


The manifestations of the practice of within-class homogeneous ability grouping

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Background: This article casts the analytical spotlight on the practice of within-class homogeneous (same) ability grouping where learners are placed in small groups for instruction based on their perceived performances, reading levels and interest. Very few studies have focused on within-class ability grouping, especially in a South African context, where this homogeneous style within-class grouping is the dominant practice in Grade 1 classrooms, despite literature's cautions against its continuous use.

Aim: This article aims to address the following questions: what are the manifestations of the practice of within-class homogeneous ability grouping, and how does it account for learner achievement levels in Grade 1 classrooms?

Setting: A total of 12 Grade 1 learners, in relation to their teachers and their principals, from three selected public schools in the Western Cape, were interviewed and observed within a classroom setting. Bourdieu's work is used to explain the interiority and exteriority of social relations, how practice gets internalised and embodied on the inside, and manifested in various ways on the outside.

Methods: This empirical exploration used the qualitative-interpretive paradigm and followed a multiple case study approach where 6-year-old Grade 1 learners were observed and analysed.

Results: The results show differential treatment of groups and the labelling of learners, which gets internalised constituting particular learner dispositions and resulting in learner agency. Furthermore, it shows how learner agency is being informed and constituted in ways that affect their educational outcomes in profound ways.

Conclusion: The author argues that by placing children in groups based on their perceived ability results in the children gaining differential learner experiences and ultimately attaining differential learner achievement levels. In other words, it creates differential environments within the same classroom enabling some to outshine while disabling others.

Keywords: ability grouping; homogeneous style grouping; learner achievement; primary school; qualitative research; multiple case study approach.

Introduction

'When you do Grade 1 teaching ... you have to teach in groups, and I'm not talking here about general groups. I'm talking about ability groups. In the first term of Grade 1 you establish group cohesion ... but at the same time you observing the children to see 'who's who in the zoo', who fits where and then you do your grouping. I got maths groups, reading groups, [but] they all at different levels. You can't teach Grade 1 without doing that ... you can't teach in a blanket way.' (Dumont Primary, female, Grade 1 teacher)

The opening quotation of this article depicts the strong ability discourse that frames pedagogical practices in Grade 1 classrooms in South African primary schools. This practice of within-classroom homogeneous (same) ability grouping follows whole-class teaching where teachers categorise students into small groups, based on their perceived performance, reading levels and interests (Bolick & Rogowsky 2016). However, students with the same or similar levels of ability are placed in homogeneous (same ability) groups for instruction within a heterogeneous (mixed-ability) classroom. The rationale behind placing children in ability groups is to diversify teaching and learning so as to bring them all to the same level (Slavin 1990; Steel 2005). The practice of within-class homogeneous ability grouping continues, despite researchers' inconsistent opinions as to whether it leads to achievement. Those in favour of this homogeneous style within-class ability grouping provide compelling reasons for its continuation, such as the needs brought about by teaching to diverse groups of learners, which, in a way, individualises teaching and learning, allowing for 'students to advance at their own rate with others of similar ability' (Esposito 1973:166),

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and that it leads to improved academic outcomes, especially in the case of reading instruction (Kulik & Kulik 1992; Nomi 2010; Tieso 2003). Kulik and Kulik (1992) assert that:

... [P]rogrammes that offer the same basic curriculum have little or no effect on achievement, but that programmes differentiated for the aptitude of the group are beneficial for pupils of all ability levels. (p. 415)

However, there are researchers who caution against the use of within-class homogeneous grouping, noting that it has a negative effect on achievement, as well as the psychological and social welfare of young students. Additionally, it only accelerates achievement for students in higher achieving groups, while it holds negative consequences for those in lower achieving groups, such as low self-esteem, coupled with low academic achievement (Bolick & Rodowsky 2016; Kaya 2015; Leonard 2001; Slavin 1990; Steel 2005). Slavin (1990) cautions that:

... [G]iven the anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian nature of [same] ability grouping, the burden of proof should be on those who would group rather than who favour heterogeneous grouping, and in the absence of evidence that grouping is beneficial, it is hard to justify the continuation of this practice. (p. 494)

Kulik and Kulik (1992) and Slavin (1990), as well as Lou et al. (1996), respectively, offer some interesting thoughts on the issue of ability grouping. Although these studies are dated years ago, they are often cited as evidence, with respect to ability grouping. Slavin (1990) asserts that ability grouping has little or no effect on achievement. Kulik and Kulik (1992), to the contrary, aver that programmes, which entail more substantial adjustments of curriculum to ability, such as cross-grade and within-class programmes, produce positive effects on achievement. For Kulik and Kulik (1992), the results do not support claims that no one benefits from grouping. Lou et al. (1996) observed small, but positive, effects derived from placing students in groups within the classroom for learning. As Kulik and Kulik (1992) and Lou et al. (1996) observed, homogeneous ability grouping would be successful, if the instructional methods and materials are adapted, according to the needs of the students. In addition, Lou et al. (1996:423) emphasised that low-ability students benefited from mixed-ability (heterogeneous) grouping, compared to medium and high-ability students, who benefited most from homogeneous ability groupings. Nomi (2010) concurs that homogeneous style ability grouping is detrimental to lower achieving groups, in particular. A recent study by Kaya (2015) observed that grouping children homogeneously, or heterogeneously, had no effect on achievement. It is clear from these discussions that the issue of ability grouping and its perceived impact on learner achievement have been debated for decades, with no clear understanding on whether it is beneficial or not.

