



Ability Grouping-Based Student Placement Management in the *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an Program at Senior High School

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ABSTRACT

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This study analyzes student placement management in the *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an program through an ability grouping approach at Islamic Senior High School. *Tahfizh* programs represent strategic efforts to integrate Qur'anic memorization with schooling. However, their effectiveness depends on accurate placement that aligns readiness with program demands. This study used a descriptive qualitative method with a field research design. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with school leaders, coordinators, *Tahfizh* teachers, counselors, homeroom teachers, and students, and documentation analysis. First, the selection process lacked standardized rubrics, written procedures, and comprehensive assessment indicators. Placement relied mainly on a brief Qur'anic reading test. Second, limited *Tahfizh* teacher involvement weakened diagnostic accuracy and procedural transparency. Third, inaccurate placement produced highly heterogeneous classes. Teachers consequently spent considerable time on basic tahsin rather than memorization progression. Approximately half of students failed to achieve annual memorization targets. Several students experienced academic and psychological strain. The study implies that ability grouping requires valid, transparent, and multidimensional placement instruments. It recommends integrating reading rubrics, memorization assessment, motivation interviews, and readiness questionnaires into placement policy.

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INTRODUCTION

The management of student placement in *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an programs is not merely an internal school matter but a broader educational issue with social, moral, and developmental relevance. In many Islamic schools, *Tahfizh* programs are expected to strengthen students' Qur'anic literacy, discipline, self-regulation, and religious identity while still preserving their academic achievement in the

national curriculum. For society, such programs matter because they represent a formal attempt to integrate spiritual formation with modern schooling. However, this integration only works when students are placed in learning groups that match their actual readiness. Research on ability grouping shows that grouping decisions may affect student achievement, teacher support, psychosocial wellbeing, and access to learning opportunities (Feniger et al., 2021; McGillicuddy, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, student placement in *Tahfizh* programs should be treated as a strategic educational decision rather than a routine administrative procedure. If placement is inaccurate, the program may produce instructional inefficiency, student pressure, unequal learning experiences, and weakened institutional accountability.

The general problem underlying this study is the persistent gap between institutional aspirations and the operational quality of student placement in specialized school programs. Ability grouping is often used to create more effective instruction by placing students with relatively similar readiness levels in the same learning environment. Yet, the literature also warns that ability grouping may reproduce inequality, stigmatize learners, and create a psychological burden when placement decisions are not supported by valid assessment and transparent procedures (Feniger et al., 2021; McGillicuddy, 2021; Papachristou et al., 2021). In the context of *Tahfizh* education, this problem becomes more complex because readiness is not limited to cognitive or technical ability. Students must demonstrate Qur'anic reading fluency, memorization capacity, consistency, motivation, and emotional preparedness. Without a comprehensive placement mechanism, schools may enroll students in *Tahfizh* classes based on partial evidence, thereby creating a mismatch between program demands and students' capacities. This mismatch can weaken instructional effectiveness, student well-being, and the program's credibility.

The field phenomenon observed in this study indicates that the placement process for the *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an class remains constrained by limited assessment instruments, weak documentation, and insufficient involvement of *Tahfizh* experts. Student selection relied primarily on a short Qur'anic reading test, without a standardized rubric, systematic assessment of prior memorization, or formal evaluation of motivation and psychological readiness. In addition, *Tahfizh* teachers were not fully involved in the placement decision, even though they were the actors most directly responsible for implementing the program in the classroom. This situation produced a highly heterogeneous class, with students with strong reading and memorization readiness placed alongside those who still needed basic tahsin reinforcement. As a result, teachers were required to divide their instructional time between correcting foundational reading errors and helping students pursue memorization targets. This phenomenon indicates

that placement accuracy is a decisive managerial variable in determining the success of *Tahfizh* learning and program sustainability.

Previous studies on ability grouping have provided important insights into the relationships among grouping practices, learning outcomes, and student experience. Wang et al. (2021), for example, examined the role of teacher support in mediating and moderating the relationship between ability grouping and student performance, suggesting that grouping cannot be evaluated independently from classroom interaction and instructional support. Kanika et al. (2022) showed that different grouping arrangements influence both student achievement and learning experience in collaborative environments, while Lei et al. (2024) demonstrated that grouping can shape computational thinking when combined with shared regulation-supported learning. Other studies have examined grouping through the lens of pedagogy, inclusivity, and classroom perception (Harrison, 2023; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021). These studies suggest that ability grouping can be pedagogically useful, but only when it is implemented through careful diagnosis, appropriate instructional design, and sustained teacher support. Thus, grouping is not effective by definition; its value depends on how students are identified, placed, supported, and evaluated.

