

# Between efficacy and inequity: Teachers' practices and beliefs regarding ability grouping for coping with learner diversity in language education at upper secondary school

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## Abstract

*According to Gymnasieskolernes Lærereforening (2020), the student composition at Danish upper secondary schools has become increasingly heterogeneous over time, as more learners are allowed in than before. Teachers are forced to deal with this, for example through differentiated instruction, and more specifically ability grouping. The strategy of ability grouping, where learners are divided into homogeneous groups/classes according to their level, is a controversial approach, which according to several international studies, has shown modest positive effects, mostly among strong students, and extended negative effects in relation to equity. In an online survey study regarding teaching differentiation (Rasmussen & Fernández, 2023), we found evidence for a relatively widespread use of ability grouping in third foreign language subjects such as German and Spanish in upper secondary schools in Denmark, as well as a tendency to abandon the practice after some time. This discovery led us to expand our study to include observations and interviews (with learners, teachers and school leaders) focusing specifically on ability grouping practices. Our results indicate that many foreign language teachers practice some form of ability grouping. We find a polarized landscape, with strong believers, who experience teaching success and a positive response from the learners; outspoken opponents, who either reject the practice as a matter of principle or because of negative experiences; and some neutral school leaders who trust their teachers' ability to decide what is best for their students, even when no evaluations of this practice are performed and even when the leaders themselves might have doubt about its appropriateness.*

**Keywords:** *ability grouping, foreign language teaching, upper secondary school, differentiation, LOT*

## 1 Introduction

The admission of students to Danish upper secondary schools has gradually increased for a number of years, which has meant that the student composition has become significantly more heterogeneous than before. According to Gymnasieskolernes Lærerforening (2020), heterogeneity concerns factors such as socio-economic backgrounds, readiness for school, motivation and previous knowledge. Teachers are naturally forced to deal with this, for example by adopting various differentiation strategies, including ability grouping. In a study focusing on newly qualified upper secondary school teachers in Denmark (Qvortrup & Bak-Thomsen, 2024), the ability to impart differentiated teaching for heterogeneous learner groups was the top concern of new teachers, followed by being able to support learners with their homework and being able to support the individual learner's development. A student teacher cognition study (Andersen et al., 2025) has also rendered similar results: novel teachers point to the ability of doing differentiated teaching as a main concern, together with being able to motivate their learners. Far from being an exclusively Danish concern, several international studies (Brussino, 2021; Kärner & Höning, 2021) have pointed to the growing problem of heterogeneous student groups and the consequent strain on teachers, particularly novel ones.

Ability grouping, also called by some "attainment" grouping (Towers et al., 2019) can be defined as the division of students into homogeneous groups according to achievement, skills or ability level (Kim, 2012, p. 290) for shorter or longer periods within or across classes. It includes a continuum of practices ranging from sporadic activities in the class where students work in level homogenous groups, as the mildest form of ability grouping, to the systematic and permanent placing of students in a class according to level via screening (either in all subjects, known as "streaming", or in individual subjects, known as "setting", see Francis et al. (2020)), as the most rigid extreme. In all cases, the students work towards the same learning goals, despite being in the level-divided groups (Rasmussen, 2021).

Ability grouping can be considered a form of differentiation, which is a teaching principle where the starting point is the students' different prerequisites, potentials, needs and interests in order to use this diversity to fulfill both common and individual goals (Hansen et al. 1992). As a differentiation strategy, ability grouping is a controversial approach. Several international studies (see e.g. Francis et al., 2020; Hattie, 2009; Johnston & Wildy, 2016; Kulik, 1992) have shown modest positive effects, particularly among strong students, as well as sizeable negative effects in terms of equity. Particularly, within the movement of inclusive pedagogy (Florian, 2015) and democratic education (O'Rourke, 2013), opponents to this practice point to its potential to perpetuate academic inequities and describe it as an act of symbolic violence towards the learners assigned to the lower-level groups (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018). These learners often become weaker due to detrimental effects of teacher expectations, student beliefs, creation of student identities and self-fulfilling prophecies (Francis et al. 2020). Oakes (2005) argues that the practice of ability grouping creates a "non-educational" environment in the weakest classes, i.e., an environment that does not promote learning. For these reasons, the OECD also advises against its use (OECD, 2012).

The school system in Denmark is in general not organized with ability grouping. Within primary and lower secondary school, students are only divided by age, apart from a limited selection of electives in the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades. The legislation for primary and lower secondary schools establishes the principle of inclusion, which states that children with special needs should, as far as possible, not be segregated into special education services, but should be taught together with their peers in general education (Folkeskoleloven, 2020). In upper secondary school (*gymnasium*), students are divided into year groups, which is a continuation of the structure from primary and lower secondary school, but also by elective subjects, and specialized study lines (*studieretning*) (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2017).

Nevertheless, there are some attempts at Danish upper secondary schools across the country in subjects such as mathematics and, of relevance to this article, foreign languages to solve the heterogeneity problem by resorting to ability grouping (i.e. “setting”) (Rasmussen & Fernández, 2023). So far, there has not been a clear overview of the extent and modalities of this practice, nor of how teachers (and school leaders) who participate in such practices think about it (for a study on learner beliefs regarding ability grouping see Rasmussen & Fernández, in preparation). The purpose of this study is therefore to map: 1) to what extent and how ability grouping is practiced within and across classes in foreign language subjects at upper secondary schools in Denmark and 2) what Danish foreign language upper secondary school teachers’ (and to a certain extent, school leaders’) beliefs, feelings and experiences are regarding ability grouping.