In a recent report compiled by Khisheim (2016:3), on behalf of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which analysed 39 of the world's most developed nations' education systems, observed that 'most countries that grouped pupils into ability groups at an early age tended

to have higher numbers of pupil drop-outs and lower levels of achievement'. In addition, Khisheim (2016:3) asserts that 'we need to consider the role of within-class grouping in relation to pupils learning and quality of interaction with peers and teachers', which the researcher of this current study intends to demonstrate.

Studies on the practices of ability grouping focused mainly on streaming, or between-class ability grouping in secondary schools, mostly located in the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Kaya 2015; Kulik & Kulik 1992; Slavin 1990; Steel 2005). Very few researchers focused on within-class homogeneous ability grouping, with even fewer researching its benefits in early childhood education. In addition, research in a South African context, on within-class homogeneous ability grouping, appears to be non-existent, which is ominous, as it appears to be the dominant pedagogical practice in Foundation Phase classrooms across South Africa, especially for reading instruction and for learning phonics and mathematics (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2012). This practice is valorised in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) for Grades 1–3. According to CAPS for mathematics, 'small group focused lessons are most effective when the teacher takes a small group of learners (8-12) who have the same ability with her on the floor or at their tables, while the rest of the class engage in independent activities' (DBE 2012:11). A recent article titled: *How schools group children of different abilities*, authored by Lorayne Excel (2017), considered mixed-ability grouping preferable and warns that 'those who group, purely based on ability, could find themselves running counter to the philosophy of South Africa's national policy on inclusion'.

In this study, therefore, the researcher aims to address the following questions: What are the manifestations of the practice of within-class homogeneous ability grouping, and how does it account for learner achievement levels in Grade 1 classrooms? This article adds to the existing body of knowledge on ability grouping, by revealing the manifestations of within-class homogeneous ability grouping, from a Foundation Phase learner perspective. The researcher attempts to show how learners are framed by this practice, and how the practice positions learners to take on certain learner dispositions, which occur because of their experiences in the assigned ability group. By introducing learners into different groups, based on their perceived abilities, the researcher argues that it creates differential learning experiences in the same classroom space, which not only influences how learners are positioned, and view themselves, but also how they are perceived by others (teachers and peers), ultimately affecting their level of achievement. In addition, the researcher argues that this homogeneous style within-class ability grouping aids some and inhibits others.

Methods

In order to explore and reveal the manifestations of this dominant pedagogical practice in Grade 1 classrooms, this empirical exploration of within-class homogeneous ability grouping followed an interpretive qualitative paradigm and

is based on a multiple case study research design. Creswell (2007) notes that:

[C]ase study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information ... [emphasis in the original]. (p. 43)

The bounded systems, or the units of analysis, employed in this current research study were 12 Grade 1 learners (6-year-olds). The research participants were housed in three purposively selected public schools in the Western Cape province, South Africa. The selected schools, Flamingo, Dumont and Zola Primary (all pseudonyms), were selected based on the following criteria:

- socio-economic differentials
- resourced and under-resourced schools
- schools comprising of different racial compositions.

Table 1 presents an overview of the diverse nature of the three schools under study.

Babbie and Mouton (2001:282) assert that 'the unit of analysis in case study research is rarely isolated from, and unaffected by the environment in which it is embedded'. Table 1 contains some interesting facts about the schools, as well as the communities they serve, in which the bounded cases, under analysis, are embedded. The researcher respected the voices of the selected children, their teachers and principals, by using their verbatim responses in this study; therefore, the language, when presented later in this study, will not always be delivered in a technically correct manner. It is important to note from the onset that the findings emanating from this research is based on a broader study. The cases presented here should be viewed in terms of its intrinsic value rather than as a generalisation of the phenomenon.

Flamingo Primary (pseudonym) mainly serves a mixed-race community. This former *House of Representative (HOR)* school is home mainly to mixed-race children, being taught by a majority of mixed-race teachers. Although the school is allocated a quintile 4 (quintile 1 being poor and 5 being rich, in terms of both material and human resources), from the number of children (45%) on the National Feeding Scheme, it is evident that the school serves a diverse community. The Principal articulates the problem that the school faces, which is being located far from the communities they serve, as he expresses:

'[S]chool must be the centre of the community. We have a problem that the proximity of our school; we don't serve one geographical community. They [referring to parents], have to take off from work, travel down here.' (Flamingo Primary, Male Principal, interview, 19 June 2012)

The remoteness of this school spawns many problems, especially the safety of the teachers and learners, as well as attracting children to attend after school intervention programmes.