Another stream of literature has emphasized the risks and limitations of grouping practices. Feniger et al. (2021) argued that ability grouping may function as a mechanism through which social advantage is secured in selective educational pathways. Neumann (2021) showed how datafication processes can shape grouping decisions in secondary schools, raising questions about how numbers and records define student ability. Von Hippel and Canedo (2021) further problematized bias in early ability-group placement, while McGillicuddy (2021) highlighted the psychosocial consequences of grouping for children's friendships and well-being. At the same time, studies on Islamic education and *Tahfizh* management have examined Qur'anic learning leadership, tahsin methods, memorization programs, and Islamic educational management (Habibah, 2021; Mappanyompa & Hidayatussaliki, 2021; Rohaeti et al., 2021; Sabiq, 2021; Salim & Hasanah, 2021). However, these bodies of literature remain insufficiently connected. Existing studies rarely examine how ability grouping, student placement management, and the effectiveness of *Tahfizh* programs interact within a single institutional process.

The novelty of this study lies in positioning ability grouping not simply as an instructional arrangement, but as a student placement management strategy within a formal *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an program. Unlike previous studies that primarily discuss grouping in general education, collaborative learning, or algorithmic recommendation systems (Guo et al., 2022; Lechuga & Doroudi, 2022), this study examines grouping as part of a broader managerial cycle that includes selection, documentation, stakeholder involvement, classroom

implementation, and program evaluation. This perspective is important because *Tahfizh* learning requires a distinctive combination of technical Qur'anic competence, memorization stamina, spiritual commitment, and psychological readiness. Therefore, the placement of students in *Tahfizh* classes should not depend solely on reading fluency but also on multidimensional readiness indicators. By connecting ability grouping literature with *Tahfizh* program management, this study offers a more contextual understanding of how Islamic schools can design fairer, more transparent, and more pedagogically effective placement systems.

Accordingly, the research problem addressed in this study concerns how ability grouping-based student placement is implemented in the *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an program and how its implementation affects learning effectiveness, student experience, and program success. The central argument is that the effectiveness of a *Tahfizh* program is strongly shaped by the accuracy and accountability of its placement system. When placement is based on limited assessment, weak coordination, and insufficient documentation, ability grouping loses its pedagogical function. It may instead generate classroom heterogeneity, teacher overload, student strain, and uneven memorization outcomes. Conversely, when placement is grounded in valid diagnosis, expert involvement, transparent criteria, and continuous evaluation, ability grouping can become a strategic tool for differentiated instruction and quality assurance. This study therefore contributes to Islamic education management by demonstrating that student placement is not a preliminary technical step, but a core managerial mechanism that determines whether the *Tahfizh* program can achieve its intended educational outcomes.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design grounded in field research to examine the management of student placement in the *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an program as a naturally occurring educational practice within its real institutional context. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because the study aimed not merely to measure placement outcomes, but to understand how ability grouping was conceptualized, implemented, negotiated, and experienced by school stakeholders. In line with qualitative inquiry, the research emphasized contextual depth, participant perspectives, and the interpretation of meaning within a specific educational setting (Harvey, 2021; Irgil et al., 2021).

The research was conducted at SMA Islam Al Azhar 1, Kebayoran Baru, Jakarta, during the 2024/2025 academic year. This site was purposively selected because it represents a prominent Islamic senior high school in Indonesia that formally implements a *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an program through a dedicated *Tahfizh* class. The school's structured placement mechanism, institutional support, and integration of Qur'anic memorization into the formal school system made it a

relevant and information-rich setting for examining ability-grouping-based student placement management. Such purposive site selection is consistent with the logic of qualitative research, which prioritizes cases that yield rich, relevant, and analytically meaningful data (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Bouncken et al., 2026).

