Teachers' Perceptions and Classroom Experiences of Ability Grouping in Tanzanian Secondary Schools

Janeth O. Jonas[1] and Zamzam I. Nyandara[2]
[1,2]Faculty of Education, The Open University of Tanzania
[1]janeth.jonas@out.ac.tz, janethorder@gmail.com
[2]zamzam.nyandara@out.ac.tz, masatuzamzam@yahoo.com

Abstract
This study examines secondary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of ability grouping in Tanzanian secondary schools. Guided by Social Constructivist theory, the study examined how teachers perceive and implement ability grouping as an instructional strategy to address learner diversity and improve learning outcomes. A mixed-methods design was employed, involving 104 teachers from two secondary schools in Dar es Salaam. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, MANOVA, and thematic analysis. Quantitative results indicated that teachers held moderately positive perceptions (M = 25.79, SD = 4.09) and experiences (M = 27.66, SD = 4.72) toward ability grouping, with variations across schools, subjects, and teaching experience. MANOVA showed no significant main effects of the independent variables on teachers' perceptions and experiences. However, significant interaction effects were found between school and gender ($p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .390$) and between school and teaching experience ($p = .010$, $\eta^2 = .340$), highlighting the influence of contextual factors. Qualitative findings corroborated the quantitative trends, showing that teachers valued ability grouping for enhancing differentiated instruction and classroom management, but expressed concerns about its potential negative impact on low-performing students' motivation and self-esteem. The study concludes that ability grouping is a promising yet complex instructional strategy, whose effectiveness depends on teacher facilitation, institutional support, and context-sensitive implementation. These findings offer practical guidance for policymakers and school leaders seeking to foster inclusive and adaptive instructional practices in secondary schools.

Keywords: *Ability grouping, perception, classroom experience,* teachers, secondary schools

Introduction

Teaching students with diverse abilities, varying levels of prior knowledge, interests, learning styles, needs, and motivations presents significant challenges to educators. This complexity arises from the recognition that not all students learn in the same way and/or at the same pace (Dhakal, 2024;

Hattie & Anderman, 2019; Tomlinson, 2014). In response to this challenge, a range of instructional strategies have been developed and applied, among which student ability grouping is an effective approach (Fauziyah *et al.*, 2024; Khazaeenezhad *et al.*, 2012).

Ability grouping is an educational approach that places students in groups based on academic achievement. It involves organising students into groups or separate classes based on their academic performance, skills, or perceived intellectual ability (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016; Fauziyah *et al.*, 2024; Johnston & Taylor, 2023). This practice has been recognised as an established management strategy that addresses ability differences among students across various educational settings (Khazaeenezhad *et al.*, 2012; Mansor, Maniam, Hunt & Nor, 2016; Zubair *et al.*, 2023). It is a widely practised instructional approach that helps educators organise and simplify the teaching and learning processes.

Studies indicate that ability grouping can take multiple forms; however, the most common forms are between-class and within-class ability grouping (Matthews *et al.*, 2013). Expanding this idea, Busso and Frisancho (2023) assert that ability grouping may occur within a single classroom, such as through differentiated reading or math groups where students work at varying levels; it may happen across classrooms, known as streaming or tracking, where students are placed into distinct classes or learning tracks based on ability levels; but also it can be evident in programme placements, such as enrollment in gifted and talented programmes, vocational education tracks, or remedial support classes.

There are several rationales for ability grouping; most are tailored to devising instruction that is more closely aligned with individuals' learning needs, pace, and potential. Scholars claim that teachers employ this classroom organisational strategy to meet individual learners' needs, improve student learning, and increase test scores (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020; Yang, 2024). This is attributed to teachers' beliefs and expectations that students' abilities influence instructional choices in the classroom. Proponents in this area argue that ability grouping enables more targeted instruction, improves learning efficiency, and allows both advanced and struggling students to flourish in environments suited to their current capabilities (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Bissell, 2023; Busso & Frisancho, 2023). While some studies highlight the positive outcomes of ability grouping in diverse contexts (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016; Busso & Frisancho, 2023), others find inconclusive effects, suggesting that the practice neither significantly enhances nor impairs student achievement (Brulles *et al.*, 2012; Cantu, 2019;

Cipriano-Walter, 2015; Giesinger, 2017). Evidence often indicates that students in higher-ability groups achieve greater academic gains, whereas those in average- or lower-ability groups experience little improvement, although they may not be directly disadvantaged. They further argue that the effectiveness of ability grouping tends to vary depending on the style of grouping implemented, as well as the demographics and academic levels of students involved (Greenway et al, n.d; Nomi, 2010). These variations not only affect students' academic self-concept, motivation, and classroom engagement but also have profound implications for teachers' instructional approaches, expectations, and professional autonomy.

