

REPORT SUMMARY

THE
NEW ZEALAND
INITIATIVE

Class Divides?

The impact of streaming on educational achievement and equality

Michael Johnston and Benjamin Macintyre

Classroom streaming – separating students into classes based on how they have done in the past – is a current topic of debate in New Zealand. Some commentators want to ban streaming. The Ministry of Education would like schools to stop doing it voluntarily.

In this report, we look at the evidence on the effects of streaming on students' learning. The main findings were:

Greater learning differences between students are commonly found in schools that stream than in schools that do not.

The greater gaps might be because of differences in the way high and low streams are taught. Streaming itself might not be the problem.

Destreaming has its challenges. If schools stop streaming without changing the way they teach, it can do more harm than good.

The impact of streaming on students' learning can depend on the subject.

Very few New Zealand based studies have measured the effects of streaming on learning. Most studies focus either on schools' streaming practices or teachers' and students' views of streaming.

The international literature focusses much more on how streaming affects learning. It includes studies of successful and unsuccessful destreaming.

International research suggests that streaming does not greatly affect average educational attainment. However, larger educational achievement gaps are often found in streamed schools than in unstreamed schools.

Students living in poverty are more often placed in lower streams than their wealthier peers. In New Zealand, that includes many Māori and Pasifika students. Any harmful effects of streaming will especially affect their learning.

Streaming is not necessarily a direct cause of increased educational inequality. Research suggests that lower-stream students are often taught less engaging content by less experienced teachers. So, it may not be streaming itself that increases gaps in achievement but streaming done poorly.

Destreaming alone may do more harm than good. Successful destreaming requires teaching support for students previously in lower streams. Investment in resources, curriculum and teaching is essential.

Psychology offers insights into why streaming often has different effects on the learning of students assigned to high and low streams.

Stereotype threat is a psychological phenomenon that can affect people belonging to negatively stereotyped groups. Being reminded of those stereotypes can cause members of those groups to behave in ways that conform with them.

Stereotype threat might partly explain why streaming is associated with increased gaps between higher and lower-achieving students. Placing students in lower streams will likely activate any negative stereotypes about their ability to learn. In New Zealand, that includes Māori and Pasifika, and in coeducational schools, boys. So, stereotype threat is potentially a reason to expect that members of some ethnic minorities will fare less well in streamed classes than in unstreamed ones.

On the other hand, streaming can help ensure that students who struggle are not left behind. Teachers must ensure that students master each learning step before attempting to build on it. Streamed classes make this easier because each class or group includes a narrower range of student achievement.

Mathematics and early literacy are particularly demanding, which may explain why some studies have shown that streaming or grouping for these subjects can benefit students at all learning stages.

Recommendations

No large-scale study on streaming on educational achievement has been carried out in New Zealand. We recommend that such a study be conducted on the prevalence of streaming in New Zealand, how it is implemented, and its educational effects on students placed in different streams. Schools could make informed decisions on whether or how to stream in light of such a study.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Johnston is a Senior Research Fellow at the New Zealand Initiative. He is a cognitive psychologist by training and completed his PhD at the University of Melbourne in 1997. He commenced his academic career as a lecturer in psychology and became interested in educational assessment and measurement during a six-year tenure as Senior Statistician at the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. In 2011, he was appointed as a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University of Wellington. Prior to his appointment at the New Zealand Initiative in 2022, he spent three years as Associate Dean (Academic).

Benjamin Macintyre is a Research Assistant at The New Zealand Initiative. He has a BA (with honours) in Politics, International Studies and Italian and an MA (with merit) in International Security from the University of Warwick.