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Abstract

Ability grouping is the act of placing students in different groups based on their academic performance. This grouping strategy is a growing problem that reflects negatively on students' overall wellbeing. In this paper, I argue that ability grouping is ineffective in educational institutes because it harms psychological wellbeing and increases academic inequalities among students of different tracks. The implementation of ability grouping also limits students' learning experience as it reduces the academic and social diversity in educational institutes. I also consider alternative positions about ability grouping, such as its potential to cater to students' and faculty's pace preferences and improve students' learning experience. This paper is important because governments must acknowledge the harm that is being inflicted upon students as a result of ability grouping. I conclude my paper by recommending that all governments consider reforming heterogenous grouping to optimize students' educational journey.

Keywords: Ability grouping, tracking, wellbeing, school achievement, educational inequity

Ability Grouping: The Downfall of Education

In this paper, I argue that ability grouping is ineffective in educational institutes. Ability grouping refers to students who are assigned to homogenous groups based on their academic performance (Logsdon, 2022). The strategy is implemented in many countries as it is believed to enhance students' learning experience. However, studies show that ability grouping leads to segregation between students of various intellectual capacities (Ramberg, 2014). To allow for the construction of better upcoming generations, governments must ensure that education is set to its most effective level through implementing optimal learning techniques.

I support my position with the following three arguments. First, I argue that ability grouping has a negative impact on students' psychological wellbeing. For instance, students in higher sets experience high stress-levels because of being held at an unattainable standard (Boaler et al., 2000). Second, ability grouping limits the effectiveness of in-class peer collaboration. A study on the impacts of ability grouping reveals that students in heterogenous sets performed better than those in homogenous sets during group discussions (Saleh et al., 2005). Third, ability grouping introduces academic inequalities among students. That is, students who come from lower socioeconomic classes, families of color, and less educated parents are more likely to be placed in lower-level homogenous sets (Papachristou et al., 2022).

I also consider alternative positions that support ability grouping. These arguments include the chance to learn from peers, the possibility for students working at their preferred pace, and the increased opportunity teachers gain to satisfy their students' needs. While such positions have merit, I show that the drawbacks of ability grouping far outweigh their benefits. For example, the negative psychological impact it has on students could last for years whereas the good grades they earned through ability grouping would be very short-lived (Mulkey et al., 2005).

This paper is important because optimizing the educational system is crucial to students and educational institutes throughout the world. Many students have already suffered the consequences of ability grouping, and others continue to experience its repercussions today. The paper highlights the underlying issues with ability grouping programs and emphasizes the detrimental impact they have on students and families. If modifications do not happen soon, students' futures will be compromised.

Drawbacks of Ability Grouping

Despite long being implemented in educational settings, ability grouping has serious implications for students and teachers. That is, ability grouping has posed concerns associated with reduced psychological wellbeing, increased academic inequalities, and an inadequate learning environment. These flaws within the current implementation of ability grouping have become more prominent as more institutes continue its practice.

Effect of Ability Grouping on Psychological Wellbeing

Ability grouping can be a leading factor in increasing stress levels among students. According to Boaler et al. (2000), students in higher-level homogenous sets experience amplified stress levels because of being held at an unattainable standard. The authors demonstrate that it is the fast-paced nature of higher-level sets that causes students to become overwhelmed as they struggle to stay on par with their teachers' pace. Furthermore, as they fall behind in classes, more stress is placed on students to maintain the same learning pace as their peers. Similarly, Cheung and Rudowicz (2003) assert that high ability students exhibit increased levels of exam related anxiety compared to students of other sets. The authors' findings further emphasize the harmful impact of ability grouping as students' mental health is compromised because of the belief that their education is optimized. Despite some cases demonstrating that students' academic success is increased because of ability grouping, its psychological damage far outweighs its benefits.

