

Ability Grouping and Student Learning

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While a negative effect of ability grouping on the achievement of students assigned to lower ability groups has been noted frequently, no empirical research has looked at the effects on academic achievement of moving a student from one ability group level to a higher or lower group. In this paper, I report results of an empirical study that examines whether students would attain higher (or lower) test scores if they were moved to a higher (or lower) ability group than the one to which they were assigned.

Using tobit models, data from approximately 2,000 high school students are analyzed. The 9th grade English and Mathematics test scores that the students actually received are compared to predicted test scores based on placement in a higher or lower ability group. The analysis shows a pattern of higher predicted test scores associated with higher ability group placement in both subjects. Similarly, lower predicted test scores are associated placement in lower ability groups. What is remarkable about these findings is that they hold regardless of the students' academic ability. That is, assigning a student to a higher ability group increases the student's learning and assignment to a lower group depresses a student's learning regardless of the student's ability level. This study raises critical questions about whether American schools sufficiently challenge students to attain optimal performance and suggests a way to increase achievement for all students, and especially for slower learners.