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Original Article

Experiences of Learners in the Context of Group Learning in Selected Primary Schools of Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This study explores learners' experiences with group learning in selected primary schools in Uganda, addressing the growing need for collaborative pedagogical approaches in diverse educational settings. Focused on primary schools in Mityana District, the study's findings are context-specific but offer transferable insights for similar educational contexts. The research highlights the significance of group learning in fostering peer interaction and collaborative problem-solving, which are essential in the context of 21st-century education. Grounded in Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Piaget's Constructivist Theory, this study investigates the benefits and challenges learners face during group activities. A qualitative exploratory case study design was employed, utilising focus group discussions (FGDs), classroom observations, and lesson plan analyses to gather comprehensive insights from learners in both government-aided and private primary schools. The findings reveal that learners value group learning for fostering idea exchange, accelerating problem-solving, enhancing conceptual understanding, boosting confidence, and making learning enjoyable. The formation of mixed-ability and interest-based groups provided opportunities for peer tutoring, aligning with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners benefited from peer support and diverse perspectives. Despite challenges such as passive participation by some members and resource limitations, the study underscores the importance of group learning in promoting active engagement and inclusivity. This study contributes to the body of knowledge by offering empirical insights into how group learning can be effectively implemented in primary education, emphasising its role in enhancing academic performance and social skills development. The findings have implications for educational policy and practice, advocating for structured and inclusive group learning strategies in primary school classrooms.

1161 |

INTRODUCTION

Achieving quality education, as emphasised in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), requires a shift towards innovative teaching practices that enhance learner engagement and foster collaborative learning (UNESCO, 2020). In response to the evolving educational demands of the 21st century, there has been a growing emphasis on interactive, learner-centred pedagogies that move away from traditional teacher-centred approaches. Group learning has emerged as a powerful educational strategy, recognised for its ability to support cognitive, social, and emotional development, and is increasingly incorporated into primary education systems worldwide, including Uganda (Kaendler, Wiedmann, Rummel, & Spada, 2019).

In Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports has endorsed group learning as part of the revised competency-based curriculum aimed at improving educational outcomes (NCDC, 2019). This approach emphasises active learner participation, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving. Despite its inclusion in the curriculum, the implementation of group learning in primary schools remains inconsistent, hindered by challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and traditional classroom practices. Learners' experiences within group learning settings are shaped not only by the strategies teachers use but also by the classroom environment and available resources, making it crucial to explore these dynamics from the learners' perspective.

The roots of group learning can be traced back to the educational philosophies of ancient thinkers like Socrates, who valued dialogue and inquiry as key components of knowledge acquisition (Reiss, 2024). In modern educational theory, Lev Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978) provides a critical framework, emphasising the role of social interactions and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, learners construct knowledge through collaborative activities and interactions with peers who offer the necessary scaffolding. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) complements this by highlighting the importance of observational learning and modelling, suggesting that learners can gain new skills and knowledge through interactions within group settings. Additionally, Jean Piaget's Constructivist Theory (1973) underscores the active role of learners in constructing understanding through engagement in hands-on activities and peer discussions. These theories collectively offer valuable insights into why group learning can be an effective approach for enhancing learner experiences.

Problem Statement

While group learning pedagogy is widely recognised for its potential to enhance learner

engagement, foster academic achievement, and support social skills development, effectively implementing this approach in Ugandan primary schools remains a persistent challenge. Critical implementation gaps include low teacher adherence to structured group formation protocols (observed in less than 30% of classrooms), infrequent monitoring of group interactions (reported in only 22% of lessons), and inconsistent application of collaborative learning principles across subjects (MoES, 2021). The focus of this study is the gap in understanding the learners' experiences and perceptions of group learning, particularly in how they engage with and respond to various group dynamics.

Although Uganda's competency-based curriculum emphasises group learning as a core strategy for active and collaborative education (NCDC, 2019), the practical realities of its implementation have often fallen short. Inconsistencies in facilitation (e.g., 68% of teachers lack training in conflict resolution during group work), insufficient teacher training, and limited classroom resources (less than 15% of schools have adequate small-group learning materials) continue to hinder the full realisation of group learning's benefits (MoES, 2021).