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation study. Participant observation was conducted during the student selection, placement, and *Tahfizh* learning processes to capture the practical dynamics of grouping and classroom implementation. In-depth interviews were conducted with the school principal, religious affairs coordinator, curriculum coordinator, *Tahfizh* teachers, guidance counselor, homeroom teachers, and selected students from Class X-1 in the *Tahfizh* class. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in policy formulation, student placement, instructional delivery, counseling, or learning participation. A documentation study was also conducted by examining school policies, administrative records, placement criteria, selection documents, and *Tahfizh* program-related materials to complement and verify the interview and observational data.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, which were conducted simultaneously and iteratively throughout the research process (Li & Zhang, 2022; Monaro et al., 2022). The analysis began by organizing field notes, interview transcripts, and documents, then reduced and coded the data into thematic categories such as placement criteria, ability grouping mechanisms, selection constraints, institutional considerations, and student perceptions. The data were then displayed in thematic narratives and categorical matrices to identify patterns, relationships, and inconsistencies across sources. To enhance trustworthiness, the study employed triangulation of techniques, sources, and members, as well as peer debriefing with Islamic education experts, following established principles of credibility in qualitative research (Morgan, 2024). These procedures enabled the researcher to compare data from observations, interviews, and documents, and to cross-check information from school leaders, teachers, counselors, homeroom teachers, and students before concluding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Weaknesses in the Selection and Placement Process

The first field finding refers operationally to the absence of a standardized, comprehensive, and accountable mechanism for selecting and placing students in the *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an class. In this study, weaknesses in the selection and placement process are understood as institutional limitations in determining students' readiness based on valid indicators, including Qur'anic reading

proficiency, prior memorization, motivation, psychological readiness, and commitment to sustained memorization. The placement process was not yet supported by an agreed assessment rubric, written standard operating procedures, individual assessment records, or transparent communication mechanisms for students and parents. Consequently, student placement tended to rely on a brief Qur'anic reading test rather than a multidimensional assessment of student ability and readiness.

Table 1. Stakeholder Perspectives on the Weaknesses of Student Selection and Placement

Informant Position	Condensed Interview Excerpt	Indicator
School Principal	The <i>Tahfizh</i> program has not yet functioned as the school's primary flagship program because institutional attention remains concentrated on national academic achievement; therefore, the time allocated for selection and learning is limited.	School policy orientation and time allocation
Religious Affairs Coordinator	The placement process was conducted rapidly, with limited coordination and insufficient transparency. The final placement meeting did not involve <i>Tahfizh</i> teachers or the religious affairs coordinator.	Transparency, accountability, and coordination
<i>Tahfizh</i> Teacher	The selection result was not fully satisfactory; approximately 60% of students met expectations, while the remaining students showed weak reading proficiency and limited motivation to memorize.	Expert teacher involvement and placement accuracy
Guidance Counselor	Some students experienced psychological pressure because their placement in the <i>Tahfizh</i> class was influenced more by parental expectations than by their own intrinsic motivation.	Psychological readiness and intrinsic motivation
Student	Some students felt disappointed for not being selected despite believing that they had sufficient ability, while they did not receive clear information about the reasons for their non-selection.	Fairness and openness of information

The interview data in Table 1 indicate that the selection and placement process was constrained by two interrelated issues: weak assessment instrumentation and weak stakeholder involvement. The principal's statement shows that the *Tahfizh* program was institutionally recognized, but it had not yet been positioned as a strategic priority on par with academic achievement. This policy orientation affected the amount of time, attention, and managerial resources allocated to the selection process. As a result, placement was treated more as an annual administrative routine than as a critical pedagogical decision that would shape the effectiveness of the *Tahfizh* learning process throughout the academic year.

The perspectives of the religious affairs coordinator, *Tahfizh* teacher,

guidance counselor, and students further reveal that the selection process lacked procedural transparency and substantive validity. The limited involvement of *Tahfizh* teachers reduced the accuracy of ability diagnosis, as students' Qur'anic proficiency was partly assessed by general religious education teachers rather than specialized *Tahfizh* instructors. The absence of psychological and motivational assessment also created a risk of placing students who were technically capable but not mentally prepared, or students who were externally pressured into joining the class. From the students' perspective, the lack of explanation regarding placement decisions weakened perceptions of fairness and institutional accountability.

The data show that the core weakness of the placement system lies not only in the technical absence of a rubric, but also in the broader managerial gap between program ambition and selection infrastructure. The school aimed to organize a specialized *Tahfizh* class, yet the selection mechanism did not sufficiently measure the specific competencies and dispositions required for success in such a class. The lack of systematic assessment, documentation, and communication made it difficult to ensure that selected students were placed based on demonstrable readiness rather than on partial information.