Critically, recent studies raise concerns that ability grouping may reinforce social inequalities, stigmatise students in lower groups, lower teacher expectations, and restrict both student mobility and instructional flexibility (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Anito & Gaikwad, 2025). These concerns stand in sharp contrast to claims of its instructional benefits, leaving the overall impact of ability grouping uncertain. This uncertainty raises important questions about how the practice is experienced in different contexts. Despite extensive global debate, little is known about how ability grouping is perceived and practised in the Tanzanian education system. Addressing this gap requires an in-depth examination of teachers' perceptions and classroom experiences.

Problem Statement

Although ability grouping is increasingly adopted as a classroom organisational strategy in Tanzanian secondary schools, there remains a limited empirical understanding of how teachers perceive and experience this approach in practice. Previous studies conducted in Tanzania (e.g., Lyoka, 2008; Milinga *et al.*, 2022; Nyangas, 2025) have largely focused on the effects of ability grouping on students' learning outcomes, with little attention to the teachers who implement it daily. Yet teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and classroom practices play a crucial role in determining whether such grouping strategies achieve their intended goals of improving instruction and learning efficiency.
Moreover, global evidence presents conflicting conclusions about the impact of ability grouping; some studies emphasize its instructional benefits, while others highlight concerns of inequality, stigmatization, and reduced self-esteem among students in lower groups (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Anito & Gaikwad, 2025; Giesinger, 2017). These contradictions make it necessary to explore how teachers in Tanzania, operating within a unique educational and socio-cultural context, perceive and experience the practice.

To address this gap, the present study investigates secondary school teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of ability grouping in Tanzania. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

i) What are secondary school teachers' perceptions of ability grouping as a classroom organisational practice?
ii) What are secondary school teachers' classroom practical experiences with ability grouping?
iii) To what extent do teachers' perceptions and experiences of ability grouping vary across demographic and professional factors?

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in Social Constructivism theory, founded on the ideas of Lev Vygotsky (1978). This theory posits that individuals develop understanding and construct meanings through social interactions and cultural contexts. Central to this theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasises that a learner can perform a range of tasks with the guidance and support of a more knowledgeable other. In the context of ability grouping, the ZPD is particularly relevant, as it highlights how teachers perceive and respond to students' varying learning potentials across ability groups. Teachers' decisions about how to group students and how to engage them in different instructional activities often reflect their understanding of where students are within their ZPD and the extent to which they can benefit from peer interactions and teacher support.

Closely related is the concept of scaffolding, which involves providing structured support to help learners progress toward greater independence and mastery. This study employs Social Constructivism as a lens to examine teachers' perceptions and practical classroom experiences with ability grouping. It examines how teachers' beliefs about learning readiness, peer collaboration, and teacher guidance shape their grouping practices. Additionally, the theory highlights that while ability grouping may facilitate individualised support, it may also reduce opportunities for heterogeneous peer interaction, which is essential for cognitive development.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions and experiences regarding ability grouping in Tanzanian secondary schools. Data were collected using a questionnaire comprising closed-ended items on a 5-point Likert scale and open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their views. This design enabled the researcher to capture both quantifiable trends and rich qualitative insights.

The study was conducted in two public secondary schools in the Dar es Salaam region, one in Ilala Municipality and the other in Ubungo Municipality. Dar es Salaam was purposively selected for its educational diversity and the increasing use of ability-grouping strategies. Ilala, being one of the oldest and most established municipalities, offered insights from schools with a long history of structured academic practices, whereas Ubungo, a newer and rapidly expanding municipality, provided a contrasting context for examining classroom organisation.

All classroom teachers from the selected schools were considered the target population. Due to logistical challenges in reaching all teachers during the data collection period, responses were obtained from 104 teachers: 55 from School A (94.8% of its staff) and 49 from School B (92.4% of its staff). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarise demographic characteristics and identify general trends, followed by a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to test for differences in teachers' perceptions and experiences across demographic and professional variables, including gender, school, teaching experience, and teaching subjects. Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were analysed thematically to complement and contextualise the quantitative findings.

