



Briefing Note: Release of He Whakaaro: Does streaming work?

To:	Hon Jan Tinetti, Associate Minister of Education		
Cc:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education, Hon Kelvin Davis, Associate Minister of Education Hon Aupito William Sio, Associate Minister of Education,		
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Purpose of Report

The purpose of this paper is for you to:

Note that we have produced the attached He Whakaaro research review (with associated bibliography) on the impacts of fixed ability grouping, commonly known as streaming.

Note that we are planning to publish this report on the Education Counts website on Tuesday 7 December.

Summary

- There is a large body of evidence that fixed ability grouping and streaming practices limit the opportunities, aspirations, expectations and subsequently learning outcomes of learners allocated to middle and lower ability groups.
- International evidence and local experience indicate that in Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori and Pacific learners are likely to more often be wrongly allocated to lower ability groups and streams. This is because group placement often happens not only based on prior achievement but on assumptions about ethnicity, socio-economic background, gender, and disability.
- Research indicates that more flexible adaptive approaches to differentiating instruction benefit all learners, mitigating the risks of streaming. Groups used for delivering differentiated instruction should be flexible, changing with learners' variable confidence with concepts, interests, motivations and social connections.

Proactive Release

- a **agree** that the Ministry of Education release this briefing in full once it has been considered by you.

☒ **Agree** ☐ **Disagree.**



Sean Teddy
Hautū Te Mahau | Te Pae Aronui

23/11/21



Hon Jan Tinetti
Associate Minister of Education

28/11/ 2021

Background

1. The He Whakaaro | Education Insights series on the Education Counts website aims to provide relevant and insightful evidence and to provoke further thought and discussion on key education issues. The series is for policy analysts, people working in the programme and intervention area, educators interested in knowing more about education evidence and data, as well as the general public.
2. The Ministry of Education (the Ministry) has provided support for the campaign of Tokona Te Raki: Māori Futures Collective¹ researchers to end streaming in schools (see METIS 1249545). As part of the Ministry's supporting role on this campaign, we plan to release this literature review titled *Does streaming work? A review of the evidence*. This paper contributes to the campaign by providing an extensive (although not exhaustive) synthesis of national and international research evidence on the impact of streaming.
3. The Ministry's publicly stated position is that streaming is not a recommended practice. New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) Te Riu Roa, the New Zealand Principals' Federation and CORE Education have also shared statements to support ending streaming in Aotearoa New Zealand.
4. A recent Te Apārangi | Royal Society Expert Advisory Panel provided advice to the Ministry on the English-medium Mathematics and Statistics curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand. One of the recommendations is to "cease use of within or across-class 'ability grouping' to ensure equitable learning opportunities for ākonga students and maximise the amount of quality teaching in primary and intermediate mathematics and statistical learning."
5. Research from Aotearoa New Zealand is mostly in English medium settings. Little is known about grouping practices in Māori medium.

Research does not support fixed ability grouping, including streaming

6. Ability grouping refers to the range of different ways schools select and sort learners with similar perceived ability, achievement in testing, and/or engagement and motivation into fixed groups, classes or schools. Between-class ability grouping is when the measured lowest performing and highest performing learners are sorted into different classes. This is commonly known as 'streaming' and experienced by many secondary school learners in Aotearoa New Zealand. More familiar to primary school learners would be within-class ability grouping where a mixture of learners in the same class are grouped into smaller fixed groups based on a measurement of their ability.
7. Though it is unintentional, research indicates that the way streaming and fixed ability grouping happen in practice tends to unfairly limit some learners' opportunities. Learners in lower streams or groups often have less opportunity to learn because of less demanding curricula, lower instructional quality, lower expectations and lower levels of educational resources.
8. Fixed ability grouping and streaming practices are grounded in an assumption that an individual's capacity to learn is fixed and can be fairly and accurately measured at a single point in time. However, the most motivated and resilient learners are those who believe the learning process is active and their abilities can be developed through their

¹ Tokona te Raki: Māori Futures Collective of Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu have published two recent reports about the impact of streaming on ākonga Māori. [Tokona te Raki: Māori Futures Collective](#)

own effort. Fixed ability grouping labels learners with 'inherent' capabilities potentially limiting their aspirations. Learners are aware of and respond to the expectations of others and placement into streams are one way these expectations are communicated.

9. There is a perception that fixed ability grouping and streaming has positive effects for gifted and talented learners and learners with disabilities and/or learning support needs. The bulk of research on this topic indicates very little evidence that fixed ability grouping benefits learners in the top groups over and above other pedagogies. Unmet expectations of prior knowledge, fast pace of lessons and pressure to succeed can negatively impact learners in the top groups or streams. Research indicates that learners with disabilities and/or learning support needs can achieve equally well and better when included in heterogenous groups as when in self-contained groups or classrooms.

Other practices are effective at extending every learner towards their full potential

10. International experience has been that for all learners to benefit, we cannot simply abolish streaming. The four schools observed by Tokona Te Raki faced resistance from some whānau but all were able to ease the transition to alternative approaches they had planned by working closely with those disaffected. All four schools subsequently reported positive outcomes for learner attainment, engagement and teacher-whānau relationships.
11. Inclusive teaching approaches based upon an understanding of, and planning for the unique needs, interests, and abilities of all learners from the outset ensures that all learners have the encouragement and support to access all available opportunities.
12. Planning lessons using flexible grouping is an example of an inclusive practice to successfully facilitate learners' collaborative knowledge production. By ensuring that groups are constantly reformed with new individuals as activities progress teachers are reducing the risk that lasting labels of learners' perceived ability contribute to 'gatekeeping' of opportunities to learn. Research has found more positive outcomes for learners and a greater proportion of high performing learners in samples exposed to flexible small groups.
13. Approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can be used to proactively plan flexible learning opportunities where potential barriers to learning are identified and minimised and a range of useful options and supports for learning are made available to all learners. Some schools are already using UDL as part of fostering an inclusive pedagogical approach. Emerging evidence show promising results of employing UDL.

Next Steps

14. We propose that this report be published on Education Counts on Tuesday 7 December 2021.

Annexes

- Annex 1: He Whakaaro: Does streaming work? A review of the evidence
- Annex 2: Bibliography: Does streaming work? A review of the evidence
- Annex 3: Key messages
- Annex 4: Q&A