Although the link between ability grouping and students' social life may not be prominent, research suggests that students' relationships are negatively affected by ability

grouping. According to Byrne et al. (2022), students across various levels of homogenous sets may develop anxiety as they fear losing their friendships through placement. For instance, students of lower-level sets could experience decreased self-esteem as their friendships with those of higher sets are put at risk. Similarly, McGillicuddy (2021) argues that social interactions are crucial to the educational journey of students as they ease the learning process, which leads to decreased anxiety. From the research conducted by McGillicuddy, it is evident that there is a negative correlation between anxiety and self-esteem among students placed in lower sets compared to those placed in higher sets. Thus, placing students in lower-level sets causes their fear of social rejection to induce anxious thoughts and feelings. Such negative emotions create feelings of worthlessness and incapability among students.

Decreased self-confidence is widely noticed among students undergoing ability grouping programs. Papachristou et al. (2022) show that the margin between the self-confidence of lower and higher set students widened remarkably over the course of the study. More specifically, students of lower sets experienced a significant drop in their confidence levels, which in some cases could be a result of labelling and underestimation. While it may not be the core problem, the stigma that ability grouping creates around being in a lower set causes students to become self-conscious. The authors also reveal that decreased confidence can be displayed in the form of hyperactivity and problematic behavioural tendencies. Similarly, Mulkey et al. (2005) suggest that labelling children as low ability may be damaging to their overall development. The finding further reinforces the fact that ability grouping could have detrimental effects on the wellbeing of students.

Ability Grouping and Academic Inequalities

Ability grouping introduces educational inequity among students of different sets. According to Hallinan et al. (2003), students in higher-level sets are provided with a better educational experience in contrast to lower-level students. That is, high-level students, in addition to being more academically capable, are taught by more qualified teachers that offer

superior education. This lack of justice within the current implementation of ability grouping creates further repercussions for lower-ability students as they are subject to an inadequate learning environment alongside their weak academic abilities. As a result, students in higher sets display notable academic improvement whereas those in lower sets exhibit a declining academic status (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). Thus, the research shows that students in higher sets have an advantage over students of lower sets.

Emerging studies display a correlation between ethnic minorities, low social class families, and low set classification. Ireson and Hallam (1999) argue that, in some cases, the grouping criteria of students is established through academic levels as well as other factors. These factors include ethnic background, socioeconomic class, and parent education. The authors reveal that in American schools, students with African or Latin origins were more likely to be put in lower sets because of their ethnic background. Furthermore, students who come from low income and uneducated families are more likely to be placed in low ability sets (Papachristou et al., 2022). As such, the effect of unjust segregation among students may cause detrimental implications to the futures of minorities, as their chances of employment and educational success are compromised.

In addition to socioeconomic inequalities, the structure of ability grouping may result in the introduction of gender inequality within educational institutes. According to Tach and Farkas (2006), male students are more likely to be placed in low ability sets. Because of the more problematic behavioral tendencies exhibited by male students, they are viewed as more immature, which leads to their placement in lower-level sets. By contrast, female students are portrayed as more capable and well-disciplined, which leads to their placement in higher-level sets. The purpose of ability grouping is to enhance students' learning experience, and unjust categorization defeats this purpose, creating unnecessary implications in educational institutes. Thus, placing potentially problematic students in one set could have adverse outcomes on both students and teachers (Worthy, 2009). As such, the stereotype that male students are more rebellious could turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy for otherwise obedient

students. Therefore, the placement of low-ability students with highly problematic students could influence the behavior of unproblematic students in the long run.

Ability Grouping and Learning Experience

Ability grouping reduces effective peer collaboration among students. Saleh et al. (2005) show that students in heterogenous sets performed better than those in homogenous sets during group assignments. The outperformance was observed among low and average level groups and indicates that high ability students are unaffected in this regard. The study also shows that low ability students made limited impactful contributions during in-class discussions. Likewise, McDool (2019) suggests that limiting in-class interactions between higher and lower ability students may decrease the achievement levels of less capable students. The growing margin between the achievements of students across various levels further highlights the disadvantage bestowed upon low set students and indicates an ineffective learning environment because of ability grouping.

