

Ability Grouping Presentation:

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Ability grouping refers to the practice of placing students of similar academic ability level within the same group for instruction, as opposed to placement by age and grade level.

Between-class grouping refers to a school's practice of forming classrooms that contain students of similar ability.

Within-class grouping refers to a teacher's practice of forming groups of students of similar ability within an individual class.

(Ireson & Halem, 2001)

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With ability grouping, students are allocated to groups based on a review of performance data. These allocations are not permanent as students can move into higher level groups if their skill levels increase and lower skill level groups if their skills should fall behind the rest of the class.

The curriculum determines the concepts taught in groups, with teachers usually commencing groups at a level that is acceptable to all students. An increase in difficulty level is then initiated as students demonstrate growing proficiency in the subject matter.

Students in the lower skill level groups are seen to receive the same content as their higher level peers, albeit at a slower and more suitable/manageable pace. This approach, with lower skill level groups, may be coupled with fewer assignments in order to prioritise specific areas of need, individual student errors, and the development of specific strategies to correct those errors.

(Logsdon, 2008)

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In theory, ability grouping increases student achievement by reducing the disparity in student ability levels, and this increases the likelihood that teachers can provide instruction that is not too easy/too difficult for most students.

The assumption is that ability grouping allows the teacher to a) increase the pace and raise the level of instruction for high achievers, and b) to provide more individual attention, repetition, and review for low achievers.

There has, however, been considerable debate on the ethicality of ability grouping, and consequent research, investigating the potential beneficial and deleterious effect that ability grouping may have on students.

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Ability grouping can be highly beneficial. The benefits of ability grouping mostly outweigh those of mixed-level classes. The research findings are not conclusive, and its use should be implemented with caution.

Academic achievements are important in assessing the success of ability grouping, but other constructs are also. Friendships and self-esteem play a central role in the well-being of the child. Enthusiasm and work ethic are also important, as they can project a child's future success.

Ability-grouping does not require the complete segregation of students. Ability-grouping may be used in appropriate subjects. A mixed-level class may be used for mathematics, as it has been demonstrated as effective. Groups should mix for activities to prevent "in/out groups" effects or an "anti-authority peer group".

Grouping may be successful if teachers' enthusiasm remains high across all groups. One must consider the effects of a potential self-fulfilling prophecy, in which higher ability groups may be given more attention, resulting in accelerated learning. The monitoring of teachers' performance may ensure all areas of the curriculum are covered for each group.

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Many studies have found that ability grouping is a very helpful tool in increasing student performance, especially when altering curriculum of certain subjects (Allan, 1991), (Slavin, 1987). That said, it must be regularly assessed. There is very little evidence that children are academically harmed by grouping. Also the effects on self esteem are quite small. (Meta-analysis - Kulik & Kulik, 1992). Although greater curriculum adjustment leads to more positive attitudes towards class-work, it does not have any effect on attitudes towards school. Overall, certain types of ability grouping can be very useful and beneficial, but only when they are carefully selected and applied to specific cases to which they are suited.

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Many believe the use of ability grouping to lead to lower self esteem in groups. Higher ability groups can be shown to exhibit lower self esteem in ability-grouped classes (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). It may be that within an environment in which all students are at the same level the higher grade of competition may lead to lower self esteem.

Each piece of research regarding ability grouping stresses the importance of constant monitoring in order to create an effective educating environment. The difficulties involved in this method are also widely recognised.

Ireson and Hallam (1999) believed ability grouping to be ineffective as a situation in which a large amount of children are “unlikely to achieve academic success” (p. 345), such as a low-ability group, may create an “anti-authority peer group culture” (p. 345) in which education would be limited. The development of such a group would lead to a greater detriment than benefit to the education system.

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Ability-grouping has taken a strong stance within the media. It is often mentioned within publications and television, with the international tv series *Desperate Housewives* even involving parental conflict over ambiguously-named ability-grouped classes in their plotlines. However, the most important information in this area is to be found in research. Research findings tend to be varied within this area, with many disagreeing on the true effect of ability-grouping. However, despite uncertain results, most findings tend to agree with either the For Ability-Grouping stance or the Against Ability-Grouping stance.

