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Mixed Ability Grouping and Its Effects on Teaching and Learning

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## **STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY**

I have read ADA's policy on plagiarism and certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this paper, entitled (Mixed Ability Grouping and Its Effects on Teaching and Learning), is all our own work and does not contain any unacknowledged work.

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## Abstract

Mixed ability grouping has been debated for many decades on its effects on teaching and learning. Students' graduation results at the end of ninth grade in 2018 were not satisfactory in Azerbaijan and as one of the factors affecting teaching and learning, we decided to investigate teachers' and students' experiences with mixed ability grouping in local public schools. This study involved nine teachers and 16 students from three Baku public schools. Their responses were obtained via focus group discussions which were held online. The questions asked during these discussions mainly addressed to learn teachers' and students' challenges with mixed ability grouping and how they dealt with such problems. The results indicated that both teachers and students had experiences with students with diverse learning abilities and they both faced challenges with mixed ability grouping. Teachers' major challenges were lack of motivation, shortage of time, and design of lesson plans, whereas students' difficulties included conflicts among students, lack of time, student interruptions, and feeling of shyness. Various teaching strategies (e.g., group and pair work, use of a set of cards, role-plays, visuals, games) were employed by teachers to mitigate the adverse effects of mixed ability grouping while students mainly sought teachers' and peers' assistance in case of difficulties. Our policy suggestion is the implementation of ability grouping as a pilot project in several public schools to reach better student learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Mixed ability grouping, teaching, learning, Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect, ability grouping,

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Every country has its own specific educational goals and strategies to build and sustain the welfare of society. According to the Article 4 of the Education Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Azerbaijan Ministry of Education, 2016), the goal of education is “to ensure the acquisition of systematized knowledge, skills, and abilities, and the continual improvement of the specialty, to prepare the learners to social life and efficient labor activity” (p. 11).

General education in Azerbaijan is comprised of four levels: preparation to school (age 5-6), primary, general secondary, and complete secondary education (Law on General Education, 2019). Classes from fifth to ninth are covered in general secondary education. Article 19.14 in Education Law of Azerbaijan states that secondary education is compulsory in Azerbaijan and students have to pass graduation exam to get a certificate to further their education (Azerbaijan Ministry of Education, 2016). Successful students are issued with an official document that indicates graduation from general secondary education.

Graduation exams are administered by the State Examination Center (SEC) for ninth graders at the end of academic year. SEC publishes reports on results of students at the end of every academic year. We looked at SEC’s annual report (2018) demonstrating student achievement of academic year 2017-2018; the data presented that students’ skills and abilities were not at the appropriate level on graduation exam administrated in 2018 (State Examination Centre of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2018). Lesch (2012) highlighted that there is a relationship between student outcomes and student learning and to ensure better student outcomes, in-class learning should be effective. Student learning is defined by Lesch (2012) as the “statement of the knowledge, skills and abilities individual students should possess and can demonstrate upon completion of a learning experience or sequence of learning experiences” (p.12). Hence, it is



worth investigating factors affecting student learning. These can be students' socioeconomic status, cultural background, level of parental education, teaching strategies, class size, and grouping of students (Coleman, 1966; Drennan, Kennedy, & Pisarski, 2005). To the best of our knowledge, some research has been conducted to investigate the above-mentioned factors except grouping in the Azerbaijani context.

In any educational setting, the question of how classes or students in classes should be organized has always been arguable (Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Slavin, 1987). There are several grouping formats such as grouping based on gender and age, only age, and ability. First grouping format is executed based on students' gender and age, where females and/or males attend different schools with members of their own sex (Bofah & Hannula, 2016). Some other education systems practice grouping students based on their abilities. According to Jones and Gerig (1994), "ability grouping has been practiced with the belief that organizing instruction for students with similar ability levels will facilitate the most effective learning by providing an optimal pace and level of instruction" (p. 27). Next grouping format that has been used for many years is mixed ability grouping which is organized on the basis of students' ages (Theilheimer, 1993). Grouping students based on their age to form a class in public schools is also a common practice in Azerbaijan.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In Azerbaijan, students are required to pass graduation exams at the end of ninth grade. These exams aim "to assess the secondary school students' knowledge and skills based on unified standards" (State Examination Centre of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2018, p.7). As stated above, students' graduation results were not satisfactory and the report concluded that students both faced challenges in two-staged grade nine graduation exams comprising both open

and closed-ended questions. Particularly, they had difficulties with open-ended questions as it moves students beyond content memorization and requires critical thinking (State Examination Centre of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2018). Since grouping students is one of the factors affecting student learning, we aim to investigate teachers' and students' experiences with mixed ability grouping in Azerbaijan. In this regard, it is worth reviewing the literature.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Many researchers (e.g., Ainslie, 1994; Al-Subaieci, 2017; Butterworth, 2010; Row, 2016) investigated how mixed ability grouping affects the teaching and learning process. In this section, we discuss the existing literature on this type of grouping and explore its effects on teacher instructional practices, student performance, and student learning outcomes.