Another reason why this approach is counterintuitive in the educational setting is because motivation levels are lower among students who experience ability grouping. According to Boliver and Capsada-Munsech (2021), students in ability groups are exclusively exposed to peers that share a similar academic level. Therefore, students do not feel inclined to enhance their academic performance as they do not have sufficient motivation. By contrast, students in heterogenous sets are constantly competing with those that are more successful than them to improve their skills and earn a better academic standing. Unfortunately, ability grouping limits this variation among students, which hinders their academic enthusiasm and motivation. Similarly, Trinidad and King (2021) demonstrate that lower set students are more prone to experience decreased motivation than higher set students. Because of the generally more plausible academic behavior of higher-level students, they are less likely to lose their ambition to prosper. However, lower ability students usually have negative associations with learning, which may be amplified because of grouping many like-minded students in one setting. The negative effect that ability grouping imposes on

students' learning experience affirms the importance of understanding that this approach is not reliable.

In addition to decreased motivation, ability grouping restricts academic prosperity among students. In many cases, students are unfairly assigned to homogenous groups, and they are also deprived of the chance to change tracks even if they show a notable improvement in their academic level (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018). This unjust grouping system means that students are given a fixed label throughout their academic journey and falsely categorized into a specific track. The unjustified label may affect students' future academic opportunities as well as their chances of employment. Additionally, for cases in which ability grouping is implemented during early educational years, the academic label assigned to students may be misrepresentative of their true potential. Prejudgment creates further implications to their educational journey as their desire to prosper is hindered. As a result, students may experience ceilings in their academic progress and develop negative impressions of learning as they are constantly viewed as less capable than they truly are.

Potential Benefits of Ability Grouping

Proponents of ability grouping support the practice with a variety of claims. First, they assert that ability grouping fulfills its intended purpose by enhancing students' overall learning experience. Second, they claim that ability grouping allows for increased classroom flexibility through personal pace preferences and specialised faculty. Finally, they contend that students learn more effectively in ability groups.

Ability Grouping and Pace Preferences

Although supporters of ability grouping claim that teachers can adjust their pace according to their students' needs, studies show that this practice has many negative impacts on teaching effectiveness. For example, according to McGillicuddy and Devine (2018), teachers that are assigned to lower-level ability sets experience difficulties with class management. Because of the heavy burden placed on teachers, their attentiveness to students may decrease. Reduced classroom management negatively affects students' learning

experience and introduces further disadvantages to their academic journey. As they struggle to keep their students under control, teachers' instruction pace and quality of delivery is restricted. The finding indicates that maintaining the pace and educational outcomes of a low-ability class is an obstacle that ability grouping programs have yet to overcome.

Another area of concern with regard to ability grouping is the phenomenon of *de-skilling* of teachers as a result of tracking students by ability (Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011). These concerns are expressed with regard to teachers' regulated teaching pace and effectiveness, both of which are believed to be put at risk because of ability grouping. As such, the research suggests that ability grouping worsens the educational outcomes of students deemed lower in ability.

Some may assert that students can work at their preferred pace because of ability grouping; however, studies demonstrate the consequences associated with this opportunity. McGillicuddy and Devine (2018) show that students in higher-ability sets may be expected to perform their tasks independently as they are assumed to work at a faster pace. Although some students may use this to their advantage to complete their assignments quickly, others may require their teachers' guidance prior to working individually. The authors also demonstrate that some educational institutes have this independent task completion integrated within their ability grouping programs. Abnormally high expectations could lead to increased stress levels among students and unfair competition as those who are more equipped to work independently may get an advantage over their less capable peers within the same group. Inequity also reiterates to the fact that students' psychological wellbeing may be compromised as they struggle to maintain the pace of their teachers and classmates.