## 2 Ability Grouping and Teacher Cognition Studies

The field of language teacher cognition has been characterized as focusing on “the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think” (Borg, 2003, p. 18). The study of teachers’ knowledge and beliefs became an established academic discipline in the 1970s, recognizing that teachers play a crucial role in making significant classroom decisions as they continuously plan, implement, and evaluate their instructional strategies (Blömeke et al., 2022; Hattie, 2003). As we will see later in this article, the practice of ability grouping in upper secondary school foreign language subjects in Denmark is mainly teacher-driven (i.e. a bottom-up decision), which makes it crucial to understand the beliefs and thoughts that lead teachers to choose this practice.

Borg (2015) describes teacher cognition as complex, dynamic and often unconscious. Complexity arises from the diverse types of knowledge teachers hold, which span from broad societal and intercultural awareness (macro level) to understanding the national educational framework (meso level) and the specific local institutions where they work (micro level). Beyond factual knowledge, teachers possess both general and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge, which they acquire through formal education and practical experience. For language teachers, this includes not only proficiency in the language they teach but also an understanding of the historical, cultural, and social contexts of the target language, all of which make up their pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986).

Teachers’ knowledge is intertwined with their beliefs, which encompass their personal convictions about teaching, learning, and their roles as educators (Fives & Buehl, 2012). These beliefs are profoundly shaped by social and cultural norms (Kubanyiova, 2018), personal language experiences (Busch, 2017), and individual aspirations or fears (Kubanyiova, 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020). However, these beliefs do not always align with research-based knowledge and can act as filters during teacher education (Borg, 2006). Teacher beliefs are not static; they evolve throughout a teacher’s career, influenced by their classroom practices and reflective processes. Self-efficacy beliefs, or confidence in own knowledge and abilities, also play a significant role (Bandura, 1994). Teachers with low self-efficacy may avoid certain topics if they lack confidence in their own ability to address student questions (Borg, 2015), and they may feel insecurity in, for instance, having to deal with heterogeneous learner groups (Andersen et al., 2025).

Even though teacher cognition studies with focus on foreign language teachers are abundant, there is an overweight of studies focusing on the acquisition of English (Ushioda, 2017) or focusing specific areas of the language classroom, such as the teaching of grammar (see e.g. Askland, 2018; Nilsson et al, 2019; Andersen & Fernández, 2022) or of intercultural competence (see e.g. Fernández, 2015; Svarstad, 2016; Pettersson, 2019; Löbl, 2022). Studies regarding differentiation and ability grouping among foreign language teachers are less frequent. Therefore, it is relevant to look at research from

other subject areas, such as mathematics or L1 English, as findings from these contexts can serve as a comparative basis for discussing the results of our study.

Research on teachers' attitudes toward streaming and ability grouping consistently highlights both perceived benefits and significant limitations. Across multiple international contexts, including Australia (Forgasz, 2010; Sweeney & Reid O'Connor, 2024; Towers et al., 2019), Denmark (Mathiesen & Jessen, 2017), Turkey (Özelçi, et al., 2016), the United States (Hughes, 2020; Webel & Dwiggins, 2019), the United Kingdom (Hallam & Ireson, 2003), and South Korea (Kim, 2012), teachers often express support for streaming because it allows for more targeted instruction and better classroom management, particularly for high-achieving students (Forgasz, 2010; Sweeney & Reid O'Connor, 2024; Mathiesen & Jessen, 2017; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Kim, 2012; Towers et al., 2019). Teachers in these studies report that streamed classes alleviate their workload and improve teaching conditions. They frequently view streaming as an ideal method for optimizing learning outcomes for students deemed high achieving (Kim, 2012; Mathiesen & Jessen, 2017; Sweeney & Reid O'Connor, 2024).

However, while teachers recognize the advantages for high performers, they simultaneously acknowledge the negative consequences for low-, and at least to some extent, middle-achieving students. Ability-grouped classes with low-achieving students are often perceived as less motivated, less engaged, and more difficult to manage than classes with high-achieving students or mixed-ability classes (Forgasz, 2010; Özelçi, et al., 2016; Mathiesen & Jessen, 2017; Kim, 2012).

Teachers' attitudes are shaped not only by perceived student outcomes but also by contextual factors such as subject area, school type, teaching experience, and teacher qualifications (Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Forgasz, 2010; Towers et al., 2019). For example, streaming is widely accepted by teachers in upper secondary years (e.g., Year 10), whereas earlier streaming may be viewed as premature and potentially harmful to students' development (Forgasz, 2010). Towers et al. (2019) note that in primary school classrooms, grouping can produce unintended social consequences: low-performing students may experience reduced peer support and motivation. Consequently, both teachers and school leaders often navigate tensions between equitable access and effective instruction. In the United States, Hughes (2020) points out that minority students are overrepresented in lower-level tracked classes, while white students are overrepresented in advanced classes, highlighting the intersection of streaming with issues of equity and social justice. Hughes (2020) found that teachers in schools emphasizing diversity recognize the social benefits of mixed-ability classrooms, whereas those in schools prioritizing ability grouping tend to concentrate more narrowly on instructional management.

There is no existing work about the context of our investigation – foreign language teachers, including languages other than English, at upper secondary schools in Denmark and their beliefs regarding ability grouping (but see Rasmussen (2021) for beliefs on differentiation). The present study intends to remedy this knowledge gap.

### 3 Methods

The multifaceted nature of teacher belief calls for studies that combine diverse research methods (Barnard & Burns, 2012). The present study is based on an online questionnaire, individual and focus group interviews, and classroom observations.

The digital questionnaire survey was sent out to 227 upper secondary school principals, who were asked to forward the link to their employed foreign language teachers. The questionnaire contains both closed and open questions (Dörnyei, 2007), so that respondents have ample opportunity to describe their practice and attitudes regarding ability grouping. The questions were selected based on the literature on ability grouping and thus on what we know about the factors that play a role in the implementation of this differentiation strategy. The questionnaire is divided into sections regarding: 0)

background information about the respondents, 1) how ability grouping is carried out (including timing, allocation of students, teaching strategies, 2) why it is carried out, and 3) how it is assessed and evaluated. The questionnaire was piloted by six foreign language teachers at different education levels, and this resulted in a few minor adjustments.

