

Nurturing Inequality: How Early Primary School Streaming Creates Difference Via Teachers' Perceptions

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Streaming involves grouping hierarchically, by “ability”, all pupils within a school year-group, for the majority of teaching. Since the turn of the century, it has increasingly been used in English primary education.

Streaming has been resurrected despite evidence that it “exacerbates inequities, without raising average performance.”¹ So how, exactly, does it lead to attainment differences?

Three interrelated theories propose answers to this question: that streaming affects the teaching and opportunities offered to children; that it affects children’s own self-perceptions; and that it affects teachers’ judgements and assessments of pupils.

This analysis focusses on teacher judgements, using data for 800+ seven-year-olds taking part in the UK Millennium Cohort Study. It examines children who score equally on recent

cognitive tests, who were also assessed equally at age five, who have the same individual and family background characteristics, and the same behavioural assessments from their parents and teachers – but who have been placed in different streams.

Despite these similarities, otherwise equivalent pupils in the top stream are viewed by their teachers as having relatively higher ability and attainment, and those in the bottom stream as less able. Formal, teacher-assessed Key Stage One scores also vary in line with pupils’ stream placements.

Teachers’ everyday judgements affect their interactions with children, and formal assessments influence pupils’ trajectories through education. So streaming seems to shape teachers’ perceptions, and – especially as pupils in the lower streams tend disproportionately to have less educated parents – to play a part in perpetuating long-standing inequalities.