Results

As outlined in the previous section, this study examines secondary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of ability grouping practices in Tanzania. The study further sought to determine whether there are any differences in perceptions and experiences among teachers regarding ability grouping across diverse demographic and professional variables such as gender, schools, teaching experiences, and teaching subjects. The collected data were subjected to various analysis methods, and the results have been organised into distinct categories based on the questions that they intended to address, as presented below.

Respondents' Demographic Information

This section presents the demographic profile of the respondents who took part in this study. Including demographic information in the study findings is essential, as it provides important context for interpreting the results, assessing the representativeness of the sample, and determining the extent to which the findings may be generalizable to broader populations. As identified earlier, a total of 104 teachers, teaching various subjects across the two sampled secondary schools, were involved in this study. Their profiles include

characteristics such as gender, schools, teaching experience, and teaching subjects, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1:
Respondents' Demographic Information

Demographic Variable	Code	Category	N	F
School	1	A	55	94.8
	2	B	49	92.4
Gender	1	Male	32	30.8
	2	Female	72	69.2
Teaching Experience	1	1-5 Years	15	14.4
	2	6-15 Years	55	52.9
	3	16-25 Years	24	23
	4	Above 26	10	9.6
Teaching Subjects	1	Language	33	31.7
	2	Science	15	14.4
	3	Arts Subjects	39	37.5
	4	Mathematics	10	9.6
	5	Business	7	6.7

***Source**:* Field Data, (2024).

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the teachers who participated in the study. The results show that the majority of respondents were female (69.2%), whereas male teachers accounted for 30.8%. This reflects the general gender distribution commonly observed in many Tanzanian primary and secondary schools, particularly in urban areas. Understanding this distribution is important, as demographic patterns may shape teachers' perceptions and experiences examined in the study. Regarding teaching experience, over half (52.9%) of the teachers had 6-15 years of teaching experience, indicating a predominance of mid-career educators in the sample. This suggests that the majority of respondents have had substantial exposure to classroom diversity and variations in student performance, which are central to forming informed perceptions of ability grouping. Teachers with several years of experience are likely to have encountered a range of student abilities and may have developed specific attitudes and strategies for managing heterogeneous classrooms.

Regarding the school-wise distribution, participants were nearly evenly distributed across schools A (94.8%) and B (92.4%), indicating balanced participation across both study sites and enhancing the representativeness of the data across different institutional contexts. Regarding teaching subjects, the most represented groups were arts subjects (37.5%) and language subjects (31.7%), followed by Science (14.4%), Mathematics (9.6%), and Business (6.7%). This distribution reflects the staffing structure typical of many Tanzanian secondary schools, in which arts and language teachers constitute a

larger proportion of the teaching workforce. In this composition, the study's findings are likely to be more strongly shaped by teachers' perceptions and experiences in these subject areas. This is important to keep in mind when interpreting general trends in ability grouping practices.

Secondary School Teachers' Perceptions of Ability Grouping

One of the central foci of this study was to examine secondary school teachers' perceptions of the use of ability grouping in classroom practice. These perceptions were assessed using a seven-item, five-point Likert scale, complemented by open-ended questions. The Likert-scale responses were subjected to descriptive statistics to compute the mean and standard deviation. The results have been summarised and presented in Table 2.

Table 2:
Descriptive statistics for teachers' perceptions of ability grouping

Factor	**Level**	**M**ean	**S**tandard **D**eviation
School	A	26.75	4.51
	B	25.20	4.09
Gender	Male	26.59	3.94
	Female	25.42	4.27
Teaching Subjects	Mathematics	27.40	2.99
	Science	26.73	3.31
	Languages	24.91	5.44
	Arts Subjects	25.45	3.41
	Business	27.14	1.10
Teaching Experience	1-5 Years	27.13	5.36
	6-15 Years	25.60	4.34
	16-25 Years	25.09	3.29
	26+ Years	26.40	2.50

***Source**:* Field Data, (2024).

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for teachers' perceptions of ability grouping across schools, gender, subjects taught, and teaching experience. Overall, teachers reported holding moderately positive perceptions of ability grouping (M = 25.79, SD = 4.09, N = 104). As shown in Table 2, teachers' perception scores varied across schools, gender, subjects taught, and years of teaching experience. For instance, teachers at school **A** reported slightly higher perceptions (M = 26.75, SD = 4.51) compared to those at school **B** (M = 25.20, SD = 4.09). These differences appear to reflect school-level factors such as administrative support, availability of teaching and learning resources, or prior professional development on differentiated instruction. This suggests the need for targeted support or training to address such variations.

