

Cost

£££££

Evidence strength



Impact (months)

+2

Effect size

0.17

What is it?

Within-class grouping (also known as within-class attainment grouping) means organising pupils within their usual class for specific activities or topics, such as literacy or mathematics. Pupils with similar levels of current attainment are grouped together, for example, on specific tables, but all pupils are taught by their usual teacher and support staff, and they usually all follow the same curriculum but at different levels of difficulty.

The aim of this type of grouping is to match tasks, activities and support to pupils' current capabilities, so that all pupils have an appropriate level of challenge.

Within-class grouping can involve the use of other approaches such as [collaborative learning](#) or targeted strategies (see [reading comprehension strategies](#)).

Although within-class grouping is sometimes described as 'ability grouping', we refer here to 'attainment' rather than 'ability', as schools generally use measures of current performance, rather than measures of ability, to group pupils.

In the UK, within-class attainment grouping tends to be more common in primary schools than in secondary schools. In primary schools this may involve pupils grouped together on specific tables, but this is typically not the case in secondary schools. The research evidence does not examine the effect of pupils working in groups, but rather the effect of pupils being grouped by attainment which may, or may not, involve them working in groups.

Key Findings

1. Within class attainment grouping has a positive impact, on average, of 2 months additional progress. The evidence strength, however, is very limited and there is variation behind this average.

2. It is important to carefully consider which content is appropriate for within class attainment grouping. While the impact in maths was positive, studies that measured literacy outcomes found no difference, on average.

3. Consider the impact of within class attainment grouping on pupils with low prior attainment and carefully monitor engagement and attitudes to learning.

4. One advantage of within class grouping might be flexibility in grouping arrangements. Pupils progress at different rates so regular monitoring and assessment is important to minimise misallocation and ensure challenge for all pupils.

How effective is the approach?

The average impact of the within-class grouping is about an additional two months progress over the course of a year.

Within-class attainment grouping may also have an impact on wider outcomes such as confidence. Some studies from the broader evidence base conclude that grouping pupils on the basis of attainment may have longer term negative effects on the attitudes and engagement of low attaining pupils, for example, by discouraging the belief that their attainment can be improved through effort.

Evidence of within-class attainment in the Arab world is still inconclusive, however, studies that have taken place have found evidence of promise on improving students' social and academic skills. Studies in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar reported that this within-class attainment grouping provides students with opportunities to improve their learning when interacting with others and learning from errors. Within-class attainment grouping was implemented to improve students' understanding in difficult subjects like science and math but also to promote their 21st century skills.

Using cooperative learning/jigsaw and small group discussions are strategies that are found to be mostly beneficial when implementing within-class attainment grouping. However, researchers have recommended teachers be more prepared and trained in applying this strategy in the classroom. Furthermore, curricula and assessment in some contexts are considered as potential barriers. Not only that, but when the majority of students in the class are weak, this has a negative impact on the quality of the discussions, interaction and task completion in their groups.

To date, research on within-group attainment is limited in this region despite the few reported benefits on enriching the effective teaching practice. More research is needed in this area, including using larger sample of students and teachers from various course subjects and from different contexts in the Arab world. Additionally, experimental and long-term studies are necessary to concentrate on investigating factors in pedagogy that could mostly support the implementation of this strategy and improving students' learning. Exploring students experiences would also prepare teachers for a successful implementation that would better target students' academic needs and

support their learning.

Behind the average

The benefits of this approach are more apparent for primary age pupils (+3 months) than secondary (no overall impact), though the overall number of studies in secondary schools is small.

Impact appears greater in mathematics (+4 months) than for other subjects.

Closing the disadvantage gap

As with setting and streaming, evidence suggests that disadvantaged pupils can suffer from lower teacher expectations which increases their chances of being grouped with lower prior attainers. If groups are not arranged flexibly, and the impact of grouping on pupil engagement and motivation not monitored, within-class grouping could have negative effects for disadvantaged pupils.

One [recent study](#) commissioned by the EEF found that schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils seem to be more likely to use whole-class teaching with KS2 pupils, as opposed to within-class grouping. This finding was not consistent across Key Stages however.

How could you implement in your setting?

By adapting teaching to pupils' needs and prior knowledge, teachers may be able to support, stretch, and challenge pupils' learning more effectively.

Effective implementation of within class grouping approaches might include:

- Effective use of assessment to identify pupils' prior knowledge and understanding, and potential barriers to learning
- Grouping pupils flexibly so that pupils know ability is not fixed
Adapting teaching to the needs of pupils, providing targeted support to pupils who are struggling
- Reframing questions and lesson content to provide greater scaffolding or stretch and challenge pupils further
- Carefully monitoring the impact of groupings on engagement and motivation.

The evidence indicates higher impacts, on average, for mathematics. It is particularly important that teachers consider appropriate content for within class attainment grouping.

Within-class grouping interventions may be used as often as teachers require in their daily practice. Within-class groupings might be used as a temporary process for specific tasks, or a more regular routine in which seating plans are orientated around prior attainment outcomes. This latter approach should be implemented with caution, as without flexibility to move between groups some pupils may suffer from a lack of confidence leading to lower engagement, and subsequently attainment.

What does it cost?

Overall, the global evidence indicates that the median costs of implementing within-class grouping are estimated as very low. The costs associated with within-class grouping arise from the production of any additional resources (e.g., scaffolds or prompt sheets) that are provided to groups with differing levels of prior attainment.

This cost estimates assume that schools are already paying for teacher time, assessment methods, and potentially IT software to monitor pupil needs and attainment. These are all pre-requisite costs of implementing within-class grouping, without which the cost is likely to be higher.

As yet there is no information about local costs.

How secure is the evidence?

The security of the evidence around within class attainment grouping is rated as very low. Only 22 studies were identified that meet the inclusion criteria of the Toolkit. The topic lost an additional padlock because a small percentage of studies have taken place recently. This might mean that the research is not representative of current practice.

As with any evidence review, the Toolkit summarises the average impact of approaches when researched in academic studies. It is important to consider your context and apply your professional judgement when implementing an approach in your setting.

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