We conducted semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014) with teachers (sometimes individual, sometimes in groups) and with school leaders in order to gain insights into their beliefs, evaluations, and perceived practices. The interviews were conducted after classroom observations, audio recorded and transcribed. Our interview guide comprises three types of questions: 1) background information on the teacher, 2) practices regarding ability grouping (screening, organization and evaluation) and reasons for such practice, and 3) reactions to prejudices regarding ability grouping. The interviews and observations were carried out in 2024. Interviewees are identified with the number of the school, the language taught (G for German or S for Spanish) and the teacher number (e.g. S1/G/T1). The data was submitted to content analysis using a combination of inductive and deductive coding (David & Sutton, 2004, p. 205). Deductive codes were derived from the interview guide (e.g., “screening practices,” “evaluation,” “reasons for grouping”), while inductive codes emerged from recurring patterns in participants’ narratives. In the first cycle, the two authors independently coded the transcripts line by line, identifying expressions of attitudes toward ability grouping (e.g., positive evaluations, concerns, or ambivalence). These codes were then clustered into broader thematic categories through iterative comparison and discussion. During this process, we noticed that participants’ positions toward ability grouping consistently aligned along a continuum from strong support to strong opposition, with some expressing mixed or conditional views. Based on this emergent pattern, we organized our results section regarding teacher beliefs following three interpretive categories: Believers (those who articulated clear benefits and endorsed ability grouping), Opponents (those who rejected ability grouping or emphasized its drawbacks), and Neutral (those who expressed ambivalence or conditional acceptance). This categorization was not predefined but resulted from the inductive analysis of attitudes across interviews. To ensure reliability, both coders compared their categorizations and resolved discrepancies through discussion until full agreement was reached.

Classroom observations were selected to complement interview data because they offer direct access to classroom behavior (OECD, 2018). The non-participant observer (the second author) took field notes by means of a semi-structured observation chart (O’Leary, 2010) with columns for noting time, teacher and learner actions, as well as teaching materials. The observations served mainly as a point of departure for the interviews, which were performed right after an observation.

Participants gave their written consent to take part in the study. They were assured anonymity and the possibility of withdrawing their consent at any time. Table 1 offers an overview of the interviews and observations that we have carried out.

**Table 1.** Overview of observations and interviews.

School	Observations	Teacher Interviews (individual or in groups)			Leader Interview
		Number of teachers	Language subject in question	Duration	
School 1	3x90 min in grade 1 1x90 min in grade 2	4	German	76 min	13 min
School 2	2x90 min in grade 2	1	German	45 min	23 min
		2	Spanish	33 min	
	4x90 min in grade 2 (two classes)	2	German	28 min 44 min	
TOTAL	15 hrs	9	2 languages	3,8 hrs	min

### 3.1 Participants

We received 468 responses to the online questionnaire with the following language distribution: 48% of respondents teach English, 31% teach German, 23% teach Spanish, 15% teach French and 9% teach other languages. Some respondents teach more than one language. Respondents come from all regions of the country and represent all forms of upper secondary school (general, business and technical, with 65% of the teachers belonging to the general upper secondary school, which is the one with most students). Most respondents are women (78%) and experienced (68% have 10-20 years of teaching experience, 22% have 5-9 years of experience, and only 10% of respondents have less than 5 years of experience).

For the qualitative part of the study, we selected questionnaire respondents who expressed an interest in being interviewed and observed and who experimented or had experimented with the most extreme type of ability grouping (i.e. systematic and permanent placement of students in a class according to level via screening), i.e. a purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2014). Table 1 below offers an overview of the interviews and observations that were conducted. Only teachers who were performing ability grouping at the moment of the study were observed in their classroom practice.

## 4 Results

In the following section, we present our results based on the survey responses supplemented by interviews with teachers and school leaders. To organize the presentation, we follow our two research questions on a) ability grouping practices in foreign language subjects at upper secondary school (section 4.1.), and b) teachers' and leaders' beliefs regarding such practices (section 4.2).

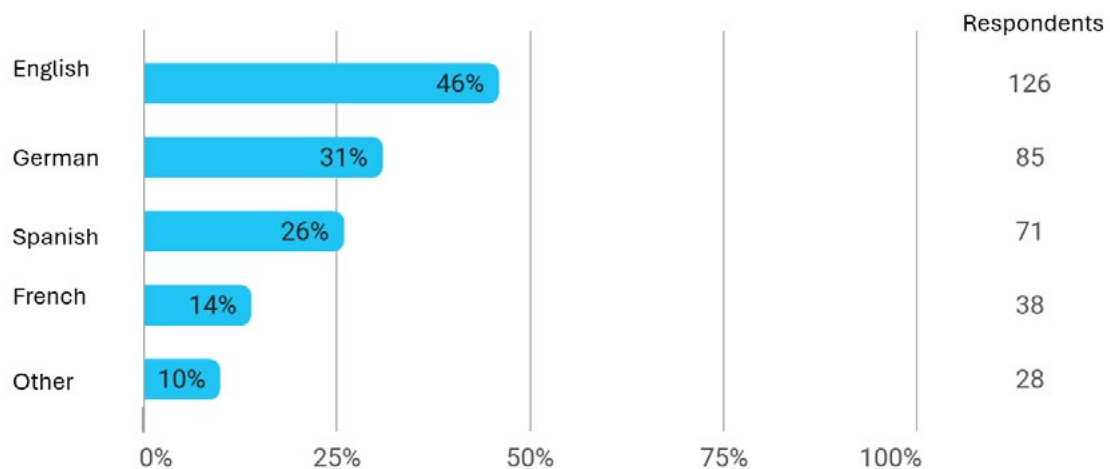
### 4.1 Ability grouping practices

Our study shows that the vast majority of the 464 teachers who have responded to the questionnaire have experience with ability grouping to some extent. Overall, 59% of respondents worked with ability grouping either internally in their classes or across classes at the time the survey was administered. Of the 41% who state that they do not carry out ability grouping, 44% have done so in the past. Of the 56% who have neither now nor previously carried out ability grouping, approximately half of them (53%) are considering doing so, of which 45% are considering ability grouping across classes and

88% internally in their classes. All in all, only 44 respondents (9%) have not tried ability grouping and are not planning to do so.