Dumont Primary (pseudonym), a former *Model C* school (formerly *all-white* school), serves a multiracial group of learners, mostly from middle class families, who are taught by mostly white teachers, although at the time of this research, more teachers of mixed-race were being appointed. This well-resourced school is quite different from the other schools visited by the researcher. The Principal explains the *Model C* concept, and describes how the school community changed after 1992:

'People view Model C schools in the wrong light as if it was for the privilege few because you have Model C status it only means that the school would take it upon itself to buy books, buy textbooks, pay for electricity. The community changed and it's the best thing that ever happened to this school. There was the 'white' flight but then you have to understand a lot of the community [that surrounds the school] is senior and therefore other areas, surrounding the school attracts the younger community. Yes, the school dynamics changed children come from all over the place. This use to be a 'white' school, after 1991 the school committee in 1992 voted for this model. Parents knew the implications were that we would become a fee-paying school but at the same time we could decide whom to employ and enrol. Allowing the school to open up [to other races] brought a good vibe into the school.' (Dumont Primary, male, Principal interview, 01 June 2012)

What is clear from the above extract is that this English-speaking school is no longer a community school, in the traditional sense, and that children travel to the school from various outlying suburban areas. The community served by the school is varied, comprising children from different racial and class backgrounds. This is confirmed by the Principal, in his description of the community the school serves, 'The community that we serve is predominately middle class families, professional people in education, a hand full of working class families; mothers working in the area' (Dumont Primary, male, Principal interview, 01 June 2012).

TABLE 1: Overview of the main features of the three selected primary schools.

| School type | Primary school – Flamingo: Former HOR school | Primary school – Dumont: Former Model C school | Primary school – Zola: Former DET school |
|--|---|---|---|
| Quintile rating | 4 | 5 | 1 |
| Annual school fees | R550.00 | R6400.00 | Non-fee paying |
| Total number of learners | 1159 | 612 | 1275 |
| Number of teachers | 27 | 22 | 29 |
| Number of Grade 1 learners | 165 | 86 | 236 |
| Average class size for Grade 1 | 33 | 29 | 47 |
| % of learners on the National Feeding Scheme | 45% | 0% | 100% |

HOR, House of Representative; DET, Department of Education and Training.

Zola Primary (pseudonym) is a former *Department of Education and Training (DET)* school, serving a majority of African black learners, from a poor semi-urban area, being taught by African black teachers. The number of children (100%) on the National Feeding Scheme, and the fact that this is a non-fee paying school, is indicative of the level of poverty faced by this community. The Principal outlined this in one of the interview sessions:

‘It’s a type of rural setup in an urban area. We have lots of challenges. The first few years I was confronted with a lot of child abuse, rape; fathers and stepfathers raping their children. So that is the nature that our children are surrounded with. There’s a great deal of social mishaps in this community because of the background of the parents.’ (Zola Primary, male, Principal interview, 11 June 2012)

In addition, he continues:

‘They [referring to the parents] don’t come to meetings maybe 20% will attend intervention meetings with teachers. Disappointing factor, parents don’t come ... when you insist they come here smelling like liquor. Those factors surrounding us, they are retarding the process of teaching and learning.’ (Zola Primary, male, Principal interview, 11 June 2012)

The physical location of this school, nested among shack-like informal homes, a bottle store, serving customers in clear view of children walking to school, and a very busy taxi-rank, as well as the Principal’s description of the daily struggles faced by the school, are an indication of the manifold contextual problems that appear to impede teaching and learning at this school.

These brief descriptions of the three selected schools that formed part of this current study indicate that South African schools, *post-democracy*, are still segregated, not only along racial lines but also along class lines (Hoadley 2005). Therefore, school choice and quality schooling appear to be dependent on what parents can afford.

The bounded cases, the sample of 12 Grade 1 learners (four learners per school), were selected based on the information obtained from their learner profiles, which outline their academic progress thus far, questionnaires which gave the researcher an indication of what they had access to in their homes, and input from their class teachers. An indication of the 12 learner participants’ nature is presented in Table 2.

As mentioned, learners’ academic records, contained in their learner profiles, were used to ascertain the levels of achievement. The use of the terms, *above average*, *average*, *below average* and *at risk*, are categories used by teachers for group learners according to their levels of achievement, based on assessment outcomes over time. These categories are used in this article for analytical purposes, and not as a form of labelling, or marking of the learner research participants. As shown in Table 2, all these children attended Grade R (preschool); however, the nature and quality of prior schooling are unknown. The class status of the learners was derived from questionnaires completed by the learners, which ascertained their socio-economic status.

TABLE 2: The unit of analyses – The nature of the 12 learner participants across the three schools.

| Learner code | School | Achievement level | Gender | Grade R attendance | Class status |
|--------------|----------|-------------------|--------|--------------------|---------------|
| FPL101 | Flamingo | Above average | Male | Yes | Middle class |
| FPL102 | Flamingo | Average | Female | Yes | Middle class |
| FPL103 | Flamingo | Below average | Male | Yes | Working class |
| FPL104 | Flamingo | At risk | Male | Yes | Working class |
| DPL101 | Dumont | Above average | Female | Yes | Middle class |
| DPL102 | Dumont | Average | Female | Yes | Middle class |
| DPL103 | Dumont | Below average | Male | Yes | Working class |
| DPL104 | Dumont | At risk | Female | Yes | Middle class |
| ZPL 101 | Zola | Above average | Female | Yes | Working class |
| ZPL 102 | Zola | Average | Female | Yes | Working class |
| ZPL103 | Zola | Below average | Female | Yes | Working class |
| ZPL104 | Zola | At risk | Male | Yes | Working class |

Data collection

Data collection was carried out in various ways, namely, observations in Grade 1 classrooms, semi-structured focus group discussions with learner participants, individual semi-structured interviews with their class teachers and school principals, as well as document sources. A brief overview of each of these data collection instruments follows hereafter.

