THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CLASS AND ABILITY GROUP ON STUDENTS ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NORTH SUMATRA PROVINCE, INDONESIA: A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR IMPROVEMENT

BY

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ABSTRACT

Ability group system (AGS) can be understood as grouping students according to their academic abilities. There are pros and cons of the ability group implementation in schools. This system is still practised in modern national educational systems, and Indonesia is among such countries. The present study explored the impact of students’ socioeconomic status (SES) and the AGS implementation on selected primary students’ academic achievement in the North Sumatra Province of Indonesia. The research utilised the qualitative method and followed a case study design confined to a selected primary school that implemented the ability group system in their teaching and learning process. A total of 12 informants were selected using the purposive sampling technique. The sample consisted of four teachers with experience adopting ability groups in the teaching and learning process and eight parents who have children in different ability level classes. Data was obtained using semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observation, and document analysis. The findings suggest that ability group implementation in the North Sumatra Province of Indonesia has widened the academic gap among students of different social classes. Students placed in high ability groups benefited more from AGS than students placed in low ability groups in terms of learning duration, quality of teaching and learning, and care, which is reflected in the academic achievement of all ability groups. The teachers believed that there are advantages and disadvantages to ability group implementation. They showed a varied attitude towards it, with some of them in favour of the system while others rejected it. The findings demonstrate that SES background and AGS could impact students’ academic performance. Teachers who lack the competence and the training in the teaching and learning process for AGS will face challenges regarding the system. Parents with children in high ability classes were supportive of the ability group while the rest believed that students should study in heterogeneous ability classes. Overall, most of the parents agreed that SES could impact their children’ academic achievement. Therefore, the findings provide an invaluable resource for designing a proposed framework for ability group implementations. This framework would be a step forward in ensuring equal learning opportunities and benefits for students of all ability groups. Besides, the research finding gathers empirical evidence about the issue related to ability group implementation. Also, this contributed to the analysis provided by the conflict paradigm in general and the critical theory in particular regarding the relationship between social class and educational attainment, especially the application of ‘ability group.’
خلاصة البحث

يمكن فهم نظام تصنيف المستويات التعليمية (AGS) على أنه تصنيف للطلاب وفقاً لقدراتهم الأكاديمية على أن يوضع كل مستوى تعليمي في مجموعة مخصصة، ولذا النظام إيجابيات وسلبيات، وأندونيسيا تطبق هذا الأسلوب في أنظمة التعليم الوطنية الحديثة إلى جانب بعض البلدان الأخرى. أكملت الدراسة تأثير الوضع الاجتماعي والاقتصادي للطلاب (SES) على التحصيل الدراسي لطلاب المرحلة الابتدائية في مقاطعة شمال سومطرة في إندونيسيا، وقد استخدم البحث النهج التجريبي واتبع تصميم دراسة حالة، واقتصراً على مدرسة إبتدائية مختلفة طبقت نظام تصنيف المستويات في عملية التعليم، واطلعت الدراسة أيضًا على تصورات المعلمين وأولياء الأمور الذين شاركوا بشكل مباشر في تنفيذ هذا الأسلوب من الأنظمة التعليمية. وقد تم اختيار 12 مجموعة كعينة، وتكونت العينة من أربعة معلمين لديهم خبرة في تبني تصنيف المستويات التعليمية في مجموعات مخصصتين في عملية التعليم، وثمانية آباء لديهم أطفال في فصول ذات مستويات وفترات آكاديمية مختلفة. وقد تم الحصول على البيانات باستخدام المقابلات الشفائية، وعملية تحليل النتائج.

