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Children's Perspectives Toward Ability-Based Group Work in a Primary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the findings from a study that explored children's interactions and their perceptions of working in groups in a primary classroom. Group work among children has been researched widely to highlight its efficacy in influencing children's cognitive and social learning in mainstream classrooms. Such research, however, appears to ignore children's own perspectives, and thus may contribute only slightly to presenting a true picture of children's thinking and their experiences of working with others during their routinely organized group work. This small-scale study was conducted with twenty-seven 9- to 10-year-old children studying in Year Five. Using ethnographic research design, unstructured participant observations were used to study children's interactions, and informal conversational interviews were held with children to listen to their perspectives. The data gathered through observations and interviews were analyzed qualitatively. This article reports findings from the interview data and provides insight on what children think of group work, how children experience group work, and how children want to see group work in the future. With these findings, the article highlights the importance of listening to children's perspectives by practitioners, researchers, and policymakers when organizing group work in the mainstream classrooms.

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Group work among children has been favored greatly in the theories of learning and development (Howe et al., 2007). Numerous research studies have been conducted to confirm group work as beneficial for children's cognitive and social learning (Gillies, 2015). Previous research in the field of group work, however, offers few opportunities for children to express their thinking and report on their experiences of working with others. Studies mainly have been led by adult researchers (Baines et al., 2009; Howe et al., 2007; Roseth et al., 2008), while using experimental and intervention-based research designs.

The new paradigm in the field of childhood studies defines children as competent and complete individuals (Hammersley, 2017) and able to construct meaning of the world around them, as they are active agents of their own social lives (James et al., 1998; Kehily, 2009). According to the new paradigm (Kehily, 2009), children and their interests possess huge importance in research, policy, and practice in various domains, including welfare, medical, and educational institutions (James & Prout, 1997). It considers and defines childhood as a variable of social analysis, which cannot be separated from social and cultural structures, and, therefore, emphasizes study of social relationships among children and their contexts (James & Prout, 1997). This child-centered paradigm questions the adequacy of the adult-led research framework, and their ways to conceptualize children (Jenks, 1996) in the overall research process. It asserts that children observe and interpret things in different ways due to being insiders of their cultures and contexts, which adults may not notice (Fargas Malet et al., 2010) from their position of outsiders in children's worlds (Kellett, 2011).

The perception of children as competent individuals and social agents of their world (Jenks, 1996) has changed their position from object to subject in education research (Kellett, 2005, 2011). It demands researchers ensure children's agency in the overall research process (Mayall, 2008) by awarding them greater opportunities to participate in research that relates to their lives (Powell & Smith, 2009). The present study builds upon the agenda of giving a voice to children and attempts to explore children's perspectives on classroom-based group work while using a participatory ethnographic research design.

Group work: What has been researched so far?

Previous research on group work first appeared to identify how group work is useful for children's cognitive and social learning (Baines et al., 2008; Battistich & Watson, 2003; Fawcett & Garton, 2005; Gillies, 2014; Tolmie et al., 2010). For example, Fawcett and Garton (2005) examined 6- to 7-year-old children's cognitive abilities to sort blocks, according to their different size, shape, and color, by grouping them in experimental and controlled groups. Children's block-sorting abilities were assessed through both pre- and posttests, and the findings revealed that children working in groups exhibited a higher level of reasoning while sorting the given blocks, compared to their classmates who worked on the task individually. In 2008, Baines and associates' year-long experimental study with 6- to 11-year-old children, at two different sites in England, revealed that children exhibited higher levels of cognitive behaviors while working in groups. Some other researchers (e.g., Gillies, 2003; Howe & Ritchie, 2002; Tolmie et al., 2010) attempted to identify positive influences of group work on children's social and communicative skills at early elementary and elementary levels, while using an intervention-based research design.

While considering group work important for children's cognitive and social learning, previous research on group work also appeared to identify the effective ways of organizing group work among children. In this regard, Roseth et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 148 studies on group work and identified that the group structure (that is, cooperative, noncooperative, and individualistic) influences social interdependency among children. The authors stressed upon teachers to group children in cooperative groups to develop positive interdependency between group members, while considering competitive or individual group structures not suitable for children's learning in group-based learning environments. Similarly, Gillies and Haynes (2011) and Webb (2008) talk about the role of the classroom teacher in instructing children about conflict management and the processes of making joint decisions, to enable them to successfully work with others in groups. Furthermore, Baines et al. (2009) consider children's training, and Gillies and Boyle (2008) highlight the importance of structuring appropriate learning tasks as crucial aspects for effectively organizing group work among children.

