Ability grouping has been a conversation in education for many years. In fact, some studies date back several years. Meta-analytic reviews show that ability grouping results depend upon the features of the grouping. In across-grade and within-class programs that provide both grouping and the adjustments of the curriculum, for one to two subjects, students outperform control group, mixed-ability classes by 2-3 months on a grade-equivalent scale (Kulik, J., 1992, Slavin, R. 1987). Programs that enrich curriculum show the greatest gains. Overall, evidence does not support assignment of students to self-contained classes according to ability, but grouping students across-grade for selected subjects or for specific skills. Also, student achievement can increase when groups are frequently reassessed (flexible grouping) with students remaining in heterogeneous classrooms most of the day. A number of additional studies connected student motivation and self-concept. The results of one study (Williams, 1972) found that attempting to group children according to ability may adversely affect their motivation to achieve academically. Therefore, ability grouping should be considered only under the conditions noted above, and monitored frequently.

It would be important to note that using clearly identified goals and proficiency scales increase the accuracy of flexible grouping based upon a specific set of identified criteria. One way to enhance the specificity of prioritized standards is to have teachers create, review, and revise proficiency scales for each standard. Proficiency scales clearly describe what students need to know and be able to do at varying levels of performance (that is, scores 2.0 [simple], 3.0 [target], and 4.0 [complex]).The concept of proficiency scales stems from the research regarding learning progressions. Learning progressions are pathways of development that outline related but increasingly more sophisticated understanding and skill in an area of learning (Heritage, 2008; Daro, Mosher & Corcoran, 2011). Standards documents often designate what students are to know and be able to do to obtain proficiency (score 3.0). However, few standards documents specify knowledge and skills for students slightly below the standard (score 2.0) or exceeding the standard (score 4.0).

Table X.X shows an example of a generic scale based on Marzano’s (2010) work.

Table X.X: Generic Proficiency Scale

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Score 4.0 | More complex goal |
|  | *Score 3.5* | *In addition to score 3.0 performance, partial success at score 4.0 content* |
| Score 3.0 | Target goal |
|  | *Score 2.5* | *No major errors or omissions regarding score 2.0 content, and partial success at score 3.0 content* |
| Score 2.0 | Simpler goal |
|  | *Score 1.5* | *Partial success at score 2.0 content, and major errors or omissions regarding score 3.0 content* |
| Score 1.0 | With help, partial success at score 2.0 content and score 3.0 content |
|  | *Score 0.5* | *With help, partial success at score 2.0 content but not at score 3.0 content* |
| Score 0.0 | Even with help, no success |

In the scale in table X.X, score 3.0 is the prioritized standard. Score 2.0 is a simpler version of the prioritized standard and score 4.0 is a more complex version of the prioritized standard. Scores 2.0, 3.0, and 4.0 are the only parts of the scale whose descriptors change from scale to scale.

Using carefully specified criteria and reassessing students often enhances any use of ability grouping for within class or across-class groups.