

Cost

£££££

Evidence strength



Impact (months)

+3

Effect size

0.21

What is it?

Within-class attainment grouping involves organising pupils within their usual class for specific activities or topics, such as literacy. 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.

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.

For evidence on the impact of grouping pupils by attainment *into different classes*, see the '[Setting or streaming](#)' Toolkit entry. 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.

How effective is it?

The evidence on within-class attainment grouping indicates that it is likely to be beneficial for all learners, providing an average benefit of three months' additional progress. However, there appears to be less benefit for lower attaining pupils than others.

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.

How secure is the evidence?

The evidence has accumulated over at least 50 years, and there are a large number of experimental studies. The conclusions on the impact of within-class attainment grouping are relatively consistent across different evidence reviews. However, most of the reviews present relatively basic analysis. They do not explore whether effects vary between different types of study and different types of grouping interventions and the evidence base would benefit from new reviews which considered these issues in more depth. Overall, the evidence is rated as limited.

The majority of the experimental evidence comes from the USA, and there are few rigorous experimental studies from other countries.

There is more evidence from primary schools than secondary schools, as within-class grouping is more commonly used for younger pupils.

Studies which measure the impact of within-class attainment grouping often compare it with mixed attainment whole-class teaching. This means it is possible that the positive impact observed is partly or wholly due to *grouping*, rather than to *attainment grouping*. To know whether this is the case requires more studies which compare within-class attainment grouping with within-class

grouping which is not based on attainment.

Because lower attaining pupils appear to benefit less than others from within-class attainment grouping, it is important to consider the wider evidence on supporting these particular pupils when developing strategies to improve their attainment. See for example [Small group tuition](#) and [One to one tuition](#).

What are the costs?

Within class grouping by attainment has few associated financial costs. Additional expenditure may be required for additional teaching resources for different groups. Overall the costs are estimated as very low.

As yet there is no information about local costs.

What should I consider?

How will you decide which subjects or activities are grouped by current level of attainment and which are not?

How will you ensure that all pupils receive high quality teaching when different groups are doing different tasks or require different teaching strategies?

How will you minimise the risk of allocating pupils to the wrong group? Have you assessed whether your grouping criteria could disadvantage certain pupils? For younger children, have you taken their relative age within the year group into account?

How flexible are your grouping arrangements? Pupils progress at different rates so regular monitoring and assessment is important to minimise misallocation and ensure challenge for all pupils.

How will you monitor the impact of grouping on pupils' engagement and attitudes to learning, particularly for lower attaining pupils?