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No 'clear advantage to setting'

Setting in primary schools by ability has no clear advantages, but can have a detrimental effect on children in the bottom groups, a report says.

Setting is when children are in ability groups for different subjects.

Those in the top group work faster and have enhanced learning opportunities, with teachers expecting more from them, a team of academics from London said.

But those in the lower groups can be stigmatised, and often have their activities restricted, the report said.

The findings come nearly a decade after then prime minister Tony Blair said schools needed to "take account of different abilities, for example by setting".

Another finding of the paper, published as part of the Primary Review - a wide-ranging examination of primary school education - suggested class sizes should be cut to a maximum of 25 to help young children who struggle with reading.

It also suggested that smaller classes could help children in the first year of secondary school.

'Arbitrary affair'

On setting, the report said: "Teachers believe that they are matching instruction to the level of the students' ability, but the evidence suggests that many pupils find the work they are given is inappropriate; often it is too easy."

In fact, teaching quality had the biggest influence on whether pupils were successful or not, said the researchers from the Institute of Education and King's College, University of London.

And teaching quality varied from group to group.

Pupils were aware of the grouping structures in their schools.

Those in the lower and the top groups were often teased by their peers, while those in the lowest group could be stigmatised, they said.

But the researchers added that the allocation of pupils to groups was a "somewhat arbitrary affair" and often depended on factors not related to attainment.

It continued: "The adoption of structured ability groupings therefore has no positive effects on attainment but has detrimental effects on the social and personal outcomes for some children."

The researchers said group working within classes offered more flexibility when done well.

But they added that it could be used more effectively.



The academics said group working could be used more effectively

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