Regarding gender, slightly higher perception scores were observed for male teachers (M = 26.59, SD = 3.94) than for female teachers (M = 25.42, SD =

4.27). Although this difference is modest, it suggests variation in how male and female teachers perceive the implementation of ability grouping. This implies that gender can shape teachers' views and attitudes toward classroom practices, potentially reflecting differences in classroom management approaches or in confidence in implementing differentiated instruction.

With respect to teaching subjects, notable variations emerged in teachers' perceptions of ability grouping. For instance, mathematics teachers reported the most favourable perceptions (M = 27.40, SD = 2.99), whereas language teachers expressed the least positive views (M = 24.91, SD = 5.44). Teachers of other subjects, such as business, science, and arts, fell between these two groups. This pattern suggests that teachers of structured and sequential subjects tend to view ability grouping as a supportive instructional strategy. In contrast, teachers of subjects that emphasise creativity and open-ended learning, such as languages, appear to find it less adaptable to their pedagogical contexts. These differences highlight that the perceived usefulness of ability grouping is shaped by the nature of subject content and whether learning outcomes rely on stepwise mastery or on interpretive and expressive skills.

With respect to teaching experience, notable variations emerged in teachers' perceptions of ability grouping. Teachers with 1-5 years of experience reported the most favourable perceptions (M = 27.13, SD = 5.36), while those with 16-25 years of experience recorded the least positive views (M = 25.09, SD = 3.29). Teachers in the remaining experience groups fell between these two categories. Notably, teachers with more than 26 years of experience also expressed relatively favourable perceptions (M = 26.40, SD = 2.50). These variations suggest different influences across stages of teachers' careers. Early-career teachers may be more receptive to innovative instructional strategies such as ability grouping, partly because of their recent exposure to learner-centred pedagogies. Highly experienced teachers may hold positive views due to the confidence, adaptability, and broad instructional exposure they have developed over many years of practice. In contrast, mid-career teachers appear slightly less enthusiastic, possibly due to established teaching routines or a reduced inclination toward pedagogical change.

These findings indicate that teachers regard ability grouping as a potentially effective instructional strategy for facilitating teaching and learning in secondary schools. These quantitative results were further reinforced by insights from open-ended responses, which provided a deeper understanding of teachers' views. For example, one male mathematics teacher from school **A** remarked, *"…to me, this approach is good as it encourages competition when students of similar ability are grouped, and it becomes easier to support those*

with low ability..." Similarly, a female business teacher from the same school noted, *"...this approach helps us teachers to apply varied teaching methods based on students' academic levels..."*. In addition, an experienced science teacher from school **B** explained, *"...in my view, this approach is helpful to students; it motivates them to work harder as they aspire to be promoted to higher-performing classes..."*

Although the overall perception scores among teachers were moderately positive (M = 25.79, SD = 4.09), indicating generally favourable views of the practice, a small proportion of teachers expressed neutral or negative perceptions. The relatively high standard deviations (mostly SD > 1.0) suggest that some teachers remain sceptical or undecided, reflecting reservations about the approach. These concerns were further echoed in the open-ended responses, where several teachers highlighted challenges in implementing ability grouping, particularly with lower-performing students. For instance, one female arts teacher from school **B** remarked, *"...placing students into groups causes those with lower ability to deteriorate further due to lack of self-confidence, as they perceive themselves that they cannot perform well..."*. Similarly, a male language teacher from school **A** stated, *"...this is not an appropriate approach as it causes low-ability students to remain stagnant as they consider themselves inferior and excluded..."*. In a more emphatic response, a female mathematics teacher from the same school expressed, *"...I completely disagree with separating students based on their abilities... this practice discourages students and severely undermines their self-confidence. This approach also causes some teachers to focus only on the high-performing classes, while neglecting and isolating the struggling ones..."*

In light of these perspectives, these observations indicate that, despite its potential as an instructional strategy, the ability grouping approach requires careful and context-sensitive implementation to avoid reinforcing inequities or demotivating students, particularly those in lower-performing groups.