Classroom observations

The learners were observed in the classroom setting for three consecutive days, with the focus on pedagogic practices (teaching and learning in its natural setting) and pedagogic relationships (interactions between teachers and learners, as well as learners and their peers). Hoadley (2005:82) notes that ‘the assumption is that by that stage [after three consecutive days of observing] the social relations between teachers and learners would be well-established and routine pedagogic practices would have been sedimented’. Audio recordings of the observed lessons, as well as the written notes that captured real-life details (e.g. expressions, silences, movements and interruptions), created a variety of data.

Focus group discussions and individual interviews

At each school, four selected learners were engaged in focus group discussions, following on Patton’s (2002:386) assertion that ‘participants can hear each other’s responses and can make additional comments beyond their original responses as they hear what other people have to say’. Lessons learnt from the pilot study, conducted prior to entry into the field, helped in terms of observing the ethical dimension involved in gaining access to the children. In addition, the pilot study allowed the researcher to gain the necessary confidence and practice in interviewing young children, which could be challenging. The researcher drew on the work of Cameron (2005), who suggested techniques and strategies to use in child-centred interviews, Flewitt’s (2005) knowledge of dealing with ongoing consent issues, as well as Birbeck and Drummond’s (2005) views on dealing with silences and issues of suggestibility (the need to fill in conversational spaces) when interviewing young children. Additionally,

three Grade 1 class teachers, as well as the principals of the three selected primary schools, were engaged in semi-structured individual interviews, in order to gain a broader perspective of issues relating to achievement in Grade 1.

Document sources

Document sources (learner profiles, grade progression schedules, teacher intervention reports, learner workbooks and worksheets) were used, not only as a source to indicate their academic progress to date but also to ascertain what transpired inside the classroom.

Data analysis

Data from the various data sets (questionnaires, interviews and document sources) were brought together and analysed inductively, that is, looking for 'recurring regularities or patterns' (Merriam 2009:180). The transcribed lessons and interviews were transformed into readable text, divided into segments and coded to identify linkages and patterns. Before identifying the themes that emerged from the analysis process, a brief discussion on the credibility and transferability of the findings is warranted. A number of ways were employed to ensure the credibility of the findings:

- data and source triangulation (using more than one method to collect data and from more than one source) (Shenton 2004)
- peer scrutiny of the research project (all transcripts were verified for authenticity against audio recorders).

In terms of transferability of the findings, the aim is not to generalise the findings but to comprehend the extent of the readers' understanding of the phenomenon (Merriam 2009). The themes that emerged from this analytical process were:

- differential treatment – teacher talk and teacher expectations
- an issue of labelling and positioning – internalising the characteristics of the animal
- different forms of learner agency – learner coping mechanisms.

Each of these themes are presented and discussed later in this article, but firstly, the researcher discusses the theoretical framework, which framed the way data were analysed, which ultimately resulted in these three themes.

Theoretical framework

In this study, the researcher draws on the seminal work of prominent sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1977). Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical constructs, habitus, field and field-specific capital are crucial to understanding the interiority and exteriority of social relations, which establishes the mutual relationship and connectedness between practices (objective structures) and human action (subjective dispositions). For Bourdieu (1977:77), social reality is a 'dialectic process of internalisation externality and externalisation internality'; that is, the process where objective structures and meanings

of subjective structures (agency) converge (Bourdieu 1977; Suminar 2013). This dialectic is one of objectification and embodiment between 'the human body and structured space ...' (Bourdieu 1977:87). The interaction between structures and actors, therefore, involves both subjectivity and objectivity.

Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical project is useful in this research, to unveil what happens when learners enter a social interaction situation (within the social space of the classroom), as well as engage in certain practices (pedagogical practices like within-class homogeneous ability grouping), and how this engagement creates differential experiences for these young learners, different forms of internalisations and how these internalisations are actualised on the outside, as they have to cope with and make sense of the world around them. Devine (2013) asserts that:

[C]onceptualising school (classroom) space as social interactive and agentic allows for a more nuanced analysis of the processes of both production and (re)production that gives rise to different learning trajectories for children in schools. (p. 6)

Additionally, the interplay between the three core constructs, that constitute Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical project, produces agent's social practices (Fuchs 2003). The interplay between these three core constructs are illuminated in the following equation, introduced by Bourdieu (1990:101):

$$[(\text{Habitus} \times \text{Capital}) + \text{Field}] = \text{Practice} \quad [\text{Eqn 1}]$$

Social practice, the aspect of social action, is dependent on the habitus, capital and social field (Bourdieu 1990); therefore, one construct cannot be explained without referring to the others.