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Cheung and Rudowicz (2003) found high-ability students to make effective use of ability-grouped classes. They also found that all ability groups gained in achievement. No groups achieved less than the mixed-ability classes.

They found that students who participated in a class with greater ability-variation showed lower self-esteem and achieve less within this learning environment.

Hallinan and Sorenson (1985): students within an ability-grouped class are more likely to develop close friendships by increasing interaction within the group and decreasing communication across groups. The similar expectations of the teacher to each member of the class would lead the students to behave more like one another, fostering stronger connections.

Adelson et al. (2011) examined the effects of ability grouping on children in kindergarten in small groups. It examined the effects on the progression of their reading skills throughout the year. It also looked at variables, e.g. gender, minority status etc. They found that ability grouping provided benefits for all students. They suggested that smaller groups benefit children more.

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Linchenski and Kutscher (1998) found the achievements of “the average and lower ability groups in the mixed-ability classes were higher” (p. 550). Similarly, they found that it was possible to teach mathematics effectively to all ability levels within a mixed-group class, providing the teacher is satisfied with the situation (p. 551).

Ireson and Hallam (1999) discovered that ability-grouping raised the self-esteem of lower aptitude students while reducing that of the higher-ability students. As self-esteem can be seen as a major aspect of both life and education the negative impact upon higher-ability students is an important factor in ability-grouping.

Hamilton and O’Hora (2010) looked at the effects of ability-grouping in primary schools. It found that it was often associated with potential inequities such as; a reduced curriculum, less experienced teachers and reduced expectations of the future. The researchers also recognized the emergence of predominant groups in this setting like boys, ethnic minorities and children with low socio-economic backgrounds.

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In regards to ability grouping in schools, there have been research studies which provide both favourable and non-favourable results. In one case, Dr. Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University proposes the argument in favour of ability grouping, and the research findings that support the favourable argument come from the study entitled, “Grouping for Achievement Gains: For Whom Does Grouping Increase Kindergarten Reading Growth?”. The strengths of this research suggest that using achievement groups in smaller quantities correlates to higher reading levels for kindergarteners, which can then be generalised to Slavin’s research as well.

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In contrast, the proposition against ability grouping considers that the lower-level achieving students have no high-achieving model to compare to, therefore there is no example. Also, by labeling students as a ‘lower-level’ learner demoralises and lowers their self-esteem. The weaknesses of the research, however, are drawn from the study, “Between-class achievement grouping for literacy and numeracy: academic outcomes for primary students”. This study provides evidence that the results of ability grouping are ineffective and students of various achievement levels are put at a disadvantage.

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As with most empirical research when testing hypotheses, there are always strengths and weaknesses with the methodologies used. In ability grouping specifically, most studies look

at the cause and effect of the teacher-student relationship to understand the research findings. In the specific study, “Grouping for Achievement Gains: For Whom Does Achievement Grouping Increase Kindergarten Reading Growth?”, the researchers employed a large, diverse population of students, which is a strength to this research because it makes the sample population easier to generalize. Another strength to the methodology of this study is the utilisation of three different environments in which the children were evaluated, testing to see if there were differences among the three.

In contrast, using a sample study can be less credible in comparison to an experimental study due to the lack of design. Another factor to note is that there is no control group.

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Although an immediate reaction to the proposition of ability grouping may be that it has a negative impact on students, the research has shown, that when used properly, it can be highly beneficial.

When using ability grouping in an educational setting, there are a number of suggestions from the literature, which encourage practitioners to monitor progress carefully, use regular feedback, and ensure that recurrent evaluations are employed.

Based on the research, ability grouping can work well when implemented, and can improve the student's learning environment and outcomes if it is utilised effectively.

Therefore, it is the contention of the authors that, providing the conditions which have proven to make it the most efficient (e.g. within class, part day separation) are met, it would be beneficial to effectuate ability grouping in schools.

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