



Dispelling Myths And Misconceptions About Streaming: A Case Of Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

This study examines the myths and misconceptions about streaming on pupils' academic performance in four Masvingo secondary schools. In Zimbabwe, and indeed many other countries in Southern Africa, streaming has been a much used and sometimes misused approach, in meeting the diverse needs of pupils. In this study, the qualitative survey design was adopted for use and data was collected using questionnaires, observation checklists and interviews. The study established that low ability pupils received low quality instructions, few text books, less attention from teachers and were also taught by negatively labelled teachers, temporary and student teachers. On the contrary, high ability classes were labelled positively, receiving maximum support from teachers and were taught by more experienced teachers. In some instances, mixed feelings on streaming were recorded. The initial differences between pupils in high ability and low ability classes were however exacerbated by streaming. Subsequently, in the way forward, the research study proposed that heterogeneous grouping be adopted, that schools allocate experienced and positively labelled teachers to low ability classes and that teachers use positive labels to stimulate interest among pupils at the same time building pupils' self-concepts.

Key words: streaming, myths, misconceptions, self-concept, labelling, lower stream, upper stream

1. Background of Study

The practice of allocating children to different classes according to their ability is one very common practice which bears closely to my question. The educational practice of streaming emerged around the turn of the 20th century as a way in which to prepare students for their 'appropriate' place in the workforce (Cooper, 1996, cited in Slavin, 2010). Students with high abilities and skills were given intense, rigorous academic training, whereas students with lower abilities were given a vocational education. The two most common forms of streaming are within-class grouping and between-class grouping. The current paper will only focus on the between-class grouping that forms part of a school's practice of separating students into different classes, based on their academic achievement.

Researchers have struggled for decades to find answers on whether students benefit from streaming and if there are pupils who are harmed by it. The answers on whether streaming benefits or is harmful to pupils' academic performance are not always clear cut and often depend on whom you ask and what learning outcomes are deemed important.

Banks (2006) as well as Bosire, Mondoh, & Barmao, (2008) posit that streaming has had positive results which explains why the system continued to exist. It addresses the needs of individual children. Kulik and Kulik (2004) in their meta-analysis reviews assert that the practice increases student achievement by allowing teachers to better tailor the pace and content for instruction to student's needs. For example, teachers can provide more repetition and reinforcement to low achieving students and an advanced level of instruction to high achievers. O'Neal (2011) supports the above assertion saying, streaming allows schools to better differentiate instruction by giving high achievers the challenge and the low achievers the support each needs to learn. This practice is in keeping with the need for gifted students to be with their intellectual peers' in order to be appropriately challenged and to view their own abilities more realistically.

On the other hand, Crompton, (2003) argues that streaming places students on two different academic paths and can limit a student's opportunity to learn by restricting the quantity and quality of course material provided in lower tracks. Streaming allocates the most valuable resources including a high currency curriculum, effective instruction and positive teacher expectations to students who already possess the greatest social, academic and economic advantages (Chisaka and Vakalisa, 2003 and Oakes, 2005). This results in the differentiation of an undifferentiated curriculum. This also contributes to

the widening of the achievement gap between the gifted and the slow learners. Thus initial differences become exacerbated and those children in the low streams who happen to improve latter fall too far behind the higher streams in attainment to be able to catch up and lose the chance to show their merits (Gwarinda, 2011). Chinyoka (2012) adds that in the lower streams, fewer curriculum units are covered, the pace of instruction is slower, fewer demands are made for learning higher order skills, and test and homework requirements are taken less seriously.

A study by Chinyoka (2011) found that teachers made distinctly different types of knowledge available to A, B, and C stream pupils. They assumed for example that 'A' streams did not require illustrations and examples while C streams could only grasp issues in concrete, descriptive ways. Teachers prepared more for 'A' stream classes than they do for the C stream. She also found that teachers modified the methods and the information they transmitted depending on which stream they were teaching. Furthermore, while questions from C streamers were viewed as attempts to disrupt the lessons, similar questions from the A streams were taken as confirmation of their thirst for knowledge. Appropriate knowledge is therefore matched to appropriate pupils. This result in knowledge defined as high grade being given to students perceived as having high ability, pupils perceived as having low ability being denied knowledge which is essential for educational success. Kulik and Kulik, (2004) support streaming saying that it increases student achievement by reducing the disparity in student ability levels, increasing the likelihood that teachers can provide instruction that is neither too easy nor too hard for most students.

