

Fact File

ABILITY GROUPING

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Traditional ability grouping involves students being:

- Split into classes based on their ability
- Taught the same stuff pitched at different ability levels

People also refer to traditional ability grouping as *tracking* and *vertical streaming*. Typically you have classes for struggling, average and bright students – often with additional levels in between.

John Hattie's synthesis of research shows that overall, ability grouping has little impact on students' subsequent results ($d = 0.12$). Furthermore, one of the key features of Finland's rise to educational excellence is its removal of traditional ability grouping from the first ten years of schooling.



Bright students enjoy more academic benefits ($d = 0.14$) from traditional ability grouping than less able peers ($d = 0.09$ struggling & $d = -0.03$ average) – yet the impact is still marginal.

Research also shows that classes of low ability students experience low expectations and little worthwhile work to do. When it comes to academic learning, we seem to give up on these students. *Lower expectations, less passionate teachers, and poor teaching* are likely to contribute to the failure of traditional ability grouping.

The *Direct Instruction* Paradox & What It Tells Us

While **traditional ability grouping** has no positive impact on students' subsequent results, research shows **Direct Instruction (DI)** programs have a substantial impact ($d = 0.59$). This is a paradox because one of the core features of **DI** programs is that they group students into classes based on ability.



To understand this paradox, you need to know a little about what *Direct Instruction* is, and the **non-traditional** way it uses ability grouping (see *Fact File: Direct Instruction* for further details). DI programs provide a levelled curriculum. When implementing a DI program, you place students into classes according to where they are at within this levelled curriculum.

The key difference is that there are no smart, dumb or mediocre groups. All students are expected to *progress through all levels*. However, they start at the level that they are ready for.

In this way, the **non-traditional form of ability grouping** that DI uses is a type of *mastery learning*. It is more akin to martial arts belts or dancing levels than it is to classes formed according to traditional ability grouping methods.

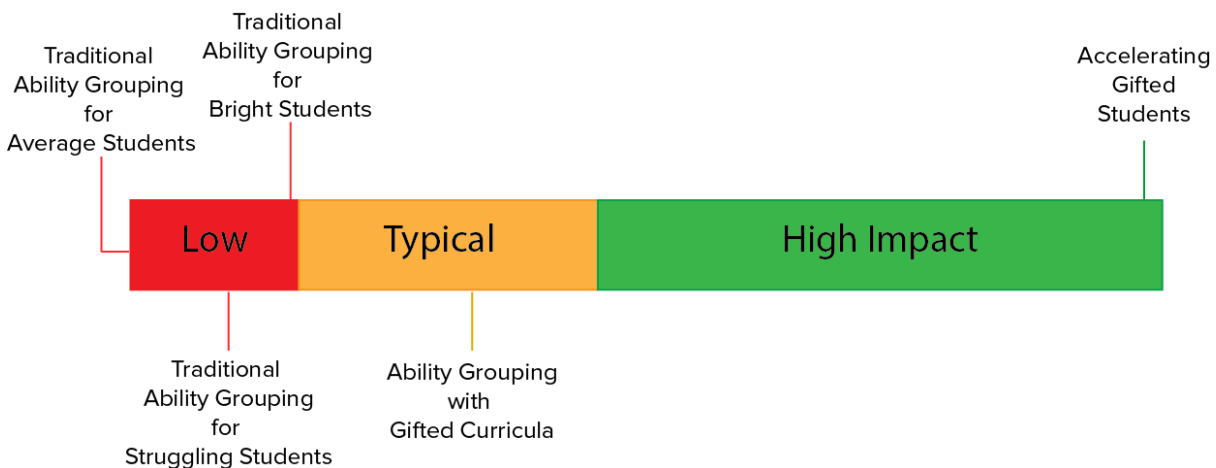
An average student in a class of 31 students would jump over 7 students

Ability Grouping for Gifted Students

As mentioned earlier, *traditional ability grouping* has more impact on bright students ($d = 0.14$) than it does for other students.

However, when bright students receive entirely different work, this impact increases substantially (0.3).

Despite this, it is important to point out that accelerating bright students has far more impact (0.88) than placing these students in an 'advanced class' within their existing year level (see *Fact File: Acceleration* for more details).



Within Class Ability Groups

While *traditional ability grouping* involves organising classes based on ability, *within class ability grouping* involves organising small groups within a single class.

Teachers often decide to place their students into small groups for particular learning tasks. When you do this, you have to decide whether to create *mixed ability groups* or to group children of similar abilities together (i.e. *uniform ability groups*).

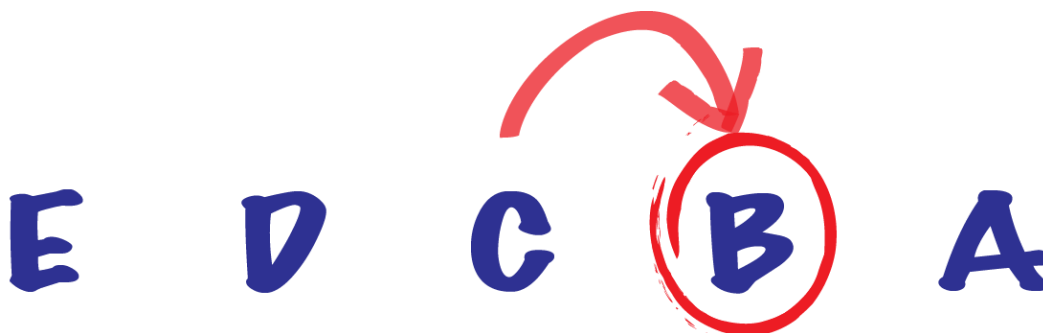
Placing students into small groups for particular activities can have a positive impact on how well those students master the material (d = 0.33 more effective than using no group work). However, not all group work is effective.

You can maximise the potential power of groups by:

- ✔ Only using group work once students have already reached a degree of proficiency in the task at hand
- ✔ Following the principles of collaborative learning (see our *Fact File: Group Work*)

In addition to the positive impact of group work in general, research shows that organising these groups by ability (i.e. uniform ability groups) has a positive impact on reading achievement (d = 0.36 more effective than mixed ability groups).

Put another way, a student currently achieving a C in a class using *mixed ability* reading groups would earn a B in a class that groups students according to their ability.



Using uniform ability groups did not lead to improved outcomes in mathematics or science.

Research References

All references to research in this *fact file* are either directly from or cited in the following:

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Slavin, R. E. (1987). Ability Grouping & Student Achievement In Elementary Schools: A Best Evidence Synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 293-336.

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