

National Association for Primary Education

Setting and Streaming in Primary Schools

Despite substantial evidence from research, the setting and streaming of children in primary schools remains widespread. Numerous studies undertaken in both the US and the UK have shown that, overall, the organisation of pupils into homogenous ability sets and classes does not lead to improvement in standards of learning. Only marginal gains have been found for children of exceptionally high ability whereas there are adverse effects upon the progress of most children, particularly the less able..

A majority of the studies assess educational standards in terms of performance in snapshot tests. However there are other, equally important, considerations to be taken into account when we assess children's progress. Aspects of personal development such as the level of confidence and learning how to learn are vital in primary education and it is here that the segregated sets and classes have their most damaging impact. Children who find it difficult to learn are taught by teachers who have the best intentions but who, nonetheless, lower the challenge presented to the children and who have reduced expectations of outcomes. There is regression to the mean and in the course of time children are conditioned to become more like the stereotype of the set or stream in which they are placed.

Selection for segregated teaching groups is problematic and the younger the child the more it becomes. Children born in the spring or the summer, boys and the disadvantaged by accident of birth are vulnerable to allocation to learning groups where early lack of progress is hardened into long term failure. Children's past should not predetermine their future. Head teachers of schools which continue to favour setting and streaming should review the membership of the lower groups.

It is argued that selection can be provisional and that children can be promoted or demoted depending on their progress. However this rarely happens. Research studies show that once segregated learning groups are formed there is little movement between the groups. This is related to the conditioning of children to conform to the nature of the group to which they have been allocated.

Comparative studies have shown that setting and streaming, particularly with regard to younger primary pupils, are more prevalent in the UK than in other developed countries. This contributes to the wide spread of attainment among young people at the conclusion of formal education. Differences in educational attainment related to early upbringing are exacerbated by streamed schooling and continue to widen through adolescence.

Primary teachers focus on the growth and development of individual children and the question should be asked: why do schools persist in organising groups and classes which show real evidence of damage to the learning process? The answer lies in government policies which demand frequent high stakes national assessments. There is a wholly unsound assumption that snap shot testing is an accurate measure of progress and setting

and streaming facilitate coaching for immediate success in tests. The most recent confirmation of this was demonstrated when setting in year 1 was introduced by a growing number of schools following the imposition of the test of phonic knowledge.

The longer term benefits of natural, mixed ability groups should not be sacrificed to short term gain. A major change in assessment policy is required in order that the schools can be encouraged to offer their pupils true equality of opportunity.

References

Setting and Streaming: A Research Review. SCRE Publication 143. 1999

R. Marks., *Ability Grouping in Primary Schools*. Northwich, Critical Publishing. 2016