The pattern emerging from the data is a chain of institutional under-preparation. Limited policy prioritization led to limited selection time; limited selection time encouraged simplified assessment; simplified assessment reduced placement accuracy; and weak documentation reduced transparency and accountability. Thus, the weakness in student placement was not an isolated procedural problem, but a structural issue involving policy orientation, expert involvement, assessment design, and communication with stakeholders.

Challenges of Heterogeneity in Learning

The instructional and psychological challenges that emerged when students with substantially different Qur'anic reading ability, memorization readiness, motivation, and emotional capacity were placed in the same *Tahfizh* class. Heterogeneity in this context does not merely refer to normal individual differences among learners, but to a wide gap between the expected entry profile of *Tahfizh* students and the actual readiness of students placed in the class. This gap produced instructional inefficiency because teachers had to divide their attention between basic tahsin correction and the intended *Tahfizh* targets. It also created psychological pressure on students who were not sufficiently prepared to meet the program's memorization demands.

Table 2. Stakeholder Perspectives on Heterogeneity Challenges in *Tahfizh* Learning

Informant Position	Condensed Interview Excerpt	Indicator
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Tahfiz Teacher	Only about half of the students achieved the memorization targets for Juz 29 and Juz 30 because the class was too heterogeneous; instructional time was often spent correcting basic reading errors among students who were not yet fluent in hijaiyah pronunciation.	Memorization achievement and instructional effectiveness
Guidance Counselor	Some students experienced emotional pressure and psychological burden because they felt uncomfortable or were placed in the <i>Tahfiz</i> class without sufficient mental readiness.	Psychological well-being and emotional resilience
Homeroom Teacher	Students' concentration in general academic subjects decreased because their energy and attention were heavily absorbed by the demand to pursue memorization targets.	Integration of academic and spiritual learning load
Student	Some students felt burdened by high expectations and perceived that the learning facilities or support in the <i>Tahfiz</i> class were not always sufficient, which contributed to fatigue and burnout.	Intrinsic motivation and learning environment perception

The interview with the *Tahfiz* teacher shows that heterogeneity had a direct impact on instructional effectiveness. When students with strong Qur'anic reading skills were placed together with students who still struggled with basic hijaiyah pronunciation, the teacher could not move the class uniformly toward memorization targets. A significant portion of instructional time had to be redirected to tahsin remediation, causing the *Tahfiz* process to slow down. This explains why only around half of the students were able to complete the expected memorization targets of Juz 29 and Juz 30 within one academic year. The issue, therefore, was not simply student underperformance, but a mismatch between placement accuracy and instructional design.

The guidance counselor, homeroom teacher, and students revealed that heterogeneity also produced emotional and academic consequences. Students who entered the *Tahfiz* class because of external pressure rather than intrinsic motivation tended to experience anxiety, fatigue, and reduced learning comfort. At the same time, the homeroom teacher observed that the pressure to meet memorization targets affected students' concentration in general subjects. This suggests that the *Tahfiz* class created a dual-load situation: students were required to maintain academic performance while simultaneously pursuing intensive memorization targets. For students who were not adequately prepared, this dual demand became a source of role strain rather than spiritual-academic enrichment. The flow of the sub-theme can be described as follows:

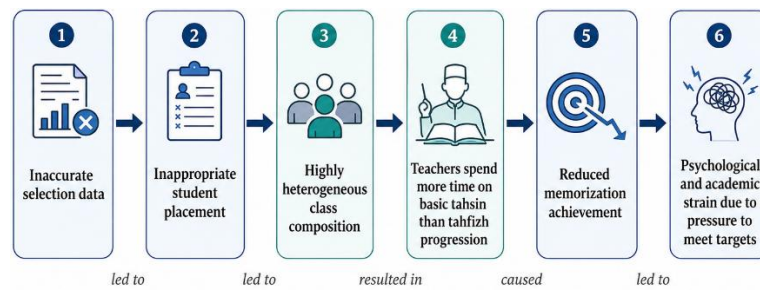


Figure 1. Causal Flow of Heterogeneity Challenges in *Tahfizh* Learning

Figure 1 indicates that heterogeneity was not the initial problem but rather a consequence of weak placement diagnosis. In other words, classroom diversity became problematic because it was not supported by differentiated instructional planning, diagnostic assessment, or mobility mechanisms.