Habitus is defined by Bourdieu (1977) as:

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of generation and structuring of practices and representations. (p. 72)

In addition, the habitus is both the 'opus operatum' and the 'modus operandi' (Bourdieu 1977:36), which are the results of practices, as well as the modes of practices. According to Suminar (2013:202), the habitus can be used to explain how objective structures and subjective dispositions influences human action, as well as how social and cultural messages shape an individual's thoughts and actions. In addition, what should be considered is that the habitus loses its potency, when viewed in isolation from the field and cultural capital. Actors enter a particular field (education field), with a particular disposition (habitus – internalised over time through interactions in different social spaces), and differently endowed with particular 'field-specific capital' (cultural capital), which ultimately determines their positioning in the field. Bourdieu (1986:231) asserts that 'social positioning is influenced by the overall volume of capital and the composition of that capital'. Therefore, instead of seeing ability as being natural and an innate characteristic, 'a Bourdieuan analysis allows for the theorising of ability as

cultural capital, where there is an interrelationship between the individual whose habitus is legitimated and valued through the objectified structuring practices in the field' (Zevenbergen 2003:5). Involvement in a field, therefore, shapes the habitus, which, in turn, shapes the perceptions and actions of actors in a field (Crossley 2001). Bourdieu (1990) views the field as a 'field of struggle', when stating:

[A] field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field... Constant permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time, becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. (pp. 40–41)

Position within any structure 'motivates strategies aiming to transform or to preserve it' (Bourdieu 1990:128). It is by linking habitus and capital to the concept of field that Bourdieu (1990) is able to capture the dialectical relationship between objective structures and subjective dispositions, and demonstrate how structural constraints act upon social practices. According to Suminar (2013:206), Bourdieu's theory of practice, ties all three core concepts (habitus, capital and field) together so that the actors' dispositions (habitus), not only reflect their lived experiences but also depend on changing capital endowments and boundaries in fields. Bourdieu (1990), therefore, provides the analytical tools, which could be used to capture how classroom practices are experienced by these young learners, and how their educational experiences, in turn, frame their learning dispositions and account for their academic performance. Before proceeding to a discussion on the themes that emanated from the analysis process, one should note that Bourdieu's framework smoothens and helps to identify signals in the data that help to understand the interiority and exteriority of social relations.

Differential treatment – teacher talk and teacher expectations

According to Lou et al. (1996), the variety of students, who populate classrooms, means that teachers are faced with difficult pedagogical decisions, if students are to learn effectively and enjoyably. For Christie (2008):

[T]here is a general agreement that good classroom practice is about the quality of the interactions between the students and their teachers, and the optimal use of resources and time. (p. 195)

Christie (2008:195–196) suggests that one way of enhancing student learning is 'engagement with difference', which for her means 'deliberate attempts in pedagogical enactment to increase the participation of different students and build inclusive classrooms'. The researcher's observations in Grade 1 classrooms, across the three selected schools, revealed that teachers did not know how to engage with a difference or work with children who learnt differently, especially those who were struggling to learn. They often adopted one of the following choices:

- diagnosing learners with one or more disorders, either in need of occupational therapy (OT), or suffering from attention deficit disorder (ADD), and therefore, needed to be referred to a therapist

- sending children to the learners with special needs (LSEN) teacher
- labelling children, either in positive terms as 'bright' or 'clever', or in negative terms as 'dumb', 'slow' or 'lazy'.

Diagnosing learners with one or other disorder is a popular middle class talk, as is evident from the following Grade 1 teacher's interview session:

'He (referring to a boy who reads above his grade level and who completed the Grade 1 programme in March of that year but still found himself in the 'below average' group) is a lazy boy. OT [occupational therapy] is a combination of being lazy and low muscle tone. He is a prime example of someone who needs OT and the sad part is because of his intelligence he would benefit ... He can do the verbal stuff but the actual motor stuff he cannot do and that is going to inhibit his learning in my opinion.' (Dumont Primary, Grade 1 teacher, interview, 29 August 2012)

Additionally, this boy, who normally *attempted* to respond to the teachers' questions, was destined to be ignored, being treated as if he was invisible. Subsequently, he would lapse into disruptive behaviour, teasing children close to him, which would, in turn, frustrate the teacher. The researcher observed that the teacher associated more with learners in high status groups and with children who displayed characteristics closer to the teacher's own social field, displaying what Panofsky (2003:419) refers to as a 'habitus that reflects similar cultural and economic capital'.

Children in high status groups, who were seated together, and displayed what Nespors (1996:128) refers to as a 'school body', were often called on to respond to questions, or to read out loud, and often received praise. These cooperative and forward-thinking students embodied all the qualities of a good student, which afforded them more opportunities to enhance their learning, whereas children in lower groups where not provided with the same opportunities. According to Davies and Hunt (1994):

Competent students are also unmarked in terms of the good/bad student binary. These students with their teachers create the context that is recognisable as a classroom. They know 'how to behave' and in doing so become members of those social scenes in which the teacher is positioned as authoritative teacher and they are positioned as cooperative students. (p. 389)

The differential treatment of children, as seen in this class through verbal and non-verbal messages communicated by the teacher, could account for certain children lapsing into disruptive behaviour, an issue that is elaborated on later in this discussion. Additionally, it could account for the teacher's view of children in low status groups, as a discipline problem, instead of an educational problem, one that might require them to adjust their teaching strategies. Pillay (2004:5) asserts that such treatment is common when 'teachers who are not trained to work with children from different cultural backgrounds often ended up mapping problems that emerge onto students, rather than on the system that needs to be modified'. A study conducted by Wilcox (1998, cited in Panofsky 2003), and later confirmed in Zevenbergen (2003),

revealed similar results of students in high status groups being given more opportunities to develop self-presentation skills, such as speaking and presenting before a group, as well as receiving considerable guidance and support for doing so. It was clear from the researcher's classroom observations, in all three schools, that teachers could clearly differentiate between learners, which was evident in their descriptions of their learners; however, they were inexperienced in working with these perceived differences, as one teacher articulated:

