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## Synthesis

# Setting or streaming<sup>i</sup>

Negative impact for very low cost, based on moderate evidence

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The terms 'setting' and 'streaming' are used to describe 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 language, 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 usually combined in the evidence reviews on attainment grouping. Both involve regular and consistent grouping of pupils into classes based on attainment.

For evidence on the impact of grouping pupils by attainment within classes, see the Within-class attainment grouping, 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.

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## How effective is it?

On average, pupils experiencing setting or streaming make slightly less progress than pupils taught in mixed attainment classes.

The evidence suggests that setting and streaming has a very small negative impact for low and mid-range attaining learners, and a very small positive impact for higher attaining pupils. There are exceptions to this pattern, with some research studies demonstrating benefits for all learners across the attainment range.

Overall the effects are small, and it appears that setting or streaming is not an effective 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.

A recent EEF project aimed to improve outcomes for pupils by tackling poor setting practices, including misallocation. The project had no overall impact on attainment, but this appeared to be largely because it was a challenge for schools to change their setting practices.



Evidence suggests that setting and streaming has a very small negative impact for low and mid-range attaining learners.

## Latin American Evidence<sup>ii</sup>

There is limited evidence in Latin America and the Caribbean regarding the impact on learning outcomes of grouping students according to their level of attainment. Some exploratory research in the region focuses specifically on teaching practices for talented students, and the description of abilities, characteristics and learning practices for these students. The teaching practices that tend to be most valued by outstanding students are those that allow them to be co-responsible for their educational process. These practices allow high levels of challenge and also recognize the potential of these students. It is argued that support for talented students is a major challenge for teachers, who generally do not have the necessary and specific pedagogical tools or methodologies to properly foster the learning process of talented students.

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Research on streaming produced in Latin America and the Caribbean is not conclusive on the effect of this intervention on students' learning outcome. More research in the region is required on setting or streaming to understand its impact in particular contexts.

## How secure is the evidence?

The evidence on setting and streaming has accumulated over at least 50 years of experimental studies. The conclusions on the impact of setting and streaming 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 interventions and the evidence base would benefit from new reviews which address 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 secondary schools than primary schools, as setting and streaming are more commonly used for older pupils.

## What are the costs?

Setting and streaming are organisational strategies that have few associated financial costs. Additional expenditure may be needed if setting or streaming results in greater numbers of classes. Overall the costs are estimated as very low.

## What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Have you considered alternative approaches to tailoring teaching and learning? One to one and small group tuition are targeted interventions which have positive impacts on attainment.
2. How will you ensure that your setting or streaming approach enables more effective teaching for all pupils, including lower attaining pupils? Which groups will your most experienced teachers be allocated to?
3. How will you ensure that all pupils follow a challenging curriculum, including lower attaining pupils?

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4. 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?
  5. How flexible are your grouping arrangements? Pupils progress at different rates and so regular monitoring and assessment is important to minimise misallocation and ensure challenge for all pupils.
  6. How will you monitor the impact of setting or streaming on pupil engagement and attitudes to learning, particularly for lower attaining pupils?

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