Children's perspectives in research on group work: Importance

Previous studies on group work propose profound knowledge about the role of group work in positively influencing children's learning. These studies also attempted to identify ways to make group work conducive for children's learning while offering insights into the effective organization of group work among children. However, they do not actively involve children in the research, and therefore may lack insider perspectives (Kellett, 2005). Researchers in these studies have relied upon experimental and intervention-based research paradigm (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). The use of experiments and interventions on children raises concerns regarding the appropriateness of experimental principles in explaining children's lives (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008), as the findings are analyzed and interpreted by adult researchers in light of the object questions (Mayall, 2008). The children mainly appeared to be considered as objects of investigation (Kellett, 2005), or in the words of Qvortrup (1999, p. 86), as "dependent" on the contextual factors, who can be manipulated by the learning environment, group structure, teaching strategies, learning tasks, and training in order to

enable them to work effectively in groups. Compared to this, research that gives children the opportunity to express their views and report on their personal experiences generates meaningful, rich, and complex data (Sinclair, 2004). According to Prout and James (1990), a separate reality emerges when children are given active voices in research. Such research can potentially lead toward a social policy that accurately represents the concerns of children (Prout & James, 1990), and helps us to understand children from their own perspective (Kellett, 2005) rather than from the adult's perspectives. Adults' perspectives on the affective implementation of group work can be very different from children's perspectives. Children have abilities to express what is helpful and effective for their learning during group work if they have been given choices about participating in research on group work. Findings of such research studies can help practitioners make group work more meaningful for children. They also can be used to motivate children to actively participate in classroom-based group work when it is organized according to their will and desires.

Children's perspectives on ability grouping

Research evidence is limited in terms of perspectives from children and young people in research on ability grouping (Tereshchenko et al., 2019). A very few studies in the field of ability grouping reported perspectives from children and young people. For example, in 2014, Marks's study with 10- to 11-year-old children reported their experiences of working in ability-based groups using a mixed method research design. Her study revealed how ability grouping is not welcomed by primary school children. The study reported that children felt teachers mostly spend time in subject teaching while implementing ability grouping. Due to which, teachers have much less time to hear from children about the problems they face in their wider lives that impact their learning in schools. The study also reported that, in some cases, children must work in ability groups with children from other classes under the guidance of subject teachers not their classroom teachers, which led children to experience anxiety. Subject teachers might have strong understanding of their children in subjects they teach, but their understanding of the children across the curriculum is limited. So, they do not have holistic understanding of the children and what they are going through inside and outside the classroom.

With these findings, Marks (2014) considers that traditional research based only on practitioners' perspectives is not sufficient to understand the effects of ability-based grouping on children's learning. Therefore, children should have frequent opportunities to express their thinking in research on ability-based groupwork. The negativity experienced by children in ability groups does not only occur during their school lives. It continues further in their adulthood, as identified by Boaler (2005). Boaler (2005) interviewed 24-year-old young people to explore how being in low-ability groups had influenced their professional lives. The findings showed that ability grouping appeared to negatively affect their self-confidence as they defined themselves as low attainers in all spheres of life. These views were completely different from those of adults who were taught under equitable and effective grouping policies in primary schools.

The importance of hearing children's perspectives on group work is also echoed by Tereshchenko and associates. While reporting data from a large study on student grouping in England (Tereshchenko et al., 2019), they stated that secondary school students expressed divergent views on mixed-ability grouping and its organization in schools. Authors involved 11- to 12-year-old students studying under mixed-ability grouping. Both individual and group interviews with students highlighted that most of them preferred to have mixed-ability groups compared to fixed-ability groups. However, there were some disagreements regarding the efficacy of mixed-ability grouping from students with diverse learning levels. These findings prove that exploring children's perspectives on group work and its efficacy for supporting their learning in the mainstream classroom is a complex debate. It demands researchers seek an in-depth understanding of the topic by providing children opportunities to reflect on their experiences of working in groups, as they are the ones whose learning and development is hugely affected (Boaler, 2005; Marks, 2014) by the nature of grouping strategies being implemented in their classrooms.

