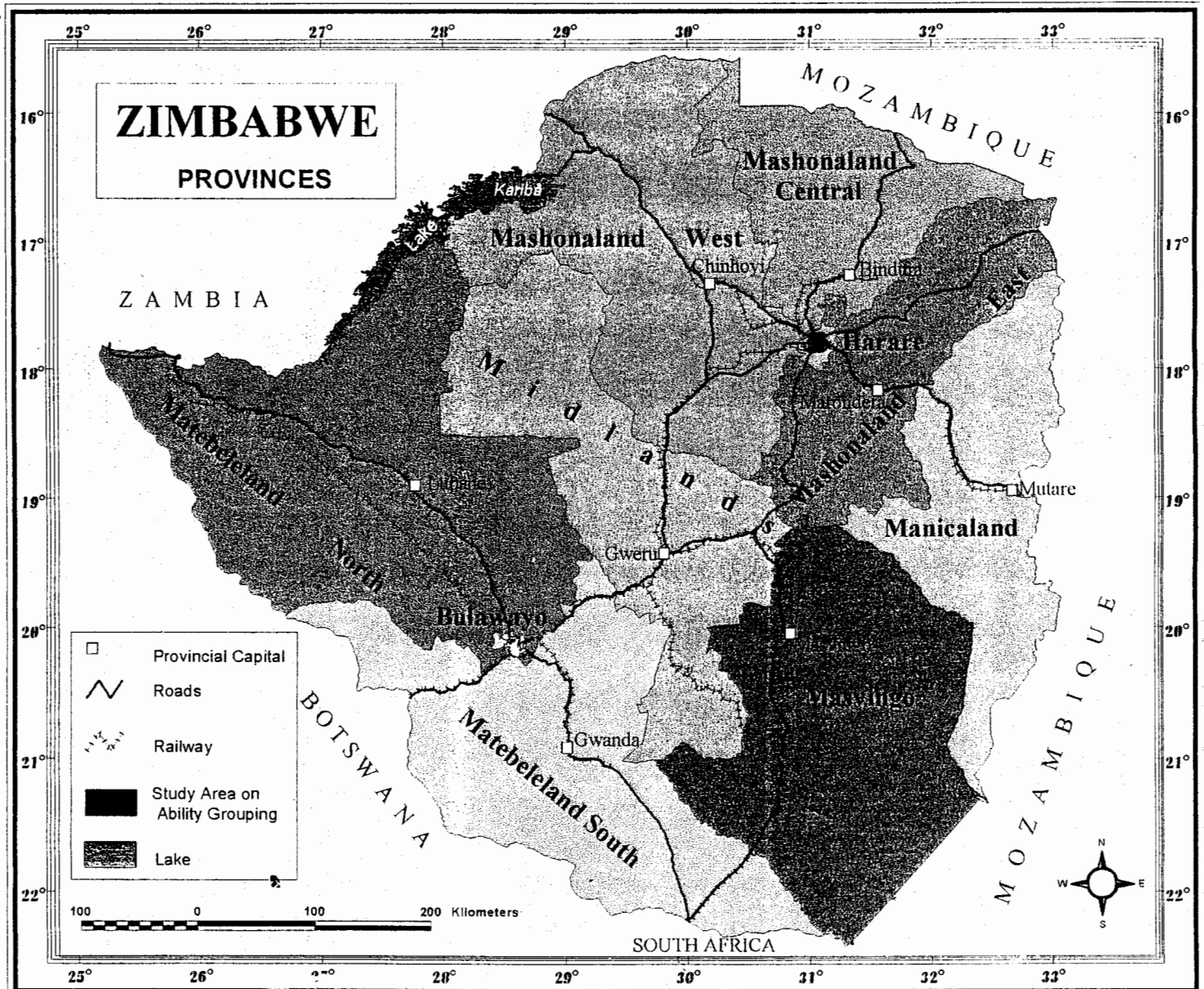
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

HARARE: SITE OF THE STUDY ON ABILITY GROUPING: 1999 (MAP OF ZIMBABWE SHOWING POSITION OF HARARE)



SOURCE: SURVEYOR GENERAL ZIMBABWE GOVERNMENT.

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW GUIDE

QUESTIONS		
ADMINISTRATORS	TEACHERS	PUPILS
1. Why have you found it necessary to assign your pupils to ability classes?	2. Why have you found it necessary to assign your pupils to ability classes?	1. How has your assignment to the present class affected your learning?
2. Is streaming a Government or school policy?	2. What have been your experiences, in handling ability grouped pupils?	2. How has your assignment to a high ability class affected your learning?
3. How is streaming done at your school?	3. How much instructional preparation is done by you for high and for low ability pupils?	3. How has your assignment to a low ability class affected your learning?
	4. Does streaming at this school allow for free interaction between high and low ability pupils?	4. Does streaming allow for free social interaction between you and your peers in the other streams?

