

# Setting harms education of some young children, report warns

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Teaching young children in groups according to their ability does not increase their achievements and is damaging to those pupils allocated to the bottom groups, the biggest review into primary education for 40 years has concluded.

Bright children perform just as well whether they are taught in mixed-ability classes or in exclusive groups of high achievers, the study found. But less bright children do less well when they are taught with other lower achievers than if they study with the rest of the class, according to the latest reports of the Primary Review, led by Cambridge University.

The reports, by academics from the University of London's Institute of Education and King's College, also called for smaller classes, arguing that pupils can fall behind when they are forced to move to larger classes as they progress up the school.

They called for classes of fewer than 25 pupils for the youngest children as well as for the first year of secondary school to stop pupils falling behind when they transfer from primary to secondary school.

The three reports published today, examining school groupings, buildings and teaching, followed 25 earlier reports that delivered a damning indictment of the Government's record on primary education.

The Government has encouraged schools to use ability grouping or setting as a way of raising standards. The Prime Minister used his first major speech on education in October last year to call for more setting by ability in secondary schools. The Conservatives have also said they want to see a big rise in setting by ability in individual subjects.

But today's report suggests that there is no significant boost to children's results and that some pupils suffer socially and emotionally because of it.

Setting is most common in secondary schools but a significant minority of primaries have also adopted it – particularly in English and maths. Figures from Ofsted, the schools watchdog, suggest that 28 per cent of schools set seven- to 11-year-olds for maths, 15 per cent for English and 2 per cent for science.

Children are usually placed in ability groups according to their performance in national tests or other assessments. However, children with behaviour problems are often placed in the bottom groups no matter how highly they achieve. Research has suggested that the bottom groups tend to include disproportionate numbers of pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, boys and summer-born children.

While in theory children should be able to move between the groups, in practice children rarely move, damning pupils in the bottom groups to low achievement, the study found.

The report called on schools to "look more deeply into their current practices" and resist the "rhetoric" which urged them to adopt ability groupings which were not in the best interests of pupils.

A spokeswoman for the Department for Children, Schools and Families said that teachers should decide which kinds of groupings worked best for their class. "We support effective setting and grouping in schools but it is up to teachers' professional judgement to apply it," she said.