Owing to the inconclusive findings for preceding researchers on this area of streaming, the current researcher has also decided to conduct a research in a bid to dispel the myths and misconceptions about streaming thus establishing the advantages and disadvantages of streaming on the form three learner's academic endeavors in Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

2. Theoretical Framework

The current study was guided by the labelling theory. A learner who is perceived to be dull by teachers and fellow learners may lack confidence and in turn might feel ridiculed, despised and inferior. S/he might perceive the class atmosphere as unfriendly and insecure. A self-fulfilling prophecy may result as the learner develops a poor self-concept and hence underachieve (Hayes, 2008 and Santrock, 2009). The notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy implies that differences between "dull" and clever pupils or 'good

ones' and 'deviants' may be heightened, or even created by classification. Pupils may gradually feel persuaded to bring their own self-image in line with that of the teachers (Biton et al, 2003). Mead and Cooley cited in Hayes (2008) focus on how a person is judged by others. They say that we develop our self-respect or self-concept depending on how others have judged us. Cooley describes this as the looking glass self, that is, other people are mirror of what one is.

Becker, (1996) cited in Haralambos and Holborn (2010) a proponent of labelling and self-fulfilling prophecy argues that by perceiving certain students in this way, teachers experience problems in working with them. The teacher applies labels on the basis of his perception and evaluation of pupil's conduct in school. Where a pupil is evaluated favourably, positive labels are applied and the pupils regarded as a conformist to teachers expectations, where the evaluations is unfavourable, when negative labels are applied the pupil is regarded as a deviant (Haralambos and Holborn, 2010).

Given the above, in assigning a label to a pupil, the teachers may emit expectations that the pupil will behave in accordance with the label attached to him i.e. form 1A, 1B, 1C and 1D. This has a lot of bearing to my study since pupils' self-concepts are shaped by teacher's groupings.

3.Purpose Of The Study

The study will give a cost benefit analysis involved as far as streaming is concerned in pupil's academic performance through examining the positive and negative effects of streaming on pupils' academic performance.

4.Major Research Question

What are the effects of streaming on pupil's academic performance?

5.Methodology

The present study took the form of a descriptive survey that was conducted in four urban secondary schools in Masvingo district, Zimbabwe, in order to explore and present the advantages and disadvantages of streaming among form three learners in Zimbabwe.

The survey design was used in the research because such design concerned itself with providing rich descriptions of phenomenon that could occur without the intervention of an experiment or in the absence of an artificially contrived treatment (Creswell, 2010). The main aim of the study was descriptive and exploratory. One of the advantages of the

study was that it allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of social phenomena from the participants' perspectives, as seen within their natural settings (Macmillan & Schumacher, 2010:315).

The target population comprised students who were in Form Three at the four secondary schools concerned, as well as teachers who were teaching the pupils involved in nine different subjects. From a population of about 380, 50 O-level pupils were selected. Stratified random sampling was used, since the population was split up into homogeneous groups by the academic performance of the pupils concerned. The sample consisted of 25 boys and 25 girls. To authenticate the findings, a triple-pronged approach was used, made up of interviews, questionnaires and observations. The questionnaire was completed by 50 pupils. The researcher interviewed 20 O-level pupils face-to-face to obtain their views towards streaming. The assistance of 8 teachers with observations and interviews was secured by means of purposive selection. By making observations and taking copious notes during the audiotaped interviews, the researcher helped to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data obtained, in accordance with Maxwell's methodology (2006,) which holds that doing so contributes meaningfully to securing a valid description of what researchers see and hear. The questionnaires were hand-administered by the researcher concerned.