وقد أشار التحليل إلى خمس موضوعات رئيسية تتعلق بهذا النوع من أساليب التصنيف التعليمي، وهي: قدرات المجموعة المصنفة، مدى قدرات المجموعات الطلابية المصنفة حسب المستوى التعليمي على التنفيذ، والخلفية الاجتماعية والاقتصادية والمتعلقة بالتعليم، ومدى إدراك المعلمين وأولياء الأمور لهذا النوع من أساليب التعليم، والثبات بين الطلاب والإنجازات الأكاديمية للطلاب. وتستعرض النتائج إلى أن عينة من قدرات الطلاب المصنفين في مجموعات حسب مستواهم التعليمي في مقاطعة شمال سومطرة بإندونيسيا قد ومع الفجوة الأكاديمية بين الطلاب من الطبقة الاجتماعية المختلفة واستفاد الطلاب الذين تم وضعهم في مجموعات ذات قدرة عالية من AGS أكثر من الطلاب الذين تم وضعهم في مجموعات ذات قدرة منخفضة من حيث مدة التعليم وفرص التدريس والتعلم والرعاية، وهو ما يعكس في التحصيل الأكاديمي لجميع المجموعات، كما يعتقد المعلمنون أن هناك مزايا وعيوب لتطبيق هذا النوع من الأساليب التعليمية. وأبدوا نزوعًا في موقفهم تجاهه، فكان بعضهم مؤيدًا لهذا النوع من الأنظمة التعليمية، بينما رفضه آخرون. علاوة على ذلك، فإن الطلاب الذين يعانون من ضعف SES يمكن أن تؤثر عليه الأداء الأكاديمي للطلاب، كما سواجه المعلمنون الذين يعانون من AGS تحديات فيما يتعلق بالنظام. وقد
دعم الآباء والأمهات الذين لديهم أطفال في فصل دراسي ذا قدرات عالية هذا النوع من الأساليب التعليمية، بينما يعتقد البعض أنه يجب أن يكون الطلاب في فصول دراسية موحدة دون تمييز بين المستويات، وافقت معظم أولياء الأمور على أنSESيمكن أن يؤثر على التحصيل الدراسي لأطفالهم. كما توفر النتائج موردًا جيدًا لتصميم دليل مقتضى لتطبيق هذا النوع من أنظمة التعليم. وسيكون هذا المبدأ التوجيهي خطوة إلى الأمام في ضمان تكافؤ فرص التعليم وإفادة للطلاب من جميع المستويات. كما تقدم نتائج الدراسة أداة تجريبية للفحص المتعلق بالتعليم بناء على تصنيف المستويات. كما يوضح التحليل كيف يمكن استخدام نموذج الدراسة والتحليل والنقد، خاصة لفحص العلاقة بين الطبقات الاجتماعية المختلفة والتحصيل التعليمي من خلال تصنيف الفصول حسب المستوى التعليمي للطلاب. إضافة إلى ذلك ففي النتائج توفر نموذجا عمليا جيدا لتصميم إطار عمل مقتضى لاختبار قدرات المجموعات، وسوف يمثل هذا إطار حقيقة عملية في ضمان تكافؤ فرص التعليم والفرص للطلاب من جميع الطبقات الاجتماعية المختلفة. كما تقدم نتائج الدراسة أداة تجريبية للفحص المتعلق بتنفيذ قدرات المجموعات التعليمية. كما يوضح التحليل إمكانية استخدام نموذج النمذجة بين النظريات بشكل عام في هذاالطار والنظرية النقدية بشكل خاص، خاصة لفحص العلاقة بين الطبقات الاجتماعية، وتحديداً التحصيل التعليمي في تنفيذ المجموعات التعليمية، أو ما يسمى بمجموعة المهارات التعليمية.
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Siti Salmah

Signature .............................................. Date .............................................
First of all, Allah, thank you for making me who I am today, and for giving me the abilities that I have, I will always be grateful your grace and for the good accommodation facilities I utilized to cleave my way to success.

This research work is dedicated to my parents, brothers, sisters and relatives. My husband, as always you have supported me throughout all that I have done. Gratitude for your unconditional support, both financially and emotionally. Thank you for your endless prayers and supports. My lovely sons, you are my strength.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... ii
Abstract in Arabic ................................................................................................................ iii
Approval Page....................................................................................................................... v
Declaration .......................................................................................................................... vi
Dedication ............................................................................................................................ vii
Copyright ............................................................................................................................ viii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ ix
List of Tables ....................................................................................................................... xv
List of Figures ..................................................................................................................... xvi
List of Abbreviations .......................................................................................................... xvii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 1
1.1 Background of the Study ............................................................................................... 1
1.2 Statement of the Problem ............................................................................................ 5
1.3 Research Gap ................................................................................................................ 10
1.4 Objectives of the Study .............................................................................................. 11
1.5 Research Questions .................................................................................................... 12
1.6 Significance of the Study ......................................................................................... 13
1.7 Delimitations and Limitations of the Study ............................................................... 14
1.8 Definition of Terms ..................................................................................................... 14
1.8.1 Ability Group ......................................................................................................... 14
1.8.2 Social Class ........................................................................................................... 14
1.8.3 Academic Achievement ......................................................................................... 15
1.8.4 North Sumatra Province, Indonesia ........................................................................ 15
1.8.5 Primary School ..................................................................................................... 15
1.9 Summary .................................................................................................................... 16