Reports from primary schools in Uganda indicate several issues that affect learners' experiences during group activities. Learners often face challenges related to uneven participation (40% of learners report "rarely" contributing ideas in groups), dominance by certain group members, and inadequate support from teachers during group tasks. The lack of structured guidance and clear role assignments frequently results in imbalanced group interactions, limiting the potential for meaningful peer learning and reducing the inclusivity of the group learning process (Ezumah & Ezumah, 2020). These challenges are compounded by large class sizes (average 1:70 teacher-learner ratio) and resource constraints, which restrict opportunities for effective group engagement.

These issues are not unique to Uganda; similar challenges have been observed globally, where learners struggle with group dynamics and inequities in participation due to a lack of consistent, theory-driven facilitation and supportive classroom practices (Care et al., 2017; Kwarikunda et al., 2022). The limited focus on learners' voices and their experiences with group learning has created a gap in empirical research, preventing educators from fully understanding what makes group activities effective from the learner's perspective.

This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the experiences of learners in the context of group learning in selected primary schools in Uganda.

Objective of the study

The study was done to explore the experiences of learners in the context of group learning in selected primary schools in Uganda.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

Group learning has evolved as a critical pedagogical approach, supported by historical and philosophical foundations emphasising dialogue, social interaction, and collaborative problem-solving. In ancient educational philosophies, figures like Socrates promoted the importance of dialogue and inquiry, highlighting the role of social interaction in fostering deeper understanding (McLeod, 2018). The modern educational landscape has built upon these foundations, with theorists like Vygotsky and Piaget emphasising the value of social interactions and active participation in cognitive development. Vygotsky's focus on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Piaget's emphasis on constructivist, hands-on learning activities have both shaped contemporary group learning practices, underscoring the importance of peer support and collaborative engagement (Eun, 2019; Zajda & Zajda, 2021). Empirical studies further validate these theories; for example, Mercer and Littleton's

(2007) research demonstrates how structured peer dialogue in groups significantly improves problem-solving skills in primary classrooms, aligning with Vygotsky's ZPD framework.

Recent literature suggests that group learning enhances cognitive, social, and emotional development, making it a favoured strategy in primary education (Kaendler et al., 2019). Learners' experiences in group activities are influenced by factors such as group composition, task design, and the facilitation provided by teachers. Mixed-ability grouping, for example, allows for diverse skill sets and perspectives, promoting peer tutoring and collaborative problem-solving (Schmidt et al., 2017). Research by Webb et al. (2019) corroborates this, showing that heterogeneous groups in primary schools lead to greater academic gains for low-achieving students without hindering the high-achievers. However, challenges such as dominance by certain group members and passive participation by others often limit the effectiveness of this approach, indicating a need for structured facilitation and clear role definitions to ensure balanced engagement (Kagan, 2017). Studies like Cohen's (1994) work on "productive group work" emphasise the importance of assigning interdependent roles to mitigate these issues.

Despite its potential, the implementation of group learning in Ugandan primary schools faces significant challenges due to contextual factors such as large class sizes, resource constraints, and traditional teacher-centred approaches (MoES, 2021). Studies indicate that learners often experience frustration with passive participation, unequal contribution, and frequent changes in group composition, which can disrupt group cohesion and reduce the effectiveness of collaborative learning (Oyegoke, 2019). A 2022 study by Naluwemba et al. in Ugandan schools found that 78% of observed group activities lacked clear objectives, exacerbating participation imbalances. Additionally, the lack of adequate learning materials and teacher support further exacerbates

these issues, limiting the quality of learner engagement and the overall success of group activities (Tomlinson, 2018).

Research focusing on learners' perspectives reveals that while many appreciate the interactive and engaging nature of group learning, they also encounter barriers that hinder their experiences. Learners reported enjoying the opportunity to share ideas and learn from peers, aligning with Vygotsky's emphasis on social learning (Vygotsky, 1978). However, the success of these interactions heavily depends on the classroom environment, teacher facilitation, and the availability of resources (Mendoza & Heymann, 2022). For instance, Gillies' (2016) meta-analysis highlights that teacher training in collaborative techniques increases equitable participation by 40%. Addressing these gaps requires a focus on enhancing the conditions that support effective group learning, such as improved teacher training, better resource allocation, and structured group management practices tailored to the needs of diverse learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative exploratory case study design to investigate the experiences of learners within group learning contexts in selected primary schools in Uganda. The qualitative approach was chosen to capture the complex and nuanced perspectives of learners, providing a deeper understanding of how they engage with and respond to group learning activities. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, the methodology emphasised an interpretative approach, focusing on learners' lived experiences and their reflections on collaborative learning processes (Creswell, 2014). Data were collected using a combination of focus group discussions (FGDs), classroom observations, and lesson plan analyses, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the learners' experiences and the contextual factors influencing these interactions.

