

The streams flow on: re-visiting the boundaries between ability groups

John Calvert

PhD Candidate, University of Canterbury

Abstract

This paper takes a look at the idea of grouping students by ability, a very common practice in our schools. It will be taken here that ability grouping, streaming, banding and tracking are all similar enough to be treated as equivalent. Now the work of researchers like Jeannie Oakes (2005) and John Hattie (2009), and a legion of others, indicates strongly that streaming is not a good idea. Of particular interest here, streaming appears to have very negative social justice outcomes. It seems to serve only to replicate, legitimate and exacerbate existing class and ethnic inequalities, both in education, and in society. This looks bad but may perhaps be justified if streaming is an efficient way to “raise achievement for all” – as Government policy rhetoric puts it. The evidence again seems clear; it produces little if anything in the way of learning gains. This all raises a number of puzzling questions. If streaming is so bad then why is it almost universal in New Zealand secondary schools? Why does a widespread and apparently harmful practice elicit such little attention; from parents, teachers, students and indeed, philosophers of education? Is streaming a price we pay to avoid something worse? Why do so many, contrary to the evidence, believe streaming to be a good thing? It is argued, for example, that streaming is a way to provide an education tailored to the different educational needs of each student. That does sound like a good thing. The literature on this topic seems to be dominated by educational and social researchers and the topic is generally dealt with only fleetingly by philosophers of education. Maybe the case is settled and there is nothing further to say on streaming. But surely something which is the everyday reality for nearly every New Zealand child at some stage in their life needs greater scrutiny, and wider discussion. This paper attempts to do that. If the researchers are correct streaming is a boundary preventing us from getting to a more just educational system. Can it be crossed?

References

- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning : a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track : how schools structure inequality* (2nd ed.). New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press.