



IS SETTING WORKING FOR YOUR CHILD

Whilst most parents will agree that it is important to receive feedback from schools about their children's progress not the same proportion of parents understand the full implications of the feedback that they get.

One of the areas of interest is the aspect of grouping by ability; a thing that has had a long tradition in the UK. The philosophy was founded rightly or wrongly upon the idea that students have relatively fixed levels of ability and need to be taught accordingly. The two main methods of grouping are **streaming** and **setting**. Almost all UK schools were streamed in the 1950s and 60s; however there was a change to more mixed-ability teaching in the late 1970s and 1980s, this being in line with increased concern for educational equality. Since the 1990s many schools have returned to the practice of ability grouping but by **setting** rather than streaming. Since setting is currently practised in most schools in the UK it is clearly beneficial to explore how the system works and how to make it work for your child.

A survey in the 60's revealed that working-class students were over-represented in the low streams and that the schools had a tendency to allocate teachers with less experience and fewer qualifications to such groups.

Shockingly recent research has highlighted yet again that despite measurable Key Stage scores social class continues to be a factor in allocating students to sets and therefore to

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markedly differing possibilities of attainment. The questions that spring to mind immediately are 'which set is the black child likely to be in?' and 'is the situation made worse by the fact that he/she attends an inner city school?' Although personally acquainted with so many successful black pupils I cannot help but wonder whether being in the 'wrong social class' means many black children have been placed in

sets lower than their ability.

The results of a study sometime ago about the benefits and disadvantages of setting published on the DCSF (formerly DfES) website included the negative experiences of some lower set children. These included dissatisfaction with pace, attainment, teachers' expectation, prospects of movement between sets, and self-esteem. Some quotes from the interviews held are below:

'Sir treats us like babies, puts us down, makes us copy stuff off the board, puts up all the answers like we don't know anything.'

'And we're not going to learn from that, 'cause we've got to think for ourselves.' *Set 6 girls*

'I don't think he's got – maybe you'd call it faith in us, or whatever, he doesn't believe we can do it.' *Set 6 boy*

'I say 'Oh, I've done this before already.' And he says 'Well you can do it again'. He's nothing like 'Oh, I'll set you with some harder work' or nothing.' *Set 5 girls*

'In sets you all have to stay at the same stage' *Set 3 boy*

In a more recent study some of the findings about the same students during and at the end of Key Stage 4 were:

The amount of progress made during Key Stage 4 (i.e. in years 10 and 11) varied greatly from set to set. If students with the same Key Stage 3 scores were

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compared, an average student placed in the top set would raise their GCSE result by nearly half a grade, while being placed in the bottom set would lower it by nearly half a grade

In two of the schools, more working class students were placed in lower sets than would be expected, considering their Key Stage 3 scores. Given the difference in attainment between sets, this effectively lowered their achievement

Other considerations:

There are as many as five or six sets for some subjects. In some schools certain subjects are aligned together for example English and RS or Maths and Geography. Therefore if a child is in the lowest set for English in such a school he/she may also be in the lowest set for RS

Setting may not be only for academic ability but it is sometimes due to bad behaviour in lessons. Such a pupil will be removed from disrupting other competent pupils in a higher set.

If a child has got a foreign accent or has a foreign language listed as first language, he/she may erroneously end up in a lower set because the teachers are not finding it easy to communicate with the child.

IS SETTING WORKING FOR YOUR CHILD (CONTINUED)

The Cockroft report recommended that students should only take those papers appropriate for their attainment at GCSE. Currently there are three tiers of mathematics entry with different syllabuses. Most schools enter all students in a set for the same tier. The result is that students in the lower sets will be entered for an examination in which the highest grade they can achieve is a C or below, although the grade specified for recruitment or further study is a C. In fact the top universities' admission criteria is for candidates with mainly A*, A and a few B grades.

There is curriculum polarisation. Upward movement between sets is difficult because a student moving up will not have been working to the same syllabus as the class they are joining

The Way Forward

What can we do as parents to prevent a downward spiral in our children's education and future?