Participants were purposively selected from both government-aided and private primary schools in Mityana District, a location chosen for its representative blend of urban and rural schools and its typical implementation of Uganda's competency-based curriculum. This district's average class sizes (65:1 teacher-learner ratio) and mixed socioeconomic profiles mirror national education conditions, making it an ideal microcosm for studying group learning challenges (MoES, 2021). The sample included 24 learners (12 per school type), stratified by gender (50% female) and academic performance levels (high, medium, low) to capture diverse perspectives. This approach ensured the study reflected varied educational contexts while maintaining methodological rigour (Gundumogula, 2021).

Data collection instruments (FGD guides, observation checklists, lesson plan analysis templates) underwent a two-stage validation process. First, three educational experts assessed content validity using a 4-point relevance scale (CVI = 0.89). Subsequently, pilot testing was conducted with 8 learners (4 per school type) in a neighboring non-participating school, revealing three key refinements: (1) simplification of FGD question phrasing for child comprehension, (2) addition of visual prompts to observation checklists, and (3) restructuring of lesson plan analysis categories for clearer alignment with competency-based objectives.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data, a method that facilitates the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns and themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts from FGDs and observations were systematically coded, with themes emerging related to learners' engagement, enjoyment, challenges, and preferences in group learning settings. The analysis of lesson plans provided additional context on how group activities were structured and facilitated by teachers, highlighting factors that influenced learner experiences. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from both learners and their guardians, confidentiality was maintained, and participation was entirely voluntary. These measures ensured adherence to ethical research standards, supporting the credibility and integrity of the findings.

This methodological approach, integrating multiple data sources and rigorous analysis, provided a robust foundation for understanding the learners' experiences with group learning in primary schools. It allowed the study to capture the voices of learners, offering valuable insights that can inform improvements in group learning practices and contribute to the development of more effective educational strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Information

The study achieved a 100% response rate, engaging 24 learners from two distinct primary schools in Mityana District: one government-aided primary school (PS1) and one private primary school (PS2). The sample was evenly divided, comprising 12 learners from each school, with equal representation of male and female participants. Learners were organised into four focus groups to facilitate data collection: Male Focus Group Discussion (MFGD) and Female Focus Group Discussion (FFGD) for each school. Specifically, MFGD PS1 #1 and FFGD PS1 #1 represented the government-aided school, while MFGD PS2 #2 and FFGD PS2 #2 represented the private school. This balanced sampling approach ensured comprehensive gender representation and allowed for a deeper exploration of learners' perspectives across diverse educational environments.

Participants were drawn from Primary 5 classes, typically aged between 10 and 14 years, a demographic chosen for its active involvement in group learning activities and ability to provide detailed feedback on their experiences. The inclusion of learners from both government-aided

and private schools allowed the study to capture a broad spectrum of experiences influenced by differences in resource availability, teaching practices, and classroom dynamics. The government-aided school (PS1) offered insights from learners accustomed to traditional, teacher-centred approaches, while the private school (PS2) provided perspectives from learners in relatively resource-rich environments. This demographic diversity enriched the findings, highlighting potential differences in learner engagement and experiences. The equal gender representation in both MFGD and FFGD groups further ensured that the study captured gender-specific insights, enhancing the reliability of the data and providing a strong basis for analysing the effectiveness and challenges of group learning practices in Ugandan primary schools.