Permission to conduct the study was secured from the Masvingo Provincial Education Office, Zimbabwe, as well as from the selected school headmasters/principals involved. Further permission was sought from the parents of the selected learners. Six days were spent at each of the schools in order to observe lessons, to carry out interviews and to obtain the completion of questionnaires.

The participants were informed that their involvement in the study was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw at any stage from an interview if they were not comfortable with their participation in such. Prior to the commencement of an interview, permission was obtained from the participant for it to be audio recorded. The participants were also assured of their anonymity in the research report.

6.Findings

Responses on the likert scale of the questionnaire were reduced from five to three as shown by fig 1 below. Responses that required strongly agree and agree were merged to form positive responses while those that required strongly disagree and disagree formed

negative responses. Responses that required not sure were retained and these indicated that the respondents might not have been informed of the subject.

Item Description	Agree %	Not Sure %	Disagree %	Total %
1. Streaming is an efficient way to handle differences in student abilities	58	04	38	100
2. Streaming addresses the needs of individual children.	50	04	46	100
3. Streaming allows teachers to better tailor the pace and content of instruction to students' needs.	66	02	32	100
4. The effects of streaming on pupils' academic performance depends on class	68	04	28	100
5. Schools offer different curriculum to pupils in different streams.	70	08	22	100
6. Streaming leads to the labelling of pupils.	88	00	12	100
7. Pupils' self-concepts are shaped by the labels given to them.	78	06	16	100
8. Streaming increases indiscipline among pupils in the lower stream.	62	02	36	100
9. Teachers relate differently to pupils in different ability groups.	82	02	16	100
10. Teachers have a negative attitude towards pupils in low ability classes.	84	00	16	100
11. Pupils have a negative perception towards streaming.	62	00	38	100
12. Streaming does not allow for the interaction between high and low ability pupils.	74	04	22	100
13. Pupils in the upper streams look down upon pupils in the lower streams.	74	00	26	100

Table 1: Summarising responses from the questionnaire

Source: (Field data, 2012)

The majority of the respondents, fifty eight percent (58%) view streaming as an efficient way to handle differences in student abilities, four percent (4%) were not sure while thirty eight percent (38%) of the respondents disagreed to the assertion. Fifty percent (50%) of the respondents agreed to the assertion that streaming addresses the needs of individual children thus improving their academic performance, while forty six percent (46%) did not agree to the assertion. Four percent (4%) of the respondents were not sure. The findings also indicate that sixty six (66%) percent of the respondents agreed that the practice of streaming increases student achievement by allowing teachers to better tailor the pace and content of instruction to students' needs, two percent (2%) were not sure while thirty four percent (34%) disagreed. The findings seem to suggest that the respondents are conscious of the advantages and disadvantages of streaming.

As shown by the table 1 above, sixty eight percent (68%) of the respondents pointed out that the effects of streaming on pupils' academic performance depends on class, four percent (4%) were not sure while twenty eight percent (28%) of the respondents did not agree. Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents are of the opinion that schools offer different curriculum to pupils in different streams, eight percent (8%) were not sure and twenty two percent (22%) did not agree. Eighty eight (88%) percent of the respondents agreed to the statement that streaming leads to the labelling of the pupils, while twelve percent (12%) of the respondents disagreed. Further, seventy eight percent (78%) of the respondents agreed that streaming shapes pupils' self-concepts (negatively or positively), six percent (6%) were not sure and sixteen percent (16%) of the respondents disagreed. Most respondents, sixty two percent (62%) assert that streaming increases indiscipline among pupils in the lower stream, two percent (2%) were not sure while thirty six percent (36%) of the respondents disagreed. Eighty four percent (84%) of the respondents' purport that teachers related differently to pupils in different ability groups, two percent (2%) were not sure while sixteen percent (16%) disagreed. It was generally believed that teachers have a negative attitude towards pupils in the lower streams, eighty four percent (84%) of the respondents agreed while sixteen percent (16%) disagreed. Sixty two percent (62%) of the respondents have a negative perception towards streaming while thirty eight percent (38%) hold positive attitudes towards streaming. Seventy four percent (74%) of the respondents also pointed out that streaming did not allow for the interaction between high and low ability pupils, six percent (6%) were not sure while twenty two percent (22%) of the respondents disagreed. Lastly, seventy four percent (74%) of the respondents believed that pupils in the upper streams

looked down upon pupils in lower streams while twenty six percent (26%) of the respondents disagreed to that assertion. The deduction that can be made from the above findings is that the respondents are informed on the effects of streaming on pupils' academic performance, especially the positive and negative effects of streaming.