Secondary School Teachers' Experiences on Ability Grouping

Another key focus of this study was to investigate teachers' classroom practical experiences with the ability grouping approach. This objective aimed to examine whether teachers experienced ability grouping in the same way, regardless of differences in gender, teaching experience, teaching subjects, and work contexts. To address this, a 5-point Likert scale comprising seven items related to teachers' experiences was employed, along with a few open-ended questions. Again, statistical responses were subjected to descriptive analysis, and mean scores and standard deviations for the items were computed. The results have been summarised and presented in Table 3.

Table 3:
Descriptive Statistics for Teachers' Practical Experiences of Ability Grouping (N = 104)

Factor	**Level**	**M**ean	**S**tandard **D**eviation
School	A	29.13	5.73
	B	26.16	4.68
Gender	Male	27.34	3.99
	Female	28.57	4.61
Teaching Subjects	Mathematics	28.80	2.62
	Science	27.29	4.57
	Languages	27.63	5.60
	Arts Subjects	26.32	4.57
	Business	27.33	1.86
Teaching Experience	1-5 Years	30.78	6.02
	6-15 Years	28.92	4.28
	16-25 Years	27.50	2.24
	26+ Years	24.50	4.06

Source: Field Data, (2024).

The findings from Table 3 indicate that teachers reported generally positive experiences with the ability grouping approach; however, these experiences varied across schools, gender, subjects taught, and years of teaching experience. For instance, in relation to schools, teachers from school **A** reported more positive experiences (M = 29.13, SD = 5.73) than those from school **B** (M = 26.16, SD = 4.68). This suggests that teachers' experiences with ability grouping are shaped largely by the broader school environment. Aspects such as leadership commitment, the school's pedagogical culture, and access to adequate instructional materials influence the effectiveness with which the practice is implemented. In settings where these supports are strong, teachers are more likely to apply ability grouping with confidence and consistency.

With regard to gender, differences were modest, with female teachers reporting slightly higher experience scores (M = 28.57, SD = 4.61) than male teachers (M = 27.34, SD = 3.99). This suggests that female teachers may engage more actively or consistently with the pedagogy, possibly due to their openness to collaborative and learner-centred practices. However, the small difference suggests that male and female teachers have comparable competence and confidence in implementing ability grouping. This indicates that gender does not substantially influence practical experiences with the approach and that the practice is generally well accepted across both groups.

With respect to teaching subjects, teachers' experience levels varied across subject areas. For instance, mathematics teachers reported the most favourable experiences (M = 28.80, SD = 2.62), whereas arts subject teachers reported the lowest (M = 26.32, SD = 4.57). This pattern suggests that ability grouping is more effective in subjects with sequential, skill-based content, such as

mathematics. In contrast, subjects that emphasise creativity or open-ended learning, such as the arts, may pose greater challenges for implementation. These differences highlight that the nature and structure of a subject influence how readily teachers perceive and apply ability grouping, with more structured subjects allowing smoother adaptation of this instructional approach.

With respect to teaching experience, teachers' practical engagement with ability grouping varied across different experience levels. Those with 1-5 years of experience reported the most positive experiences (M = 30.78, SD = 6.02), while teachers with over 26 years reported the least positive (M = 24.50, SD = 4.06). Teachers with 6-25 years of experience fell between the other groups, indicating moderate levels of positive experience. These findings suggest that less experienced teachers are more receptive to new instructional strategies, likely due to recent training, openness to innovation, or ongoing development of pedagogical skills. In contrast, highly experienced teachers may encounter challenges, such as entrenched routines, a preference for traditional methods, or reduced flexibility. This underscores the potential need for targeted support or professional development to enhance the effective use of ability grouping across all experience levels.

The qualitative responses from teachers further support these quantitative findings by illustrating how ability grouping enhances instructional effectiveness across different contexts. For instance, a female teacher from school **B** noted, *"...when students are grouped by their abilities, I found it easier to manage the class…"*, reflecting the generally positive experiences reported by teachers in both schools. Similarly, a science teacher from school **A** affirmed, *"...I've been able to adjust my lessons better when students are grouped by ability…"*, highlighting how the approach enables flexibility in teaching across subjects. Reinforcing these views, another teacher from school **A**, who teaches mathematics, remarked, "…grouping allows me to address the needs of struggling learners more effectively…", which aligns with the overall favourable experiences across genders and teaching contexts. These qualitative insights thus complement the statistical results, indicating that ability grouping is perceived as a practical and beneficial strategy for managing diverse learner needs.