The present study

The data reported in this article were collected as part of a research project conducted at University of Leeds, which aimed to explore children's interactions and their perceptions of working in groups. The article reports findings from the informal conversational interviews, which were held with children to explore their perceptions of group work using a participatory ethnographic research design. During these conversations, children were given opportunities to express their thinking about group work and report their experiences of working in groups in a primary classroom. Children were also asked to share their aspirations for improving group work to gain their perspectives on group organization, of which previous studies on group work have achieved very little. The research questions explored in this article include:

- How do children perceive their group work?
- How do children's experiences of working in groups differ from one another, and why?
- How do children express dynamic aspirations to improve their group work, and why?

Methodology

Sample

The study was conducted with 27 primary school children, age 9 to 10 years old. The children in the studied classroom were of British, Asian, Eastern European, and African heritage. The classroom was set out in five different ability groups (that is, Low, Average A, Average B, Average C, and High). The class teacher used different colors to differentiate the ability groups, such as red, yellow, and green tables. Children were allocated into the different ability groups based on their assessed academic levels. The children with similar academic levels were accustomed to working in fixed-ability groups for core subjects, including numeracy and literacy lessons. The number of children in each ability group varied in the studied classroom. The number of children in fixed-ability groups also varied in different core subjects based on their performances in the end of year assessments. For example, there were five children in the high-ability group, four in the low-ability group, and 18 children were divided into three average-ability groups in the literacy lessons. For numeracy lessons, there were five children in the low-ability group, five in the high-ability group, and 17 in the average-ability groups. Under mixed-ability grouping structures, five children with high, average, and low learning levels were grouped on three tables. On the remaining two tables, six children with mixed learning levels were grouped together during the time of data collection.

Data collection schedule and processes

An ethnographic research design, which allows researchers to engage in participatory fieldwork (Hammersely & Atkinson, 2007) and to immerse themselves (Fetterman, 2007) in the social world of the participants (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Madden, 2017), was used to study children's interactions and perceptions of group work for the study.

I first observed children's interactions during their routinely organized ability-based groups using participant observations before conducting informal conversational interviews with them to hear their perceptions of group work. The fieldwork for the study lasted for almost two years, from mid-September 2012 until September 2014. It was divided into three phases. During the first phase (September 2012, September 2013), my role as a participant researcher was fluid. I sometimes worked solely as a volunteer, helping children in their activities both inside and outside of the classroom (September to July 2012). Sometimes, I observed children's interactions during their group work after negotiating access with children, their parents, the head teacher, and the class teacher. The children would sometimes ask me questions about the ongoing learning task or would become engaged in off-task chat within the classroom. Outside the classroom, such as in the cloak (dressing) room, children

would often become louder while talking with one another, giggling and laughing. I did not stop them doing so, as I wanted to portray myself as being on the same level as them, rather than as an adult or member of staff (Mayall, 2008). This worked for me and the children (participants of the study) while illuminating my power as an adult (Mayeza, 2017). This was often not appreciated by my colleagues (other staff members), who considered that I should discipline the children and believed that I was perhaps not doing so.

During the second phase (September 2013 to January 2014), I selected two children from each fixed-ability group (low, average, and high) to focus on their interactions and to explore their perceptions of working in different fixed- and mixed-ability groups using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows researchers to recruit participants who meet the criteria set by researchers (Bernard, 2002). For example, children in this study were selected due to belonging to a high-, average-, or low-ability groups in core subjects (i.e., Literacy and Numeracy), with experience of working in mixed-ability groups in other subjects (i.e., Science, ICT, and PE). Maximum variation method, defined as a method for recruiting participants under purposive sampling (Braun & Clarke, 2006), was used to recruit children to observe their interactions and to hear their perspectives of working in different fixed- and mixed-ability groups. This allowed researchers to get information from different available angles to comprehensively understand children's interactions and their perceptions of working with peers in different fixed- and mixed-ability groups.

I discussed my plans with the class teacher before beginning my observations and informal conversational interviews with children. For each lesson, when the class teacher finished whole-class instructions and asked children to work in their fixed- and mixed-ability groups independently, I sat with groups of children to observe their group work. In the beginning, the class teacher liked to stay with the group of children being observed. I noticed that children were a bit quiet and conversed more with the class teacher compared to their peers. Despite being in the field for a long time, I sensed that I was still regarded as an outsider by the class teacher. So, I paused the observational process and explained to the teacher that my research was aimed only at exploring children's interactions and their perceptions of group work. It would not focus on her teaching practice and would not judge her classroom organizational skills. These negotiations worked well, and the class teacher then was happy for me to sit with any group of children without her being around. More about power relations and building rapport with the class teacher has been published elsewhere (Ambreen, 2017). The children's interactions were studied both inside (fixed- and mixed-ability groups) and outside of the classroom, such as in PE lessons and other outdoor activities, from October to December 2013.