Observation of the *Tahfizh* learning process supported these interview findings. Students in the same class displayed unequal levels of reading fluency, memorization speed, confidence, and learning independence. Some students were ready to proceed with memorization, while others still required intensive correction in pronunciation and reading accuracy. The teacher's attention was therefore fragmented between students who needed basic remediation and students who were ready for memorization acceleration. This instructional imbalance reduced the efficiency of classroom management and limited the teacher's ability to maintain a consistent pace of learning.

The data show that the main challenge in the *Tahfizh* class was not heterogeneity itself, but unmanaged heterogeneity. A certain degree of learner diversity is common in educational settings; however, in this case, the gap between students was too wide to be addressed through ordinary classroom teaching. The absence of accurate placement data and differentiated learning pathways meant that students with different readiness levels were expected to achieve the same targets within the same timeframe. This created pressure on teachers and students simultaneously.

The pattern that emerges from the data is a cascading effect. Weak selection produced inaccurate grouping; inaccurate grouping produced instructional overload; instructional overload reduced memorization achievement; and reduced achievement generated emotional and academic pressure. The table confirms that each informant observed the same phenomenon from a different angle: the *Tahfizh* teacher saw it as a problem of learning effectiveness, the guidance counselor saw it as a psychological issue, the homeroom teacher saw it as an academic load issue, and students experienced it as fatigue and a burden. Therefore, the heterogeneity challenge should be interpreted as a systemic consequence of placement weakness, not merely as a classroom management problem.

Strategic Impact of Placement on Program Success

Strategic role of student placement as a determining variable in the overall success of the *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an program. In this study, the strategic impact of placement is understood as the extent to which placement accuracy influences instructional effectiveness, student achievement, program evaluation, managerial decision-making, and institutional goal attainment. The data indicate that placement was not merely a technical entry-stage activity, but a managerial foundation that shaped the quality of the entire program. When placement was inaccurate, the consequences extended beyond classroom learning to include target failure, psychological pressure, weak program evaluation, and a gap between institutional vision and operational reality.

Table 3. Stakeholder Perspectives on the Strategic Role of Placement in *Tahfizh* Program Success

Informant Position	Condensed Interview Excerpt	Indicator
School Principal	The <i>Tahfizh</i> program planning remains largely annual and reactive; it needs to move toward a more strategic, outcome-oriented model to support the school's broader vision.	Strategic planning and transformational leadership
<i>Tahfizh</i> Team / <i>Tahfizh</i> Teacher	Accurate placement is a key variable in determining learning success because teachers can provide differentiated guidance more effectively when student groups are relatively homogeneous.	Instructional differentiation and learning effectiveness
Curriculum Coordinator / Management	The absence of an annual evaluation meeting causes the placement system to remain static, with limited improvement based on previous experience or data.	Systemic evaluation and quality management
Homeroom Teacher	Misplacement creates role conflict because students' energy is absorbed by memorization demands, reducing their concentration on general academic subjects.	Curriculum integration and academic-spiritual load balance
Religious Affairs Coordinator	There is no clear mechanism for moving students between groups based on periodic progress, so students who are misplaced at the beginning tend to remain in the same condition until the end of the year.	Vertical mobility and progress-based regrouping

Table 3 indicates that placement accuracy functions as a strategic control point within the *Tahfizh* program. The principal's perspective shows that program planning had not yet fully shifted from routine administration to outcome-oriented management. This is significant because a *Tahfizh* program

with formal institutional targets requires systematic planning, valid student diagnosis, periodic monitoring, and evidence-based adjustment. Without these elements, the school's commitment to producing graduates with Qur'anic memorization competence may remain normative rather than operationally measurable.

The *Tahfizh* teachers' perspective strengthens this interpretation by showing that accurate placement directly affects instructional feasibility. When comparable levels of readiness are present, group students and teachers can provide differentiated guidance, set realistic memorization targets, and manage learning time more effectively. Conversely, inaccurate placement forces teachers to address remedial reading, motivation issues, and accelerated memorization within the same instructional space. This reduces the effectiveness of ability grouping as a pedagogical strategy. Therefore, the success of the *Tahfizh* program depends not only on teacher competence and student discipline, but also on the accuracy of the placement system's management.