Although the overall experience scores among teachers were generally positive (M = 27.66, SD = 4.72), suggesting that most teachers had favourable experiences with the ability grouping approach, notable variations were observed across schools, gender, subjects, and years of teaching experience. The relatively high standard deviations (SD > 1.0) indicate that not all teachers experienced the approach uniformly, with some expressing challenges in

practice. These variations were also reflected in the qualitative responses, in which several teachers acknowledged both the benefits and the difficulties associated with implementing ability grouping. For instance, one male teacher from school **A** noted, *"…based on my experience, grouping students according to their ability tends to discourage them and diminish their self-confidence, as they begin to perceive themselves as incapable of succeeding…"* Another teacher teaching art subjects from the same school observed, *"…this situation contributes to truancy and laziness among students, hence making teaching more difficult…".* Similarly, one of the experienced teachers from school **B** remarked, *"…normally, in this instructional approach, students from low-performing groups tend to lose hope…"*

In light of these perspectives, while most teachers reported positive experiences, such remarks reveal that the success of ability grouping depends largely on how it is implemented and supported within the classroom context. The findings suggest that without adequate pedagogical strategies and emotional support for low-performing groups, the approach may unintentionally lower student morale and engagement, thereby reducing its intended instructional benefits.

Differences in Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences Across Demographic Variables

The third focus of this study was to examine whether teachers' perceptions and experiences of ability grouping differed according to selected demographic variables, namely gender, school, subject taught, and teaching experience. To determine this, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted. This analysis was considered necessary since it allows simultaneous examination of multiple dependent variables while controlling for Type I error and accounting for correlations among them (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The findings from this analysis have been summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: *Multivariate Tests for the Effects of Demographic Variables on Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences*

Source	Wilks' Λ	F	df	P	Partial η^2	Interpretation
School	0.981	1.42	2.65	.240	.021	Not significant
Gender	0.999	0.00	2.65	.964	.000	Not significant
Subjects taught	0.979	0.36	4.65	.843	.021	Not significant
Teaching experience	0.928	1.68	3.65	.178	.072	Not significant
School × Gender	0.610	4.31	2.65	.011	.390	Significant
School × Teaching experience	0.660	3.97	3.65	.010	.340	Significant

Source: Field Data, (2025).

The MANOVA results in Table 4 show no statistically significant main effects of school, gender, subjects taught, or teaching experience on teachers' perceptions and experiences with ability grouping, as all p-values exceeded 0.05. This indicates that, when each demographic factor is considered in isolation, teachers tend to report similarly positive perceptions and experiences regardless of their background or professional characteristics. However, the interaction effects reveal important patterns that would not be detected through main effects alone. Two significant two-way interactions emerged: school × gender ($p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .390$) and school × teaching experience ($p = .010$, $\eta^2 = .340$). These interactions indicate that the influence of gender and teaching experience on teachers' perceptions and experiences varies across school contexts.

The significant school × gender interaction suggests that the way male and female teachers experience or perceive ability grouping differs across schools. This may imply that certain school environments either support or constrain one gender more than the other. Such differences may arise from variations in leadership style, collegial support, instructional expectations, or access to professional development. Thus, gender differences become meaningful only within particular school settings rather than across the entire sample.

Similarly, the school × teaching experience interaction indicates that teachers' years of experience influence their perceptions and experiences differently across the two schools. This could suggest that some schools provide stronger guidance, clearer instructional frameworks, or more collaborative cultures that help teachers, whether novice or highly experienced, apply ability grouping more effectively. In other schools, however, differences between early-career, mid-career, and highly experienced teachers may become more pronounced due to variations in support structures, instructional expectations, or openness to change. Therefore, the effect of teaching experience is not uniform but shaped by specific school conditions.