**Mixed Ability Grouping (MAG)**

In mixed ability groups, learners with different ability levels are gathered in one group to work on similar tasks assigned to them by their teachers (Ambreen, 2017). Row (2016) defined mixed ability as distribution of students who are grouped based on some aspects such as age and gender. Ainslie (1994) defined mixed ability classes as an academic environment where students differ greatly in their capability, motivation for learning, needs, interests, educational background, learning styles, level of anxiety, and experiences. Regarding the aspect of how researchers approached mixed ability grouping critically, Dai's (2004) interpretation is worth highlighting since the researcher stresses the fact that due to various difficult tasks weak students get confused, as a result, they lose their motivation and interest in the learning process. In the mixed-ability classes, low ability students experience psychological and physical eradication and as a result, they may fail to make improvements (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Fernstrom, 1993).

However, some scholars (e.g., Butterworth, 2010; Ireson & Hallam, 2001) hold the positive view on MAG since it provides students with an interesting learning environment that is composed of diverse skills, perspectives, tasks, which ensure students to be more creative, innovative as they learn from each other's unique set of abilities. Mixed ability groups ensure students to stay motivated in order to beat their rivals, realize self-conceptualization since they can easily compare themselves with others to figure out their strengths and weaknesses, and to

improve their social skills by making the best use of having diverse skilled students in a classroom (Lyle, 1999).

Despite these advantages, the disadvantages of such grouping outweigh its merits. Teaching a class of mixed abilities usually puts teachers at a disadvantage as they are always under intense pressure to satisfy the needs of their diverse learners (Al-Subaiei, 2017). MAG might negatively affect teachers' level of motivation as they are not always successful to create a productive and effective learning environment for everyone to achieve better educational attainments (Al-Subaiei, 2017). Northcote (2006) states that it is difficult for a single teacher to control classes comprised of a large number of students and conduct lessons efficiently, especially in mixed ability classes considering different levels of understanding. The research by Al-Subaiei (2017) and Al-Shammakhi and Al-Humaidi (2015) also revealed that teachers usually spent a lot of time on revision since low-level students did not comprehend topics at the same pace with others. Thus, lesson planning, designing learning activities, and conducting classroom assessments should be done differently to meet the needs of every student, and this process is time-consuming for teachers because it puts them under intense pressure (Al-Subaiei, 2017). Another challenging part for a teacher is to keep the balance in the classroom when advanced level students participate actively in the class, whereas their passive counterparts remain silent with little or less development (Hedge, 2000). Since there are students with various needs in any classroom, employing different teaching methods becomes challenging for teachers. Hence, teachers experience differences in students' level of understanding, they have to devote extra hours for both planning and implementing lessons (Al-Subaiei, 2017).

Although all subject teachers may face the negative consequences of teaching in MAG classes, some researchers (e.g., Al-Subaiei, 2017; Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998; Pedersen &

Kronborg, 2014) suggest that it is mainly experienced in language-instruction and Math classes. The most challenging part for English language teachers is that they are expected to teach students at their own pace regardless of proficiency differences (Al-Subaiei, 2017). Pedersen and Kronborg (2014) stated that most institutions and teachers have solved this issue by adopting ability grouping in English classes and incorporating various student-centered methods such as games, drama, and extra activities. Regarding Math classes, it has been always perceived as "graded," "linear," "structured," "serial," and "cumulative" subject - making it difficult to work with groups of students with different levels of knowledge and ability" (Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998, p.533). It is claimed that students' different abilities are the reasonable explanation for difference in students' performance in Math.

MAG has some negative effects that profoundly affect their academic performance and motivation. These downsides of MAG on students are encased in Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect. The theory was presented by Marsh and Parker in 1984. This theory holds the view that students among higher performing students tend to evaluate their performance worse in comparison to their peers' accomplishments (Marsh & Parker, 1984). As a result, usually low-performing students shy away from asking questions or further explanations to understand the concepts deeply, and this gradually affects their academic performance and motivation negatively (Dai, 2004; Hedge, 2000). Evidence also shows that mixed ability groups can create difficulties even for high-achievers since they can get demotivated and bored when teachers focus on the same topic many times to meet the needs of low-level students (Gurgenidze, 2012; Pedersen & Kronborg, 2014; Smith & Sutherland, 2006).

As mentioned earlier, low-achievers compare their performance with others and get affected negatively. Festinger (1954) argues that low-achieving students' academic self-concept

can be skewed as a result of their constant comparison with their peers' achievements. Academic self-concept has been regarded as one of the primary objectives of education and defined by Seaton, Marsh, and Craven (2009) as students' self-perception on their academic accomplishments in particular disciplines or more general academic areas. Therefore, positive academic self-concept plays an important role in building students' ability to perform academically well.

### CHAPTER 3: PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study aims to investigate teachers' and students' experiences with MAG and its effects on teaching and learning in Baku public schools. To the best of our knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted to address this issue in the Azerbaijani context but it is worth examining. With student learning outcomes in mind, particularly students' poor performance in graduation exam, we want to understand whether MAG might be one of the factors associated with poor student outcomes.