A deeper critical interpretation of the table reveals a gap between formal program commitment and quality assurance practice. The curriculum coordinator's statement about the absence of annual evaluation meetings suggests that the placement system was not yet supported by a continuous improvement cycle. The homeroom teacher's observation about role conflict shows that placement decisions affected students' broader academic functioning, not only their memorization outcomes. Meanwhile, the absence of vertical mobility indicates that the system lacked flexibility. Students who were misplaced at the beginning of the year had limited opportunity to move into a more suitable group based on progress, readiness, or learning needs. This made the placement decision overly rigid and increased the long-term impact of initial misclassification.

Observation of program implementation confirmed that evaluation mechanisms were still limited. Student progress was mainly recorded in memorization report books, but these records did not adequately capture the quality of Qur'anic reading, memorization consistency, motivational development, or psychological readiness. There was no clear evidence of a longitudinal student database to inform future placement decisions. The absence of structured review meetings also meant that lessons from previous cohorts were not systematically converted into policy improvements. This suggests that the program had monitoring instruments, but not yet a fully developed quality assurance system.

Placement accuracy is the managerial foundation of the *Tahfizh* program. If placement is weak, the entire program becomes vulnerable: teachers face instructional overload, students experience pressure, memorization targets

become difficult to achieve, and institutional evaluation lacks sufficient evidence for improvement. Therefore, placement should not be understood as a one-time administrative activity at the beginning of the academic year. It should be treated as a strategic management process that includes diagnostic assessment, stakeholder deliberation, documentation, monitoring, evaluation, and progress-based regrouping.

The pattern emerging from the data is a misalignment between institutional aspiration and operational mechanism. The school has a formal commitment to *Tahfizh* achievement, but strategic planning, systematic evaluation, longitudinal data, and mobility mechanisms have not fully supported its placement system. This misalignment creates a recurring cycle: placement is conducted annually, weaknesses reappear in the classroom, learning outcomes remain uneven, and evaluation does not sufficiently transform the next cycle of placement. As a result, program success depends heavily on teacher adaptation rather than on a robust institutional system.

The table further suggests that the ideal influence of placement should be strategic, instructional, evaluative, and developmental. Strategically, placement should translate the school's vision into measurable student grouping decisions. Instructionally, it should enable teachers to match methods and targets with student readiness. Evaluatively, it should generate data for annual review and quality improvement. Developmentally, it should provide room for student mobility based on periodic progress. However, the existing system had not yet fulfilled these functions optimally. This finding indicates that strengthening placement management is essential to transforming the *Tahfizh* program from a routine institutional activity into an evidence-based, outcome-oriented educational program.

The three findings demonstrate a coherent pattern. Weak selection instruments and limited stakeholder involvement produced inaccurate placement; inaccurate placement generated unmanaged classroom heterogeneity; and unmanaged heterogeneity weakened the strategic achievement of the *Tahfizh* program. This pattern confirms that ability grouping can support student placement only when it is implemented through a valid, transparent, and continuously evaluated management system. In the absence of such a system, ability grouping risks functioning as a formal classification mechanism rather than a pedagogically and managerially effective one.

Discussion

The first finding, namely weaknesses in the selection and placement process, is consistent with the literature, which shows that ability grouping becomes problematic when it is not supported by valid diagnostic procedures

and transparent decision-making. Studies on grouping practices have shown that placement may influence access, achievement, and long-term educational trajectories, particularly when the criteria used to classify students are narrow or insufficiently scrutinized (Feniger et al., 2021; Neumann, 2021; von Hippel & Canedo, 2021). In this study, the reliance on a short Qur'anic reading test, without a standardized rubric, prior memorization assessment, psychological screening, or written documentation, indicates that the school had not yet developed a comprehensive placement architecture. This finding extends existing literature by showing that in *Tahfizh* education, placement validity cannot be reduced to technical reading fluency alone. It must also include memorization readiness, spiritual commitment, motivation, and emotional capacity. Theoretically, this finding expands ability grouping discourse into Islamic education management. In practice, it implies that schools need a formal placement instrument and a stakeholder-based decision-making mechanism.

The second finding, concerning unmanaged heterogeneity in the *Tahfizh* classroom, supports previous studies which argue that the effectiveness of grouping depends on instructional alignment and teacher support. Wang et al. (2021) emphasized the role of teacher support in shaping the relationship between ability grouping and student performance, while Kanika et al. (2022) and Lei et al. (2024) showed that grouping arrangements influence both achievement and learning experience. The present study confirms this logic in a *Tahfizh* context. When students with very different levels of Qur'anic reading ability and memorization readiness were grouped, teachers had to devote substantial time to basic tahsin rather than *Tahfizh* progression. This instructional redirection reduced the efficiency of memorization learning and contributed to uneven target achievement. The finding differs from studies that view grouping primarily as a classroom strategy because it demonstrates that grouping failure may originate before instruction begins, namely in the selection and placement stage. Thus, the practical implication is that *Tahfizh* teachers require differentiated pathways, remedial tahsin groups, and periodic regrouping mechanisms.

