

Ability Grouping

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information on
timely topics

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What is ability grouping?

Researchers have struggled for decades to find answers to questions about ability grouping: Does anyone benefit from it? Is anyone harmed by it? Who benefits (or is harmed) the most? Why? Are there alternatives to ability grouping? The answers are not always clear-cut and often depend on whom you ask and what learning outcomes are deemed important. To many educators, ability grouping is considered a sensible response to academic diversity. To others, the practice has harmful unintended consequences and should be abandoned. Indeed, research, logic, and emotion often clash when debating the topic of ability grouping. But what do we really know? This issue of the *Balanced View* takes a close look at the research evidence and attempts to make sense out of this nearly century long debate. We begin our discussion with a clarification of terms.

Ability grouping, simply put, is the practice of dividing students for instruction on the basis of their perceived capacities for learning. The two most common forms of ability grouping are

- ❖ **within-class grouping**, which refers to a teacher's practice of dividing students of similar ability into small groups, usually for reading or math instruction, and
- ❖ **between-class grouping**, which refers to a school's practice of separating students into different classes, courses, or course sequences—curricular tracks—based on their achievement.

Students in classes grouped by ability are said to be **homogeneously** grouped. Conversely, students in mixed-ability classes are said to be **heterogeneously** grouped.

The term *tracking* historically referred to the practice of grouping high school students by ability into a *series of courses* with differentiated curriculum. Students took all high, middle, or low-level classes, labeled college preparatory, general, or vocational, and rarely moved between them. Although this type of tracking has declined in recent years, many researchers still use the term to describe various forms of between-class grouping.

How prevalent is ability grouping?

Within-class ability grouping is nearly universal at the elementary grades, particularly for reading instruction. Two or three reading groups are typical, with each group working on different materials unique to their needs and abilities.

Between-class ability grouping can also be found in elementary schools. In some schools, for example, students from the same grade level, or across grade levels, may be grouped by ability for reading or math instruction. For all other subjects, students are instructed in mixed-ability groups. Schools may also have special remedial classes for low achievers and enrichment courses for gifted and talented students.

Between-class grouping is by far the most common type of ability grouping in secondary schools, although forms of within-class grouping are occasionally seen. Studies show that by 7th grade, two-thirds of all middle school students are grouped into differentiated courses for some or all subjects, with about a fifth grouped homogeneously in every subject. The prevalence of between-class grouping, moreover, increases when there are sizable enrollments of black and Hispanic students.

At the high school level, over 80 percent of the schools offer a hierarchy of courses tailored to different abilities. But unlike the tracking practices of 30 years ago, most schools allow students to choose their courses provided prerequisites have been met. For example, a student might take honors English and general math. Only 14 percent of all high schools offer heterogeneous classes in all subjects.

What do people say about ability grouping?

Proponents of ability grouping say that the practice increases student achievement by allowing teachers to better tailor the pace and content of instruction to students' needs. For example, teachers can provide more repetition and reinforcement to low-achieving students, and an advanced level of instruction to high achievers. Defenders also argue that

- ❖ it is easier for teachers to teach and manage homogeneous classes,
- ❖ low-achieving students feel more comfortable and par-

ticipate more when they are grouped with peers of similar ability, and

- ❖ high-achieving students maintain interest and incentive in homogeneous groups, but languish when grouped with slower learners.

In support of their position, advocates point to the wide range of achievement within classes, which can be several grade levels. They say that with such widely divergent aptitudes, it is unrealistic to expect all students to master the same curriculum as would be the case in a mixed-ability class.

Opponents, however, contend that ability grouping not only fails to benefit any student, it also channels poor and minority students to low tracks where they receive a lower quality of instruction than other groups. This, they claim, contributes to a widening of the achievement gap. Critics also make the case that

- ❖ the criteria used to group students is based on subjective perceptions and narrow views of intelligence,
- ❖ students in low-achieving groups are often taught by teachers who are less experienced or capable,
- ❖ students in low-achieving groups need the presence of brighter students to stimulate and encourage them, and
- ❖ students take on labels that stay when they are grouped by ability; for those in lower-achieving groups, labels may communicate self-fulfilling low expectations for learning.

Harsher critics of ability grouping say that it is just another form of racial segregation, for when students are

divided on the basis of ability they are also divided by race and economics.

Several prominent groups have called for an end to ability grouping including the National Governor's Association, the College Board, the National Education Association, and the ACLU. Yet, surveys show solid support for the practice among many parents. Teachers, on the other hand, are far from united on the topic. For most, the crux of the problem is how best to give low-performing students the extra help they need without dampening the interest and progress of brighter students.

What does research say?

The research on ability grouping, particularly its effect on achievement, is quite extensive. Several meta-analyses and research syntheses have been conducted, and a number of literature reviews have been published. The results of these reviews could easily make one skeptical about educational research—there is something to please everyone. Still, there are areas of consensus, which we highlight below. We begin by summarizing the impact of ability grouping on academic achievement and then examine evidence on three other topics: instructional differences among ability groups, equity and ability grouping, and school detracking efforts.

Achievement

In general, the research suggests that the effects of ability grouping

on student achievement depend on the type of grouping arrangement.