'We don't exercise different styles of teaching because children learn differently so we supposed to teach in different styles.' (Flamingo Primary, female, Grade 1 teacher, interview, 30 July 2012)

The inexperience of the teachers often resulted in the use of the same methods of teaching for all learners, as a Flamingo Primary school teacher explained, referring to working with students who were *below average* and *at risk*: 'we give them less work, work slower or lower the number.' This was confirmed by a Zola Primary school, Grade 1, female, teacher: 'if the learner is a slow learner, you give them less work'. Therefore, it appears that these teachers held low expectations for students in lower groups, which affected not only the content selected but also the pace of the lesson. Fataar and Du Plooy (2012:17) observed similar types of results in their ethnographic study of a township school, noting that 'although teachers do not read their students as homogeneous, what is apparent is that they enact their pedagogical practices in the classroom in a homogeneous manner, failing to make distinctions among them'. Consequently, very little happens by way of diverse teaching strategies, although the rationale for placing students in different ability groups was to teach them according to their diverse needs.

The children were also aware of the pacing of lessons, in terms of content delivery, and expressed the following: '... they just pasting stuff' (DPL102, female, learner) or 'I'm at bonds 11 and they are only on bonds 3' (FPL 101, male, learner). Zevenbergen (2003:9) observed that differently paced lessons had different effects on the learners' capacity to perform in examinations, because restricting, or enhancing, the amount of content inhibits, or extends, what can be learnt, creating different opportunities in terms of assessment. In Zevenbergen's (2003) opinion, examinations can be viewed as the most overt structuring practice, as children are exposed to different learning environments, but have to take the same examinations. Boaler, William and Brown (2009), who examined children in ability groups for mathematics, observed the following:

Students in high sets come to be regarded as mini-mathematicians who work through high-level work at a sustained pace, whereas students in low sets come to be regarded as failures who could cope with low-level work, or worse, copying off the board. (p. 19)

The exposure to less content and undifferentiated teaching approaches could account for children in low status groups being entombed in repeated patterns of powerlessness, and

being locked into low-ability groups, with very little chance of moving out of these groups. A teacher expressed the following views on a boy, who was *at risk* of failing:

'It is September already and I'm still seeing no progress in his work. This child will either fail or move on, but he will remain in the low achieving group throughout this phase. These children seldom move out of this group and they struggle even more as they continue. They work with the LSEN teacher but she serves this whole district so there is not much she can do in the time they spend with her. Parents are not of any help either ...' (Flamingo Primary, Grade 1 teacher, 30 July 2012)

According to this teacher, there does not seem to be much hope for children finding themselves in lower ability groups. In addition, the teachers' perception of parents and guardians, especially their description of working class parents and guardians, emerged as a common opinion across all the three schools. There was clearly a disjuncture between the teachers' perception of parental involvement and what the learners conveyed about their parents' and guardians' involvement in their learning. Some parents and guardians were often blamed for, as teachers articulated: 'babying their children', 'not of any help', or 'just not interested at all', which is quite contrary to what the children were communicating regarding their parents and guardians actions. The children conveyed that their parents and guardians read to them, helped them to learn the spelling lists, did sums with them and prepared them for tests. According to Kravolec and Buell (2000:79), 'parents from low socio-economic families are frowned upon and their voices are not heard'. Fataar and Du Plooy (2012) also observed that the involvement of parents from low socio-economic families are seldom recognised, valued or acknowledged by teachers.

An issue of labelling and positioning – internalising the characteristics of the animal

In Dumont and Flamingo Primary schools, respectively, the practice of naming groups according to animal names is common practice. When being called to the mat to do *mat work* for reading, phonics and mathematics, the teacher often calls groups by these animal names, such as cheetah, bear, rabbit or giraffe, depending on the composition of the group. It appears that the characteristic of the animal encompasses the dynamic of the group; *above average* learners are cheetahs (fast), while *below average* and *at risk* learners are giraffes (slow). As the Dumont Primary school teacher articulated in the opening extract (see introduction), '... at the same time you are observing children, to see *who's who in the zoo*' or as a Flamingo Primary school teacher participant explains:

'At the beginning of the year we have a baseline assessment that we do and from there we immediately know who goes where ability groups especially for mathematics and reading and phonics, but for the rest [referring to the curriculum] like Life Skills is for everyone.' (Flamingo Primary, female, Grade 1 teacher, interview, 30 July 2012)

The children in the following extract, taken from a focus group discussion, provided a recognition of the unintended

messages being relayed by the practice of within-class ability grouping:

Researcher addressing an *above average* learner: 'What would you feel like if you were no longer a cheetah but a giraffe?'

Above average learner immediately responds: 'I will cry but this will not happen because we are busy with bonds 11 and they [referring to *below average* learners] are only on bonds 3.'

Researcher addressing an *at risk* student: 'Why do you think you are not a cheetah?'

An *average* learner interrupts: 'Because they are pasting stuff. Miss makes the numbers then they paste because they don't know the bonds of 10.'

Researcher addressing *at risk* learner: 'What bonds do you know?'

At risk learner responds: 'Bonds of 1 only.'

A *below average* student's states: 'I want to be faster. I want to be a cheetah.'