#### **Research Questions**

1. What are Math and English teachers' experiences with MAG?
  - a. What challenges do teachers face with MAG?
  - b. How does MAG affect teaching?
2. What are students' experiences with MAG?
  - a. What challenges do students face with MAG?
  - b. How does MAG affect student learning?

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

**Research Design**

The study employed exploratory design to investigate teachers' and students' experiences with MAG classes. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) defined research design as "procedures for collecting, analyzing, interpreting and reporting data in research studies" (p.58). Exploratory research is the understanding of the "why" and other factors of the problem that have yet to be defined. Exploratory research recommends the use of open-ended questions to give participants the chance to reply in their own words rather than pushing them to choose from fixed responses, like quantitative methods do (Jupp, 2006).

In this study, we collected qualitative data to understand participants' context, actions, and experiences with MAG as well as identify unanticipated phenomena and outcomes (Maxwell, 1992). Data were gathered through focus group discussions organized with both teachers and students of three public schools located in Baku. Consistent with Wilkinson (2004), focus group methodology "involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), 'focused' around a particular topic or set of issues" (p. 177). Focus group discussion is an effective tool for collecting data because participants introduce new topics and issues throughout discussions. This method is also a quick and appropriate way to collect data from numerous people instantaneously and achieve complementary data (Kitzinger, 1994).

**Methodology**

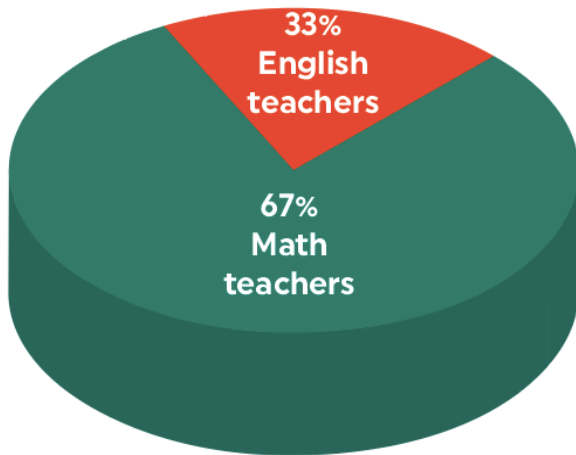
This section describes details about research participants, instruments applied, and the procedural steps for data collection and analysis.



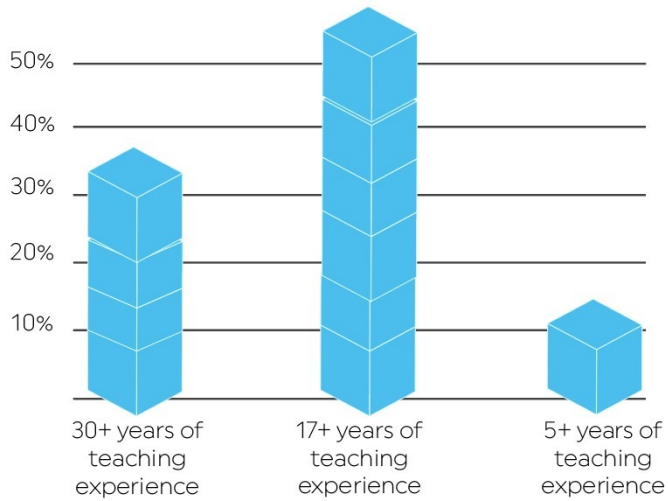
## Participants

We purposefully selected three districts of Baku, that is Yasamal, Binagadi, and Sabail, which are close in their statistical index for their population (The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2018). The study involved three public schools, one from each district, and these schools were chosen using a convenient sampling method, which means based on their availability and willingness (Creswell, 2003).

We asked the school administration to help us with the selection of teachers and nine Math and English teachers from three schools were purposefully chosen to participate in our study. All teachers were females but 67% of them taught Math, while 33% taught English (See Figure 1). Years of teaching experience of our participants are demonstrated in Figure 2.

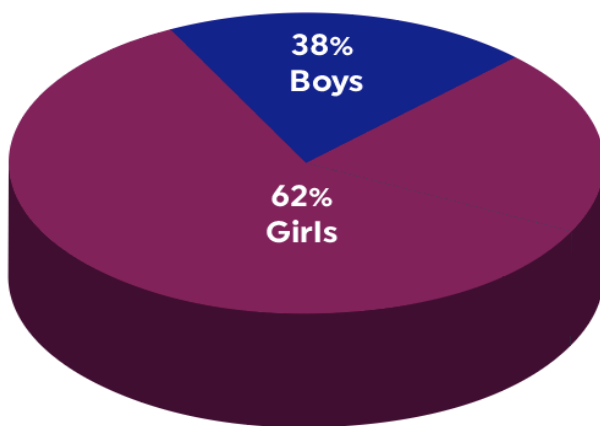


*Figure 1.* The percentage of Math and English teachers that participated in this study.



*Figure 2.* Years of teaching experience of research participants.

