

Streaming Experiment Transforms Test Results

Primary schools in a Labour inner-city stronghold have overturned decades of so-called progressive educational thinking by proving that a return to traditional "streaming" of pupils by ability raises standards dramatically. They have achieved huge improvements in test results in mathematics and reading after abandoning the modern orthodoxy of mixed-ability classes. It is the first hard evidence that grouping pupils of similar ability together can improve their performance. The pioneering scheme was set up by Labour-controlled Nottinghamshire County Council after tests revealed that many primary pupils in its inner-city schools were under-achieving. Nearly one in five was barely able to read and hardly any were in the top-ability bands.

The unpublished results show a more than eight-fold increase in the number of high achievers and a halving in non-readers in just two years. Council researchers found pupils were more motivated and teachers set more challenging work that was better matched to pupils' abilities. The findings call into question what government inspectors describe as schools' dogmatic adherence to mixed-ability teaching since it swept the country in the 1960s and 1970s. Their reports have suggested that this is commonly linked to poor standards because of the problems teachers have in pitching work at the right level for all pupils.

Few primary schools group pupils by ability, partly because of claims that it is élitist and stigmatizes the less able. John Botham, the head teacher who co-ordinated the Nottingham scheme, said primary teachers had been "railroaded" into one approach when common sense dictated that a variety of methods should be used. Botham said, "We don't want to go back to the 1950s, where pupils sat in rows all day, but we also don't want to return to the 1970s, where there was very little focused teaching and it was all about discovery and children doing their own thing. We want the best of both systems."

Ten schools, serving some of the most deprived parts of Nottingham, started from the premise that they would test out what worked - irrespective of whether it was seen as right- or left-wing. All introduced sets where pupils were grouped by ability for English and mathematics but stayed in mixed-ability classes for other subjects. When the scheme started in 1992, 19.1% of seven-to-11-year-olds could not read, almost 10 times the national average. This year, the proportion had dropped to 8.3%. The transformation is being studied by government inspectors as a model of what can be achieved in the inner cities. Last year, they said a generation of inner-city pupils was being failed by low expectations, poor standards and a culture that put creating a "welcoming and secure" environment for pupils above academic achievement.

(Excerpted from "The London Sunday Times", December 18, 1994)

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