Taken together, these interaction effects indicate that while demographic characteristics alone do not predict differences in teachers' perceptions and experiences, the combination of school environment, gender, and years of experience plays a significant role in shaping how teachers understand and practice ability grouping. This underscores the importance of considering school-level dynamics, such as leadership practices, resource availability, and professional culture, when interpreting teachers' responses to instructional innovations.

To further explore these outcomes, follow-up univariate tests were conducted for each dependent variable separately. These analyses aimed to determine whether any of the independent variables, school, gender, subjects taught, or teaching experience, had statistically significant effects on teachers' perceptions and experiences with ability grouping when considered individually. Conducting these univariate tests provided a clearer understanding of the extent to which each factor uniquely contributed to the patterns observed in the multivariate analysis and whether any specific variable independently influenced teachers' responses. The results of these tests are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5:
Univariate Tests for the Effects of Demographic Variables on Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences

Source	Dependent Variable	F	df	P	Partial η^2	Interpretation
School	Perceptions	1.20	1.66	.278	.018	Not significant
School	Experiences	1.64	1.66	.205	.024	Not significant
Gender	Perceptions	0.01	1.66	.924	.000	Not significant
Gender	Experiences	0.09	1.66	.768	.001	Not significant
Subjects taught	Perceptions	0.45	3.66	.717	.021	Not significant
Subjects taught	Experiences	0.51	3.66	.675	.023	Not significant
Teaching experience	Perceptions	1.13	3.66	.344	.049	Not significant
Teaching experience	Experiences	1.25	3.66	.298	.053	Not significant

Source: Field Data, (2025).

The results in Table 5 show that none of the demographic or professional variables, school, gender, subjects taught, or teaching experience, had statistically significant main effects on teachers' perceptions or experiences with ability grouping, as all p-values were above 0.05. This suggests that individual characteristics alone did not meaningfully differentiate how teachers viewed or experienced the approach. For example, teachers from different schools demonstrated comparable levels of acceptance and comfort with ability grouping, as reflected by the low F-values and very small effect sizes (partial $\eta^2 < .05$). Similarly, male and female teachers, regardless of subject area or years of experience, expressed generally similar perceptions and experiences. The consistently small effect sizes further reinforce the conclusion that demographic factors contributed minimally to explaining variation in teachers' attitudes. This pattern indicates a relatively uniform perception of ability grouping among the teaching staff, suggesting a shared professional culture or common instructional realities within the sampled schools.

Thus, the univariate results confirm that no single demographic variable exerts a strong standalone effect, while the multivariate findings highlight the potential importance of contextual dynamics. Together, these results suggest that teachers' engagement with ability grouping is shaped less by their individual characteristics and more by their fit within the broader institutional context.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study revealed that secondary school teachers in Tanzania generally held moderately positive perceptions and experiences of ability grouping. They view it as an effective strategy for managing diverse classrooms and enhancing instructional efficiency. A critical reading of these findings, however, suggests that such positive views may be influenced not only by teachers' belief in the instructional benefits of ability grouping but also by the broader teaching conditions in which they work. Many Tanzanian classrooms continue to face challenges, including large class sizes, limited resources, and varying levels of learner readiness. These contextual pressures may make ability grouping particularly appealing because it helps teachers organise instruction more efficiently and maintain classroom order. Importantly, this interpretation does not contradict teachers' genuine support for the method. Rather, it highlights that their perceptions are shaped by a combination of instructional benefits and contextual realities. An observation consistent with previous studies that emphasise the role of ability grouping in improving instructional focus and managing learner diversity.

These findings align with earlier empirical evidence (Bolick & Rogowsky, 2016; Fauziyah *et al.*, 2024) showing that ability grouping can enhance classroom organisation and allow more targeted instruction. The broader literature (Tomlinson, 2014; Magableh & Abdullah, 2020) similarly argues that differentiated practices help teachers address diverse learner needs. Nonetheless, the present study highlights that in the Tanzanian context, such positive views may be intertwined with the practical necessities of teaching in resource-limited environments, an insight that warrants further examination.

These positive perceptions may also reflect teachers' awareness of the increasing complexity of contemporary classrooms and the need for adaptive teaching strategies that support both individualised and peer-assisted learning. Empirical studies similarly report that flexible and differentiated approaches are essential for meeting diverse learner needs (Dhakal, 2024; Hattie & Anderman, 2019). Furthermore, research by Busso and Frisancho (2023) and Johnston and Taylor (2023) suggests that teachers value ability grouping because it enables both high-performing and struggling learners to engage meaningfully in classroom activities at their respective levels. Although

student outcomes were not directly measured in this study, the positive perceptions and experiences reported suggest that teachers perceive ability grouping as an effective means of promoting instructional efficiency and learner engagement.