Students were also selected purposefully with the help of teachers. Our priority was to involve students with excellent, moderate, and low-level abilities to make sure all voices were heard in group discussions. Overall, 16 students from the seventh grade participated in our study. Information about their gender can be found in Figure 3.



*Figure 3.* Gender distribution of students (in percentage) that participated in this study.

## **Instruments**

We employed two instruments in this study: focus group interview protocol for teachers and focus group interview protocol for students. Description of each instrument is provided below.

**Focus group interview protocol for teachers.** We developed this instrument with 14 questions most of which aimed to understand teachers' experiences with MAG, their challenges with MAG, and its effects on teaching (See Appendix A). Some of the questions include (1) "What difficulties/challenges do you face while teaching?" (2) "Have you taught students with different learning abilities?" (3) "How do you work with students with different abilities?"

We used expert review to validate the instrument. Two experts with research background reviewed our questions. Then, we tested this instrument in a pilot interview to see how the interview questions worked. In qualitative research, researchers should predict how participants will understand the interview instructions and questions; therefore, the significance of piloting interview questions gives the opportunity to the researchers to put themselves in the position of the participants (Maxwell, 2013). Sandberg (2005) argues that in order to assure precise understanding of all interview questions by the participants and accomplish high communicative validity, interviewers need to ask follow-up questions and provide explanation when needed. We considered Sandberg's suggestions and adhered to the same procedure. Pilot study revealed that teachers had difficulties in comprehending some questions, hence we made necessary modifications and retested these questions.

**Focus group interview protocol for students.** We also developed a focus group discussion protocol for students which centered around 13 questions (See Appendix B). These questions mainly focused on students' challenges with MAG and its effects on their learning.

Some interview questions include (1) “Are you happy to study with students with different abilities? Why?” (2) “What are your thoughts or experiences of studying with students with different abilities?” (3) “How do you think mixed ability grouping affects your learning?”

Similar to focus group interview protocol for teachers, expert review was used to validate the protocol for students as well. Again, two experts who have research experience reviewed the questions. We piloted these questions, made appropriate changes, and retested them once more.

### **Data Collection**

We gathered data through focus group discussions. Upon identifying schools, the letters were prepared and signed by our program director to enter the sites and collect data. However, due to COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, we could not meet the principals in person, that is why contacted them via phone, gave clear information about our research, and proceeded with the data collection process.

Because of the unprecedented situation, we had to conduct focus group discussions on Zoom software. We bought pro package as a free plan had a time limit. One online focus group discussion was conducted with nine teachers and two discussions were organized with 16 students. Each focus group interview lasted about 90 minutes. We provided brief information about our research and asked whether they wanted to participate in this study. The teachers and students confirmed their participation verbally over Zoom and after receiving their consent, we recorded the discussions. In addition, we obtained parents’ consent about students’ participation since they were below 18. Data were collected in Azerbaijani as it is the main medium of instruction and communication in our country. One of us was a moderator and the others were note takers in all focus group discussions.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis process started right after the data collection. All data were first transcribed and translated from Azerbaijani to English. Then, we read the data, identified preliminary themes, organized the data per research question, and coded manually in Excel. We re-read again, checked the data for the major themes five times, and finalized codes. Afterwards, the data were analyzed and interpreted.

## CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

This section outlines our findings per research question and sub-question. It also includes general findings that are not directly related to any research question.

### **Math and English Teachers' Experiences with MAG**

Majority of respondents (88.8%) reported that they enjoyed teaching; only one teacher expressed not enjoying working as a teacher. According to the respondents (n = 9), major challenges in teaching were excessive parental involvement, lack of student attention and interest, problems with technology integration, working with students with special needs, and teaching a class of different learning abilities.

**Teachers' challenges with MAG.** All teachers responded working in a class with students with different learning abilities. And they all stated that they faced challenges (See Table 1) such as lack of time, lack of motivation, and difficulties in designing lesson plans to meet the needs of students in such grouping.

Table 1

#### *Teachers' Major Challenges with MAG*

<b>Teachers' Challenges</b>	<b>Percentage of Responses</b>
Lack of time	78% - (7 out of 9)
Lack of motivation	56% - (5 out of 9)
Difficulties in designing lesson plans	56% - (5 out of 9)

Teachers firstly mentioned experiencing time issue in MAG classes. As an example, they complained that low achievers asked too many questions which usually broke the flow of the planned lesson as they had to explain one topic three or four times. Accordingly, they could not

allocate enough time for explaining new concepts as it was planned. As a result, less time was left for extra activities such as group work or pair work to strengthen newly taught concepts. One teacher also mentioned that when she taught a new topic in Math classes, she had to explain new concepts several times as students had difficulties understanding Math concepts. Teacher 5 shared:

I teach Math in different MAG classes and during the lesson I often spend nearly 40 minutes on explaining a new concept. Although I explain it several times comprehensively, students ask the same questions again and again. Unfortunately, low - achievers struggle to understand new concepts, especially in Math. Therefore, I cannot find time to give students additional group work or tasks. Time is a big issue for me. So, lesson duration (i.e., 45 minutes) is not enough for a class with students with different learning abilities.