7. Findings From Interviews And Observations

- Accommodates pupils' pace of work.
- Facilitates competition among pupils.
- Enables pupils of high ability classes to complete their work.
- Satisfies teachers' preferences. Resources, best teachers and the best curriculum and subjects are being channelled to high ability students.
- Provide more individual attention, repetition and review for low achievers.
- Reduces disparity in student ability levels.
- Leads to labelling of students and teachers
- Increases indiscipline among pupils in the low ability stream.
- A positive self-esteem for those in 'A' streams and a negative self-esteem for those in the low ability classes.
- Pupils in upper streams look down upon pupils in lower streams.
- Social life of those in upper streams is affected by too much pressure of work.

8. Discussion

It was found in this study that streaming enabled pupils in high ability classes to complete their syllabi by avoiding being slowed down by low ability pupils. A teacher from one of the schools revealed that:

Teaching a group of like-ability students allows teachers to adjust the pace of instruction to student's needs. Teachers instruct at a slower pace, providing more repetition and reinforcement with a group of low achieving students than would be with a group of high achievers.

Some teachers who participated in this study also said that there was room for extra work or extension especially for fast learners when they are grouped together. The majority of the respondents, 84%, assert that streaming addresses the needs of individual children thus improving their academic performance. This is in line with findings made by Chinyoka (2011). Some also say that streaming is an efficient way to handle differences

in students' abilities. A teacher from one of the schools, purports that a class of high achievers is given more opportunities for independent research and co-operative group discussion than a group of low achievers would be given. It was also observed that high achievers were asked to apply their skills to solving higher level thinking problems. A student from one of the schools was clear that the pupils in low ability classes were considered to be a write-off, and therefore were there to be simply entertained. Findings from the four schools established that teachers were better motivated by high ability classes rather than low ability classes, and they looked forward to their work with them. This confirmed the observations of the critics of streaming, that it has the effects of making teachers dislike teaching pupils in low ability classes (Good and Brophy, 2003) and that high and low ability groups are not offered equal opportunities.

Eighty percent (80%) of the teachers interviewed asset that streaming increases student achievement through providing instruction that is neither too easy nor too hard for most students. However most low ability pupils interviewed were against the idea saying that the disparity between the gifted and the slow learners is often exacerbated by streaming especially when teachers give more attention, resources and highly expensive curriculum to the gifted students. A teacher from one of the high schools pointed out that the high achievers benefited from competing with one another and the low achievers benefit from not having to compete with their more able peers. Chinyoka (2012) noted that there was also competition within the groups as well as in the class or group as a whole. However, some pupils in the 'A' streams also blamed streaming for exerting too much pressure on them. In one school, a student from an 'A' class pointed out that,

I don't like the competition here, it makes me lose confidence. I used to be good before we were streamed but now no.

Too much competition among learners will therefore lead to high levels of anxiety among pupils thus affecting their self-esteem and their academic performance.

Some teachers in this study however argue that it is not easy to cater for individual attention even in a streamed class because of the diversity of pupils' aptitude. It was also observed that the differences are not only found among different individual but can be noticed within the same individual too. This is in line with Stauffer, Abrahams and Pikulski's (2001) findings that students in a class are so different from each other, that no group has yet been found in which the individuals composing it possess equal amounts of any one ability. This study established that teachers continue to differentiate pupils even in streamed classes, giving more attention, favour, resources to those they think

were the high flyers. This was also confirmed by observation. The above findings contradict findings from Kulik (2007) and Kulik & Kulik (2004) who posit that streaming caters for individual differences in a class.