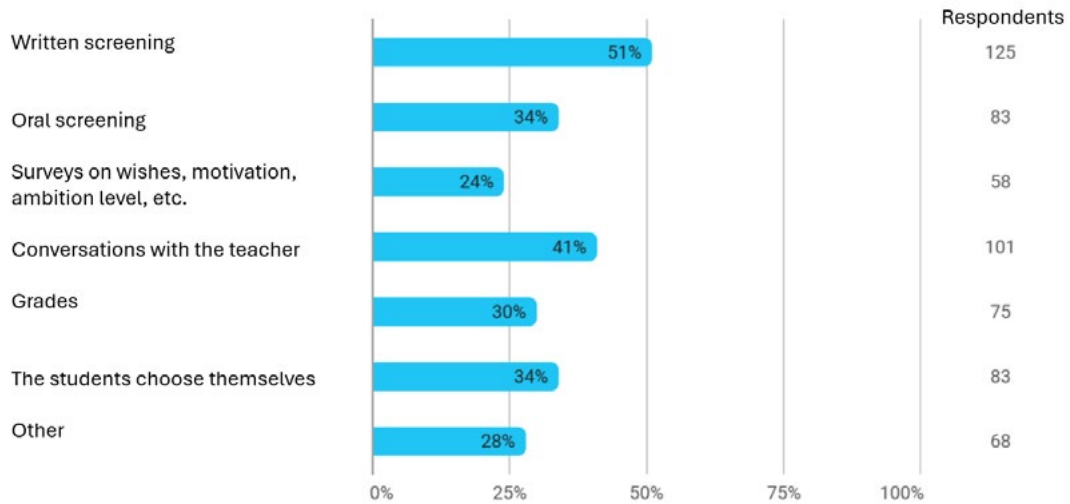
At the time the survey was administered, 26% of respondents who were working with ability grouping did so across different classes, while 91% did it internally in their class. Of those who responded that they have previously worked with ability grouping, approximately half of them (49%) stated that this was across different classes, while 73% state that they have previously done ability grouping internally in their class. The numbers indicate that both in connection with previous and current ability grouping, there are some teachers who carry out both forms (class internal and external) and that ability grouping internally within the class is the most frequent option. According to the received responses, ability grouping across classes, when it happens, is stable during the period in which it takes place, whereas internal ability grouping often happens sporadically, depending on the class, the activities performed, and punctual needs.

Our results indicate that ability grouping takes place across all the languages taught at the Danish upper secondary school (see Figure 1) and at all three grades in upper secondary school, although it is most widespread in the second year. The reason why fewer teachers do ability grouping in the third year is probably due to the fact that, most often, the continuation languages German and French are completed after two years (i.e. first and second year of upper secondary school). On the other hand, some teachers point out that ability grouping is less relevant in the first year in beginner languages (e.g. Spanish), because everyone starts from scratch. In addition, some informants comment that students are more fragile in the first year, which is why ability grouping is postponed, even when level differences are conspicuous.



**Figure 1.** To what extent is ability grouping performed? Distribution of languages.

We find a wide range of methods of assessment of students' foreign language skills for placement in the different groups (see figure 2), although two methods seem to dominate: written screenings and a holistic overall assessment (i.e. the teacher's general impression of each student). Many teachers emphasize that the possibility of changing from one group to another should be available, but there is a difference between class internal and external ability grouping, as change in the latter is considerably more complicated for practical and social reasons. According to the respondents, this can, however, take place at set times. In addition, the same topics and content are worked on in all ability-grouped classes to facilitate any necessary changes.



**Figure 2.** Methods of assessment for placement.

Teachers who choose class-internal ability grouping report adopting a wide range of strategies to differentiate instruction. These include adapting written tasks by reducing scope for weaker students, dividing the class into two alternating groups (one working independently, the other with the teacher), and engaging in small-group conversations while others work autonomously. Other approaches involve station learning with homogeneous groups, matrix groups for information exchange, extra tasks for fast finishers, and purposeful use of heterogeneous groups. Teachers also describe providing targeted assistance during individual work, dividing students into groups with different materials, encouraging strong students to support weaker peers, and allowing students to self-select tasks of varying difficulty. Collectively, these practices illustrate the flexibility and creativity teachers employ to manage diverse learner needs within a single classroom.

Classroom strategies in the ability grouped classes are less apparent, as in those cases, the class is homogeneous and different teachers are in charge of different classes. Nevertheless, teachers report working differently with grammar and vocabulary in strong and weak classes. Several respondents work only with “basic” grammar with weak students (taking up more complex grammatical issues, e.g. the subjunctive mood, only in the strong classes). For weaker classes, the focus is rather on vocabulary learning than on grammar. However, the same content, texts and materials are often used for all groups/classes, because teachers report rarely having time to plan different things for different groups, or because students should have the opportunity to change classes. Therefore, rather than choosing different content, the same content is processed at different “taxonomic levels”. While weaker groups or classes can focus on understanding and translating a given text, a stronger group or class works on analysis and perspective-taking. Time management is also a differentiation strategy, where weaker students are allowed to spend more time on a single text or a single grammatical topic.