Researcher: 'Is there a reason why you not faster?'

Below average learner: 'Because I work slow.'

Researcher: 'Why do you think you work slowly?'

Below average learner: 'Because I'm in a slow group.'

(Flamingo Primary, Grade 1 group interview, 30 July 2012)

In this focus group discussion, the children expressed that they wanted to be cheetahs, not giraffes, and they were aware that if they, as they expressed, 'work hard', 'listen more to teacher' and 'not talk in class', this would be possible. A Zola Primary school teacher cautions about naming groups, in the following extract:

'We don't do that and we all [referring to other Grade 1 teachers at the school] don't do that because the issue that when a teacher named the group she told the learners you are this flower because this flower is dull, you are that flower because that flower is bright ... and learners started labelling each other as this dull flower like 'You can't do anything because your name is dull and ... I'm the bright one I'm the clever one' and all these things.' (Zola Primary, female, Grade 1 teacher, 14 March 2013)

It is unclear how the naming of the groups at Dumont and Flamingo Primary schools came about, but at Zola Primary school, the teachers, who previously engaged in this practice, would name the groups. What is clear, however, is that being marked as a cheetah or a giraffe, a dull or bright flower, and being positioned as 'fast' or 'slow', as depicted in the above extracts, translated into different classroom experiences and internalisations. It not only affected how the learners perceive themselves, but also how others (teachers and peers) started to perceive them. In addition, Rist (2000, cited in Panofsky 2003), observed that low status students' experiences of schooling differed substantially from those in high status groups, especially in terms of their treatment by teachers, as well as their peers, as is evident in this study.

The transfer of learners out of low performing groups seldom happens, although these groups are meant to be flexible. However, shifting learners from higher performing groups to a lower one is more salient, as voiced by one learner:

'I used to be a cheetah in reading but now I am a bear. Teacher moved me out of that group I didn't know list 19 words and I struggled so now I moved down. I have to learn my lists so that I can wear the class badge.' (DPL 102, female, learner, Dumont Primary, interview, 29 August 2012)

Children in low status groups aspired to move out of their low-ability group, as mentioned previously, 'I want to be faster' and 'I want to be a cheetah' (FPL 104, male, Grade 1 learner, interview). These learners also knew what needed to be done in order to move, but they often felt restricted. Ermakoff (2010) is of the view that:

If actors have the resources and dispositions allowing them to take advantage of the shift, changes in objective relations provide them with new opportunities. If they lack these resources or dispositions, the shift can turn out to be a source of deprivation. (p. 531)

The labelling or naming of groups could suggest, in Bourdieu's (1977) language of description, that this structuring practice, that is, the act of grouping and labelling of students, has become internalised over time, constituting particular learner dispositions. For Panofsky (2003:413), it amounts to 'what you are able to do or not able to do'. In addition, Devine (2013:6) notes that children must negotiate and position themselves in an increasingly value-laden, synoptic environment, arguing that children are differently valued in schools, which sets the context in which wider inequalities between different groups of children emerge.

Different forms of learner agency – learner coping mechanisms

Learners performing *below average* and those considered *at risk* of failing come into schools with an embodied sense of deficit. Most of these learners come from working class families, as evident from Table 2, not having the required or valued habitus, or field-specific capital required to cope with the demands of schooling. Consequently, these students enter the social space of the classroom, considered a social interactive space, where they encounter differential treatment, in terms of being labelled in negative terms as *lazy*, *dumb* and *slow*, or marked as *struggling learners*, and in some cases, seen as *suffering from OT*. This is compounded by undifferentiated teaching methods and the added implications of low teacher expectations, which ultimately results in differentiated treatment. These learners, as regularly observed by the researcher, become *interrupters* of their own learning, as well as the learning of others. They laugh, talk, look around, do not listen or concentrate, and, as a result, seldom complete tasks on time. Their disruptive behaviour appears to punctuate instructional time, because, as observed by the researcher, teachers have to stop and take time to regulate the disruptive behaviour, often to the detriment of valuable classroom instructional time, as observed by a learner 'they [referring to the *at risk* group] make a noise'. The learner further adds that:

'He [a particular *at risk* learner] always talk and laugh when nothing is a laughing matter. When they do wrong stuff then he

laughs, always when Miss is talking stuff but it's not funny then he always laughs ...' (Grade 1 learner, Flamingo Primary group interview, 30 July 2012)

A teacher at Dumont Primary school notes that such behaviour is often a 'coping mechanism'. These coping mechanisms, which articulate into disruptive behaviour, is employed when learners do not understand, or do not know how to proceed with a task. A teacher at Flamingo Primary school expresses her frustration with such behaviour as follows:

'The main thing we expect of them is to listen. That's something they struggle with because it doesn't get implemented at home also. We expect them to be in school, to listen, to read and write, and all the little things.' (Flamingo Primary, female, Grade 1 teacher, 30 July 2012)

Learners, as mentioned, are aware that such behaviour does not benefit their learning. They shared in the focus group discussions that if they 'listen to the teacher', 'talk less', 'learn my words' or 'concentrate', things will be different. Ogbu (2003:23) refers to 'low effort syndrome', a kind of 'norm of minimum effort', in terms of which students themselves recognise, as well as explain their behaviour and low academic performances. In addition, it is common across the three schools that *below average* and *at risk* learners seldom complete tasks, as was evident, while perusing their workbooks. The following extract explains why they end up with incomplete work:

Researcher: 'I noticed that you have a lot of incomplete stuff. Why do you think you don't complete stuff or what are you doing when other children are busy?'