APPENDIX 3

MODEL OF SCHEME-CUM-PLAN: CHIKOMO

Week Ending	Topic	Aims	Objectives	Work Planned	Teaching Methods, aids, sources	Exercises	Comments

APPENDIX 4

MODEL OF SCHEME-CUM-PLAN: BRICKHILL

Week Ending	Topic	Work Planned	Teaching Methods, aids, sources	Exercises Given	Comments

APPENDIX 5

LETTER REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH

DEPARTMENT OF
TEACHER EDUCATION

Chairman: T.J.E Bourdillon, BA(Hons) (Rhodes), CertEd (Cantab)
DipEd (London), MEd (UZ)

P.O. Box MP 167
Mount Pleasant
Harare, Zimbabwe

Telephone: 303211
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Fax: 263 4 333407



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

11 May 1999

The Secretary
Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture

Attention: Regional Director, Harare

Dear Sir

**RE: DOCTOR OF EDUCATION DEGREE IN DIDACTICS: REQUEST TO DO
RESEARCH IN HARARE SECONDARY SCHOOLS, JUNE - OCTOBER 1999.**

I am a member of the academic staff at the University of Zimbabwe, in the Department of Teacher Education. Currently I am studying for a degree of Doctor of Education in Didactics, which focuses on curriculum classroom practice in Harare secondary schools, with special reference to streaming and its impact on student learning.

I am therefore kindly requesting your permission for me to do this research in the Harare secondary schools from May to October 1999.

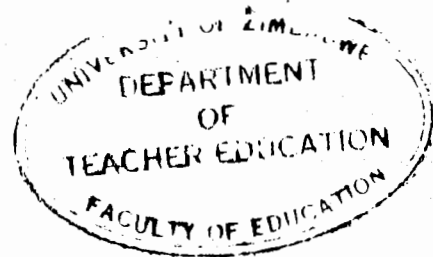
I undertake to surrender a copy of my research findings to the Ministry on completion of this research.

I will be very grateful to the Ministry for allowing me to carry out this research.

Thanking you.

Yours faithfully


BORNFACE CHENJEZI CHISAKA

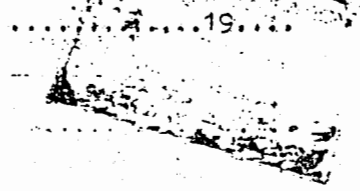


APPENDIX 6

LETTER GRANTING PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH

REF: C/440/1 Hre

Ministry of Education
Harare Regional Office
P O Box CY 1343
CAUSEWAY



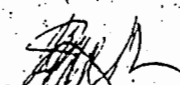
MR. B.C. CHISTKA
C.2

RE : PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT A RESEARCH ON : ABILITY
GRASPING IN HARARE SEC SCHOOLS
EFFECTS ON INSTRUCTION / LEARNING
Reference is made to your letter dated
and the Secretary's clearances letter dated

Please be advised that you have the Regional Director's permission to carry out your research in schools under Harare Region.

Please liaise with the Heads of Schools of your choice and show them this letter before you make firm arrangements with them on the conduct of your research.

By copy of this minute all Heads approached by Mr/Ms/Miss
CHISTKA are kindly requested to assist him/
~~her~~ with his/~~her~~ research.


.....
for : REGIONAL DIRECTOR : HARARE REGION

/HTT

APPENDIX 7

SAMPLE SHOWING PROCESS OF DATA ANALYSIS: 1

2. What effect do you think ability grouping has on pupils' learning? You have had a long experience of the system?

A. The only effect is on the behaviour of students. Those who are in the lower forms, think they are neglected, and hence they behave in such a way. That you won't understand them, and even teachers have an attitude towards the students.