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ..................................................................... 17
2.1 Introduction .................................................................................................................. 17
2.2 Social Class and Education ......................................................................................... 17
2.2.1 The Concept of Social Class .................................................................................. 17
2.2.2 The Relationship between Social Class and Education ...................................... 20
2.3 Ability Group and Social Class .................................................................................. 22
2.3.1 The Concept of Ability Group .............................................................................. 23
2.3.1.1 Defining Ability Group .................................................................................... 23
2.3.2 Pros and Cons of Ability Group ............................................................................ 25
2.3.2.1 The Pros of Ability Group .............................................................................. 26
2.3.2.2 The Cons of Ability Group ............................................................................ 29
2.3.3 Ability Group Implementation in Indonesia .......................................................... 32
2.4 Is Ability Grouping in Fact A Social Class Grouping? .............................................. 35
2.5 The Effect of Social Class and Ability Group on Students’ Academic Achievement ......................................................................................................................... 37
2.6 Theories of Social Class ............................................................................................ 42
2.6.1 Karl Marx’s Social Theory .................................................................................... 42
2.6.1.1 Conflict Theory ............................................................................................. 43
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY ........................................... 66

3.1 Introduction ....................................................................... 66
3.2 Research Design ................................................................ 66
   3.2.1 Research Method ...................................................... 68
   3.2.2 Research Procedure and Data Collection Procedure ....... 72
      3.2.2.1 Methodology to Answer the Research Questions in the Study ........................................ 73
3.3 Selection of the Participants ............................................ 75
   3.3.1 Characteristics of Research Participants ....................... 76
   3.3.2 Research Procedure ................................................ 79
3.4 Instrumentation ............................................................. 80
   3.4.1 Interview .................................................................. 80
   3.4.2 Classroom Observations ......................................... 81
   3.4.3 Documents Analysis ............................................... 81
3.5 Data Collection Procedure .............................................. 82
   3.5.1 Data Collection ....................................................... 82
      3.5.1.1 Data Collection Procedure for the Interviews .......... 83
      3.5.1.2 Ethics Guiding the Interviews .............................. 84
      3.5.1.3 Interview Protocol ........................................... 85
      3.5.1.4 Data Collection Procedure for the Classroom Observation .............................. 86
   3.5.1.5 Data Collection Procedure for the Document Analysis .... 87
3.6 Pilot Study ....................................................................... 88
3.7 Data Analysis ................................................................... 90
   3.7.1 Data Analysis Technique for the Interview .................. 90
   3.7.2 Data Analysis Technique for the Classroom Observation .... 94
3.7.3 Procedure for the Analysis of Data of the Documents analysis...... 96
3.8 Preserving Confidentiality................................................................. 98
3.8.1 Trustworthiness and Credibility....................................................... 98
3.8.2 Validity and Reliability................................................................. 101
3.8.3 Confirmability............................................................................... 102
3.9 Ethical Considerations.................................................................... 103
3.10 Summary.......................................................................................... 104

