

The Facts on Education

Should We Be Streaming Students?

‘Grouping’ by ability, or ‘tracking’, or ‘streaming’ means that students are placed into groups defined by their ability levels. Students may be grouped by ability either for a subject (for example for mathematics or reading) or for all or almost all their instruction. Students’ assignment to an ability group may be temporary, changing during the year, or relatively permanent.

Advocates of grouping by ability claim that it can raise achievement standards since teachers can target their instruction and use resources more effectively. However, researchers have shown that grouping by ability can have adverse effects on students’ attitudes towards schooling and their self-esteem. Studies on ability grouping show inequitable outcomes and social consequences:

- It is very difficult to distinguish ‘ability’ from ‘prior achievement’.
- Use of grouping by ability is associated with worse overall student performance.
- Students placed in higher ability groups may perform better but students placed in lower ability groups typically perform worse than in mixed ability groups.
- There is a tendency for lower teacher expectation and lower quality of instruction in lower ability groups.
- For students assigned to low-ability groups, there are negative effects on their self-esteem, motivation and attitudes towards schooling.

Research suggests that students in non-grouped settings, especially for those with lower achievement, have more healthy and positive attitudes towards school than students in grouped settings.

Researchers advocate using mixed grouping and reducing ability grouping in schools, but more important is to focus on improving instruction and curriculum for students of all achievement levels.

For online resources on grouping by ability as well as the research references that inform this issue, please visit:

www.cea-ace.ca/facts-on-education

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