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# School streaming 'hurts' less-academic students'

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By [Vaimoana Tapaleao](#)

Children at the lower end of a streaming system at school do worse, but it has no affect on brighter students, a British study has found.

Less-able children achieve poorly when they are placed with children of the same ability but achieve better if they study with the rest of the class.

More-capable students perform well regardless of whether they are in an exclusive class of high achievers or taught in a mixed-ability class, according to the latest reports of the Primary Review - led by Cambridge University.

Auckland Primary Principals Association president Owen Alexander says streaming children can be "devastating".

"You end up labelling them. Even though schools don't tell students which class is the lowest and the highest, kids know. For those at the bottom, their self-esteem can be affected," he said.

Mr Alexander said he did not know of any primary schools with a streaming system, and said there has been a move away from it in secondary schools.

"They [kids] come out of primary school, where they are encouraged. But when they get to high school, streaming definitely has limited them."

Children are usually placed in ability groups according to their performance in national tests or other assessments.

However, those with behavioural problems are often placed in the bottom groups no matter how highly they achieve.

Secondary Principals Association president Peter Gall acknowledged that streaming makes no difference to a motivated child.

Mr Gall, principal of Papatoetoe High School in Manukau City, says the new curriculum has had an impact on the way schools function.



More-capable schoolchildren will do well regardless of the stream they are in. Photo / Wairarapa Times-Age

"Streaming is probably something that has happened as a result of NCEA, which virtually organises students into streaming subjects like maths, English and science."

The study found that 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.

Professor John Hattie, of Auckland University, who has researched classroom composition and peer effects, says schools would do better to re-group students once in a while, to prevent "locking" them in.

He said there was also "a difference in the distribution of teachers".

"There certainly was a tendency for better-quality teachers to be assigned to the top classes," Professor Hattie said.

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

They called for classes of fewer than 25 pupils for the youngest children and for first-year secondary school students, to stop pupils falling behind when they transferred from primary to college.

The University of Auckland's dean of education, Dr John Langley, said although most people thought a smaller class would be better for a child, class size was not the issue, rather the teacher was.

"You can have a class of 25 kids or fewer and a bad teacher, where on the other hand you can have a class of around 30 kids and a good teacher, who can still handle and teach those kids well. It's really around the quality of the teacher," Dr Langley said.

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