Teachers reported that spending a lot of time with low-level students also affected their energy and motivation. After a certain point, they were less motivated to teach. It was mostly because their efforts did not pay off to increase students' performance. Interestingly, one English teacher (i.e., Teacher 3) said:

Low-level students are divided into two groups: first group of students have interest in lessons, but their level of comprehension is low; second group of students do not have any interest or motivation toward lessons. It is always difficult to work and improve second type students' performance since they excessively drain my energy and motivation during the lesson.

All teachers considered students' abilities when they designed lessons and prepared plans, but the difficulty was to adjust lessons to diverse needs of students. They had to employ different

methods and use varied activities in the lesson to actively involve all students in the lessons. Although teachers admitted that they were immune to design lesson for a class of mixed abilities, they still found it challenging enough. Some teachers mentioned that textbooks lacked the variety of exercises with right level of difficulty. “There are not enough tasks in the textbooks in alignment with different levels of students’ abilities, thus we have to spend a lot of time to find new activities or tasks from other resources” (Teacher 8, Focus group discussion). In addition, teachers prepared additional tasks for high-level students, as high-achievers felt bored when teachers spent more time with low-level students and re-explained wither concepts or some exercises. To eliminate this problem, teachers had to develop or find supplementary tasks and include them in their lesson plans. Teachers indicated that this process was time-consuming and created extra burden.

**Effects of MAG on teaching.** Working with such grouping made teachers adopt varied teaching strategies and approaches to accommodate the needs of all students. Almost all teachers utilized group and pair work in a way that students with different skills and levels were intermingled; teachers said that students learned more from each other, shared ideas, and produced a common product at the end. Both English and Math teachers prepared supplementary exercises and questions appropriate for all levels of students. Math teachers particularly emphasized using a set of cards while English teachers mostly relied on visuals, role-plays, videos, different activities and games to involve all students. However, all of them claimed that managing group and pair work could sometimes be challenging due to the dominance of high-level students.

Math teachers highlighted using different strategies to overcome the difficulties they faced. Firstly, all Math teachers said that they constantly used a set of cards in different



occasions. For example, when high-achievers finished tasks earlier teachers gave them a set of cards to work on and meanwhile they re-explained new concepts to low-achievers. Teachers prepared some cards with easy tasks for low-achievers as they were not able to move at the same pace with other students. Secondly, Math teachers usually employed group and pair work to blend low-level students with high-achievers so that the former benefited from their strong peers. According to most Math teachers, high-attainers feel motivated to work with their peers as they feel like a teacher and gain confidence. Teacher 9 said:

One day I organized competition in the class. I paired low-level students with high-achievers. They first worked on given tasks and then the pairs started competing against each other. When the competition started, I saw how low-achievers were motivated and engaged. They wanted to win. At the end, I realized that all students were involved.

Afterwards, I occasionally used this strategy.

English teachers mentioned that they mostly utilized various interactive strategies (e.g., worksheets, role plays, videos, visuals, games) to engage all students during the class. “Since English is an international language, it is easier to find a range of materials on the Internet. I usually use worksheets from the busyteacher.org” (Teacher 2, Focus group discussion). They also emphasized the benefit of using role-plays to prevent students from memorizing texts. It allowed students to engage and apply different scenarios and contents to a real world context. Another strategy employed by English teachers was application of videos to catch and keep students’ attention. “I find videos on YouTube interesting and useful as they help students learn by both seeing and hearing” (Teacher 7, Focus group discussion).

When asked about teachers’ views on grouping students based on their abilities, 77,8% of them thought it was a good idea and believed that it would be beneficial for both teachers and

students. Some teachers said that ability grouping could enhance students' performance and lessen their burden to accommodate the learning needs of diverse students. Nevertheless, 22,2% of teachers preferred MAG and expressed their concern with reference to teaching; they would not want to be assigned to work with only low-level students. This might label them as low-performing teachers.

### **Students' Experiences with MAG**

The interview started by asking students' opinions on school life. All students (n = 16) found school life interesting as they made friends, gained knowledge, and saw school life as a path to successful future, whereas 38% of them thought school was also very difficult since they experienced comprehension problems in some subjects and were given a great deal of homework. To deal with these difficulties, most students reported that they received certain tutoring programs, which created more stress and made their school life more challenging. High proportion of students (62.5%) reported that they enjoyed the learning process as they acquired knowledge and broadened their horizons. On the contrary, 25% of them argued that whether they enjoyed learning depended on subjects, while 12.5% said that it was the teaching methods that made their learning process enjoyable. All students unanimously confirmed studying in a class of students with mixed abilities. A significant proportion of students (81.25%) were happy to study in such grouping, however, the rest expressed their dissatisfaction. Majority of students (56.25%) shared positive experiences of studying in MAG because they mutually helped each other. Not only low-achievers but also high-performers found such grouping beneficial as they had an opportunity to learn, revise, and improve their performance by exchanging knowledge and assisting each other. High-attainers stated that this grouping helped them deepen their

understanding where low-achievers mostly received assistance from their peers to fill gaps in their knowledge.