Table 1: Demographics of Learners

Government-aided Primary School (PS1)	Category	Sex	School	Class
MFGD PS1 #1	Learner	M	PS 1	Primary 5
FFGD PS1 #1	Learner	F	PS 1	Primary 5
Private Primary School (PS2)				
MFGD PS2 #2	Learner	M	PS 2	Primary 5
FFGD PS2 #2	Learner	F	PS 2	Primary 5

Learners' Experiences of Group Learning

The study explored learners' experiences within group learning settings in selected primary schools in Uganda. Data collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), classroom observations, and lesson plan analyses provided detailed insights into how learners engage with various group learning activities and the dynamics they encounter. The learners reported diverse experiences, reflecting the different strategies used by teachers to organise group activities. Key themes identified included the benefits of peer learning, challenges with unequal participation, and the impact of structured roles within groups. The primary group formation strategies experienced by learners included random grouping, mixed-ability grouping, same-ability grouping, size-determined grouping, temporary grouping, special needs-support grouping, and the use of grouping cards.

Learners' feedback on **random group formation** indicated mixed experiences. While this method promoted inclusivity and allowed for interaction with different classmates, learners noted that it often resulted in uneven group abilities. This imbalance sometimes hindered collaborative efforts, as stronger students tended to dominate discussions, leaving less confident peers disengaged. In contrast, **mixed-ability grouping** was widely appreciated by learners for fostering peer support and enhancing learning opportunities. Many learners reported that working with peers of different abilities allowed them to receive help and learn new problem-solving strategies, aligning with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). However, some learners felt overwhelmed by the pressure to rely on high-performing peers, indicating a need for better teacher facilitation to ensure balanced participation.

Same-ability grouping was perceived positively by learners who valued the opportunity to work with peers at a similar skill level, especially in subjects like Mathematics and English. This strategy allowed learners to focus on specific challenges without feeling outpaced by more advanced classmates. However, learners expressed concerns that this approach limited their exposure to diverse ideas and perspectives, reducing the benefits of collaborative learning. Similarly, experiences with **size-determined group formation** were varied. Learners appreciated smaller group sizes, which made it easier for everyone to contribute, but noted

that overcrowded classrooms often made it difficult for teachers to monitor and support all groups effectively.

Learners reported positive experiences with **temporary group formation**, highlighting the flexibility it provided in aligning groups with specific tasks or learning objectives. This adaptability was particularly effective in engaging learners during project-based activities. However, some learners found the frequent changes in group composition disruptive, making it challenging to build strong, cohesive group relationships. **Special needs-support grouping** was noted for its inclusiveness, as it integrated learners with special educational needs alongside supportive peers. While this approach fostered a sense of belonging, learners recognised gaps in teacher facilitation, as many were unsure how best to support their classmates with diverse needs.

The use of **grouping cards** was well-received by learners, who appreciated the clarity and structure provided by assigned roles such as leader, note-taker, and presenter. This strategy helped to minimise conflicts and ensured that all members had specific responsibilities, promoting equitable participation. However, learners noted that the inconsistent use of grouping cards due to limited resources sometimes diminished their effectiveness. Feedback from FGDs underscored the importance of clear role definitions in enhancing group dynamics and ensuring active engagement from all participants.

Overall, the findings indicate that while learners generally value the collaborative aspects of group learning, challenges such as uneven participation, frequent group changes, and inadequate resources can limit their positive experiences. Learners highlighted the need for better teacher facilitation and structured support to maximize the benefits of group learning. Addressing these challenges through improved training for teachers, consistent use of structured grouping strategies, and adequate resource allocation could enhance the effectiveness

of group learning practices and create a more inclusive and engaging learning environment for primary school learners in Uganda.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of learners participating in group learning activities within selected primary schools in Uganda. Learners encountered a variety of group formation strategies, including random grouping, mixed-ability grouping, same-ability grouping, size-determined grouping, temporary grouping, special needs-support grouping, and the use of grouping cards. These strategies reflect the adaptive approaches taken by teachers to address the diverse needs of learners and the varying classroom environments. Notably, mixed-ability grouping was particularly appreciated by learners, aligning with Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory. This strategy enabled stronger students to support their peers, facilitating cognitive scaffolding and enhancing overall learning outcomes. This finding is consistent with Schmidt et al. (2017), who emphasise the benefits of mixed-ability groups in fostering peer tutoring, especially in resource-limited educational settings like those in Uganda.

Despite the positive aspects reported by learners, the study also identified significant gaps in the consistent application of these group learning strategies. For instance, while same-ability grouping was favoured for its ability to tailor instruction to specific learning needs, learners noted limited opportunities for exposure to diverse ideas and peer learning, echoing the concerns of Care et al. (2017). Additionally, the frequent reliance on random grouping due to time constraints and logistical challenges often led to imbalanced group dynamics, reducing the effectiveness of collaborative learning. These inconsistencies highlight the need for more structured teacher facilitation and training on strategic group management, ensuring that group formation aligns with both cognitive and social learning goals.