There was no indication in this study that streaming was used to tailor instruction to the levels of abilities, as is suggested by the proponents (Slavin, 2010; Gwarinda, 2011; Kulik and Kulik, 2004 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 study established that the practice of streaming was loaded with the values of discrimination, stigmatisation and elitism. Pupils in high ability classes believed 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 the best results. The positive teacher expectations motivated them to work hard. The higher levels of motivation were not related to the superior instruction when compared to low ability classes. The critical factor was therefore high teacher expectations. It was found that streaming had a motivating effect on pupils in high ability classes. To some extent, it also had a motivating effect on pupils in low ability classes.

In the four schools, the majority of teachers and pupils agreed that teachers tended to prepare less for pupils in low ability classes than those in high ability classes. The views of pupils in low ability classes were that their teachers often absented themselves from lessons, they did not give them adequate notes and they did not give them adequate textbooks. The problem of textbooks was confirmed by observation. In one school, pupils in high ability classes were allocated a textbook each and they would use these to compile their own notes. At one school which had serious problems of textbooks, pupils in the low ability groups were not given even a single book to share but those in high ability groups shared a book among six students. This confirmed that the disadvantages faced by pupils in low ability classes arose out of teacher and school choices.

Although the allocation of resources was different between ability groups, the schemes and records of work of the teachers were always the same for both high and low ability classes. There was no evidence that teachers, in their planning, made special plans to cater for the diverse aptitudes of the learners. The separation of the ability groups did not therefore give low ability groups any particular advantage with regard to the way they were taught. It was found that in schools where the same curriculum was given to all streams, those from the upper streams benefited the pace, revision while those from the low streams lagged behind. In most cases they were pampered with notes without

explanations. Some pupils said, “Isu tinongopiwa manotes chete chete” (Teachers do not give any explanations on the notes they give to us). It can be concluded from the interviews, questionnaires and observations made that the initial differences between those from low ability classes and those from high ability classes are exacerbated by streaming.

This study also established that pupils in low ability classes fared less well because of a combination of teacher neglect and the demotivation they experienced due to their inferior status. At one of the high schools, pupils in low ability classes also claimed that teachers often absented themselves from their lessons for no good reasons; this was also confirmed by observation. It was also observed that teachers dreaded teaching periods when they were scheduled to meet pupils in low ability classes for lessons. Some teachers were also observed to bunk lessons in high ability classes. All in all the evidence produced in this study showed that there was a lack of teachers’ commitment and motivation when it came to the instruction of pupils in low ability classes, either through absenteeism from lessons, or through displaying attitudes and feelings that demoralized pupils in low ability classes. This also confirms findings of Chisaka and Vakalisa (2003) who found that even where low stream pupils are not disheartened, teachers may expect little of them and attempt less work with them than they would with others. This may be part of the reason why streaming tends to boost the performance of the top stream pupils but depress that of lower streams.

The majority of the respondents eighty six percent (86%) in this study pointed out that the major issue of streaming is that of labelling, stigmatization and discriminatory treatment of low ability pupils and teachers. A teacher from one of the schools studied claims that, labelling students according to ability and assigning them to low achievement groups may also communicate self-fulfilling low expectation as proposed by the proponents of labelling theory Becker (1971) in Haralambos and Holborn (2010). Majority of the respondents interviewed purport that children in low ability classes were described as being of low intelligence, the worst classes, problem classes, as groups that gave teachers problems, write offs as poor or dull classes and as playful. In contrast, the high ability groups were described as very good classes, ‘A’ streams, as the cream, an enthusiastic group, and as above average students. The study corroborated the observations of Oakes (2005), Mortimore and Blackstone (2008) with respects to the effect of streaming on stigmatization. It was also found that the teachers’ approach to discipline problems was different between the ability groups. Pupils in low ability classes

were more likely to be subjected to manual punishments than their peers in high ability classes.

