

SCHOOL REFORM PROPOSALS: THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

GROUPING STUDENTS FOR INSTRUCTION

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Research Quality

Research on grouping varies tremendously based on the discipline and background of researchers. Researchers who belong to ethnic minorities are far more critical of ability grouping than are researchers from white, middle-class backgrounds. Research on grouping falls into two disciplinary categories: one produced by educational psychologists, who largely rely on testing to establish the effects of grouping on individual achievement; the other produced by sociologists, who rely on interviews and observation, and who address broader questions about opportunities, preconceptions, and the impact tracking has had on society at large.

Psychologists have tended to focus on short-run comparisons of different ability groups exposed to the same curriculum. Sociologists have taken a broader view of the various effects that ensue from the separation of students into homogeneous groups: the curriculum they receive, the type of instruction they are given, the social climate that is created and how it might shape their long-range plans, and the like.

Research Findings

History: Sorting students into homogeneous ability and achievement groups dates to the 19th century and includes practices ranging from limited grouping of pupils by reading level during reading instruction periods to more sweeping approaches, including tracking and even school-district segregation. Grouping has been traditionally seen as enabling teachers to tailor instruction according to students' differing abilities – faster pace and enriched material for bright students; remediation, repetition, and review for low-ability students.

Incidence: Approval of grouping has declined in the last quarter of the 20th century, but the practice remains widespread (although not always labeled as such); one survey found up to 90% of schools tracked students in mathematics instruction in grade 8. Reading grouping in elementary grades is nearly universal, and surveys may underestimate the incidence of grouping. Even open enrollment plans allowing students to elect courses of study have been observed to stratify students by ability groups. Support for grouping is high among teachers –

except those assigned to lower-tracked classes – and highest among educated and wealthy parents who expect their children to be placed in higher tracks.

Psychological Studies: Psychologists’ studies of the effect of ability grouping yield inconsistent results. One group of studies found modest effects for high-ability students in gifted classes, possibly because high-ability students receive an enriched curriculum in homogeneous classes. A second group of studies found little or no effect of ability grouping on the achievement of secondary students, but some modest benefits from grouping students by ability within a classroom for mathematics and reading. The principal beneficiaries of ability grouping are students identified as “gifted” and given enriched and accelerated curricula.

Sociological Studies: Sociologists’ studies have found that lower-tracked students were less likely to attend college and more likely to receive a poorer quality curriculum, less experienced teachers, and teachers with lower expectations for their students’ performance than were students in higher tracks. Sociologists’ studies show that tracking is rarely remedial, in that students placed in lower tracks tend not to move into higher tracks and tend to suffer from decreased ambitions and achievement.

Conclusions: The value one attaches to traditional academic achievement versus the broader goals of education will likely determine one’s attitudes toward tracking. Those who view schooling’s purpose as preparing students – particularly those more academically able – for higher education or the workforce are likely to accept it. Those who see education as reproducing social and economic class inequalities will likely regard grouping as perpetuating and reinforcing that outcome.

Recommendations

- Mixed or heterogeneous ability or achievement groups offer several advantages:
 - less-able pupils are at reduced risk of being stigmatized and exposed to a “dumbed-down” curriculum;
 - teachers’ expectations for all pupils are maintained at higher levels;
 - opportunities for more able students to assist less able peers in learning can be realized.
- Teachers asked to teach in a “de-tracked” system will require training, materials and support that are largely lacking in today’s schools.
- Administrators seeking to “detrack” existing programs will require help in navigating the difficult political course that lies ahead of them.

The foregoing is a summary of a chapter in the book *School Reform Proposals: The Research Evidence* (Information Age Publishing, 2002), edited by Alex Molnar. The full chapter can be viewed at:

http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsil/EPRU/documents/EPRU_2002-101/Chapter_05-Glass-Final.pdf