Once observations were completed, I invited sample children to participate in an individual informal conversational interview. The purpose of holding conversations with these children was to gain a proper understanding of the children's world to produce in-depth and valid knowledge (Mayall, 2008) of their group work. I wanted to hear children's perspectives on the observed actions and interactions and confirm the credibility of my observation in producing solely children's perspectives (Christensen & James, 2008; Christensen & Prout, 2002) on group work.

Conversations with children took place in January 2014. Consent for holding these conversations with children was granted from teachers, children, and their parents at the start of the field work. However, each child was consulted again to confirm whether he/she wanted to take part in an informal conversational interview after their identification and selection in the second phase. I conversed with each child individually in a relaxing and quiet atmosphere of the designated room after gaining consent from the child and his/her class teacher. The timing of each conversation varied for each child, from 20 to 25 minutes. The classroom was small, which made the possibility of being distracted by other children quite high. Additionally, the children may have felt under pressure, and may not have felt that they could share open and honest knowledge about their experiences of working in groups in the presence of their class teacher.

For probing children's thinking, I used less-specific list of questions (Bryman, 2012) linked with group-based actions, skills, and processes, which children may experience while interacting and working with others in groups. I added questions about children's likes and dislikes regarding

group work. Careful consideration was paid while probing children's rationales behind their likes and dislikes for group work or working with peers. Questions about group structure and children's experiences of working under different group structures, their understanding of group composition, peer interaction, and working with others were added. The children were able to see the list and ask questions about the conservation. Before the conversations commenced, the children were asked if they were happy to be recorded. Consent for digitally recording these conversations was granted by the children themselves, their parents, and the class teacher.

Nearly all the children who participated in conversations agreed to be recorded, except for one child from the average-ability group. She asked me not to record her discussion with a voice recorder, but agreed that I could take notes instead. During the conversation, she kept reading my notes to make sure I had not missed any of her points. Children were asked to confirm their answers and responses consistently during the conversations. I reassured the children about what they had said to me by asking questions such as: "Is this what you mean ...", or "Are you saying ...," and felt happy when some children denied their responses, stating: "No, I was saying this this ... I did not mean that, but I think it is ..."

The third phase commenced after reviewing an overview of the data collected in the second phase. All children recruited through purposive sampling in the second phase were observed again in their fixed- and mixed-ability groups from March to April 2014, and conversations with sample children were held again in May 2014.

Analyzing the data

The data gathered through informal conversations were transcribed manually using Microsoft Word. Later, all the transcriptions were imported into NVivo Version 10. Children were assigned pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of their identities. However, respecting children's wishes about wanting to use their own names, pseudonyms were closely matched with their real names by using the first letter of real names in the pseudonyms. This respected the children's wishes (Saunders et al., 2015) about being able to read about themselves and their voices/contributions once the project is finished.

Using thematic analysis, I organized interview data by labeling it into several loose themes. The repeated and similar nature of children's perceptions were listed in one theme. The local terms present in the data (Bernard & Ryan, 2010) were mostly used to label children's perceptions. For instance, children's views were labeled as follows: know or do not know their academic levels, aware of or not aware of ability groups, like or dislike for fixed-ability groups, like or dislike for mixed-ability groups, prefer or do not prefer to work in groups, prefer to work with friends only, prefer to work with different people or alone, work in the same or different groups, and think positively or negatively about group discussions. Later, after consulting the literature on group work and considering the research questions, loose themes were categorized under three broader categories, including children's thinking on group composition, group-based learning experiences, and aspirations to improve group work.

Findings

This article reports findings from the informal conversational interviews that were held with the children. The children were asked to share their knowledge of classroom-based group organization, their experiences of working in groups, and their aspirations to improve their group work in the future. Their following responses explain the answers for the questions listed in this article.

Children's perspectives on group composition/organization

The children's responses on questions relating to group composition/organization in the studied classroom have shown that they seemed to mix their "groups" with "tables" by saying:

[Extract #1]

I: Which group do you work in?

Ahsan: In what?

I: Like when you do your lessons in numeracy or literacy, where do you sit?

Ahsan: OK, in numeracy, I am on purple table; in literacy, I sit on red table, no ... no, blue table.

(Conversation recorded on 17/12/13 at 2:00)

[Extract #2]

I: Which group do you work in?

Sumaira: Miss, like what group?

I: Groups, like your tables.