Prevention is the best bet; where possible stop your child from getting into the lower sets in the first instance as it is more difficult to correct this problem once it has begun. Some of the preventative measures that can be taken include:

Monitoring your child's progress at school regularly, a child doesn't just drop from set one to set six overnight, it's a journey and as a parent you need to be aware of what's going on

Understanding the system used in your child's school as soon as he/she starts there; ask questions such as 'when do they get grouped by ability?' e.g. end of year 7 or end of year 9 etc. Following that, at every opportunity ask investigative questions like 'based on current performance which set is he/she likely to be in when the grouping occurs?'

Ask probing questions at the parents' evenings; although political correctness does not allow the teachers to say your child is failing, you can ask what the highest level of attainment is for his/her class and what the class average is, that will help you assess your child's position

Don't accept labels placed on your child without making any effort to challenge the opinion. There was a lady whose son was labelled as having learning difficulties whilst he was in year

one, five years later he obtained a scholarship into one of the best private schools in the country! His mother never accepted the initial assessment and she never gave up trying and providing him with every opportunity to succeed

Check for warning signs in the school homework diary, notes brought home etc., because even if a child is naturally intelligent if he/she is labelled as disruptive, then the road to the lower set has been thrown wide open. It is



therefore imperative that you discipline your child and nip any appearance of disruptive behaviour in the bud

If your child is already in one of the lower sets it is not the end of the world, the earlier you know about it the better though, the reason being that if your child has lost self-esteem and confidence the job is harder! Some of the measures you can take are stated below:

If you believe your child has been erroneously placed in a lower set you will need to fight to change this. However the battle is not with aggression towards the teachers but with a lot of encouragement and extra support for the child in terms of exposure to the right material. Once you think your child is ready to prove him/herself you should be assertive enough to request for a re-assessment.

There are several private tutors and tuition centres around. Investigate these, look for the best you can find and enrol your child there to turn the grades around then ask the school to re-appraise the situation.

Monitor your child's progress on a daily basis if possible by checking the homework diary, ask questions about school lessons and tests sat

You may want to consider changing your child's school but this could prove to be disruptive to the child and such measures should be applied only where it seems like the child is extremely unlikely to make progress in that environment due to stigmatisation or very negative peer influence

Whatever method you choose to apply, you will have to find a way of raising the child's grades and this is more likely to happen outside the school than within as the level of work set for the child may not be enough to foster growth.

On a positive note, setting is preferred by parents whose children are very bright as it allows the teachers to move on at a pace which challenges the more able child to work harder and provides an opportunity for them to achieve better results. It would be presumptuous to think that every child is suited for set one as some children in the lower sets are indeed unable to cope with more challenging work. The point of this article however is that some children may not necessarily be less able children but may be in the wrong set due to other factors such as social class or background. Others may have been labelled as boisterous or disruptive earlier on in their schooling years and therefore classified as having learning difficulties because they are not settling down. From that point on it could be a downward spiral if corrective action is not taken immediately by the parents.

If you take nothing else away from this article remember these two things:

Prevention is better than cure, stop it from happening at all in the first place if you can

The school's verdict is not always the correct and/or final verdict, do your best to push through the barriers by providing all the support you can to help make your child successful.

- Bunmi Adekeye

A PARENT'S ROLE IN EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

So just how can parents help their children take advantage of worthwhile extracurricular activities? Here are some pointers:

Be willing to put in the time and effort to get your children to and fro.

Probably the first thing that comes to mind for parents of school-age children is the many miles and hours they spend driving children around to different activities. While you may see this as simply a chore, remember that you are contributing to a different but important type of education for your child. Besides, you may even find the time you spend in the car with your child (and his friends) can offer you new insight into his life, views, and friendships!

Help decide how much is too much.

If your child is engaged in a lot of extracurricular activities, your challenge may be to help him balance all of the demands on his time. There is no hard-and-fast rule to tell you how much is too much at any given age. Instead, you need to help your child be realistic about how much time and energy he has. (One hint: If your child is tense, irritable, and having difficulty concentrating in class, a possibility to keep in mind is sleep deprivation.)

Assist your child in identifying options and interests.

