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TOP

Education

Streaming in schools: The 'seismic shift' that's looming in education

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NEW ZEALAND LISTENER

By Mark Revington

Most New Zealand schools stream their students according to ability. In what's being billed as a seismic shift in education, moves are under way to end the practice. By Mark Revington.

"Streaming kills dreams," says Hana O'Regan. And she should know. As chief executive of Core Education, an equity-focused learning consultancy, she has observed the unfortunate consequences of picking early winners in our schools.

Streaming means sorting students into groups or classes based on perceived ability. More than 90 per cent of schools in New Zealand stream their students in some way, in the belief that it helps both students and teachers progress at a pace that suits almost everyone.

But research is increasingly questioning this assumption. It has been noted that in this country, those in the top streams are usually white and privileged, while those at the bottom of the heap are often brown.

Eruera Tarena, executive director of Tokona te Raki: Māori Futures Collective, a Ngāi Tahu organisation that helps young Māori take on leadership roles, calls it an outdated and biased idea. Streaming, he says, means students are taught in a system that strips them of motivation and often drums into them that their futures are predetermined.

Even Education Minister Chris Hipkins is against the practice, although his government and the Ministry of Education leave the decision to individual schools.

Hipkins has said streaming is discriminatory and unfair and does more harm than good. Other critics say the practice suits some parents and teachers, but not students.

Unless streaming is halted, our children face a bleak future, says Tokona te Raki convener Piripi Prendergast. We have a growing young Māori population and an ageing Pākehā population, but streaming adversely affects Māori and Pasifika youth most of all.

TOP

According to a ministry report last year, and a recent Tokona te Raki report, schools that have stopped streaming report improved academic achievement, especially among Māori and Pasifika students. They also report much improved student motivation and aspiration.

Although the government and ministry have resisted the temptation to ban streaming, as Ontario in Canada has done, some believe it is inevitable it will eventually be ditched. "I don't think we are at the tipping point yet, but there is huge momentum for change," says O'Regan.

Not everyone is convinced, of course. O'Regan agrees a ban may not necessarily be the answer. "If the government said 'stop', all that will happen is that schools will do it by different means. It'll be the same practice but by a different name because people believe that they went through the system and it didn't do them any harm."

But she believes both teachers and parents will eventually be won over by the evidence.

Tokona te Raki has been researching streaming for the past five years and has been asked by the ministry and the Iwi Chairs Forum to lead a collaborative approach to end it. It has assembled a group including representatives from the Mātauranga Iwi Leaders Group (the education arm of the Iwi Chairs Forum), the ministry, the Education Review Office, New Zealand Qualifications Authority, principals, teachers' unions, professional learning associations and Auckland and Canterbury universities, and intends to release an action plan by September. This blueprint will raise awareness of the pitfalls of streaming, and propose alternatives and next steps, says Prendergast.

Fair assessment

Many parents who expect their children to pursue professional careers do not seem to realise it, but global research shows that streaming does not benefit anyone, except some teachers who see it as an efficient way of dealing with large classes.

In primary schools, children are often streamed due to a teacher's assessment of ability. Although we would like to believe that all children get a fair assessment, research shows these decisions are often based on an individual teacher's prejudice.

Streaming in secondary schools occurs most often in mathematics and science, as these are subjects often seen as vital to jobs of the future. It is usually based on the result of a single test. One of the reasons critics believe mixed-ability classes are much better for

students is because they take into account a broader range of strengths and weaknesses.

Streaming is especially damning for Māori. Extension classes for brighter children are predominantly Pākehā, while many Māori are placed in foundation classes, colloquially known as "the cabbage classes". Critics believe this can lead to stereotyping and the risk of Māori and Pasifika students internalising those stereotypes.

According to Prendergast and Tokona te Raki, streaming also acts as a gatekeeper, reducing the career choices of students placed in lower streams. In 2019, a third of Year 11 Māori students were not entered for a full NCEA mathematics course, ministry figures show.

Channelling Māori

According to O'Regan, streaming has its roots in early attempts to establish Māori as a labouring class. "In Aotearoa New Zealand, the history of streaming was deliberately around channelling Māori into vocational roles."

She has researched the history of streaming in New Zealand and concluded it came about by deliberate intent. "It was designed to keep Māori out of the academic profession. When you look at the rhetoric that came out from the government and the Director of Education and his reports to the House of Representatives, it's explicit. So, streaming isn't just a test that you get to determine if you're going to be in a certain class, it's also about the opportunities you get or don't get and how you get channelled into certain courses and then certain vocations."

She points to a link on the Office of the Auditor-General's website, which examines historical and current context for Māori education. It specifies how, in 1862, government expectations of Māori were not high. A school inspector reported to Parliament that "a refined education or high mental culture would be inappropriate for Māori because they are better calculated by nature to get their living by manual than by mental labour".

Later, in the 1880s, Te Aute College produced Māori graduates but came under pressure to abandon its academic curriculum and teach agriculture instead.

In 1915, the annual report from the Department of Education quoted the inspector of native schools: "So far as the department is concerned, there is no encouragement given

to Māori boys who wish to enter the learned professions. The aim is to turn, if possible, their attention to the branches of industry for which the Māori seems best suited."

And in 1930-31, the Director of Education thought schooling "should lead the Māori lad to be a good farmer and the Māori girl to be a good farmer's wife".

As the Waitangi Tribunal noted in its 1999 Wānanga Capital Establishment Report, "it would not be difficult to argue that the seeds of Māori underachievement in the modern education system were sown by some of the past education policies".

