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What Classrooms in New York Could Learn From Kenya

The New York Times [notes](#) the resurgence of “ability grouping” in US elementary school classrooms:

Now ability grouping has re-emerged in classrooms all over the country—a trend that has surprised education experts who believed the outcry had all but ended its use... Teachers and principals who use grouping say that the practice has become indispensable, helping them cope with widely varying levels of ability and achievement.

Teachers, concerned about neglecting learners on the higher and lower ends of the spectrum, have begun to separate students out by ability in order to provide better-personalized instruction. Despite its benefits, and its newfound popularity, ability grouping is still facing some criticism from those who are afraid it may put low-achieving students at a disadvantage.

IPA has also looked at ability grouping as a solution to educational under-achievement in children, and our work in India and Kenya has demonstrated its effectiveness. In Kenya, students were divided into units based on their initial (exam-measured) academic preparedness. This ability grouping led to more homogenized classes—which in turn allowed “teachers to better tailor their materials to the level of their students.” The students who participated in this type of tailored learning had higher test scores, as well as long-term learning gains after the classes were re-combined ([full study description here](#)).

In India, where many students had fallen below basic competency levels for their grade, targeting extra assistance to students’ levels also led to increases in test scores. In a number of Vadodara and Mumbai schools, a tutor was assigned to children in grades 2 through 4 who had been identified as “falling behind their peers.” Following the tutoring program, the lowest-achieving third of students realized an [8% gain](#) in passing scores on competency tests, and even the highest-achieving third realized a 4% gain.

Overall, we’ve found that ability grouping can increase test scores, and decrease gaps in academic achievement. In Kenya, it even appeared that joining the lower-achieving student group put students at an advantage, rather than a disadvantage, as researchers found that the “decrease in peer quality was compensated by a positive effect of being at the top of the class.” While the circumstances surrounding ability grouping in the US may be unique, our data suggests that targeting teaching to the level of the child can be a powerful tool for the developing world.

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