**Students' challenges with MAG.** Although majority of students were happy to study in MAG, some students (43.75%) expressed their concerns. Firstly, students experienced particular difficulties in some subjects. They highlighted difficulties not only in English and Math classes, but also in other lessons such as Physics, History, and Geography. Students' problems in English classes included learning new words, comprehending grammar patterns, whereas in Math they had difficulties in memorizing math formulas, solving multi-step problems, and mathematical reasoning. Secondly, students referred to particular occasions when they experienced negative issues in MAG such as conflicts among students, time, student interruptions, and feeling of shyness (See Table 2).

Table 2

*Students' Major Challenges with MAG*

<b>Students' Challenges</b>	<b>Percentage of Responses</b>
Conflicts among students	50% - (8 out of 16)
Time	37.5% - (6 out of 16)
Student interruptions	37.5% - (6 out of 16)
Feeling of shyness	31.25% - (5 out of 16)

Students reported that conflicts mainly caused by disagreement in group work where high and low-achievers were assigned to work together. High-achievers dominated the group and did not usually take other group members' ideas into account. Student 7 said:

Once we are assigned to work with high-performing students in a group, they usually take a lead and try to control the group work. They do not want to

consider our opinions since they think our answers might be wrong or misleading.

Some students also complained about spending too much time on repeating some concepts since low-level students could not keep up with the rest and that was the reason why teachers sometimes did not move to the next topic. To illustrate, some students gave an example from Math classes that they spent too much time for learning new concepts and could not practice exercises. With regard to student interruption, some students reported that they could not answer questions posed by teachers since high-performers immediately answered and prevented their participation in discussions. Student 6 shared:

High-performers tend to answer questions quickly and it does not allow me to think over teachers' questions. In this case, I lose the chance to demonstrate my knowledge. Therefore, sometimes I just avoid answering questions as I know that high-achievers will immediately outperform me.

Additionally, almost half of students noted that they often shied away from asking questions. This happens mainly because a) sometimes teachers overreact; b) high-attainers may already know the answer to these questions; c) these students did not want to be labelled as low-achievers.

**Effects of MAG on learning.** When asked about how students overcame the aforementioned difficulties, half of them said that they relied on both their teachers' and peers' assistance. They could ask teachers for further explanations or request their fellows to share their learning techniques. On the contrary, 25% of students only asked their teachers since they believed that their peers could mislead them with their answers. Some students (25%) reported that they used Internet or requested only peers' assistance because they did not want to bother

their teachers when some concepts were unclear. Forty-four percent of students said that they were not able to freely ask questions for further clarifications when they could not understand new concepts. Only small proportion of students (18.75%) expressed that it depended on the teacher. Student 3 stated:

It is really hard to say that I did not understand a concept among 30 students as most students may have already understood it. You know what I mean, right? So, I choose keeping the questions to myself to avoid embarrassment.

Students' answers to the question about their feelings when they could not catch up with their classmates were particularly interesting: majority of them (56.25%) noted that producing results with correct answers was much more important than finishing early or late. However, four students highlighted the feeling of relief and proud after finishing tasks early. On the other hand, 43.75% of students expressed that falling behind others affected them adversely since they felt jealous and disappointed. With reference to asking questions in the class where classmates might already know the answer, 56.25% of students found it quite natural not to know or understand something while 43.75% of them felt disappointed and judged their knowledge and skills compared to others.

When students were asked to express their opinions on ability grouping, significant proportion of students (81.25%) were in favor. They said that if everyone moved on according to his/her pace, knowledge, and skills, it would result in increased student outcomes. Only 12.5% of students did not want to study in classes where students would be grouped based on their abilities; they claimed that such grouping would hinder low-achievers from further improvement. In other words, they believed that this grouping would deprive low-achievers from their high-

performing classmates. Only one student mentioned that this way of grouping did not matter as she mainly learned from teachers.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The findings of the study revealed that teachers and students in mixed ability classes perceived their teaching and learning environment both challenging and rewarding. Although teachers faced some challenges in their career, they loved their job and were proud of themselves for being a teacher. Students also had some issues in their MAG classes; nevertheless, they enjoyed studying with students with different abilities as low-level students learned from their peers and high-achievers liked teaching their knowledge to the mid- and low-level students. Therefore, we can conclude that our findings are compatible with the reviewed literature (Al-Subaiei, 2017; Butterworth, 2010; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; Northcote, 2006).

Interestingly, teachers have already become immune to work with MAG as they have developed strategies such as group and peer work, use of cards, role-plays, visuals, games to deal with the drawbacks of such grouping. Our study showed that teachers had time issue in both preparing and implementing lesson plans which corroborated with previous studies (Al-Shammakhi & Al-Humaidi, 2015; Al-Subaiei, 2017). Students also complained that time was a problem in MAG classes as teachers spent too much time on revision of concepts because of low-level students, who could not keep up with the rest and that was the reason why they had less time to do practices for increasing their knowledge. As the reviewed literature presents, when teachers spend too much time with the low-achievers, high-achievers feel bored, or when teachers work only with the high-level students, others cannot join the lesson and gradually, lose motivation and interest toward the lessons (Gurgenidze, 2012; Pedersen, & Kronborg, 2014). In line with Al-Subaiei (2017), when teachers spend much time with low-level students, it negatively affects teachers' energy and motivation. This was mentioned by our participants as well.

