

Dos and Don'ts of attainment grouping

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Best Practice in Grouping Students

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There are well-documented challenges with all forms of attainment grouping. Nevertheless, development of support for good practice in student grouping, and effective pedagogy therein, is under-developed. As such, this research-based aide-memoire is intended to improve existing practices in attainment grouping, and mixed attainment grouping, with regard to efficacy and equity.

Students from all social backgrounds and prior attainment levels are entitled to equality of access to high quality pedagogy and curriculum, and to opportunities to progress and achieve: this document is intended to support practice to this end.

Key reading

Best Practice in Grouping Students project
<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/groupingstudents>

Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit: Setting or Streaming
<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/setting-or-streaming/>

Further reading

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- Tereshchenko, A., Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Mazonod, A., Taylor, B., Pepper, D. & Travers, M.C. (2018). Learners' attitudes to mixed-attainment grouping: examining the views of students of high, middle and low attainment. *Research Papers in Education*. DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2018.1452962

Dos and don'ts of setting

Do make setting as subject specific as possible

The negative effects of streaming – grouping students based on general ‘ability’ – on attainment and self-confidence are widely documented. The streaming approach also undermines the perceived benefits of attainment grouping (homogeneity of attainment in a group), given that students have different attainment for different subject areas. Instead, group students for maths according to maths attainment, for English by English attainment and so on.

Do group students by attainment only

Current attainment can be a reliable way of grouping students, based on what they know and can do. Other measures, such as ‘effort’ or ‘attitude to work’ are often influenced by negative stereotypes without teachers realising.

Do retest regularly and move students between groups

Students are motivated by the belief that when they work hard they will be rewarded by moving up a group. Regularly testing and moving students can act as an incentive and also destigmatise belonging to lower sets. Retesting and movement is also necessary to ensure that set groups reflect homogeneous attainment levels.

Do use a lottery system when assigning borderline students to sets

This mitigates the introduction of bias in assigning students from particular backgrounds to lower or higher sets.

Do make sure all students have access to a rich curriculum

Students in all sets will benefit from exciting subject knowledge and a wide range of activities. Being in a low set shouldn't mean you miss out on problem solving or creative opportunities.

Do apply high expectations to all sets

Keep expectations for learning opportunities, curriculum, behaviour and homework consistent and high across all sets.

Don't set by timetable convenience

Attainment grouping can be less fair when the timetable forces particular outcomes, for example preventing students from moving between groups. Aim to have a timetable that works to the benefit of students.

Don't extrapolate setting across subjects

If the timetable requires students to be in the same group for two or more subjects, you are no longer setting (rather, you are introducing elements of streaming). Students have different levels of attainment in different subjects, so a high attainer in English is not necessarily a high attainer in MFL. Hence linking subjects in such ways is likely to narrow opportunities for individual students as well as undermining the principle of subject-specific setting.

Don't assign subject expert teachers only to top sets

Lower sets can benefit greatly from subject experts, whose depth of understanding can help them explain subject material much more clearly.

Don't give less homework to low sets

Research has found that students in low sets tend to receive less homework. But being in a low set shouldn't mean fewer opportunities for learning development - and this includes homework.

Don't provide low sets with a ‘dumbed’ down curriculum

If lower sets are taught a different curriculum from higher sets, it can be impossible for students to move groups, as well as impoverishing students' knowledge and skills. Make sure all students have access to a curriculum that gives them the best chances.

Don't leave students in sets without regular testing

Students can be motivated by knowing that they can move sets. It is more helpful for students to believe that they can improve their attainment through effort than that they have a fixed amount of ‘ability’ that means they need to stay in a low set.

Dos and don'ts of mixed attainment grouping

Do practice differentiation

Students will start your lesson with different levels of prior knowledge and understanding. We recommend differentiation through questioning, feedback and outcome. Pre-teaching may also be helpful.

Do change in-class groupings regularly

Fixed table groups based on ‘ability’ share many of the same negative impacts on low prior attainers as setting and streaming.

Do have high expectations of all students in the class

A key benefit of mixed attainment grouping is that teachers can communicate the same high expectations to all students and offer the same tasks, regardless of prior attainment.

Do plan rich tasks that students can access at different levels and receive feedback

Students will benefit from feedback on their work, so choose tasks that all students can access (potentially at different levels), and which provide opportunities for feedback from peers as well as the teacher.

Do encourage a classroom climate where students support one another

All students benefit from articulating their ideas and listening to the ideas of others.

Don't teach to the middle

It can be much more effective to teach to the top and ask yourself what you need to do to make the planned learning objectives accessible for all your students.

Don't establish fixed within-class ‘ability’ groups

Fixed groups can mean that students develop ideas about their ‘ability’ and ‘potential’ being fixed. Flexibility avoids this, and ensures that groups are changed according to pedagogic demands of the particular lesson, as well as providing diversity in students' learning from one another.

Don't plan three lessons for every class

Mixed attainment grouping should not mean an unrealistic workload for teachers. Rather than differentiation by task or resource, try differentiation by questioning, feedback and outcome.

Don't over-rely on high attainers explaining to others

Explaining learning to others can be very effective, but be careful not to depend too often on using high attaining students as explainers, as this can be frustrating for high attainers and patronising to students at other attainment levels.