Ability Grouping and Teachers

Although some may argue that ability grouping allows teachers to target students' needs more effectively, this claim is not always true. Boliver and Capsada-Munsech (2021) reveal that teachers who specialize in ability grouping programs do not provide their students with sufficient support. The authors demonstrate that teachers who are assigned to teach low-

level ability groups are usually of limited educational background. The authors claim that this unfair assignment of faculty is justified by the ideology that students with low academic abilities are not expected to improve over time. Pre-judgment of students' academic potential creates a major setback in the educational journey of low-ability students. In addition to being unjustly stereotyped to be of lower ability in many cases, students are also not given the opportunity to improve their skills because of less equipped staff. Therefore, this obstacle indicates that assigning students to specialised groups could lead to a declining academic status.

While critics contend that students are provided with a better educational experience because of the specialization of each set, this overspecialization may limit students' learning outcomes. Chorzempa et al. (2006) suggest that students in low-level ability sets are assigned less sophisticated and less age-appropriate tasks compared to those in high-level sets. Although students in both sets are of the same grade, higher set students are favored in terms of the educational experience they receive. For ability grouping to be successful in this regard, students of different sets must be delivered the same quality and amount of information in methods that are relevant to their academic levels. Allocating resources that enhance the delivery of information to less capable students ensures that they are just as achieving as those of higher sets.

Ability Grouping and Enhanced Educational Experience

Some may claim that ability grouping optimizes students' comfort; however, in some cases, it puts low-ability students at a disadvantage. Data in support of ability grouping shows that students within the same group feel less intimidated when contributing to class discussions (Saleh et al., 2005). Despite the decreased intimidation, the findings indicate that low-ability students are unable to perform as well without higher-ability peers. That is, high-ability students contribute heavily to the performance of less-capable peers through collaboration and the exchange of ideas. In addition to the increased diversity between the ideas proposed in heterogenous collaborative tasks, students' communication skills are

amplified because of the varied learning environment. The enhanced skills may lower students' intimidation levels as their self-confidence and comfort is prioritised. Therefore, this observation highlights that ability grouping does not account for the more optimal scenarios in which students' comfort is favoured.

Others claim that students of similar level are better at performing cooperative tasks, but studies display that this assertion is not always accurate. Saleh et al. (2007) show that when placed in controlled heterogenous ability groups, students across different levels show improvements in post-study test scores. That is, when placed in groups composed of one student from each ability set, all pupils performed better than if the groups were formed of similar ability students. The improved performance could be because of increased exchange of diverse knowledge among these students, which enhances their overall potential. Furthermore, the authors reveal that the group members were ordered to follow a turn-taking strategy during their presentation. Regulated grouping ensures that all students are given an equal opportunity to decrease the potential over-contributions by the higher ability student in each group. This requirement also allows the impact of heterogenous grouping on the students' performance to be studied more accurately as the effect of other factors is minimized. Through implementing this controlled grouping system, it can be demonstrated that heterogenous grouping encourages effective peer collaboration as opposed to homogenous grouping.

Conclusion

The implementation of ability grouping can be detrimental to the educational journey of students. This practice can be a leading factor in harming students' psychological wellbeing, which negatively impacts their chances of employment and educational success. Among the several drawbacks of ability grouping is the increased levels of academic inequalities exhibited among students. Ability grouping also restricts students' learning experience by limiting social and academic interactions between students of different intellectual levels.

Despite the negative implications of ability grouping, critics continue to support its implementation in educational institutes. First, opponents argue that ability grouping allows students and teachers to work at their preferred pace. However, evidence shows that increased stress is placed on both students and teachers because of different pace choices. Second, others claim that ability grouping allows teachers to address their students' needs more effectively. However, data displays a negative impact on students' education because of underqualified teachers. Third, critics posit that ability grouping enhances students' overall learning experience. However, studies reveal that many students are put at a disadvantage because of an inadequate learning environment.

Although the implementation of ability grouping may have potential benefits, its drawbacks far outweigh the benefits. The practice of ability grouping was introduced to improve students' educational experience; however, the striking harm it has imposed on students cannot be overlooked. Thus, in order to optimize students' learning experience and increase their future opportunities, heterogenous grouping must be reformed to accommodate students of different academic levels.

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