Sumaira: Yeah! I am on green table.

(Conversation recorded on 13/12/13 at 2:00)

Children from the average- and high-ability groups mentioned their tables allocated to color (for example, green, red, blue, and purple tables) when referring to their groups. They seemed to interpret their groups as a way of allocating children's seats at different tables as depicted from their responses below:

[Extract #3]

I: Why is your table called blue?

Ahsan: That's the table where our levels are.

I: So do you know your levels?

Ahsan: Yes, 3 ... B.

(Conversation recorded on 12/12/13 at 2:30)

[Extract #4]

Sumaira: We sit on different tables; like for maths, I sit on green, highest table.

I: The highest table; what does it mean?

Sumaira: Mean high levels, like, Miss, you know, my level is 4b in maths, and it's really good, mean I am very bright.

(Conversation recorded on 13/12/13 at 2:00)

The children also appeared to be aware of the ability-based group organization that was being practiced in their classroom. They mentioned their assessed distinctive academic levels in the above extracts. The child from the high-ability group called herself "bright," as her level in Math was high (4b), which, as she shared, was "really good."

The children from the low-ability group did not appear to express a clear understanding of the ability-based group organization. They mentioned that this was their class teacher's decision, for example:

[Extract #5]

Danial: Yes, yes I am in purple.

I: Why is it called purple?

Danial: Because, because the tables, and then the color, and Miss put some people on each table so you got color for your table.

(Conversation recorded on 11/12/13 at 02: 45)

Danial was placed in the low-ability group. Upon sharing his understanding of the ability-based group organization, he mentioned that "miss" (the class teacher) put people on different tables, just as he was

assigned to sit at the purple table. He did not mention his assessed academic levels being the reason he was allocated to the purple (low ability) group, as his peers from the average- and high-ability groups did.

Children's perspectives on their experiences of working in groups

The children from the high-, average-, and low-ability groups appeared to share varied perspectives about their experiences of working in groups. Their responses show that they interpreted group work differently, based on their learning experiences in different (low, average, and high) ability groups.

For instance, the children from the average- and high-ability groups admired their fixed-ability groups, as they were able to gain opportunities to learn from their peers:

[Extract #6]

I: What do you do in your groups?

Isma: Miss, we work on questions that Miss gave to us . . . Sometimes we tell each other, like me and [Huma].

(Conversation recorded on 19/05/14 at 2:00)

The children shared that they work on tasks given by their class teacher, and sometimes share this with their group members. The same children did not appreciate their mixed-ability group work, in which they work with children of different academic levels.

[Extract #7]

Isma: Like, sometimes, when Miss, she puts us with Suleiman and Rafi's table, they know more, and they know how to do difficult things, so, yes, we learn with them practically obviously. Like, if someone who know their times tables, like Rafi or Suleiman know more timetables, I know a few of them so they can teach me which I don't know.

I: Is it still helping when you are grouped with someone who does not know much?

Isma: Yeah . . . [silent] well, my numeracy group, we always help each other, we don't argue over the answers cause [because] sometimes I might say – right, I will have a go, and Usman might say – I will go so (she talked about her fixed ability group).

I: And what about your normal table?

Isma: Hhhhhh [reluctance in voice].

I: Come on, you can trust me.

Isma: Oooooooooooooo [making some voices]. It depends miss . . . sometimes other people don't listen you, they talk about other things and don't let you to do work. So sometimes it's annoying.

I: How annoying? Can you recall any example?

Isma: When people don't let you to do work, especially normal tables, like Fatima, Miss, as you know I don't want her in my group as she is messy . . . and you know, Miss, once I worked with Sonam in ICT, she deleted something which was important in slides. Thank God . . . I saved two copies of presentation otherwise we need another one . . . So if they don't know what to do then it is not good for all.

(Conversation recorded on 19/05/14)

Isma seemed to like the mixed-ability group in the case when she is grouped with academically high-performing peers. She shared that she learned about timetables from them. She did not share any positive views while reporting her experiences of working with peers from the low-ability group. She considered that their lower level of knowledge was not useful for other group members.

The children from the low-ability group did not report their experiences of engaging in effective group work either. While reflecting on their experiences of working in fixed-ability groups, they reported:

[Extract #8]

Farkhanda: No . . . it's right working with an adult if you need help so . . . if you are on different table and you are struggling . . . so that means that you need an adult . . . You have to work independently. Yeah, but if you are on low table it is good because there is an adult helping you . . . yeah.