Innovative strategies such as the use of grouping cards were well-received by learners for their ability to clarify roles and responsibilities within the group, promoting equitable participation and minimising conflicts. This approach is supported by Piaget's Constructivist Theory, which emphasises active engagement and hands-on learning. However, the study uncovered a significant gap in the availability of resources needed to implement this strategy effectively, with many learners noting inconsistencies due to limited materials. Additionally, while special needs-support grouping was praised for fostering inclusivity, learners and teachers alike reported challenges in adequately supporting peers with diverse needs. This finding aligns with Kwarikunda et al. (2022), who documented similar difficulties faced by educators in providing tailored support for students with disabilities due to limited training and resources.

Recommendations

To strengthen group learning implementation, educational stakeholders should prioritise comprehensive teacher capacity-building initiatives. Professional development programs must move beyond theoretical training to include hands-on coaching in managing diverse group configurations, from mixed-ability clusters to specialised support groupings. Such programs should incorporate micro-teaching sessions with real classroom scenarios, enabling educators to practice conflict resolution techniques, dynamic grouping methods, and differentiated facilitation strategies tailored to learners' evolving needs.

Resource innovation should complement pedagogical improvements. Schools could establish mobile learning stations with tactile materials for kinesthetic group activities, while education ministries might develop open-access digital repositories for collaborative learning templates and monitoring tools. Strategic partnerships with local communities could help repurpose everyday materials into low-cost learning aids, addressing resource gaps creatively. Such interventions would provide the scaffolding necessary for consistent group work implementation across varying school contexts.

Sustainable change requires systemic commitment. Establishing professional learning communities within schools would allow for ongoing reflection and strategy-sharing among teachers, while district-level monitoring frameworks could track implementation fidelity. Parental engagement initiatives should demystify group learning methodologies, fostering home-school alignment. By addressing structural, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions simultaneously, these layered recommendations aim to transform group learning from an occasional activity to a robust driver of educational quality.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the complex realities of group learning through the authentic voices of Ugandan primary school learners. The research reveals how collaborative pedagogies create dynamic spaces for cognitive and social growth, where peer interactions transform abstract concepts into tangible understanding. Learners' narratives demonstrate the profound value of diverse grouping approaches, from mixed-ability collaborations that bridge knowledge gaps to specialised configurations that nurture particular skills. Yet beneath this potential lies a critical tension - between the vibrant possibilities of peer learning and the systemic constraints of overcrowded classrooms, underprepared facilitators, and scarce materials. These findings position group learning not as a simple methodological choice, but as a microcosm of broader educational equity challenges in resource-constrained settings. The study's empirical contribution lies in centring learners' perspectives, offering a ground-level view of how pedagogical theories manifest - or falter - in daily classroom practice. Future research might build on these findings to explore culturally adaptive models of collaborative learning that honour both universal

educational principles and local implementation realities.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

The implications of this study are substantial for policymakers, educational administrators, and teacher educators. The findings suggest a need for policy adjustments that include standardised frameworks for implementing group learning pedagogy, tailored to accommodate the diverse contexts of Ugandan primary schools. Policymakers should consider revising curriculum guidelines to emphasise collaborative learning strategies and provide clear, practical guidance for teachers. Educational administrators are encouraged to allocate resources for classroom materials and integrate technology to support effective group management. Enhancing teachers' capacity to facilitate group learning will not only improve classroom dynamics but also advance broader educational objectives, such as enhanced student engagement and overall academic success.

While this study offers valuable insights into learners' experiences with group learning, additional research is needed to explore the long-term effects of these practices on academic performance and social skills development. Future studies could adopt a longitudinal approach to assess changes in learner outcomes over time, providing more comprehensive evidence of the impact of various group learning methods. Additionally, quantitative research could measure the direct effects of specific grouping strategies on student achievement, while cross-cultural studies may shed light on how different educational environments influence group learning experiences. Addressing these areas will provide a deeper understanding of effective group learning practices, guiding educators and policymakers in optimising teaching strategies across diverse educational settings.

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