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS....................................... 106
4.1 Introduction...................................................................................... 106
4.2 Structural Codes............................................................................... 106
4.3 Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings........................................ 108
4.4 RQ1: How do Primary Schools in the North Sumatra Province
Implement ability groups?................................................................. 110
  4.4.1 Ability Group Implementation....................................................... 110
    4.4.1.1 Criteria in Dividing Students into the Ability Group
Classes................................................................................................ 115
    4.4.1.2 Teacher’s Styles in Teaching Ability Group Class............. 119
4.5 RQ2: How are Ability Groups and Students’ Socioeconomic
Backgrounds in Primary Schools in the North Sumatra Province
Indonesia, Interconnected?................................................................. 124
  4.5.1 Ability Group and Students’ Socioeconomic Background........ 125
    4.5.1.1 Students’ Socioeconomic Background and Academic
Performance...................................................................................... 129
4.6 RQ 3: To What Extent do Ability Group and Students’ Socioeconomic
Backgrounds Affect their Academic Achievement?............................ 133
  4.6.1 The Impact of Ability Group and Students’ Socioeconomic
Background on Students’ Academic Achievement.......................... 133
  4.6.2 The Impact of AGS Implementation.............................................. 140
    4.6.2.1 Teachers’ Expectations for Different Level Groups......... 140
    4.6.2.2 The Impact of AGS Implementation on School Drop-out
Rate..................................................................................................... 142
    4.6.2.3 AGS Implementation and Social Stigma......................... 143
    4.6.2.4 Psychological Impact of AGS Implementation............. 145
4.7 RQ4: How do Teachers Perceive the Implementation of Ability Groups
in Primary Schools in the North Sumatra Province, Indonesia?........ 148
  4.7.1 Teachers’ Perception of the Implementation of Ability Group.... 148
  4.7.2 Challenges Faced by Teachers in Teaching Ability Group
Classes............................................................................................... 153
    4.7.3 Teachers’ Suggestion in Ability Group Implementation........ 157
      4.7.3.1 Improving Ability Group Implementation.................... 158
      4.7.3.2 Narrow the Gap between Ability Groups............... 159
4.8 RQ 5: How do Parents Perceive the Implementation of Ability Groups in
Primary Schools in the North Sumatra Province, Indonesia?............ 161
  4.8.1 Parents’ Perception of the Implementation of Ability Group..... 161
  4.8.2 Parents’ Attitude toward Ability Group Implementation........ 166
  4.8.3 Parents’ Suggestions on Ability Group Implementation......... 169
    4.8.3.1 Improving Overall Implementation of the Ability Group 169
    4.8.3.2 The Revision of the School Fees................................. 170
4.8.3.3 Narrowing the Gap between the Ability Classes .......... 170
4.9 RQ 6: Is there A Need to Design A Framework to Improve Group Implementation in North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, Primary Schools? .. 172
4.9.1 Proposing a Framework for Improvement of the Ability Group Implementation .................................................. 172
4.9.1.1 Academic Gap between Students’ Different Ability Groups ........................................................................... 173
4.9.1.2 Disadvantages of Current Ability Group Implementation 176
4.9.1.3 Promoting Inequality Practice in Education............... 177
4.10 A Proposed Framework for the Improvement of Ability Group Implementation in North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, Primary Schools ... 178
4.10.1 The Theoretical Foundations of the Proposed Framework ...... 178
4.10.2 General Objective of the Proposed Framework ................. 180
4.10.3 The Processes of the Proposed Framework ....................... 181
4.10.3.1 Formation of Goals .................................................. 181
4.10.3.2 Planning Stage ..................................................... 182
4.10.3.3 Implementation Stage ............................................. 183
4.10.3.4 Evaluation Stage ................................................... 184
4.11 Summary ........................................................................ 186

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION ........................................................................ 194
5.1 Introduction ..................................................................... 194
5.2 Summary of Major Findings ............................................ 194
5.3 Recommendations of the Study ......................................... 199
5.4 Direction for Future Research .......................................... 203
5.5 Implication of Research Findings ....................................... 204
5.6 Conclusion ...................................................................... 206