I: So as you said, if you are struggling and you need some help . . . do you ask others at your table to help you?

Farkhanda: Yeah ... you can ... [Breath] Neighbors [they] can help you ... [Silent] if you [are] stuck in a question but only sometimes they could help you so it's better to have an adult with you.

(Conversation recorded on 12/05/14 at 2:30)

Farkhanda regarded working with an adult as an ideal working environment. She shared that she does not usually get help from her peers during their work, and therefore it is good to have an adult at the table for support. The children from the low-ability group also felt quite negative when talking about their experiences working in mixed-ability groups, as seen below:

[Extract #9]

I: And if you need any help what will you do?

Danial: Mr John [support teacher] or Miss Perini [class teacher].

I: Okay, will you ask anyone else mean other children when Mr John will not be there? [I meant here the mixed-ability table]

Danial: No.

I: Fine, can you please explain why?

Danial: Because they say go away. They don't let me do anything. *(Conversation recorded on 11/12/13)*

Danial did not seem convinced about working with other peers, as he reported being treated negatively when he asked for any help in the lessons. He mentioned that he felt that he could only get help in his class from the support teachers.

In the above extracts (7–9), the children from different (high, average, and low) ability groups expressed different views, both positive and negative, regarding their experiences working in groups. In the extracts below, the children explain their rationales for considering their group work to be positive or negative. For instance, children from the average- and high-ability groups seemed to prioritize their individual work, and expressed it as one of the reasons behind not interacting and working with others in their mixed-ability groups, as disclosed below:

[Extract #10]

Isma: I need some time to concentrate and think about work so I can do it easily when I am alone.

I: So why can't you do it as a group?

Isma: 'Cause ... you know, people ask about things and then you can't work.

I: How do you feel when you work alone?

Isma: I feel happy as I'm finishing off my work, so yes ... I like it.

(Conversation recorded on 11/12/13)

Isma expressed that she did not like to be questioned by her peers, as she then found it hard to concentrate on her own work. She found it more helpful when she worked alone because she could finish her tasks. Sumaira (a child) from the high-ability group reported the fear of being copied by peers, which is why she did not like to work in mixed-ability groups:

[Extract #11]

Sumaira: Basically, Miss, people mostly distract me in Science.

I: Who are they?

Sumaira: Miss, sometimes ... it's ... [Silent pause] most of the boys.

I: How do they distract you?

Sumaira: I try to do something they just, oh we did that ... We did that. They always copy me right and I shout at them. I know you don't need to shout; you can stop them calmly or simple you just tell them you shut up.

(Conversation recorded on 12/05/2014)

Sumaira mentioned that some of the children, particularly boys, distract her by copying her work or taking credit for doing what she has already done in her work, and therefore she feels the need to give them a "shut up call."

Emphasis upon continuing their own work or preserving it from other peers has been noted in the children's accounts. Some children, particularly those from the high and average groups, appeared to be aware that their individual work would be considered to allocate them to the top or bottom of ability groups. This awareness appeared to lead children from the high and average groups to prioritize their individual work above group work.

Children's perspectives on improving group work

Children expressed different aspirations about improving their group work. For instance, children from the high- and average-ability groups mainly talked about the improved group work skills of their peers, such as:

[Extract #12]

I: Do you enjoy group discussion?

Rafique: Yeah! I get to know the people and I know like ... what, yeah ... I know who they are ... like to help them.

I: What do you expect from them?

Rafique: They should be listening because they ... [Silent] should be useful that I am helping them. [If] they didn't have me or anyone teacher. They will be stuck.

(Conversation recorded on 6/12/14)

Rafique, from the high-ability group, regarded group work as a way of knowing others (peers), but expected them to listen to one another during their group discussions. Similarly, Isma from the average-ability group expected her peers to exhibit good manners, stating:

[Extract #13]

Isma: Mmm, I like to work with different people as you know about different people, but if they are behaved not naughty.

I: Naughty.

Isma: Yes ... Miss ... You know, sometimes they don't let you do work, that's why like sometimes boys they talk about other things not work.

(Conversation recorded on 11/12/13 at 2:00)

Isma expressed her willingness to work with different people; however, she expected good and cooperative behavior from them.

The children from the low-ability group, on the other hand, did not mention good group skills and behaviors; they preferred to work independently while working in groups, as per the example below:

[Extract #14]

I: OK, so anything you don't like about group work?

Farkhanda: Sometimes I ask the teacher and get piece of paper ... I ask the teacher so I can do it by myself but sometimes they might say no you have to work with group and keep trying.