Data from interviews and questionnaires also indicated that the stigmatization and stereotyping at the four schools created feelings and attitudes of resignation, frustration, nervousness, guilty, shame, hostility, phobia, stress, tension and low self-esteem 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. The teachers contributed to the negative atmosphere, which could be inferred to constitute denial of instruction and learning to pupils. Most students highlighted that lower track classes are often stigmatized by a general feeling that they are not capable learners and cannot be expected to master the same kinds of skills that are demanded of other classes. Students from the four schools attributed feelings of inferiority and worthlessness as one of the outcome in low achieving groups. This confirmed the observations of critics of streaming, Rogers (1998) in Santrock (2009) who asserts that without self-regard, pupils in low streams often feel small and helpless and they fail to become what they want to be.

On the contrary, the majority of respondents from upper streams agreed that labelling and stigmatization was also found to have some positive effects on pupils in the upper streams, whose self-concepts were raised because of being in the 'A' streams. This contradicts findings of Kulik and Kulik (2004) who found out that impact of homogeneous grouping on self-esteem are slightly negative for high ability students and slightly positive for low ability students. Majority of the students in the upper streams posited that they worked hard to keep pace with the challenge in the best class. On the other hand, one teacher suggests that placing academically disadvantaged students in special classes with other lower achieving students will lead to a negative self-concept and create long lasting stigmatization. Some pupils in the lower streams asserted that lower streams are associated with rejection, poor academic performance, laziness and dullness.

This study also established that not only pupils were labelled, teachers were also labelled as A, B, and C teachers. In all the four schools, headmasters confirmed that the best classes were taught by the best teachers who were either 'O' level or 'A' level examiners. At one school, a teacher stated that, I have been at this school for more than five years but I was never given the opportunity to teach a high ability class. Another teacher also said that the way classes are allocated to teachers at this school is unfair.

This research found out that only teachers teaching the upper streams worked hard and those who were deprived of the chance to teach best classes adopted a negative attitude towards their work. This however worsened the plight of the low ability pupils who are already disadvantaged. A high level of absenteeism was observed as a result. Like pupils in low ability classes, teachers who were only made to teach low ability classes felt worthless, their self-esteem was negatively affected as a result. This however worsened the plight of low ability pupils who were already disadvantage. A study by Chaska (1996) in Chinyoka (2012) in Harare's fifteen urban secondary schools also confirms that the best teachers were usually assigned to the best "pupils" thus increasing the achievement gap between streams. In all the schools because of teacher shortages, lower streams were often taught by temporary teachers, new corners and also negatively labelled teachers. Chinyoka (2011) also found out that 80% of the teachers indicated that they were demotivated when teaching upper streams. It is therefore crystal clear to say both teachers and pupils are labeled in a streamed school.

The evidence produced by this study revealed that low stream classes were black spots for indiscipline. Because of labelling and self-fulfilling prophecies, pupils in low streams tended to misbehave. It was observed that they take drugs, engage in bullying, do not hand their books for marking in time, absent themselves from school for no apparent reason. In all the four schools studied, some pupils became truants because of some teachers and some students in the upper streams may be teasing them because of performing badly. To avoid this, some pupils assert that they will choose to stay away from school especially on lessons they did not want or on days of writing tests. This was related to findings made by Siann and Ugwuebu (1990) in Haralambos and Holborn (2010) who pointed out that truancy sprang up because of some children's thinking that schools offered nothing of importance to them. The child would perceive schooling as irrelevant to their interests thus leading to withdrawal in active participation in class.

9.Recommendation

On the basis of the findings made in the current study, the following recommendations and suggestions were made. Heterogeneous grouping has more to offer by way of such strategies as cooperative learning, peer coaching and small group discussions, all of which can be explored and used to create productive social relationships among learners of different learning abilities, while improving their learning abilities. Teachers also need

to vary their level and pace of instruction according to the student level of readiness and learning rates in regrouped classes.

Schools should also allocate experienced and professional teachers to low-ability classes. Doing so might lead to the development of positive attitudes towards the subject and to the building of self-confidence in the pupils. Inexperienced and unprofessional teachers should share classes with more experienced teachers so that they can be assisted in their teaching practice.

Last but not least, since teachers are significant others who shape pupils' self-concept through their comments, attitudes, assessments and reactions to pupils, they should comment positively on pupil behaviour in the lower streams, so that their self-concepts are built up.

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