Another issue caused by MAG is Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect, which was described in literature review section of this paper. Our participants stated that low-level students compared their talent with that of high achievers and it negatively affected their learning process. Teachers confirmed this statement when describing their experiences with MAG. Students also shied away from asking questions and it had negative influences on both their learning and motivation. This resonated with earlier research (Dai, 2004). Although teachers carried out group or pair works, it created conflicts among students as high-achievers did not pay enough attention to other students' thoughts, which resulted in less participation of low-level students. Not hearing the voices of low-achieving students was not mentioned in the reviewed literature.

Both teachers and students welcomed the idea of grouping students based on their abilities as according to them, it will give an opportunity to both low-level and high-level students to move on at their own pace and progress accordingly. It will create a classroom environment that may result in better student learning outcomes.

Despite these findings, there are some limitations to our research study as well. It only targeted three public schools located in Baku, the capital city and included 25 participants. These participants represented Math and English teachers and students from 7th grade. However, considering both our research findings and the literature reviewed, we think this is a topic worth attention and additional research is needed, especially to investigate further effects of grouping of students. To conclude, we think that piloting ability grouping in some schools and studying its effects might be interesting. Therefore, as a culmination of our Capstone project paper, we present a policy proposal about the implementation of ability grouping in pilot public schools.



## CHAPTER 7: POLICY PROPOSAL: IMPLEMENTATION OF ABILITY GROUPING IN PILOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Upon analyzing our findings, it became clear that each class is a mixture of students with different abilities and both students and teachers experienced some difficulties in learning and teaching respectively. OECD (2013) also reports that each class across different countries consists of students with different levels and interests and to address such diversity school systems apply various programs. These programs can be curriculum adaptation or ability grouping in which students' educational needs can be met more effectively (OECD, 2013). The rationale behind the programs is to homogenize the student contingent with the aim of better student outcomes. In the context of Azerbaijan, there is only one form of grouping and that is based on age. As stated earlier, the results of grade nine graduation exams were not satisfactory and the reviewed literature suggests that one of the reasons of low attainment might be grouping of students. Considering all these plus the findings of our small scale research study, we suggest the implementation of ability grouping as a pilot project in several public schools to reach better student learning outcomes.

### **Ability Grouping**

Ability grouping has been defined by Bolick and Rogowsky (2016) as an educational approach that groups students based on their academic achievement with the aim of providing appropriate instruction in alignment with students and their individual needs. According to Hattie (2009), the advantage of ability grouping is that students can learn better when grouped with peers like themselves in the environment where teachers can adapt the instruction to their needs. Students can be grouped based on ability in two ways: within classes or between classes (Matthews, Ritchotte, & McBee, 2013). First grouping format is a way of grouping students in

the classroom based on students' academic ability or performance whereas between class is identified as a practice placing students in different classrooms on the basis of ability (Matthews et al., 2013).

The United Kingdom (UK) and United States of America have practiced between-class ability grouping for many years by distributing students to classes within a hierarchy from highest to lowest and it is usually referred to as streaming and tracking respectively (Hornby & Witte, 2014). The study conducted by Ireson, Hallam, and Hurley (2005) in the UK with the aim to investigate the effects of ability grouping showed that high-achievers did academically better in such grouping format. Yet, there was no or less significant progress in the performance of students with low-levels. To better the learning outcomes of low-achieving students, it is essential to maintain a challenging curriculum, create a need-based learning environment, and provide high-quality instruction (OECD, 2012).

### **Local Case Study**

The Bilasuvar Lyceum-School Complex named after National Hero of Azerbaijan Mubariz Ibrahimov, semi-private school located in Bilasuvar, Azerbaijan has adopted grouping students based on ability for three years. We wanted to learn about this practice and requested the principal to share the school's experience with us. The school does not have a written policy on ability grouping, yet the school management decided to pilot this approach. According to the principal, the first-year implementation of the project can be characterized as a pilot experiment to evaluate its feasibility. After the project evaluation, school determined the project as successful and continued its school-wide implementation. It is currently being applied starting from the fifth to the ninth grade by distributing students into classes based on their ability and knowledge level. The lessons are held according to the national curriculum and there are

four group categories per core subject depending on students' academic performance. These groups are usually identified at the beginning of the academic year by looking at students' assessment results. Since students of top-performing groups fully meet the requirements of the national curriculum, they are exposed to more information in classes to participate in knowledge competitions which goes beyond the local curriculum. As for the low-performing groups, teachers hold lessons considering these students' needs and learning speed. We asked whether low performers get negatively affected due to being placed in low-ability groupings, the principal responded that they experienced such cases in the beginning. Some parents and students complained about the form of grouping as it labeled students as low-achievers which resulted in student demotivation. The principal emphasized that students were not placed in low-ability groups in each and every subject but only in a subject where their performance is low. For example, one student can be placed in low-ability group in History, whereas he/she is in high-ability group in Math. This happens because students' abilities and knowledge levels differ from one subject to another. Students have an opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills throughout the academic year and can switch to higher-ability groups between classes.