- ❖ **Within-class ability grouping** consistently produces larger gains than mixed ability grouping especially in mathematics and in the upper elementary grades. The positive effects are slightly greater for low-achieving students than for average or high achievers.
- ❖ **Cross-grade ability grouping** (where students are regrouped for reading or math instruction across grade levels) and **non-graded plans** (where children are divided by performance rather than age) also produce greater gains in reading and mathematics than mixed-ability groups. Students of all achievement levels appear to benefit equally from these arrangements.
- ❖ **Between-class ability grouping**, where students spend most of the day in “high,” “middle,” or “low” classes and use the *same or similar curricula*, **do not** result in any achievement benefits; the ability-grouped students learn the same amount as students in mixed ability classes.
- ❖ **Between-class ability grouping**, where students spend most of the day in ability tracks and use *curricula substantially adjusted to their ability levels*, yields consistently positive effects for **high-track** students. For students in lower tracks, however, there is no appreciable effect on achievement, positive or negative. The end result of this differential impact is a widening of the achievement gap between high and low achievers. The magnitude of

this gap, moreover, has been found to be greater than the achievement difference between students who stay in school and those who drop out.

- ❖ **Between-class grouping for particular subjects** such as reading or mathematics, can produce greater achievement gains than mixed-ability groups if the level and pace of instruction are adapted to students’ needs, and students are not regrouped for more than two subjects. These benefits, however, have only been observed for elementary school students; at the high school level, the findings are more equivocal.

Instruction

The results of studies examining the quality of instruction in ability groups basically confirm what critics of ability grouping argue. Namely, classroom instruction is not just different in high-level classes compared with low-level classes, it is better. This qualitative edge, moreover, has been shown to contribute to achievement differences between ability groups and a widening of the achievement gap. Specifically, studies have documented the following:

- ❖ Instruction in low-track classes is more often fragmented, emphasizing isolated bits of information rather than sustained inquiry. By contrast, instruction in high-ability classes is more often characterized by *coherence*: teachers regularly interweave reading, writing, and discussion to help students relate topics and to reinforce and build upon previous learning.

- ❖ Students in lower tracks spend more time completing worksheets and reading textbooks, while students in upper tracks are more likely to participate in hands-on, active learning.
- ❖ More off-task behavior occurs in low-ability classes. Teachers spend more time on discipline and less time on instruction.
- ❖ Students in low-ability classes spend less time on homework.

Some researchers say that achievement inequalities between high- and low-ability students could be reduced significantly by raising the caliber of instruction in low-level classes. Studies of heavily tracked Catholic high schools, for example, have found these schools to be successful in providing low-track students with a quality education and moving them to higher tracks as quickly as possible.

Equity

Research also corroborates the claim that low-income and minority students are disproportionately represented in lower-ability tracks. The disparities are particularly evident in mathematics and science. For example, a recent National Science Foundation study of high school graduates showed that black and Hispanic graduates were far more likely than white or Asian graduates to have taken general or remedial mathematics courses in high school, and far less likely to have taken advanced math courses such as algebra II, geometry, or calculus. Similarly, black and Hispanic students were more

likely than their white or Asian counterparts to have taken general science courses rather than advanced courses such as chemistry or physics. This gap in course taking—and, ultimately, math/science achievement—is significant considering the strong link between scientific/mathematical literacy and participation in (lucrative) science- and mathematics-related occupations. To this point, only 2 percent of scientists and engineers are black or Hispanic, far lower than the proportion of blacks and Hispanics in the population.

Detracking Efforts

In its simplest form, *detracking* involves the move from homogeneous to heterogeneous groupings. More comprehensive forms of detracking include a fundamental restructuring of school structures, cultural norms, pedagogy, and curriculum. At the classroom level, a completely detracked program might feature integrated or theme-based curricula; cooperative learning groups; team teaching; peer tutoring or cross-grade tutoring; active, hands-on, and contextualized learning; and ability grouping for specific skills instruction.

Not surprisingly, there is limited research on the benefits of detracking, as so few schools are fully detracked. The research that is there suggests that many schools have found it politically difficult to replace tracked courses of study with heterogeneous classes. The greatest concern is that heterogeneous classes might depress the achievement of high-performing students. Some

schools have used “choice-based” enrollment policies as a way of creating heterogeneous classes. Under this arrangement, schools retain their high tracks, but allow all students who wish to enroll in advanced classes to do so. A recently released report, however, suggests that “choice” plans do little to change the composition of high-track classes because poor and minority students do not take advantage of the choice.

Institutional barriers, feelings of inadequacy, and a determination not to leave the “safe space” of lower tracks, all appear to contribute to students’ decisions not to enroll in advanced courses.

These results are timely given that increased minority enrollment in rigorous courses is seen as a strategy for helping to close the achievement gap. Apparently, simply opening up access to high-track courses is not enough to encourage substantial numbers of minorities to take them.

Summary and Implications

Key findings from this research review can be summarized as follows:

- ❖ Within-class and cross-grade ability grouping plans benefit students of all ability levels.
- ❖ Between-class grouping or “tracking” benefits high achievers, provided the tracked classes use enriched curricula.
- ❖ Between-class grouping does not improve the achievement of low-ability students, but neither does it harm their learning.
- ❖ Instruction is qualitatively better in high-ability tracks compared with low-ability tracks.

- ❖ Poor and minority students are disproportionately represented in low-ability tracks.
- ❖ Detracking remains a difficult and controversial process for schools.
- ❖ To date, there is no solid research on whether or not detracking leads to improved student achievement.

For those whose paramount concern is equity, these results make it difficult to justify the continuation of ability grouping: poor and minority students are disproportionately assigned to low tracks where they receive inferior instruction and do not benefit academically. Those concerned with excellence, however, would see these results as validating the practice: high-achieving students benefit from tracking, no one is harmed by it, and some parents would likely transfer their child to another school if high tracks were eliminated.

In short, research cannot conclusively determine whether ability grouping is better or worse than heterogeneous grouping. Nor does it seem that more research and debate will resolve the issue. It appears, then, that decisions about grouping are best left to teachers, parents, and principals working collectively to decide how best to educate students. There probably always will be tracked and untracked schools. The goal should be to promote quality education in both settings.

The *Balanced View* welcomes your comments on this topic. The primary references used are available upon request.