The three most frequently cited reasons for ability grouping, whether it is internal or across classes, are that 1) there is a large difference in the students’ academic level (87% of respondents who ability group), 2) the weak students get more space and are encouraged to participate (86%), and 3) the strong students can better realize their potential (89%). In addition, 63% believe that weak students can get better help, and 56% believe that ability grouping provides a feeling of safety. In the following section, we will delve into the participating teachers’ beliefs and feelings regarding ability grouping, both among them who do it and them who do not.

## 4.2 Teachers' and leaders' beliefs

Our data presents a very polarized picture of how teachers perceive ability grouping and the extent to which they believe in this practice in terms of providing optimal conditions for learning and teaching. We can identify three categories of teachers that we shall call "believers", "neutral" and "opponents". There is no doubt that the majority of teachers in our study feel a need to cope with heterogeneity in their classrooms. The fact that only 44 respondents have never tried nor are thinking of trying ability grouping witnesses to a very extended need for differentiation. At the same time, the fact that 83 teachers have tried ability grouping in the past and decided (or their school decided) to discontinue this practice signals that, at least for some, ability grouping has not been a solution to their problem. In the following, we present the different teacher positions each in their section. The focus is on most cases on the most extreme form of ability grouping, i.e. grouping students across classes.

### 4.2.1 Believers

This group of teachers (featuring survey respondents and interviewees from school 1 and 2 who teach German) argue that ability grouping is necessary due to large differences in level. Among other things, they report that grouping the students in different classes by level saves time, as it would be more difficult for the individual teacher to differentiate within the same class. They maintain that, given the preparation time at their disposal, they can do better teaching at ability grouped classes, as they simply do not have the time to prepare differentiated materials and strategies for the general classroom:

I 110% support ability grouped classes in German. It's the only thing that makes sense.  
(Survey respondent)

Well, one of the reasons why I might still be an advocate for ability grouping is also when I have the whole classes regularly it's heavier somehow. I think I am more effective when we ability group. In other words, I find it difficult to take care of everyone in the same way in my mixed classes. Then you would have to do, just like some schools talk about, the 3 traffic light tasks, where you have both red, yellow and green, but very few teachers can manage to do a whole set with all 3 types of tasks for each class. (S1/G/T4)

And then it may be that as a teacher I am actually really busy all the time [when I differentiate within the class], because if I send some out to work on their own, they do it, and then they come in, and then I am busy again and again, and it can actually be really, really hard for us to do the level division internally in the class, and where I may also have less contact with those out there [outside the classroom]. (S2/G/T1)

These teachers report that there is a risk of "teaching to the middle" when the class is heterogeneous:

I just don't have time for that, and then it might turn into something like this, I teach the middle, give the strongest those compendiums that they can sit with, hope the weakest come along a little, try to help them a little when I can see that it's completely hopeless, and then we run a little middle teaching like that. (S2/G/T7)

Heterogeneity is not totally erased in ability grouped classes, where a certain amount of internal differentiation will still be necessary. By adjusting the size of the classes, particularly making smaller classes for the weaker students, the necessary internal differentiation and the personal attention that some students require become more manageable:

I actually think it gives greater peace in the class, if I do this division into different classes, where I can then be more present and can of course still do the level division internally,

because that will still be there in the classes, they are not completely homogeneous at all, but I can accommodate it better. I can be better at it, and I can also divide them in size, so that the more capable classes may have some more students and the weaker classes fewer, so that I can be better there for the students who need me. (S2/G/T1)

Believers state that the practice of ability grouping across classes benefits both strong and weak students. They elaborate on the fact that they experience that the weak students appreciate the safety, motivation and activity level that the ability grouping contributes to, while the strong ones appreciate being challenged:

I taught the weakest class myself. They were happy because there was no pressure, and they enjoyed themselves. I don't know if they also got better at the things we worked on. The strongest students were a little dissatisfied that they got less speaking time and attention because there were more at their level. However, they experienced a greater academic challenge. (Survey respondent)

Believers experience that weak students become more engaged and interested in the subject. They get more opportunities for experiencing that they master the subject when they do not have to constantly run after the strong ones. The strong students are reported to be "hungry for more", and there is room and time for more in the ability grouped class at high level.

But if I don't do targeted ability grouping, I can see it in the evaluations, where students write that they feel 'unsafe' or 'inhibited' when they are with people who are much more capable than themselves. And conversely, ambitious students express that they feel inhibited when other students in their groups have a clearly lower level of motivation. (Survey respondent)

We and the students are very happy with ability grouping. As a teacher, you can target your teaching so that both academically weak and strong students get more benefit. (Survey respondent)

The weak students felt that they were given the opportunity for a fresh start and to fill in the gaps they had. The strong students felt that they were challenged and not bored, and probably got a boost in their self-confidence from being in the strong class. (Survey respondent)

The weak students are given a safe room and space to say something without the strong students sighing impatiently. At the same time, the strong students have more time to develop themselves when they don't have to wait for the weak students. (Survey respondent)

Some teachers believe, though, that it is important for their own motivation to teach the strong classes or to rotate between strong and weak classes, as weak classes are known to be more challenging.

