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“ They are a strange lot at Chelsea, being run on the whim of one man ”

Martin Samuel

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From The Times

May 16, 2008

Sets in primary classes can blight a child's school life

Nicola Woolcock

Children placed in bottom sets in primary school suffer "adverse long-term" effects and are often stuck in that group for the rest of their school days, an academic report says.

The authors of one of the final reports for the Primary Review also found that some badly behaved pupils were placed in bottom sets, regardless of ability.

The review, led by researchers from the University of Cambridge, is the largest evaluation of primary education in 40 years. This will be followed by a government review of the primary school curriculum, led by Sir Jim Rose, the former director of inspection at Ofsted, which began in January. It will focus on how to improve the chances of summer-born children and consider giving younger children more time for play and less formal learning.

The primary school study, by researchers from the Institute of Education and King's College London, investigated the effect of classroom groupings. Their report suggests: "There are no consistent effects of structured ability grouping, such as setting, on attainment." But it adds: "There can be detrimental affects on social and personal outcomes for some children."

Although pupils in the top groups could have an "enhanced educational experience", children who were deemed less bright were less fortunate.

The authors said: "While in theory movement between groups is possible, in practice it is frequently restricted, limiting some children's educational experiences and having adverse long-term effects on some of those children who start in the lowest groups.

"Pupil differentiation, by ability or attainment, has not generally been associated with positive learning outcomes and it may restrict some pupils' access to significant areas of knowledge, and enforce social divisions between them."

HAVE YOUR SAY

As a teacher teaching lower ability maths groups...surely it is better for these children to be supported and feel they are succeeding in a smaller group? In a large class maths group most would just give up. They are big fish in a small pond. My aim is to give them confidence to succeed.

Carolyn Jane King, cheltenham, UK

This story does question the ability of teachers to improve the lot of children in the bottom sets. Undoubtedly these research findings would depress any parent whose child remained an under-achiever, especially if the parent considered the amount of tax he had paid for the privilege!

Des, Edinburgh,

It's particularly a problem for children with chronic health problems, such as asthma, who miss a lot of school and get no help to catch up. After a while you stop trying because no one will help you and you'll always be bottom of the class.

Why it takes an academic report to see this I do not know.

Thalia, London,

HAVE YOUR SAY

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