

Streaming – Really?!

Rob Vingerhoets

It's 2020 and we should be better than that.

I know "streaming", "ability grouping", "fluid groupings" or whatever you may want to call it (it has many different names and the word streaming seems to be actively avoided by schools and teachers, but if it looks like poo and smells like poo - it's probably poo!) has been going on since Moses was a lad but that doesn't make it right. And, in fact, it's wrong – educationally and ethically.

Let's get to who actually likes streaming:

- Teachers who get the top group
- Teachers who have been streaming for years and don't want to change because it's all become just a little too easy and comfortable
- Kids who are in the top group
- Principals who see it as an easy fix for lifting data for top group kids and being able to tell parents that the bottom group are being specifically catered for (even though they are highly likely to be going backwards and feeling crap about themselves at the same time)
- Parents who have kids in the top group ("...and so which group is your child in?")

Let's get to who actually dislikes streaming:

- John Hattie, Doug and Barb Clarke, Jo Boaler, authors of Paper 18... people who know their stuff
- Good teachers who see the damage it causes kids
- Kids in the middle and lower groups
- Good principals who know in their gut that streaming is something that's NQR – it just isn't quite right but have often inherited the system/process or who are under significant parental pressure

Let's get to who actually hates streaming:

Me! I'm not in the same intellectual league as Hattie or Jo Boaler or Doug Clarke but I work in schools every working day of my working life and I know it's wrong and cruel, and I honestly believe it reflects badly on the school, grade level, or individual teachers who promote it.

Schools, grade levels, and individual teachers should not be streaming - it's an awful thing to do to kids and if you really cared about kids, it's simple: don't stream.

Here are some reasons why:

- It is toxic to self-esteem.

Sight unseen and with 3 groups in front of you, it isn't hard to pick the bottom group. You don't have to be particularly clued-in to do this – just check out their body language and those that aren't dripping in a fog of apathy will be acting out.

Twice (once in a secondary setting and the other in a primary setting) I have been asked to take a streamed class/group of kids. In the secondary setting all the year 7 kids were filing in from recess and the year 7 coordinator said "that's your group coming in now Rob". I replied that it looks like I have the bottom group. She wondered if someone had already told me because she hadn't let me know which group I would be taking. I said, "Take a look at them. Top group kids don't act or look like that."

Just a postscript to that. I had been asked to take a lesson on fractions/decimals/percentages with the Year 7's. Turns out I had the bottom group. Just as well I had a very open-ended activity (Match Up to 1; Maths On The Go, Book 2) and as such the kids got into it pretty well after initially being convinced they would be hopeless at the task. Having seen that they could get into the activity at their own level, the confidence levels rose pretty rapidly. To the point where three of the students (Taneesha, Liam, and Stella) were doing some pretty outstanding work – and I don't mean for the bottom group, I mean for anyone!

About that time the Year 7 maths coordinator, who I knew, walked past and I asked her over to check out what some of the kids were doing. I remarked that the top group must be something else if these three kids were in the bottom group. I asked her to check out their work. Her response was that it was excellent work BUT that they hadn't shown that in the test that determined who went into what group. I asked to have a look at the test – honestly, it was 13 pages long! I'm convinced Taneesha and Liam and Stella and God only knows how many others consigned to the bottom group simply ran out of test stamina or, just as likely, were beaten by the terminology of the questions - not the maths itself.

Sorry, long anecdote but you see where I'm coming from. BTW – Taneesha etc. and 3 others went straight from bottom to top group based on their work in that open-ended lesson.

You can call your bottom group the 'Good Looking Long Leaping Antelopes' or innocuous titles like Group G – you're absolutely not fooling anyone. The Long Leaping Good Looking Antelopes and the kids of Group G know who they are – they're the 'thickheads'. We don't want to see them as that or for them to see themselves as that, but the point is THEY DO. They must laugh at the fact that we try to hide who they are. They know who they are, and it hurts – a lot.

- The groups are usually based on a dodgy summative test that is nearly always more a test of reading than maths

See the anecdote above re. the Year 7's and the fraction test. It sums up the point very succinctly.

- Research suggests that only one group demonstrates any benefit at all (and it's pretty negligible) and that's the top or extension group - the other 2 groups go backwards.

My own anecdotal evidence from the schools I have worked in where streaming (sorry, 'we don't have streaming here. We have fluid grouping'. See comment re. if it smells like poo....) was occurring would support that research. I think the most pertinent point as to why the bottom and middle groups go nowhere relates to the one below re. role models, but a lot can also be attributed to aspects such as:

- The teachers who get the bottom and middle groups being not well suited to that task – I'd suggest your better teachers should be with the bottom group (if you're going to stream).

- The defeatist attitude of the kids. You can address this with good tasks and good teaching but it doesn't help when kids think poorly of themselves before a lesson even starts.

- When you stream, all the good role model kids are 'gone'- lost to the kids who would actually benefit from seeing/listening to those kids work

It consistently surprises me that the blindingly obvious doesn't occur to teachers/principals: that when you stream, all your good role models that other kids would clearly benefit from watching and listening to and learning from are gone. Gone to a very special place where only the smart kids go, and sorry you of the not smart kids type – you don't get to learn from them.