The multivariate and univariate analyses offer further insights. The absence of significant main effects across gender, school, subject, and teaching experience might initially suggest a uniformity of perceptions and experiences. However, this uniformity may reflect systemic homogenization in teacher training, curriculum expectations, or institutional cultures rather than genuine consensus. In other words, teachers may express similar attitudes not because their experiences are identical, but because their work environments shape and constrain how instructional strategies are understood. The significant interaction effects between school and gender, and between school and teaching experience, underscore this point. These interactions reveal that certain groups of teachers respond differently depending on the institutional context in which they work.

This finding aligns with studies emphasising the influence of school culture and leadership on instructional practices (Mansor *et al.*, 2016; Alam & Mohanty, 2023). Importantly, these interactions challenge the assumption that demographic characteristics alone shape teachers' attitudes; instead, they highlight the mediating role of school environments. Less experienced teachers, for example, may be more sensitive to institutional norms, while gendered expectations in certain schools may subtly influence confidence or instructional decision-making. These contextual nuances warrant greater attention in discussions of teachers' attitudes toward ability grouping.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings resonate with Social Constructivist principles (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasise that learning, and by extension teaching, is shaped by social and contextual processes. Teachers' appreciation for ability grouping reflects an attempt to scaffold learning within students' Zones of Proximal Development. Yet, a constructivist critique would note that scaffolding must be dynamic and responsive. The concerns teachers raised regarding the demotivation of low-performing students suggest that grouping practices may fall short of constructivist ideals, particularly when groups become rigid or when instructional support varies in quality.

The qualitative findings illuminate this tension more sharply. While teachers acknowledged benefits, many expressed reservations about negative socio-emotional consequences for struggling learners. These concerns echo a large body of research showing that ability grouping can reinforce learner

hierarchies and psychological disparities (Brulles *et al.*, 2012; Cantu, 2019; Bissell, 2023). Teachers' observations that low-ability students may experience reduced motivation or self-esteem point to structural risks that cannot be ignored. Inequities may arise not merely from grouping itself, but from disparities in teacher expectations, resource allocation, and instructional attention, factors that have been emphasised in studies by Wang (2023) and Papachristou (2022).

Thus, while the overall findings suggest that teachers recognise ability grouping as a useful instructional tool, a more critical interpretation highlights its conditional effectiveness. The approach holds promise for supporting differentiated learning, but only when implemented flexibly, supported by adequate training, and monitored for unintended consequences. Without such safeguards, ability grouping may inadvertently undermine the very equity it seeks to promote (Jerrim et al, 2025; Johnston et al, 2024). In sum, the study demonstrates that teachers value ability grouping but also navigate its complexities and limitations. Their perceptions reflect both pedagogical insight and the structural pressures of Tanzanian classrooms.

Summary and Conclusion

This study examined secondary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of ability grouping practices in Tanzanian secondary schools, with the aim of understanding how they view and implement the approach for managing classroom diversity. The findings revealed that teachers generally hold moderately positive perceptions and experiences toward ability grouping, recognising it as an effective strategy for enhancing instructional efficiency and promoting differentiated learning. However, variations in responses indicated that while many teachers value the approach, others expressed concerns about its potential negative effects on low-performing students' motivation and self-esteem. From a Social Constructivist perspective, teachers' practices reflect constructivist-informed approaches that emphasise scaffolding and collaborative learning, though their effectiveness varies with school culture and implementation challenges. Overall, ability grouping remains a promising yet complex instructional strategy that requires context-sensitive and equitable application to effectively support all learners.

Implications of the Findings

These findings imply the need for targeted professional development to equip teachers with strategies for implementing inclusive and effective ability grouping. Educational policymakers should ensure adequate institutional support, including resources and teacher collaboration frameworks, to minimise disparities among student groups. School leaders should foster

supportive environments that encourage differentiated instruction while safeguarding the well-being of lower-performing students. Finally, future interventions and policies should focus on balancing instructional efficiency with equity to maximise the benefits of ability grouping across diverse learning contexts.

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