The psychological and academic strain experienced by students also resonates with studies that critique the social and emotional consequences of ability grouping. McGillicuddy (2021) showed that grouping may affect children's friendships and psychosocial wellbeing, while Papachristou et al. (2021) linked ability grouping to behavioral trajectories across childhood and adolescence. Reinholz and Ridgway (2021) further remind educators that learning systems should center access needs rather than force students to adjust to rigid institutional norms. The present study contributes to this discussion by showing that the emotional burden in *Tahfizh* classes arises not only from peer

comparison but also from the moral weight of Qur'anic memorization, parental expectations, and the pressure to meet institutional targets. This is a distinctive contribution because *Tahfizh* learning carries spiritual meaning that may intensify students' sense of responsibility and failure. The practical implication is that placement management must include counseling input, motivational assessment, and continuous monitoring of student wellbeing, not only memorization records.

The third finding demonstrates that student placement has strategic implications for the success of the entire *Tahfizh* program. This finding aligns with Islamic education management studies emphasizing the importance of principal leadership, structured Qur'anic learning management, and institutional commitment in developing *Tahfizh* programs (Rohaeti et al., 2021; Salim & Hasanah, 2021). Studies on the implementation of *Tahfizh* and tahsin methods have also shown that program success depends on systematic learning methods, teacher guidance, and consistent institutional support (Habibah, 2021; Mappanyompa & Hidayatussaliki, 2021; Sabiq, 2021). However, the present study adds a more specific managerial insight: even when a *Tahfizh* program has formal targets, its success may remain fragile if placement is treated as an annual administrative routine rather than a strategic quality assurance mechanism. The absence of annual evaluation meetings, longitudinal student data, and vertical mobility between groups shows that the program lacked a continuous improvement cycle. Therefore, placement should function as a managerial control point that connects selection, instruction, monitoring, evaluation, and curriculum adjustment.

Taken together, the findings advance a new understanding of ability grouping-based student placement management in *Tahfizh* education. Existing studies have examined grouping in relation to social stratification, classroom pedagogy, teacher perceptions, student performance, inclusivity, and data-driven grouping systems (Donelan & Kear, 2023; Guo et al., 2022; Harrison, 2023; Herrmann & Bach, 2025; Lechuga & Doroudi, 2022; Wilkinson & Penney, 2021). This study shows that in a *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an program, ability grouping is effective only when embedded in an integrated management system. Its novelty lies in identifying a causal chain from weak selection instruments to inaccurate placement, unmanaged heterogeneity, instructional inefficiency, reduced memorization achievement, and psychological-academic strain. The theoretical impact is the extension of ability grouping theory into religious program management, while the practical impact is the development of a placement logic that is diagnostic, transparent, flexible, and evaluative. This study therefore offers a model for transforming *Tahfizh* placement from a static classification process into an evidence-based strategy for program improvement.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the central lesson from the management of student placement in the *Tahfizh* Al-Qur'an program is that ability grouping can only function effectively when supported by accurate, transparent, and multidimensional assessment. The most important finding is that weaknesses in the initial selection process particularly the absence of standardized rubrics, limited *tahfizh* teacher involvement, lack of documentation, and insufficient assessment of motivation and psychological readiness created inaccurate placement, highly heterogeneous classrooms, instructional inefficiency, uneven memorization achievement, and academic-psychological strain among students. The scholarly contribution of this study lies in repositioning student placement from a routine administrative activity into a strategic management mechanism that determines the quality, fairness, and sustainability of *tahfizh* education. By connecting ability grouping, placement management, and Islamic education program effectiveness, this study offers a more contextual framework for designing student-centered *tahfizh* placement systems. Nevertheless, this research is limited to a single institutional case and relies on qualitative data from one academic setting. Future studies should involve multiple Islamic schools, compare different *tahfizh* placement models, and develop validated assessment instruments for measuring Qur'anic reading ability, memorization readiness, motivation, and psychological preparedness.

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