This time I told XX, now she had to choose, because she has actually taken the weak class every time, because she wanted to, and I actually also want to have the strong class, if I'm being completely honest. (S2/G/T2)

It rotates, so we always get to teach a new level. (S1/G/T4)

It was hard as a teacher to teach the academically weakest class because there was a lack of dynamism and sometimes also enthusiasm. (Survey respondent)

Some teachers, though, report enjoying working with the weak classes as much as with the strong ones, both because weak learners can be grateful for the teaching, help and

attention they receive and because helping weaker learners is a pedagogical challenge at the core of their teaching profession:

It's great to teach the classes that don't have such good prerequisites, as some of them are actually grateful. It's probably mostly among the girls that I've seen them express their gratitude. I actually experience it every week, because some of them come with really bad experiences and say, well, I've learned something for the first time, and you're kind, and you're sweet and things like that which are obviously not something they've been used to. And it seems a bit like some of them have rediscovered the joy of German. And then I can't help but be happy. (S1/G/T4)

There is a great deal of professionalism in pulling a student up from 00 to 4. That is our core professionalism, so I can't understand that they [the teachers who do not wish to work with the weak classes] say that. (S1/G/T1)

When all is said and done, it seems that having good results in the final exam is for some believers a good enough reason to continue practicing ability grouping despite possible reservations:

And that's perhaps also the reason why we still say, well, if it works well, and of course the exam is not crucial, but the most important thing is that they learn something along the way, but somehow it works. It seems like everyone is getting through it well, and what I make a lot of use of in my class 3 [weak class], and where I also think I have my strength, is to get everyone up to speed. (S1/G/T4)

Other teachers do not find a justification in exam results, as these do not appear to be higher than is the case for regular classes and admit that it might be done for the sake of the teachers and their workload.

I remember sitting there a little bit depressed and looking at it and thinking: "Why aren't they [grades] much higher?" Then you can say: "Well, have they [the students] even succeeded?" Interesting question. Yes, no, they're [grades] not necessarily that much higher.

(...)

I've talked to some other teachers who actually said that they do it a little bit for the teacher's sake. It's less work. "We've been working so hard. When we ability group, the preparation is easier, that's why we do it.

(S2/G/T3)

#### 4.2.2 *Opponents*

The "opponents" are a number of teachers (both survey respondents and the interviewees from School 2 who teach Spanish and one teacher from School 1) who express skepticism about ability grouping, not least ability grouping across different classes. Some express principled resistance while others simply refer to some of the challenges they have experienced:

I am against ability grouping. But I'm just a substitute, but I would also like to say that some of the students I've talked to personally about ability grouping are in favor of it. So that's why I'm not adamant, that's why I don't intend to start a revolution against ability grouping, but as a teacher I'm fundamentally against it. (S1/G/T2)

We had to stop our original thoughts about ability grouping due to lack of confidence/resistance from the students. (Survey respondent)

Students in the top group were happy, students in the middle group were divided,

students in the bottom group were demotivated and experienced minimal progression. So after a few years we dropped the division of levels into separate groups and now differentiate internally within the classes. (Survey respondent)

Contrary to the “believers”, these teachers argue that the weak students become weaker when ability grouped because they lose role models and “assistant teachers” from the talented students and become demotivated due to the stigmatizing effect that sometimes accompanies ability grouping.

It is also a challenge for very weak students that they do not have more capable peers to look up to/to be their sparring partners. (Survey respondent)

In French, ability grouping (in the 2nd year) had a certain negative effect, as the students took on the mantle of “the bad class” and were more unmotivated, and without “an academic beacon” in the class. (Survey respondent)

The talented students were missing from the class. Also in relation to being copilots for the academically weaker students. (S2/S/T2)

You simply lack a top that is something that some students can mirror themselves on and can say: ‘OK, that’s how you could also do it’ and can be inspired. (S2/S/T1)

Presumably, strong students flourish when they are surrounded only by other strong students. But weak students certainly do not. Theoretically, they should flourish because they would not be inhibited by strong students constantly bidding, but that is just not the case. (Survey respondent)

Therefore, while opponents who have tried ability grouping have experienced that the strongest students can be happy belonging to a strong class, it is not the case for the weakest, and their classes with very weak students have functioned poorly due to irregular attendance, lack of active participation in the class, lack of motivation and other challenges, conditions that raise serious concerns about equity, and the broader social justice goals of education:

The weakest students could quickly figure out that they were at the bottom. When they saw each other for the first time, they quickly agreed that “we are not good at German”. As a result, their motivation and ambition were completely taken away from them, and I never really succeeded in creating a dynamic in the teaching during the two years. (Survey respondent)

All students with diagnoses and those with social challenges ended up in the same class, and that caused problems. (Survey respondent)

Besides, these teachers defy the fairness of screening students and assigning them to particular levels, as they cannot be sure how they will progress in the future, and as students can be good at some aspects of the subject and less at others:

There are some who can manage to progress so much and there are also some of those who would have been on X’s class who would have deserved to have some talented people and mirror themselves on them later, because they just progress later. (S2/S/T1)

That has been one of my arguments against the division of levels, that I actually think it’s good that in German you can experience that there are people who are really good at formulating and saying what they want, and then it may be that their grammar is a bit lacking, but you actually understand what they’re saying, and then there are some people who are insanely good at grammar, but they can’t... put two words together when they have to speak the language. (S2/S/T1)

These teachers point out that the sense of community is destroyed and that the educational effect of being able to collaborate with people who are not like oneself is lost. Besides, some schools experienced dissatisfaction and speculation regarding grades:

We also believe that learning happens in learning communities, so of course the weaker student can easily learn together with the stronger student. (S2/S/T1)

The students who got into the middle group were very concerned that it was cheating. After all, wasn't it better to be a good student in the bottom group than, for example, a bad student in the top group? So they began to speculate about where it was easiest to get the best grade. (Survey respondent)

Finally, they mention that students may feel unsafe when they do not work with students they know, i.e. ability grouping often happens at the expense of social well-being:

They also experience being separated from classmates they worked well with and were happy with. The class's social capital can be endangered because the community is torn apart. (Survey respondent)

The latter is in line with the opinion that students must have a certain "robustness" to be able to handle ability grouping, whether it is internal to the class or across different classes. There is thus an affective cost associated with ability grouping, as there is a risk of (self-)stigmatization:

It would be appropriate to ability group already in 1st grade, but for many fragile students it can seem frightening to be divided by levels at the moment they start their education, and many are afraid that they will be marked very early, and above all before they have integrated into the class. In 2nd grade, most are a bit more robust. (Survey respondent)

In the past, there has sometimes been something about the "loser class". I think it is very, very sad if it happens, and if I hear it being called that, I will address it. But it can also occur internally in a class itself. There are some who see themselves as that. So yes, it is difficult to control, and it is a shame. And that is precisely one of the disadvantages of ability grouping in the way that I do, that something can happen, that is, less self-confidence, that is clear. (S2/G/T2)

Regarding teacher motivation, being assigned to the weak class is not always a desired situation. Ability grouping across classes is mentioned as less time consuming than having to prepare differentiated teaching within the same class and having to keep track of students working on different things, especially if two teachers are involved (one working with each class). This time advantage does not seem to apply to teachers working with the weak classes, though. Several teachers emphasize that it is an enormously difficult pedagogical task to perform successful teaching in the weakest classes, and that the subject matter recedes into the background, which can reduce the teacher's enjoyment of the subject to some extent.