I: So don't you like about group then?

Farkhanda: Because I ask the teachers that can I do myself but sometimes she says ... no.

I: Why do you want to do your work by yourself?

Farkhanda: Because I know what I have to do.

I: It means if you know what you have to do then you don't need to work with someone?

Farkhanda: Yes.

(Conversation recorded on 12/05/14)

Farkhanda liked to be involved in independent work, which she was not able to do because of working in the low-ability group. She reported that she generally works as a group under the guidance of the

support teacher, which hinders her working independently. Similarly, another child (Fatima) shared her dissatisfaction toward the low-ability group, saying:

[Extract #15]

Fatima: "Because when we do maths we got . . . we have to do something else I want to try what [Miss Prini] tells us but [Mr John] say that we have to go with him but I really want to do what miss [Prini] teaches. They [the other groups of the class] do different work with miss [Prini] and me, Lubnaa, Farkahnda and Saira and Danial we do what Mr Jones tells us; sometimes we have to go to the ICT we sometimes do in the class as well.

(Conversation recorded on 17/05/2014)

Fatima wished to work in the other groups in her class, such as the average and high groups. She mentioned that in her low-ability group she had to work with the support teacher, working on tasks that were different from those given to the average- and high-ability groups.

The children's aspirations in these extracts (12–15) appeared to be influenced by their experiences of working in ability-based groups. The children in both the high- and average-ability groups were given independent learning tasks to complete, in groups, by their class teacher. As a result, they reflected on their experiences of working in groups and expressed a desire to improve their group-based learning conditions. On the other hand, the children in the low-ability groups worked on the same task, depending on their individual progress plans, under the guidance of the support teacher. Therefore, they did not mention their peers or how to improve in their group work. They mentioned limited experiences of interacting and working with others in groups and asked for more opportunities to independently participate in both group and individual work.

Discussion

The findings of the study heavily support the fundamental principles of the new paradigm of childhood studies (James et al., 1998) that children are active agents, and, therefore, worthy of study in their own right using participatory methods. The findings of the interview data show that children appeared as active agents while constructing their own distinctive interpretations of group work, rather than being passive recipients of social structures and processes (James & Prout, 1997) in the studied classroom. Children's abilities to interpret the prevailing outside social structures (Kellett, 2011) were noticed when the children reported their thinking on group composition, experiences of working in groups, and aspirations to improve their group work.

The children appeared to express different views toward group composition/organization and its functionality while actively constructing positive and negative self-images of themselves and their classmates (Boaler, 2005; Boaler et al., 2000; Marks, 2013). Children, particularly from the high- and average-ability groups, expressed an awareness of ability-based group organization and mentioned various colored tables matching with their own distinctive academic learning when asked about their groups. Those children appeared positive while sharing their group's placements and described themselves as "bright and smart" due to being categorized as "more able." This showed that the children from high- and average-ability groups take influence from the dominant culture of fixed-ability thinking in the English classroom (Swann et al., 2012), as they reported their assessed academic levels to be used as the main cause/reason to be placed in a particular ability group. Compared to them, the children from the low-ability group could not clearly explain the reason for their placement in that group and regarded it as their class teacher's decision to allocate them to any table/group.

Children appeared to be selective (Boaler et al., 2000; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004) while reporting cognitive and social benefits that they gain from working with others (Gillies, 2014) in both the fixed- and mixed-ability groups. For instance, children from the high- and average-ability groups acknowledged the sharing and discussing of the given lesson or activity in their fixed-ability groups. They acknowledged that they participate in task-related discussions (Mercer, 2013) and cognitive apprenticeship (Pritchard & Wollard, 2010) to seek help from peers to clarify any confusion that they might have. However, those children appeared to be selective while sharing knowledge in mixed-ability groups. For

instance, the children from the average- and high-ability groups preferred group work with their peers from the high-ability group only. They reported that their peers helped them to learn while confirming the notions of learning through peer interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and finding peer support helpful in bridging the gap between their existing and potential development (Cole et al., 1978). The presence of children from the low-ability group in the mixed-ability group work was not appreciated by those children from both the average- and high-ability groups. They stigmatized their peers from the low-ability group (Hallam & Parsons, 2013) as “low knowledgeable and unhelpful.” They complained of having their work copied by their peers from the low-ability group.

