Setting or streaming
Negative impact for very low or no cost, based on moderate evidence.

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What is it?

Pupils with similar levels of current attainment are grouped together either for specific lessons on a regular basis (setting or regrouping), or as a whole class (streaming or tracking). The assumption is that it will be possible to teach more effectively or more efficiently with a narrower range of attainment in a class.

How effective is it?

Overall, setting or streaming appears to benefit higher attaining pupils and be detrimental to the learning of mid-range and lower attaining learners. On average, setting or streaming does not appear to be an effective strategy for raising the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, who are more likely to be assigned to lower groups.

On average, studies show that higher attaining learners make between one and two additional months' progress when set or streamed compared to when taught in mixed ability groups. Studies of targeted interventions for pupils identified as "gifted and talented" are consistent with this finding. They show that high attaining pupils benefit from a range of different kinds of grouping, including pull-out classes, accelerated classes and promotion (where high attaining pupils move up a year). The effects of these programmes potentially provide an advantage for these pupils of 3 to 12 months' additional learning. However, research into gifted and talented schemes rarely records the impact of the schemes on the students not identified as gifted and talented, who are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds. Low attaining learners fall behind by one or two months a year, on average, when compared with the progress of similar students in classes with mixed ability groups. It appears likely that routine setting or streaming arrangements undermine low attainers' confidence and discourage the belief that attainment can be improved through effort. Research also suggests that ability grouping can have a longer term negative effect on the attitudes and engagement of low attaining pupils. It should be noted that there are some exceptions to this average, where setting or streaming has benefitted all learners. Further study could be undertaken to understand what happened differently in these examples.

Though the average impact of setting or streaming on low attaining pupils is negative, evidence suggests that certain types of grouping are more effective than others. Some studies have shown that reducing the size of the lowest attaining groups and assigning high-performing teachers to these groups can be effective, as can providing additional targeted catch up support.

How secure is the evidence?

The evidence on setting and streaming is fairly consistent and has accumulated over at least 30 years of research. Although there is some variation depending on methods and research design, conclusions on the impact of ability grouping are relatively consistent.

The majority of the evidence comes from the USA, and there are few rigorous UK studies. In a 2014 evaluation Year 6 and 7 pupils made an additional three months' progress from a structured programme of small group tuition. A [year] evaluation of Every Child Counts found that the programme had a positive impact when delivered on a one to one basis, or with groups of two or three, with all group sizes making similar amounts of progress. These findings suggest that small group tuition can be effective in English schools. More research could be undertaken to understand the impact of different group sizes, and to explore whether these effects vary by subject or age of pupils.

What are the costs?

Setting or streaming are organisational strategies that have few, if any, associated financial costs. Additional resources may be needed to support different groups. Overall the costs are estimated as very low.

What should I consider?

- Flexible within-class grouping is preferable to tracking or streaming for low attaining pupils.

- It is important to recognise that a measure of current attainment, such as a test, is not the same as a measure of potential.

- Have you considered how the differences in grouping will enable more effective teaching for all pupils, including lower attaining pupils?

- How will you monitor the impact of ability grouping on pupils' attitudes to learning and their engagement?