When you remove those who may actually be intrinsically motivated, then the situated motivation also becomes almost impossible to achieve. (S2/S/T1)

One of the opponents believes that, if having the right pedagogical skills, teachers should be able to cope with diversity within the class, thus linking self-efficacy to her stance on ability grouping. Besides, this teacher believes that a certain degree of internal differentiation is necessary even in an ability grouped class:

I don't think we should set up the school system that way. I think that it must be mixed, and we as teachers must be able to accommodate it, and we can. We are skilled at differentiating, i.e. in daily teaching. (S2/S/T1)

But that's just how it is - That's just how I experienced it when I had the weak group in German. So you also have 00's students and 7's students, you can't just teach them the same. (S2/S/T1)

In addition, organizational difficulties are mentioned with both forms of ability grouping, the most frequently mentioned being the scheduling problem that arises in connection with ability grouping across classes, because teaching in the different classes must happen at the same time, and this at times can imply that a teacher is always forced to teach the weakest classes:

The biggest obstacle is scheduling. We typically have 5-6 classes that have lessons at different times. So only 3-4 classes can be divided into levels because they have lessons at the same time, while the other classes have to be run traditionally/mixed. (Survey respondent)

That's why [because of scheduling problems] I've often been the one who had the learners who had the most difficulties. And then last year I had a class that was so unmotivated and so, well, they were killing me, well, that's what it really was, I often thought: "Should I even be a teacher?" And "Is this even possible?" (S2/G/T3)

#### 4.2.3 *The neutral*

The "neutral" position is mainly (but not only) manifested in the leaders of the two schools that participated in the qualitative part of the study. These leaders have adopted a bottom-up approach to ability grouping and accepted the wishes of their teacher group (in both cases, German teachers):

It all started as a request from the German teachers as to whether it was possible to ability group, because they thought there was a very big heterogeneity in the classes and that it was actually difficult to reach all students, and then we in the management thought that well, since it was a wish from the teachers, let's try it. So I think the experiment took a couple of years before it was evaluated for the first time, and it was mostly positive from the teachers and students' perspective, and so we just kept going. And then we've sometimes asked the German teacher group how it's going? Also because there's also someone like John Hattie who comes in and says it's not a good idea to ability group, because you also learn from being a bit on your toes with those you sit and listen to who can say something or do something. (S1/leader)

We don't have a clear strategy on ability grouping. It's very important that it comes from below, so if the teachers want to, we think it's fine to try. I would not want to impose it on all subjects or all students, because if the teacher is not passionate about it, if for example we have a teacher who thinks: "Oh now I have to go down and teach "the bad students". I don't think that's how you should refer to students. (S2/leader)

Even though they allow their teachers to continue ability grouping (in School 1 it has gone on for ten years at the time of the interview), the leaders know the arguments against ability grouping from the literature (cf. the mention of John Hattie) and can personally have doubts about the effect it has on weaker students:

It's not because I have any particular feelings about it or an attitude towards it, but I could also imagine that if you are, if we have 3 levels, and then, okay, I get screened, I'll be a 3. So my approach to the subject is a bit like, well, I'm stupid, or I don't really care, or I'm not good at German, so it might not matter. I could fear that. (S1/leader)

It worked for some students more than others. Yes. But for me it really depends on what the teacher's attitude is. (S2/leader)

The disadvantage can be that you can feel stigmatized. So if the teacher doesn't have, what can you say? The pedagogical flair, the knowledge of the individual student, then I would actually say that it can harm some students more than it benefits them. (S2/leader)

These leaders explain that there is not always consensus in the teacher group regarding ability grouping and that it is an ongoing negotiation whether to continue or not. The fact that not all teachers in a teacher group are equally satisfied with ability grouping (but have to adapt to the collective decision in their school) is also mentioned by some of the teachers:

But the German subject group has actually been quite divided about whether we should, whether we shouldn't and maybe, and then there has also been the fact that there have been quite a few maternity leaves in the German subject group, so it has been a bit of an up and down, and so it hasn't been, what can I say, stable in that way. (S1/leader)

It really depends on the teacher's commitment, so we don't have a set schedule. It's a teacher's request every time, and we do what we can to see if we can accommodate it. (S2/leader)

Right from the start we tried it once, but we also have several colleagues who really don't want to mix [ability group across classes], so it's also a bit difficult. And X and Y are good at mixing and often do something mixed [they take a class each, the strong and the weak class, respectively]. And then there are other colleagues who don't want to be involved. So it's actually not always possible to find someone who will collaborate with me. (S2/G/T1)

Despite having practiced interclass ability grouping for some years, the interviewed leaders admit that they have never done a systematic evaluation of the practice (e.g. by comparing exam results or following the ability group classes closer). They let their teachers decide and they adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude to it:

Leader: I can hardly say whether there was a questionnaire or the German teachers who did the oral evaluation with the classes, I simply can't remember. It's been so long, I think it was a couple of years after we started, so it's really been a long time.