REFERENCES ............................................................................. 208

APPENDIX A: LETTER FOR SEEKING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH (CLASSROOM OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEW) .......... 221
APPENDIX A1: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL OF TEACHER ............... 222
APPENDIX A2: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL OF PARENTS ............ 224
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW INFORMED CONSENT FORM ......... 226
APPENDIX B1: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION TRANSLATIONS LETTER ................................................................. 228
APPENDIX B2: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF UNA .................. 229
APPENDIX B3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF AINA ............... 234
APPENDIX B4: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF HANI ............... 239
APPENDIX B5: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF ANI ................. 244
APPENDIX B6: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF HAWA ............. 248
APPENDIX B7: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF DIANA .............. 252
APPENDIX B8: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF HUDA ............... 256
APPENDIX B9: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF FINA ............... 259
APPENDIX B10: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF RAFNI .......... 263
APPENDIX B11: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF ZULFA .......... 266
APPENDIX B12: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF HANA .......... 270
APPENDIX B13: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT OF UDA.......................... 273
APPENDIX C: NOTATIONAL CONVENTIONS TEMPLATE .............. 276
APPENDIX D: CODING TEMPLATE TEACHER .......................... 277
APPENDIX D1: CODING TEMPLATE PARENT ............................. 286
APPENDIX E: INTER-RATER FORM TEMPLATE FOR CONFIRMABILITY .......................................................... 296
APPENDIX E1: INTER-RATER FORM TEMPLATE FOR CONFIRMABILITY .......................................................... 302
APPENDIX F: MEMBER-CHECK FORM FOR VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY ...................................................... 308
APPENDIX F1: VALIDATION REPORT ON PHD THESIS INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/RESEARCH ............................................. 310
APPENDIX G: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION SCHEDULE ............ 313
APPENDIX H: DOCUMENTS ANALYSIS- STUDENTS’ MIDTERM TEST RESULTS ............................................................ 315
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Summary of Research Method</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Summary of Research Procedure/Instrument</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Transcription Template (Ahmad, 2017)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Notational Conventions Template (Ahmad, 2017)</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Coding Template (Ahmad, 2017)</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Generating Themes and Sub-Themes Template (Ahmad, 2017)</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Coding Template of Inter-rater (Ahmad, 2017)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Structural Codes of Informants and Discourse Units (Ahmad, 2017)</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Classroom Observation Schedule (Ahmad, 2017)</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Documents Analysis (Ahmad, 2017)</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Summarised Emerged Main Themes and Sub-themes</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Means of Connectedness to Parents, Siblings, Peers and Teachers</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Social Theories Model of Differential Achievement Gap between Social Classes</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Sears &amp; Van, 2000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Theoretical Framework based on Bourdieu’s Social Capital Theory and Marx’s</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict Perspective (Wright, 2003)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Stufflebeam’s (2003) CIPP Model</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Summary Sources of Data Collection</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Summary of Interview Data Analysis Procedures (Rahman, 2008)</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Schematic Representation of Procedures of Collecting, Analysing</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and interpreting the Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Framework for AGS (adopted and adapted from Stufflebeam (2003; 1992),</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zurriat and Mohammad (2012) and Bolick and Rogowsky (2016)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>AGS</td>
<td>Ability Group System</td>
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<tr>
<td>BPS</td>
<td>Badan Pusat Statistik</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CIPP</td>
<td>Context, Input, Process, and Product</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Madarasa Aliyah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td>Madrasah Ibtidaiyah</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MTS</td>
<td>Madrasah Tsanawiyah</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Sekolah Dasar (Primary School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socioeconomic Status</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SISDIKNAS</td>
<td>Sistem Pendidikan National (National Educational System)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMK</td>
<td>Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan</td>
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<td>SLTA</td>
<td>Sekolah Lanjutan Tingkat Atas</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLTP</td>
<td>Sekolah Lanjutan Tingkatan Pertama</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEA</td>
<td>National Education Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Students Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nation International Children Emergency Fund</td>
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The practice of placing students into homogeneous groupings, such as ability grouping, and achievement placing and tracking, has been debated and practised in schools since the early 1800s. This is an issue that all parents should be concerned about (Meredith, 1981). One prime aim of this practice is to enable students to learn according to their own abilities and pace. For instance, an ability group can be understood as a type of standardized grouping, which simply means grouping together students who have similar ability levels, which teachers may decide on for a variety of reasons, such as academic performance improvement for all students in different groups. However, it is argued that ability grouping usually works in favour of high achievements and does not necessarily improve all students’ academic performance. Thus, it unfairly limits the educational opportunities of disadvantaged students, (Ornstein & Levine, 2000).

Ability grouping is practised in many educational systems all over the world. For example, in the United States’ schools, the rapid increase of immigrant populations from Latin America, Asia, and other parts of the world led to rising student diversity. Limited English proficiencies and low socioeconomic backgrounds were among the challenges that American schools had to face in their quest to provide equitable educational practices to socially and economically disadvantaged students. Hence, the ability group was practised as an immediate solution (Takako, 2006).
Zittleman and Sadker (2006) stated that ability groups can be referred to as tracking or phasing the entire school population which is assigned to classes according to whether students’ overall achievement is above average, normal, or below average. Students attend academic classes only with students whose overall academic achievement is similar to their own. Primary and secondary schools might do the grouping in terms of high, average, or lower abilities.

