

Cost

£££££

Evidence strength



Impact (months)

0

Effect size

0.03

What is it?

‘Setting’ or ‘streaming’ refer to a variety of approaches by which pupils with similar levels of current attainment are consistently grouped together for lessons.

- ‘Setting’ usually involves grouping pupils in a given year group into classes for specific subjects, such as mathematics and English, but not across the whole curriculum.
- ‘Streaming’ (also known as ‘tracking’ in some countries) usually involves grouping pupils into classes for all or most of their lessons, so that a pupil is in the same group regardless of the subject being taught.

Pupils in different sets or streams sometimes follow a different curriculum, particularly when different national tests, different examination levels or different types of academic and vocational qualifications are available. The aim of setting and streaming approaches is to enable more effective and efficient teaching by narrowing the range of pupil attainment in a class.

Although these practices are 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. Setting and streaming are combined in this Toolkit entry because these practices are similar in that they separate pupils into whole classes of similar levels of attainment.

For evidence on the impact of grouping pupils by attainment within classes, see [within class attainment grouping](#). Other types of attainment grouping, such as grouping by attainment across year groups, and teaching high attaining pupils with older year groups, are not covered in the Toolkit as they are less commonly used.

In the UK, setting and streaming are more common in secondary school than in primary school.

Key Findings

1. The impact of setting and streaming is 0 months progress, on average, with worse outcomes for low attaining pupils. The evidence around setting and streaming is limited. Schools may consider other approaches to targeting learning effectively for pupils (e.g. small group or one to one tuition).
2. If schools choose to use setting and streaming it is vital to consider how the approach will enable more effective teaching for all pupils, including lower attaining pupils. For example, carefully considering how to allocate teachers appropriately to different sets.
3. It is important to ensure that all pupils follow a challenging curriculum, including lower attaining pupils. Ensuring flexibility in grouping arrangements, and regular monitoring of learning will minimise the risk of misallocation for pupils that learn at different rates.
4. Making informed choices about the allocation of pupils to groups is important. For example, there is some evidence of pupils being disadvantaged by their relative age within a year group or through subconscious bias on the basis of race or class.

How effective is the approach?

On average, pupils experiencing setting or streaming make similar progress to pupils taught in mixed attainment classes. The evidence suggests that setting and streaming has a small negative impact on low attaining learners, and a small positive impact for higher attaining pupils. There are exceptions to this pattern, with some variation between studies. Overall, the effects are negligible, and it appears that setting or streaming is not an effective way to raise attainment for most pupils.

Setting or streaming 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.

One of the challenges of attainment grouping is ensuring that pupils are correctly allocated to groups. Some studies from the UK suggest that misallocation is a particular problem for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are at greater risk of misallocation to lower attaining groups, and the negative impact which can accompany this.

Evidence of setting/streaming in the Arab world is scarce and inconclusive. There is some evidence that the strategy has a positive impact on students with high academic achievement. Studies in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lybia and Yemen reported that this intervention provides students with

opportunities to actively participate in their learning and strengthen their understanding of the topic by interacting with their peers in the same group. There is a risk that these gains are at the expense of low attaining pupils, and more research is needed to see whether the negative impacts on low and average attaining pupils are replicated in the region.

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, more studies are needed to examine the allocation of students per groups and explore teacher's understandings of this strategy and their readiness to implement in the classroom. 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

Similar effects have been found for both primary and secondary age pupils.

The impact appears similar for reading, mathematics and science.

In some development contexts the approach Teaching at the right level (TaRL) has become popular, which has some crossover with setting or streaming. The outcomes of these studies tend to be higher than the overall average. This might be explained by the greater variation in pupil scores in these contexts and by the other elements of the TaRL programme.

Closing the disadvantage gap

Evidence suggests that disadvantaged pupils may suffer from lower teacher expectations which increases their chances of being placed in lower sets or streams. Pupils in lower sets and streams are more likely to be taught by less experienced and qualified teachers, and often develop a lack of confidence in their own capabilities.

Setting or streaming may construct negative self-fulfilling prophecies for disadvantaged pupils, whereby their chances of improving attainment and experiencing success is hampered by the combination of lower teacher expectations and between class stratification.

There is also some evidence that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be misallocated to lower sets.

How could you implement in your setting?

Setting and streaming aims to improve pupil outcomes by ensuring that class content is well-targeted to pupil needs, and that pupils in lower attaining groups get appropriate support. Given the weakness of the evidence base, strong implementation will consider how to mitigate the potential risks of setting and streaming for low attaining pupils, it might include:

- Careful consideration of teacher allocation between sets to ensure that low attaining pupils receive high quality teaching.
- The use of continued monitoring to ensure that pupils are in appropriate sets and are not misallocated.
- Flexible practices that allow pupils to move between sets.

Approaches to setting and streaming are typically delivered over the course of an academic year, with grouping often being informed by pupils' attainment outcomes from the previous school year. Some schools may however move pupils between sets or streams during the school year.

Moving either from mixed ability grouping to setting and streaming or in the other direction is a substantial change that will need a careful implementation process. When introducing new approaches, schools should consider implementation. For more information see [Putting Evidence to Work - A School's Guide to Implementation](#).

What does it cost?

Grouping by attainment is an organisational strategy which has few, if any, financial costs associated with it. Additional resources may be needed to support different groups. Overall the costs are estimated as very low.

How secure is the evidence?

The security of the evidence around setting and streaming is rated as very limited. 58 studies were identified that meet the inclusion criteria for the Toolkit. The topic lost padlocks because:

- A small percentage of studies that have taken place recently. This might mean that the research is not representative of current practice.
- A large percentage of the studies are not randomised controlled trials. While other study designs still give important information about effectiveness of approaches, there is a risk that results are influenced by unknown factors that are not part of the intervention.

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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