

Research Briefing N° 76

Ability grouping, segregation and civic competences among adolescents

This research examines the linkages between ability grouping, classroom social and ethnic segregation, and civic competences (understood here as referring to attitudes and behaviours as well as knowledge and skills). It does so by analysing data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study among 14-year olds.

Key words: ability grouping; social segregation; ethnic segregation; civic competences



Key findings

The findings are relevant for policy makers and practitioners interested in the wider benefits of comprehensive education.

- Grouping by ability is associated with more social segregation across classrooms but not with more ethnic segregation.
- Grouping by ability leads to greater disparities of civic knowledge and skills. It is not associated with disparities of civic attitudes and participation.

In countries practicing grouping by ability the peer effect is much larger than in countries with comprehensive systems (i.e. the effect of classroom social composition on civic knowledge and skills).

What we did

The project began in 2010 and aimed to explore the links between ability grouping, classroom social and ethnic segregation and civic competences. The literature on ability grouping suggests that classroom social and ethnic segregation is greater in countries which practice ability grouping. It also expects these countries to show greater disparities of civic competences and stronger peer effects on these competences. The research investigated these propositions by analysing data of the IEA Civic Education Study (CIVED). This study consists of a large scale survey conducted in April 1999 among 90,000 14-year-olds from 28 countries worldwide. The research investigated a range of civic competences, including civic knowledge and skills, tolerance, interpersonal trust and civic participation.

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Implications

Policy makers interested in combating inequalities would do well to consider comprehensive education with mixed ability classes as it: helps to minimize school social segregation; helps to reduce disparities of civic knowledge and skills; and minimizes negative peer effects on student performance.

Comprehensive education is not a panacea for all social ills because: it is unrelated to school ethnic segregation; it is unrelated to disparities of civic attitudes and behaviour.

Policy makers should not assume that civic skills, attitudes and behaviours travel as a package. These components can be unrelated to one another or – worse – can mutually exclude each other. Interventions aimed at promoting one civic competence can therefore have unintended negative consequences for other competences.

Further information

The research paper on which this research briefing is based: [‘School Systems, Segregation and Civic Competences among Adolescents’ LLAKES Research Paper 5](#)

The research paper was published in a modified form in *International Sociology*: Janmaat, J.G. (2011). ‘Ability Grouping, Segregation and Civic Competences among Adolescents’. *International Sociology*, 26 (4): 455-482

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How we did it

- The study selected the national samples of thirteen Western states from the CIVED survey.
- The sample in each of these countries consists of more than 2,000 pupils drawn from over 120 schools. In each school one whole classroom was sampled.
- This nested sample structure (a computational approach that allows for the comparison of certain statistical models) enables an investigation of both classroom and individual-level conditions.
- The research made use of multilevel analysis to explore the relations between ability grouping, segregation and civic competences.