Nowadays, the formal modern educational system focuses more on developing students’ academic achievements. Therefore, schools implement ability groups as a way to help students to perform better in the class. Nevertheless, teachers, parents, guardians and even the governments have to be concerned about this issue as it remains highly controversial. Mamary and Rowe (1985) stated that there are many opinions and views on ability groups. Some people believe that ability groups should be practised in the school because it may yield many benefits to students.

Meredith (1981) stated that some arguments supporting the idea of ability grouping are based on rational assumptions and research results. They include (a) individual differences are being taken into account, (b) students of similar abilities learn better together, (c) it is easier for selecting and preparing appropriate methods, materials and so forth, and (d) a realistic range of competition is created. However, others emphasize the fact that ability groups in learning should not be practised because it brings more disadvantages than advantages for students, especially for the average and low achievers. They argue that the technique has many negative consequences which include (a) creating a negative effect on self-concept especially among low achievers, (b) ability is impossible to measure, (c) undemocratic situations develop in schools, (d) homogeneous grouping is unlike “real-life”, (e) most of the teachers are unmotivated and do not have the enthusiasm to teach low-achieving
group class, and (f) segregation along ethnic and socioeconomic lines often occurs within the educational setting which reinforces social inequality. These arguments show that the practice of ability grouping was and is still debated and it is becoming a controversial issue in the modern educational system.

Zimmerman (1997) stated that the idea of grouping students based on academic performance was first introduced into the United States’ educational system during the Jeffersonian period from 1800-1828 and the Jacksonian period from 1824-1840\(^1\). During the Jeffersonian period, liberal art education was essential for everyone. Jefferson emphasized that because of his beliefs that any academically excellent student could assume higher leadership status. However, Jefferson advocated that students with excellent talents should be educated in art and literature and trained to become leaders. On the other hand, Jackson’s beliefs about educating the children were quite different. He did not believe in educating only the privileged classes but wanted to eliminate the aristocratic beliefs brought into education by Europeans. Jackson believes that public education should be used to educate every individual and lead to equality. An emphasis was also placed on educating everyone for leadership roles and providing free and excellent education in high schools for all regardless of abilities.

Before the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century, Latin Schools were only for boys from the upper class and grouped the children according to age. Then the monitorial and common schools started “open the door policy” of education for all except for enslaved Africans. However, by the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century, the permanent grouping

\(^1\)Jeffersonian refers to several fields upon which the U.S. President of Thomas Jefferson era from 1800-1828, such as Jeffersonian democracy. Jacksonian refers to relating or consistent with the political principles and ideas held by or associated with the U.S President of Andrew Jackson as and the years from about 1824-1840 have been called the “Age of Jacksonian.”
of students in elementary schools was intensified because stability and security were needed in establishing uniformity in secondary schools, and the increasing number of immigrants who arrived in the United States with different racial and cultural backgrounds (Zimmerman 1997). Due to the large influx of immigrants, the concept of “Social Darwinism” began to be embraced by the majority of society and hence the use of mental and standardized testing to group students in schools. The Social Darwinism concept is based on Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection which generally considers that there are differences or variations among the species. Therefore, Social Darwinism was used in the educational system with the notion that lower-class parents will produce low achiever’s children. Thus, these children should be grouped according to their ability for special instructions (Kpinkpin, 2004).

To overcome the problem of students with low academic achievements, teachers should be concerned with students’ sociological backgrounds besides the technical solution of improving teaching strategies and methods. As stated by Orfield and Lee (2005), there are different reasons why students’ academic achievements are different. They include social class, the family of origin, family economic status, and so on. Hence, students’ social milieu is a crucial factor affecting students’ academic achievements.