The principal also highlighted the importance of keeping teachers motivated in order to conduct lessons effectively with ability grouping. Therefore, teachers are assigned to teach different levels of groups within the semester and rewarded based on performances of those groups. When asked whether teachers prefer to work with high-ability, average ability, or low-ability groups, the principal said that teachers were quite motivated to work with low-performers as improving these students' performance was much more visible rather than that of high-achievers. It is quite challenging for teachers to keep high-performers' academic standing steady or climbing whereas teachers can achieve visible progress among low-achievers in a relatively

short period of time. The principal also mentioned the importance of teacher professional development related to ability grouping since teachers should learn and employ subtle and comprehensive teaching methods to meet the needs of diverse groups. The results of the graduates of this lyceum-school complex should be especially noted: the average score of students representing this educational institution is 625 (out of 700) in university entrance exam. As a rule, all graduates of this school score more than 500 and 20 students more than 600. The school ranks first in Azerbaijani, Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry and sixth in English per subject specific results (Abbaszade, Bedelov, & Shelaginov, 2018). The principal claimed that ability grouping was one of the reasons leading to school's country-wide accomplishment.

We can refer to this case as well as to literature discussed above for implementing ability grouping in public schools. The implementation of this initiative is cost-effective since only teachers need to be trained to be able to work specifically with a group of low- or high-achieving students. The promising outcomes of such grouping can be a noticeable increase in school-wide student learning outcomes.

The implementation of this initiative requires several actions. First, ability grouping should be limited to core subjects that are sequential in nature such as English, Math, and Science (OECD, 2012). This approach has been practiced in various countries including the UK and Spain. Next, schools should establish clear criteria for student placement to avoid biases and misplacement. For instance, Netherlands practices high mobility to mitigate wrong student placement (Akkerman et al., 2011; OECD, 2010). Last but not least, all students should be provided with a challenging curriculum, an engaging learning environment which meets student's needs, considers their learning styles, and specific interests, and effective instruction.

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Interview Protocol for Teachers

Hello! We, Gunay Hajili, Gulchin Baharova, and Khanim Azimli, are the students of Master of Arts in Educational Management at ADA University. We are conducting a research on Mixed Ability Grouping and its Effect on Teaching and Learning for our Capstone project. This focus group will help us explore your experiences with MAG and understand how it affects your teaching. Anything you tell us is confidential. Nothing you say will be personally attributed to you in any reports that result from this focus group discussion. All of our reports will be written in a manner that no individual comment can be attributed to a particular person. Your participation in this focus group is totally voluntary. Are you willing to answer our questions? Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. Do you enjoy teaching?
3. What difficulties /challenges do you face while teaching?
4. Have you taught students with different learning abilities?
5. How do you work with students with different abilities?
6. Have you identified any challenges while teaching students with mixed abilities? If yes, please explain.
7. How do you deal with such challenges?
8. How do you manage a class of students with mixed abilities?
9. Do you consider students' abilities when you design your lesson plans? If yes, how.
10. How do you think teaching mixed ability grouping affects your teaching?
11. Do you explain new concepts (or materials) over and over when students keep asking questions for further explanation?
12. How else do you accommodate needs of students with different learning abilities while teaching?
13. What do you think about grouping students based on their abilities? How would it affect your teaching?
14. Is there anything that you would like to share with us on this topic?

**Thank you for your time!**

## Appendix B

### Focus Group Interview Protocol for Students

Hello! We, Gunay Hajili, Gulchin Baharova, and Khanim Azimli, are the students of Master of Arts in Educational Management at ADA University. We are conducting a research on Mixed Ability Grouping and its Effect on Teaching and Learning for our Capstone project. This focus group will help us explore your experiences with MAG and understand how it affects your learning. Anything you tell us is confidential. Nothing you say will be personally attributed to you in any reports that result from this focus group discussion. All of our reports will be written in a manner that no individual comment can be attributed to a particular person. Your participation in this focus group is totally voluntary. Are you willing to answer our questions? Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What do you think about your school life?
2. Do you enjoy the learning process?
3. Are there students with different abilities in your class?
4. Are you happy to study with students with different abilities? Why?
5. What are your thoughts or experiences of studying with students with different abilities?
6. How do you think studying in mixed ability grouping affects your learning?
7. Do you face any challenges while learning some new concepts /materials? If yes, please explain.
8. How do your teachers and/or classmates help you to overcome these challenges?
9. Do you freely ask for further clarification when you do not understand any concept? Please elaborate.
10. How do you feel when/if you cannot keep up with others in the class? For example, how do you feel when finish your task before/after your classmates?
11. How do you feel when/if you ask questions answers of which others may already know?
12. What do you think about grouping students based on their abilities? How would it affect your learning?
13. Is there anything that you would like to share with us on this topic?