

FACTS  
~~MYTHS~~

2025/26

# Peers matter but not always how we think

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## Funding Acknowledgement

This Policy Brief was supported by the European Commission action HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01 for the project LEARN (Longitudinal Educational Achievements: Reducing iNequalities), Grant Agreement 101132531.



Funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Programme  
HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01 Grant Agreement  
101132531 and co-funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)  
grant agreement numbers 10107302, 10092247 and the Swiss State  
Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI)



Creating classrooms that mix students of different ability levels and social backgrounds is often considered a key strategy to generate positive peer spillovers and reduce educational inequality. Yet, evidence shows that this assumption does not always hold true.

Most education systems - especially at the primary and lower secondary levels - promote classroom diversity to prevent segregation and to encourage students to benefit from each other's differences. The underlying belief is that mixed classrooms foster inclusion, cooperation, and equity<sup>1</sup>.

For decades, classroom formation practices were shaped by *de facto* or *de jure* segregation based on gender, socioeconomic background, or academic ability. Such divisions often translated into unequal learning opportunities. In the aftermath of World War II, and with the growing emphasis on freedom and civil rights, European education policies increasingly supported socioeconomic and ability diversity within schools.

Despite its popularity, the idea that classroom diversity automatically reduces inequality is far from universally supported by evidence. Some studies find that having classmates from higher socioeconomic backgrounds enhances learning outcomes - perhaps because these students' parents tend to be more engaged, monitor teaching quality, and exchange useful educational information<sup>2</sup>. However, when it comes to ability diversity, the picture becomes more complex. The assumption that lower-achieving students will naturally assimilate the behaviours and performance of higher-achieving peers<sup>3</sup> - the so-called *assimilation effect* - is not consistently supported. On the contrary, several studies point to a *big-fish-in-a-little-pond* effect<sup>4</sup>, in which exposure to more capable classmates lowers self-esteem and, consequently, leads to poorer academic performance and less ambitious educational choices<sup>5</sup>.

Recent research in Italy, focusing on lower secondary schools, has investigated the causal impact of both ability-based and socioeconomic peer spillovers. The findings suggest that having a higher share of classmates with well-educated or affluent parents has a consistently positive effect. In contrast, the ability peer effect appears slightly negative, indicating that negative comparison mechanisms may take hold.

These results are important. They do not call for abandoning the principle of heterogeneous classroom composition - since the combined effect of ability and socioeconomic diversity remains, overall, positive. However, they highlight the need to **acknowledge and manage the unintended consequences** of peer comparison. Teachers, in particular, play a crucial role in counteracting negative comparison dynamics and ensuring that classroom diversity truly translates into educational equity rather than hidden hierarchies.

#### NOTE

*Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.*

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Cooley Fruehwirth and Jessica Gagete-Miranda, "Your Peers' Parents: Spillovers from Parental Education," *Economics of Education Review* 73 (December 2019): 101910, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2019.101910>.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Boone et al., "SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY Albert Bandura Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977. 247 Pp., Paperbound," *Group & Organization Studies* 2, no. 3 (1977): 384–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/105960117700200317>.

<sup>4</sup> James A. Davis, "The Campus as a Frog Pond: An Application of the Theory of Relative Deprivation to Career Decisions of College Men," *American Journal of Sociology* 72, no. 1 (1966): 17–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/224257>.

<sup>5</sup> Antecol et al., "Peer Effects in Disadvantaged Primary Schools."