Interviewer: Yes, it's been almost 10 years, it's almost 10 years. But you haven't interfered with how this ability grouping works?

Leader: No, not really. It's actually been the German teachers who have been allowed to say, how they would screen and based on that, how they would divide them. (S1/leader)

## 5 Discussion and Perspectives

It can be concluded that the teachers in the study experience great heterogeneity in their foreign language classes, and many of them believe that some form of ability grouping is necessary to handle the students' wide differences in level, motivation and ambition. This coincides with international studies, both at primary and secondary school and for different kinds of subjects (e.g. Forgasz, 2010; Sweeney & Reid O'Connor, 2024; Mathiesen & Jessen, 2017; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Towers et al., 2019). Also coinciding with other studies (e.g. Kim, 2012; Towers et al., 2019; Özelçi, et al., 2016), the present study shows different beliefs regarding how and to what extent this ability grouping should be implemented, as well as what consequences and social and affective costs

ability grouping has. The most extreme modality of ability grouping, i.e. stable and rigid assignation of students to one class or another based on some kind of level assessment (which in our study is done in different and more or less systematic ways), is the one that creates the most polarized landscape. Some teachers in our study strongly argue that ability grouping should be limited to short periods and confined within a single class, for example, forming groups of similar ability for a specific activity, since this more flexible approach is perceived as less stigmatizing. In contrast, we also identified a group of teachers who are highly committed to the principle of stable, interclass ability grouping and advocate its consistent use.

They see advantages for all implied parties: for both strong and weak students and for the teachers themselves, who feel higher self-efficacy than when working with heterogeneous groups of students in the same class. The teachers who are outspoken opponents, on the other hand, believe that teachers should be skilled enough to deal with difference within a single class, again pointing to self-efficacy issues as being key in the matter. They feel that it is their responsibility to help students work with people of different kinds, including people who are very unlike themselves. This has, according to this group of teachers, a highly educational role and is at the core of how the Danish school system is organized. These teachers are also worried about the socially stigmatizing and self-fulfilling prophecy effect of the practice, which coincides with international concerns and with the principles of inclusive pedagogy (Florian, 2015; O'Rourke, 2013).

A bit surprisingly, the interviewed leaders adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude and rely on their faculty's own impressions and desires. They do not perform systematic evaluations, even when they themselves and their leader colleagues do have some reservations and have discontinued the practice of ability grouping in other subjects, such as Mathematics. A similar account of unclear regulation or institutional stance has been reported in other studies (e.g. Kim, 2012). All in all, the interviewed leaders believe that ability grouping only can succeed if the involved teachers are passionate about it, as this will rub off on the students. This contrasts with Özelçi, et al. (2016) and Towers et al. (2019), where leaders were highly involved in decisions regarding ability-grouping versus mixed-ability teaching and enforced decisions even though some teachers remained unconvinced. One could hypothesize that these differences in leader attitudes could at least partly be explained by more general cultural differences, e.g. as flat hierarchy is a distinguishing feature of Danish society (Jakobsen, 2011). This can lead Danish principals to place trust in their faculty's professional judgment, offering support while exercising only limited oversight and minimal performance monitoring.

In Rasmussen & Fernández (in preparation), which focuses on learners' beliefs in this same study, as well as in Kim (2012), we find a similar polarization among students as among teachers, with different student voices airing some of the same benefits and concerns as their teachers. We find both weaker students who feel stigmatized, and others who enjoy being grouped with equals and not being a burden to others. We find students from "the middle" who feel misplaced, either when they are moved upwards or downwards. Finally, we find strong students for whom it is a relief to escape the role of assistant teachers and others who experience so much competitiveness in a strong class that they miss the regular classes where there used to be more cooperation. Judging by the students' opinions, the decisive factor for success is not always the teacher's passionate attitude, but a series of other more practical factors such as (mis)placement, competition vs. collaboration, the importance of grades, etc. This contrasts with the opinions declared by leaders.

Overall, the findings of this study reveal a markedly polarized perspective among our target group, foreign language teachers in Danish upper secondary schools. While some view ability grouping as an effective response to the increasing heterogeneity of learners, others place confidence in their capacity to differentiate within the classroom, thereby mitigating potential social and cognitive drawbacks associated with ability grouping.

Notably, school leaders in this study adopt a neutral stance, expressing trust in teachers' professional judgment.

Beyond the Danish context, our results contribute to a wider understanding of language teaching in heterogeneous classrooms. The contrasting positions on ability grouping versus within-class differentiation highlight enduring tensions between efficiency and inclusivity, issues that resonate across global debates on communicative language teaching and equity. Scholars and policy bodies stress the need for inclusive pedagogies and structural support to ensure that language education promotes social justice and equal opportunities (UNESCO, 2025). Language learning is particularly sensitive to these dynamics because it involves interaction, identity negotiation, and affective engagement, all of which can be disrupted by rigid grouping practices. By revealing how teacher beliefs and structural conditions shape pedagogical choices, this study underscores the need for systemic support that enables teachers to reconcile differentiation with inclusive principles, a challenge faced in many educational systems worldwide.

Moving forward, further research is needed to clarify the effects of ability grouping, for example on exam outcomes compared to heterogeneous classes, an area that has not yet been systematically explored in Denmark (cf. the interviewed leaders' accounts). At the same time, teachers' reports that lack of preparation time is a key reason for ability grouping resonate with international debates on how structural conditions shape pedagogical choices. Globally, scholars and policy bodies emphasize that adequate support for teachers, through improved working conditions, targeted pre- and in-service training in within-class differentiation, and innovative tools such as AI (Law, 2024; Mollick & Mollick, 2024), is essential for reducing reliance on ability grouping practices. These measures align with broader international agendas that frame inclusion as a central educational goal, aiming to prevent inequities and stigmatization while fostering learning opportunities for all students (OECD, 2012; Florian, 2015).

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