Effect on neglected
Because usually, perhaps if they go there they ask questions (and) those pupils will not answer and so forth and so forth, so they feel that they are neglected, hence they have a certain behaviour. So what tends to happen is that, especially with those pupils who transfer to the school, some of them would be very good, we put them in those classes, they are affected. Their behaviour will also change, because they have to suit the behaviour of those pupils who are in that class. In some cases, let's

2. What would you say is the rationale for streaming at Marlborough High School?

A. Normally, teachers want to teach pupils of almost equal abilities, and then they will have to cover their syllabus with 4¹ and 4² or the upper classes, in the stipulated time, because they grab fast, given homework, they do, tomorrow you come, you discuss with them, they catch up very easily.

face
Whilst those 3rd, 4th and 5th classes, they don't catch up very easily, and sometimes they don't even do their homework. So, you are always behind, because there is no use going forward when you have not done something. So you try by all means to move slowly, so (1) cover the syllabus so that the pupils gain --- and that is the most important thing why we stream. And the other reason is for them to do certain subjects which are regarded as more difficult like other Physics and Chemistry which I talked about ---

APPENDIX 8

SAMPLE SHOWING PROCESS OF DATA ANALYSIS: 2

2. What effect do you think ability grouping has on pupils' learning? You have had a long experience of the system?

A. The only effect is on the behaviour of students. Those who are in the lower forms, think they are neglected, and hence they behave in such a way. That you won't understand them, and even teachers have an attitude towards the students. Because usually, perhaps if they go there they ask questions (and) those pupils will not answer and so forth and so forth. so they feel that they are neglected, hence they have a certain behaviour. So what tends to happen is that, especially with those pupils who transfer to the school, some of them would be very good, we put them in those classes, they are affected. Their behaviour will also change, because they have to suit the behaviour of those pupils who are in that class. In some cases, let's

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Whilst those 3rd, 4th and 5th classes, they don't catch up very easily, and sometimes they don't even do their homework. So, you are always behind, because there is no use going forward when you have not done something. So you try by all means to move slowly, so (1) cover the syllabus so that the pupils gain --- and that is the most important thing why we stream. And the other reason is for them to do certain subjects which are regarded as more difficult like other Physics and Chemistry which I talked about ---

APPENDIX 9

SAMPLE OF SYLLABUS AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

HISTORY

ORDINARY LEVEL (SCHOOL CERTIFICATE)

Centres considering whether to adopt any of the following syllabuses can obtain individual copies of past papers, on application to the Publications Department of the Syndicate.

Aims and Objectives (for subjects 2153-2163)

The aims of an 'O' Level History syllabus are:

1. to stimulate interest in and enthusiasm for the study of the past;
2. to promote the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of human activity in the past, linking it, as appropriate, with the present;
3. to help pupils towards an understanding of the development over time of social and cultural values;
4. to promote the understanding of basic historical concepts, such as cause and consequence, continuity and change;
5. to encourage the development of literacy and essential study skills;
6. to provide a sound basis for further study and the pursuit of personal interest.

The objectives of the examination are to test candidates' proficiency in the following skills:

1. the recall of relevant factual knowledge;
2. the deployment of knowledge in a relevant and coherent manner;
3. the understanding of basic historical concepts such as cause and consequence, continuity and change;
4. the ability to use factual knowledge and concepts to demonstrate an understanding of a historical period by analysing or explaining particular questions.

These objectives are closely interrelated and no attempt is made to allocate precise mark weightings to each. However higher grades will not be awarded on the basis of objective 1 alone.

Subject 2153. World Affairs since 1919

This subject will be available in June and November.

The examination will consist of one paper of 2½ hours. Candidates will answer five questions, taking at least one from the General Problems section of the syllabus and one question from each of at least two other, geographical, sections.

Essay questions will be structured into two parts. The first part will be descriptive, and will carry two-thirds of the marks. The second part will require explanation/interpretation, and will carry one-third of the marks. Approximately six questions will appear on 'General Problems' and five on each of the geographical sections.

APPENDIX 10

SAMPLE SHOWING 1999 MID-YEAR EXAMINATION SCRIPTS: FORM 4^S
BRICKHILL

Candidate No. 11
Section 11
4/11

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and to extend the German obligations in the Treaty included

It was started like this when Woodrow Wilson had made her 14 points in 1918. He was the first person in 1919 to do the points and also Germany had borrowed the money to the Allies and when the Allies asked their money they didn't repay the Allies their money as interest they refused to repay the Allies and also Germany had lost their colonies for about 1.5 million including the territories submarine and guns. Woodrow Wilson had also the first person to form the Treaty of Versailles it had got its own army on the first world war in 1919 because Hitler and Mussolini they also wanted to take over in 1914. The Treaty of Versailles was also made the German to lose their lands and refused to say the Allies the Germans they were left with nothing except their own hands unemployment rate and also the unemployment cost of living and the crisis power soldiers. Germany was a self sufficient to other countries.

