

One in six junior school children streamed in England

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Research published by the Institute of Education has revealed that one in six children is allocated a stream by the age of seven. Streaming is a distinct type of selection, in which pupils are placed into different classes on the basis of a judgment about their supposed academic ability.

Wales has the highest incidence of streaming, where one in five children (19.5 percent) are streamed by ability, Scotland 16 percent and Northern Ireland 11 percent.

Several research studies have proven that streaming and setting, where children are divided into ability groups within the same class, can cause long term damage to a child's educational achievements and aspirations. Its prevalence reveals that a two-tier education system is firmly entrenched behind a mask of continued adherence to the comprehensive ideal of mixed ability teaching in order to at least partially overcome educational disadvantages associated with social class.

The initial findings of the research establishes class is the determining factor, above all others, including gender, ethnicity and the age of the child relative to his or her peers, in who is set in a bottom stream and who is placed at the top.

The children were included in the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education in London. Only the initial findings have been published, and the full report will be released in September.

The report is based on information gathered from 8,875 children across Britain. Of the children who were streamed, 64.3 percent were also set for literacy and 69.5 percent for mathematics. Children in the bottom stream had witnessed more consistent poverty and were more likely to have behavioural problems and mothers

with fewer qualifications.

The analysis of setting focused on literacy and maths and included all children, regardless of their streaming status. Setting was even more widespread than streaming. Nearly 26 percent of children were set for both literacy and maths. Of these 11.2 percent were set for maths by the age of seven.

A child's educational fate and much of their entire adult life is being sealed by such measures. Professor Susan Hallam, the research project leader said, "We know that, once in a stream, the opportunities for movement to another stream are limited, so life chances are being determined at a very early age".

The research will follow the impact of this practice on children as they grow older and examine how children's educational outcomes are determined by their stream and set placements.

Research conducted in 2007 commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) shows that when left in the mixed ability environment, children do better than those who have been grouped according to the hierarchy of test results. If you take a child out of mixed ability teaching and put them in a slow stream, he or she tends to reach the level of underachievement deemed to be expected of them rather than strive to grasp the topic and rejoin the mainstream. Research has also found that streaming doesn't have any real beneficial results for children at the top of the "academic ladder" either, as they often settle into a comfort zone and are not challenged in an all-rounded way.

The practice of streaming is becoming more common in disadvantaged schools, especially with immigrant children. Exposing challenged children to the entire spectrum of ability, rather than putting them into a smaller pigeon hole that stunts their ambition to grow,

has a far greater impact on their educational achievements. The NCCA research showed that children in lower streams perform poorly in the Junior Cert exams. One factor in this is that lower stream children progressively become more negative about their school, act up and end up drifting or becoming disengaged.

The Millennium survey reveals that despite the abolition of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) tests for 5 and 7 year olds, the pressure to teach to targets dominates from the moment a child enters the school gates for the first time.

The practice of streaming all ages of children has a long history in Britain and was widespread throughout the 1940s and 1950s, as children competed for grammar school places in the 11-plus exam.

Already by then, research had established that streaming could have negative social consequences. By the 1970s only 20 percent of schools that previously streamed chose to do so. By the 1990s, streaming had virtually disappeared in primary education and mixed ability teaching became the norm.

The Conservative government's introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 and the implementation of SATs for children aged 5, 7 and 11 saw the gradual re-emergence of streaming, setting and banding in primary schools.

Labour's relentless intervention into every aspect of the education system during its 13 years in office from 1997 far surpassed anything carried out by the Tories. The 1997 Government White Paper, "Excellence in Schools", was aimed at encouraging and legitimising setting by falsely claiming that it "raised standards".

This period saw the practice of selection firmly entrenched and the implementation of Labour's policy of performance pay for teachers, linked to exam results. It produced a huge increase in streaming, as teachers were pressured to teach to tests in a target-driven system. The system is constantly monitored by a managerial elite of headmasters and numerous deputy heads (who do little or no teaching), subject to constant and invasive external monitoring by the number-crunchers of the official education police, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED).



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