If your child isn't involved in any extracurricular activities, he may need help identifying his options. You can call his school and ask about extracurricular offerings, but rather than just getting a list, try to find out from the headmaster, or other parents about the teachers who supervise the activities. For a child who may

be having some difficulty joining a group, the personal qualities of the adult leaders may be especially important. In addition, schools often know about the various community sports, scouting, dance, art, and music programs in the area, and your local Parks and Recrea-

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tion department also may sponsor a variety of low-cost programs that might interest your child.

Be an advocate. You might consider volunteering as a scout leader, coach, referee, or after-school club leader. This gives you an opportunity to spend time with your children and monitor the quality of the activity they are doing.

Ensure that activities are well documented in resume and all relevant skills are identified.

Unless your child's resume is well written and all those skills are highlighted, the purpose for doing all the above would have been to no avail.

Conclusion

Keep in mind that extra-curricular activities are still just one part of the resume. Institutions look at the whole picture, including grades, internships, volunteer work, references and life experience. Therefore a good balance is important.

-Yemisi Gibbons



He who can read but does not read is not better than he who cannot read

READERS' CORNER

I must admit I embrace this venture. Being the first I have received of the newsletter, it could not have come at a better time. More intriguing is the fact it opens one's mind to the all important factors I tend to overlook when making decisions on my children's schools etc. My personal experience has been an uphill task searching for information on where and how to get help. Thank you very much for introducing me to this forum - *Edith Soyombo*

Thank you so much for all the useful information in your recent newsletter. God bless you. - *OD*

To receive future copies of this free newsletter send an email to info@thesmartkid.org

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Streaming

This is where children are separated into groups by global ability and taught in the same class for **all subjects**. Effectively a child will be in the same set for all subjects.

Setting

This is where children are separated into different groups by ability for **individual subjects**. Although unlikely in practice the effect of this is that theoretically a child may be in the top set for maths but in the lowest set for English.



GCSE TIERS

At some time during year 10, when your child is aged 15-16, teachers will decide which tier they should enter in each of their GCSEs.

Each tier has a target range of grades that can be awarded. The aim is for your child to take an exam in which their ability will be tested, without their being thrown off course by questions that are much too difficult or much too easy. Some GCSE subjects are not tiered: art and design, history, music, PE and religious studies. All other GCSEs have tiers. Most schools will decide which tier is right for each pupil around the January before the final exam, after the bulk of work has been covered and they have the results of a mock examination.



MATHS HAS 3 TIERS:

1. Higher tier -

Possible Grades A* to C

2. Intermediate tier -

Covering Grades B to E

3. Foundation tier -



Covering Grades D to G

NEW TWO-TIER GCSE MATHS

In April 2005 the introduction of two-tier GCSE mathematics was announced. This is the same model that is used in other subjects, such as science and English. The current three-tier model will be withdrawn from 2006 and the last examination will be June 2007. The new model will be used in mathematics for first teaching from September 2006 with first award in 2008.

The standard two-tier model has:

1. Higher tier -

Covering Grades A* to D

2. Foundation tier -



Covering Grades C to G

ALL OTHER SUBJECTS HAVE JUST 2 TIERS.

Illustrated below are the possible achievement grades for each tier. The solid lines show the normal range of grades for each tier.

1. Higher tier -

Covering Grades A* to E

2. Foundation tier -

Covering Grades C to G

SCIENCE GCSE

There are three ways to take GCSEs in science. Pupils can:



- take three separate GCSEs in each of biology, chemistry and physics
- take a double award, which covers the three areas and is equal to two GCSEs
- take a single award GCSE, which covers all three areas, but in less depth. It is equal to one GCSE.

Not all schools offer all three ways.

A science GNVQ is also available.



The Smart Kid is an organisation formed to empower 21st century parents in the UK by sharing vital information and motivating them to take positive action for their children. We expect that the parents who contact us will go on to share the information with their peers, friends and family thus empowering one another. These gradual but consistent efforts will produce a shift in the culture and value system in the UK. Our vision is that previously untapped ability, lying dormant in a sizeable proportion of the population, will be discovered thus creating a more productive society where the best opportunities are no longer restricted to the realm of a select few. Thanks for taking the time to read this and we hope you share our dream for all children in the UK.

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