APPENDIX 11

BRICKHILL: FORM 4^S MID-YEAR EXAMINATION SCRIPTS (CONTINUED)

candidate name
Section A

11/1

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and to extend the German colonies as the Treaty intended. It was started like this when Woodrow Wilson had made his 14 points in 1918. He was the first person in 1919 to do the 14 points and also Germany had borrowed the money to the Allies and when the Allies asked their money they didn't repay the Allies their money as instead they refused to repay the Allies and also Germany had lost their colonies. For example, 13 million including the colonies, submarines and guns. Woodrow Wilson had also the first person to sign the Treaty of Versailles. It had got the 14 points on the first world war in 1919 because Hitler and Mussolini. They also wanted to take over in 1919. The Treaty of Versailles was also made. The Germans to lose their troops and refused to pay the Allies. The Germans they were left with nothing except their hands. Unemployment rate and also the employment cost of living and the crisis power soldiers. Germany was a sad country to other countries.

APPENDIX 12

BRICKHILL: FORM 4^S MID-YEAR EXAMINATION SCRIPTS (CONTINUED)

Name..... XX Index No..... 54
 Subject History-1
 Section B

Nothing is to be written in this column

The stages to which Mussolini had come into power from 1919 to 1922. Mussolini had come into power in 1922. He was born in Brescia. Mussolini had demanded the 35 seats to the German when he was walking at the front of people passing because he was a very sufficient person. And the king of Italy invited Mussolini in 1922 because he wanted him to sign the red agreement with him and also wanted Mussolini to show him the guns and the his power to the soldiers of Mussolini. Mussolini wanted Italy to have its colonies because Italy was rich in oil and have a lot of minerals. Mussolini had come into power by demanding the 35 seats to the German and also the army have got the full amount as in fact. Mussolini have a heavy army thus why they were demanding the seats to the Germans.

APPENDIX 13

BRICKHILL: 1999 MID -YEAR EXAMINATION SCRIPTS: FORM 4'

The Versailles treaty reduced Germany's Army to 100,000 men ^{for the army} only. Conscription or the compulsory enrolment, was banned. Arms of war were to be reduced. Heligoland which was an air base was to be destroyed and the general staff was disbanded. The treaty also affected Germany's navy. There were to be 15,000 sailors only. No submarines were to be allowed in Germany. There were to be 6 battle ships, 6 light cruisers, 12 torpedo boats and 12 destroyers only.

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The treaty of Versailles also stated that Germany was to pay reparations.

Another major term of the Versailles treaty was that of territories. Germany lost Alsace and Lorraine to France.

Memel to Lithuania, Eupen and Malmedy to Belgium, Pultschin to Czechoslovakia and Poland was to become an independent state. Schleswig was given

away to Denmark and the Kiel Canal and Port of Danzig were nationalized.

The Saar coalfield was given to France and was to be returned to Germany after a plebiscite in 1935.

APPENDIX 14

BRICKHILL: FORM 4¹ MID-YEAR EXAMINATION SCRIPTS (CONTINUED)

Germany also lost her territories and colonies to the League of Nations who awarded them. A good example is that of Tanganyika, Tangaland and the Cameroons which were mandated to Britain and France by the League. The German criticisms of the treaty were very much justified because of the following reasons. Firstly, it was unjust to say that Germany alone had caused war. Secondly, the treaty was too harsh, it asked Germany to give up territories and money. Germany was had been affected drastically by the war and was not in a state of paying so much money. Her economy was unstable and she could not afford the reparations. The army was left too small and vulnerable to attack. The army of 100,000 men was too small to maintain peace within Germany. The taking of territories isolated East Prussia therefore Germany was weakened. So, from the above, we can say that the German citizens were very much justified when they criticized the Treaty of Versailles.

BRICKHILL: FORM 4¹ MID-YEAR EXAMINATION SCRIPTS (CONTINUED)

German also last last winter and
 also to the League of Nations the
 were and then a good example is
 that of Imphibio, Tiggard and the
 Germans which were mentioned to
 of the and France by the League
 the German actions of the treaty
 were very much justified because of
 the following reasons. Firstly it was
 unjust to say that Germany alone
 had caused war. Secondly the treaty
 had no basis it called Germany
 of territories and money Germany
 was not even expected airtically
 they were not even not in the
 state of paying so much money. Her
 success was unstable and she could
 not expect the reparations. The army
 was left to small and vulnerable
 to attack. The army of 100 000 men
 was too small to maintain peace within
 Germany. The taking of territories
 related said Douglas therefore Germany
 was unreasonable
 in from the actions, and even saying
 that the German citizens were very
 much justified when they criticized the
 treaty of Versailles.