Average learner explains: 'She [pointing to the *at risk* learner] she's lazy.'

At risk learner responds: 'I'm not lazy the children just talk to me. The children at my table every time wants to talk to me, so I can't finish my work.'

Researcher, probing: 'How come your work is not completed?'

At risk learner: 'Because we [referring to the group at her table] play the whole time. He [a boy she frequently speaks to] wants to talk to me all the time.'

Above average learner comments: 'I don't think it's just the boys I think she also talks to them.' (Grade 1 learners, Dumont Primary interview, 29 August 2012)

From these observations, it is apparent that when these young children enter schools, they come into a social interaction situation, which demands of them to make sense and manage, implying that they need to exercise their agency. The researcher argues that their agency is, being informed and constructed in these social spaces (classrooms and classroom practices), in ways, which affect their educational outcomes in profound ways. Kemp (n.d.:6) explains that 'structure and agency must be considered in the context of any sincere attempt to explain and understand social action'. So, the data shows, that, in these cases, it is not only what they are coming into schools with that matters. It is what they are doing or not doing (in terms of

exercising agency), and what schools (structures) are doing to them that appear to matter.

Dialectical tensions between the structuring ordering practice and the construction of learner dispositions and agency – turning to Bourdieu

Bourdieu's (1977) theories, which explain the relationship between social reality and the individual, and the relationship between structure and agency, could be used here to demonstrate how learners are socialised into particular dispositions, how these embodied dispositions are framed and shaped within a particular field (social space), as well as how learners through their actions affect their positioning in the field. Additionally, they are affected by the constraints and opportunities evident in the practices and actions of others (teachers and peers) in the field.

A number of observations could be extracted from the analytical findings presented in this study. Firstly, the strong ability discourse, that dominates practices in these Grade 1 classrooms, facilitates differential treatment, resulting in different internalisations. Secondly, within-class ability grouping, in Bourdieu's (1977) internal language of description, could be viewed as a structuring ordering practice, in terms of pedagogic practices (in this case undifferentiated teaching, variations in the pacing of lesson content and undifferentiated assessment strategies) and pedagogical interactions (between teachers and learners and learners and their peers).

Learners in *above average* groups (cheetahs), who are labelled and positioned in positive terms as *cooperative*, *forward-thinking*, *bright* or *smart*, whose primary habitus (hailing mostly from middle class homes) is congruent with the school habitus, display a committed-sense of agency, which affords them more opportunities to build institutional capital (high grades, awards, rewards and praise). However, those in *below average* and *at risk* groups (giraffes), who are labelled and positioned in negative terms as *dumb*, *lazy* and *slow*, whose primary habitus (hailing mostly from working class homes) is incongruent with the school habitus, are not afforded the same treatment as their higher achieving counterparts, often being treated as if they are invisible. In an effort to become visible, to make sense of their experiences in these classroom spaces, and to cope, they lapse into disruptive behaviour, displaying a non-committed agency, which locks them out of higher achieving groups, and traps them in repeated patterns of failure. The researcher argues that their non-committed agency, which is displayed mainly in the form of resistance, compounded by undifferentiated teaching practices, and being positioned in negative terms, reinforces underachievement. Clearly, there is a need to understand the nature of the learner, what he or she brings into the school, as well as the ways in which the school and classroom practices shape them, and how they make sense of it, by exercising their agency.

Conclusion

Bourdieu's (1985) notions of the interiorisation of the exteriority and the exteriorisation of the interiority, how the outside (social reality) is inscribed in the body and mind, and how the inside, which is internalised, is manifested on the outside, provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which success, and/or failure, is realised through the practices embedded in schooling. It appears that the practice of within-class homogeneous ability grouping, which manifests itself in different experiences for low achieving groups, assist in the construction of particular learner dispositions, where learners in low-ability groups feel inhibited and disabled, '... I work slow, because I'm in a slow group' (FPL 104, male, Grade 1, learner interview). Although the data does not empirically reveal how the habitus is formed, it does provide insight into how learner dispositions are framed by the practice of within-class homogeneous ability grouping. The practice can be seen as a 'differentiated space of probabilities' (Ermakoff 2010:531), creating different capacities for the construction of a learner's secondary (school) habitus, corresponding with Bourdieu's broad claim that an individual's responses to a challenge needs to be coordinated, as structurally induced dispositions make them 'objectively orchestrated' (Bourdieu 1988:150).

Finally, the notion of homogeneous style within-class ability grouping, which is embedded in the CAPS curriculum for teaching young children in South Africa, especially in reading and mathematics, seems unmoving, regardless of the decades of debates, inconclusive in nature, on whether it is good or bad. This article demonstrates the exclusionary nature of this pedagogical practice, revealing how it enables some, while it inhibits others, drawing on the voices of the learners and their experiences within the different ability groups. Further study, exploring alternatives to this pedagogical practice in early childhood education, is warranted. The objective is that early learning for all children should be effective, as well as fun, which largely depends on teachers adopting creative teaching strategies, and offering a supportive learning environment that satisfies these young children's diverse educational needs and differences.

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