Furthermore, the children from the high- and average-ability groups reported that their individual work was more important to them than working with their peers in the mixed-ability group. They appeared to be satisfied by working alone, as it allowed them to finish their work rather than discussing it with others. This emphasis on finishing individual work appeared to lead children to consider that they are not interlinked with their peers (Roseth et al., 2008), and that everyone is accountable for their own performances. Usually, children are placed in mixed-ability groups to encourage interaction between more knowledgeable and less knowledgeable peers, as proven by Saleh et al. (2005) in their experimental study with 104 elementary children. Saleh et al. (2005) identified that children appeared to gain more academic benefits while working in heterogeneous/mixed-ability groups. The nature of social interaction in heterogeneous groups appeared to resemble the teacher-learner dialogue (Saleh et al., 2005), which can lead children from average- and low-ability groups to benefit from their group members from the high-ability group. However, such beneficial interactions were restricted between the children from the average- and high-ability groups in this case, as discussed earlier. The children from the low-ability group mentioned being left out by their peers from the high- and average-ability groups during their mixed-ability group work. They did not even mention their peers, but rather mentioned the class or support teacher as being helpful during their fixed-ability group work.

The inequalities faced by children from the low-ability group were further evident when the children expressed their aspirations to improve group work in the future. The children from the high- and average-ability groups were involved in independent group work as described above. When probing about future aspirations, those children reported an absence of communicative and social skills among their peers, and expected them to become involved in the collaborative learning environments (Franke et al., 2015) through self and social regulation (Alvi & Gillies, 2018). On the other hand, the children from the low-ability group expressed their desire to independently participate in group work without the over-intervention of their support teachers. They expressed dissatisfaction toward only working in the low-ability group, and desired to work in the high- and average-ability groups.

Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasized that children possess abilities to interpret group work differently as they shared different views on the group work being organized in the studied classroom. Children also have reported different learning experiences in ability groups and shared different aspirations to improve group work in the future. Therefore, the findings highlight the importance of recognizing children’s agency by actively involving them in decisions related to group organization in education settings. Teachers as well as researchers should consider children’s perspectives to discover what works or does not work for them while organizing ability-based groups in their classrooms. Teachers should hold conversations with children about the group structure to explore what types of group they preferred. Teachers also should assist children’s discussion where needed to maximize their cognitive as well as their social learning during their group work. Previous studies on group work have used a large-scale sample size and have recommended general rules and regulations for the effective implementation of group work. However, these rules and regulations may be applicable and work for some contexts, but not for all (Thanh et al., 2011). Children possess distinctive learning characteristics that should be addressed under fluid/flexible grouping structures (Hallam & Ireson, 2006) after eliciting children’s perspectives on

group organization and its importance for their learning. The use of fluid grouping will let children to stop worrying about labels, which children assign to themselves or their peers due to being grouped in a fixed-ability group (Hargreaves, 2019). This will also help children understand the importance of working/collaborating with others without overemphasizing their individual work in order to be placed in the high-ability group or to maintain their placements in the high-ability group, as noted in this study.

The findings also underline the importance of considering children's participation in ability groups as dynamic, which can be better understood through using a combination of theories from various disciplinary fields (Prout, 2011). Previous research has recommended either Piagetian or Vygotskian perspectives for the effective implementation of group work (Howe et al., 2007). Under Piagetian perspectives, grouping of children having equivalent abilities has been recommended as an ideal platform for children to learn from other peers. On the other hand, using Vygotsky's theory, groups of children with different abilities have been considered important for children's learning through peer interaction. As noticed in the present study, children interpreted the context of group work distinctively based on their distinctive learning experiences in different ability groups. In some cases, they preferred to work with other children having similar or different abilities while acknowledging the importance of peer interaction for their learning. However, at some places, children appeared to be egocentric (Frick & Baumeler, 2017) and preferred to work individually while denying the importance of learning through peer interaction. Moreover, children's awareness of ability-based grouping considerably influenced them to choose whether to work with others in groups or not. This represents children's learning in ability groups as a complex phenomenon, which can be better understood and explained through use of comprehensive and emergent theories. The use of such theories will allow teachers as well as researchers to comprehensively understand children's lives through the children's lens, while identifying multiple factors, both inside and outside the school, that affect children's participation in ability groups. In doing so, both teachers as well as researchers should use participatory and open-ended methods that allow immersion in children's lives to understand them well (Corsaro, 2011). Children should be given more opportunities to actively participate in research in order to explain the benefits and drawbacks of ability grouping for their learning and development, and to explore the best ways through which their learning can be maximized during group work, particularly in ability groups in mainstream education settings.

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