Reciprocal teaching

Among the primary schools that have already stopped streaming is Viscount Primary in Mangere, Auckland. About 88 per cent of its students are Pasifika and 10 per cent are Māori. It has replaced streaming with a programme called "reciprocal teaching".

Prendergast says when he walked through classrooms at the school, he was struck by how many students were working in groups with tightly defined roles and processes.

"The students were leading their own learning and their own assessment."

Viscount principal Shirley Hardcastle says there was no pushback from parents or teachers, who all just wanted the best for their children. She notes that primary schools had already moved away from whole-class teaching some time ago, amid a growing emphasis on diagnosing learning needs and teaching these at a more individualised level.

The challenge was how this could be done, and the most practical way seemed to be to put children into three to four groups with similar needs. This certainly made teaching more manageable, she says, and teachers could focus more particularly on specific needs.

"One of the issues, I think, is that we need to keep working on finding ways to organise that work better so that all children can learn and succeed," Hardcastle says. "One of the great things about the movement Piripi [Prendergast] is championing is that they are focused on providing examples of how to organise and work differently."

One of the important factors is recognising the power of peers in the learning process, she says, and tapping into children's knowledge and friendship dynamics. This ens everyone benefits, and no one feels embarrassed by their lack of knowledge.

"Everyone was keen. We had already moved maths learning to a more collaborative, mixed-ability group approach, so staff were keen to apply these principles to reading. The real motivation to explore and adopt this approach, though, was in seeing the way children engaged so fully in the programme — this was something Piripi commented on when he visited the classrooms."

At primary school, teachers often divide a class into groups for maths and literacy, based on each student's learning needs and progress through the curriculum. The groups can change during a term but usually don't.

"What we have sought to do is to move to teaching maths and reading in mixed-ability groups within each class, instead of groups based on perceived ability," says Hardcastle. "We are still mindful of individual needs, but we enable students to be co-teachers through the group process."

There is still room in this approach to draw individual students aside for extra support if that is needed, she says. While some teachers naturally worked this way, others seemed to pick it up quickly. "It probably helped that we had worked on a problem-solving, mixed-ability approach to maths before we started on reading. A few found it more challenging, but once they have experienced this approach and seen how the students engage with it, they are willing to make it a success, too."

The new approach has taken a year and needs revisiting annually, she says. But she has already noticed that students have been more engaged, more willing to help others, keener to take on more responsibility, showing more respect when working independently, and more willing to contribute.

Hardcastle says she first became aware of the downside of streaming and ability grouping back in the 1970s.

"The evidence has shown that students in the lowest groups or classes do not benefit from this approach. One of the reasons is that they are not able to benefit from the information other classmates may be able to share. Another is that they are aware they are in this group and start to label themselves as the low achievers and start to act accordingly."

Collaboration crucial

TOP

Christchurch Girls' High School, which has a roll of 1250 including 12 per cent Māori and 5 per cent Pasifika, stopped streaming for Year 9 last year as part of a wider update of its educational practices, says principal Christine O'Neill. This year, the school stopped streaming at Year 10 level as well.

A letter to parents explained that the decision was based on research that clearly showed streaming was divisive, detrimental and had an insignificant effect on academic attainment.

The move was approved by the board of trustees, and again received no noticeable opposition from parents or teachers. O'Neill says this was largely due to plenty of consultation and sharing of information before the move. "We spent quite a bit of time getting parents, students and staff to collaborate with us."

Critics of streaming acknowledge that this sort of collaboration and information will be crucial if they are to win over the sceptics. Prendergast calls it a seismic shift in education.

O'Neill agrees that it's a bold move that will take courage. "We can't be authentic to our values and stream. What we introduced is much more personal for individual students. It is about providing an education for the future for the girls, but one which is innovative and more personalised."

A key problem with streaming is that it tends to measure an extremely narrow band of skills, which doesn't fit with modern demands for diversity and a range of talents, she says. "We need to teach people, rather than teaching subjects. That's a different emphasis."

Teacher Vicki Teesdale says ending streaming is clearly better for developing students. "No one in the school would doubt 'why'. The challenge is 'how', but we wouldn't go back. That doesn't mean it's not difficult, but ultimately it's far better for our students.

"You know it's the right thing and love doing it, but in terms of the message, you've just got to be constantly revising what you're doing. I think for some people that can be a little bit daunting. It's educating the whole person and challenging that person."

So, if the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that streaming doesn't work, why are schools in Aotearoa persisting with the practice for now?

TOP

Shannon Walsh is a strategic researcher with New Zealand's largest education union, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), and is also on Tokona te Raki's blueprint design team. Her theory is that teachers find streaming helpful in coping with their huge workloads.

"The expectations and demands we place on teachers have expanded greatly over the past few decades, but the resourcing of schools hasn't kept pace, says Walsh. "The teachers I talk to strongly support ending streaming and ability grouping. The key barrier I see isn't attitudes or awareness, it's the often-overwhelming pressures teachers face in their day-to-day jobs.

"We have very large class sizes, especially at primary schools, which are staffed at lower teacher-to-student ratios than secondary schools. Streaming and ability grouping are seen as ways to manage large, diverse groups of students."

One teacher the Listener spoke to, who did not want to be named because it was against her school's policy, said she did not personally support streaming, because of the evidence that it disadvantaged students placed in lower streams.

"When I have spoken to older teachers who are pro streaming, their argument is that it is very challenging to create resources that can cater to a diverse set of needs and it's challenging to be teaching to such a range of different needs. Personally, having taught an extension class at all very similar academic levels and mainstream classes, I don't notice too many differences in the resources that I offer."

TOP