Moreover, despite the pros and cons related to an ability group practice in schools, it is increasingly becoming a norm in many countries. In Indonesia for instance, the ability group is implemented in many primary and secondary, private and public schools. Indonesia is a massive country with an estimated population of about 266,929,411 people and ranks as the fourth most populated country in the world with different lines of class stratifications and socioeconomic levels. According to Slameto (1991), based on the context of Indonesian schools, several factors influence students’
academic achievements such as individual/personal factors (interest and motivation) and social factors (family, teacher, and surrounding). However, family socioeconomic background has a big influence on how students perform at school. The ability group is implemented in Indonesian schools and students are grouped based on their examination results. However, since unequal students’ academic achievements could be attributed to family socioeconomic backgrounds, ability groups cannot be implemented as a proper concept.

Thus, this research intended to discuss the relationship of ability groups and students’ socioeconomic backgrounds among elementary school students and how it affects their academic achievement in the Northern Sumatra province of Indonesia.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the early 1900s, the issue of ability groups in schools had been discussed by educational researchers, especially in Western countries like the UK, USA, France, and Scotland. In 1904, Andrew S. Draper, the first US Commissioner of Education, started to identify the effectiveness of teaching by grouping students and looking for students who could benefit from the ordinary method and instruction and those who could not (Kpinkpin, 2004). Then, the USA Commissioner of Education tried to set various criteria besides intelligent quotient (IQ), like standardized test scores and past academic achievement as well as teachers recommendations to group them according to a similar academic ability (Reuman, 1989).

The present modern educational systems are still debating the issue of applying ability groups in schools. There are different opinions and assumptions about the factors that can lead to the success or failure of implementing the ability group strategies in schools’ teaching and learning processes. Some experts stand neutral,
some support the strategy, and others reject this practice. Slavin (1998) said that the pro-grouping approach believes that there are benefits of ability group for both teachers and students. By adopting such an approach, teachers can easily choose a suitable learning method based on students’ needs. On the other hand, critics of the ability group practice believe that it may bring negative effects to students who are placed in a low ability class.

Indonesia is among the countries that have implemented ability groups in its modern educational system. Based on the National Education System (SISDIKNAS-Sistem Pendidikan Nasional) of Indonesian Law No. 20 / 2003, the aim of education in Indonesia as stated in Part 3, “The aim of national education is to develop students potential to become faithful and fearful people to God Almighty, noble, healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and become a democratic and responsible citizen.” As an attempt to achieve the aim of national education, SISDIKNAS (2003) also considers students as the object of education. Students are members of the community who seek to develop their own potential through the learning process that is available in certain types of education. After their enrolment in educational institutions, especially public schools, i.e., Sekolah Dasar (SD)/Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) for primary schools, Sekolah Lanjutan Tingkat Pertama (SLTP)/Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTS) for secondary junior schools, and Sekolah Lanjutan Tingkat Atas (SLTA)/Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK)/Madrasah Aliyah (MA) for secondary schools, students need to be grouped or classified. The reason for grouping students is that students are constantly in the process of growing and developing to become independent people. At the same time, the growth and development of every student are different from one another. Hence, ability group is implemented to help fast and slow learners efficiently (Imron, 2015).
The reason why ability group is implemented in Indonesian primary schools is to balance the different growth and development of students’ differences and help each category of students to excel and realize their academic potential. However, the implementation of ability groups in primary schools in Indonesia becomes a complicated matter and several problems emerged. Among the most apparent problem are the way ability group is implemented in the first place and the standard criteria of placing students in a certain group. According to Wibowo (2015), the examination results and previous academic achievements are used to group students, especially at the Indonesian elementary school level. It becomes a problem because the unequal academic result between students is linked not only to their intellectual ability but to other several social aspects of students’ backgrounds such as students’ family socioeconomic and living conditions, parenting styles, and the schools themselves. Most of the time, educational systems assess students by grades and test scores without taking into consideration students socioeconomic backgrounds and other interpersonal factors affecting how they learn and how they academically perform.

Another factor affecting students’ academic achievements in Indonesia is parents’ participation in supporting their children learning which is also influenced by their socioeconomic conditions. It is believed that Indonesian parents with high incomes are usually able to participate and support their children’s learning more compared to parents with low incomes. As a result, students from upper-class families may achieve better results compared to students from lower-class families. Orfied and Lee (2005) stressed that the most influential factors in student academic achievement are their social condition and level of poverty. It is believed that inadequate facilities and resources among different families have a direct impact on children’s academic performance, such as lack of academic resources, learning aids, nutrition, and a