

De-streaming: What do we know?

Introduction

Streaming is deeply embedded into the organisational structure of many primary and secondary schools in Aotearoa, and even in early childhood. Whether the practice is called banding or ability grouping, it is a method of sifting learners for perceived ability and manageability.

Streaming has a long whakapapa. It was intentionally designed to sort those who would provide the labour force in our economy. It is now in place for different reasons and systemic in its bias and harm for Māori rangatahi and many Pacific and other minoritised learners.

We want all rangatahi to be inspired by their futures. We want them to thrive in their education, confident in their culture and able to determine their own path. Streaming is a barrier to this vision, and it needs to end. This is about us as a nation and what we value. It is about being fair! (p.21)

Kawānatanga, rangatiratanga, ōritetanga: our responsibility as Tiriti-honouring people and organisations

The Education and Training Act (which became law in August 2020, replacing the 1989 Education Act) includes a new requirement for school boards of trustees to “ensure schools give effect to the Treaty of Waitangi by achieving equitable outcomes for Māori students”.



Choice, agency and responsibility

In flexible groups, learners see that everyone adds value to the learning community. They bring their own skills, talents, and life experiences to the group and they develop ownership of, and responsibility for, their own learning.⁹ (p.8)



Enduring and fixed grouping – the impact

“Learners in low ability groups experience little choice, with ‘drill and skill’ lessons and no pathway or agency to move out of this group.”⁹



“All the smart classes have all the white people in it.”¹¹ (p.8)

Flexible grouping – the advantages

“Flexible grouping for different content areas is beneficial for those who learn and think differently because they may have challenges in some content areas and not in others. Gifted education research indicates that learners want choice, control and challenge and this can be achieved in flexible groups.”¹⁰



“We design our own assessment, in discussion with the teacher. We essentially write our own based on a context.”¹² (p.13)

Equity and challenge



Overall, the evidence indicates that streaming has little if any overall benefit in terms of learner academic outcomes.²

In contrast, students’ experiences of low ability grouping include disengagement, racism, stigma, low expectations and, subsequently, low achievement. Those in high ability groups experienced pressure to succeed, anxiety, fast-moving pace, and dissatisfaction with learning.³

Enduring and fixed grouping – the impact

“Streaming often increases racial segregation in learning settings, with evidence that this impacts on learners’ acceptance of racial difference and interactions between racial groups.”⁴



In 2019, one-third of Year 11 Māori students were not entered for a full NCEA mathematics course.⁶ (p.8)

Flexible grouping – the advantages

“Giving students the opportunity to take on challenging tasks as a diverse group is not only a matter of equity, but also one of improving learning outcomes. Differentiation does not need to result in learners working on individual tasks. We know that discussion and collaboration give ‘high fliers’ the opportunity to elaborate on their thinking, provide all learners with more opportunities to question, discuss and share ideas.”⁵



“I tell you we have beaten the national stats for achieve, merit and excellence across the board for males, females, Māori, European and Pasifika.”⁷ (p.11)

Wellbeing, engagement and self-esteem

Long-term ability grouping impacts students’ self-efficacy, a key determinant for successful learning, progress and achievement. Our expectations matter.¹³



Enduring and fixed grouping – the impact

“Streaming diminishes the mana of learners in low streams, the stigma of belonging to an “underclass” can remain for life and across generations.”¹⁴

“They didn’t believe in themselves because nobody believed in them.”¹⁶ (p.10)



In your head, you’re saying, I’m in the cab class, I’m dumb so I’m not going to try.”¹⁷ (p.8)

Flexible grouping – the advantages

“Within-class grouping is most successful if groups regularly change and learners can move between groups. Engagement and expectations are higher as a result.”¹⁵



“Student engagement went through the roof.”¹⁸ (p.11)

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