Fact: kids learn from other kids, and often more than they learn from a teacher.

- The notion that groups are fluid is horse poo - from all of my experience the groups are about as fluid as concrete (after it's set!)

I simply don't believe the rubbish put out there about groups being fluid. Sure, there may be the occasional kid who's original test score was so inaccurate that someone errs (often reluctantly) on the side of common sense and places her/him into the next level group, but for the vast majority of the time my experience has been that if you're in that group that's where you stay. Think about that. That's bad enough over the length of a content topic. It's awful over the length of a year, and what of that poor buggler who finds him or herself in the bottom group in prep (how in the hell could you be that bloody heartless to stream kids in prep – well, it happens!) and stays there for the whole of their primary years – that's just debilitating for that kid. And then you're off to secondary school where it's highly likely you'll be steamed again for the next 4 years at least.

Yes, you may improve within your streamed group, but the issue is that everyone else has supposedly improved as well so, well done you've improved but sorry – you're still in The Good Looking Long Leaping Antelopes group.

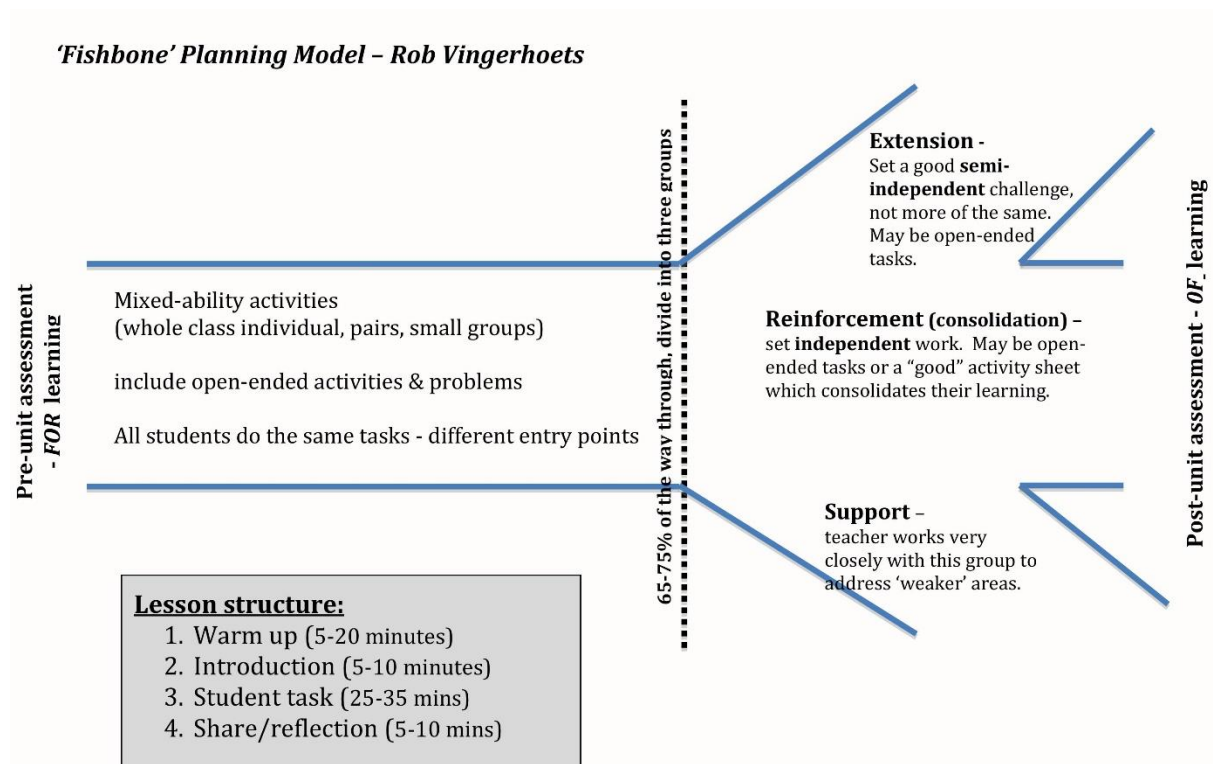
- Many people smarter than me also believe it's a harmful and a heinous thing to do to kids, and reflects badly on teachers and principals who allow it to happen

John Hattie, Doug and Barb Clarke, Jo Boaler, the authors of Paper 18 – people who know their stuff have negative views on streaming. Their thoughts and beliefs are worth reading and may give you the background and support to stand up to streaming and say you're not comfortable with the fact that your grade level or your school streams.

The Compromise: 'Fishboning'

There is an effective alternative/compromise to streaming - The Fishbone.

I've done this with my own grade and have set it up with staff in a number of schools (primary and secondary). Adam, a numeracy coordinator from a P to 12 college in Geelong, actually first used the 'fishbone' term.



Some points about 'the Fishbone':

- It still starts with some form of pre-unit assessment (**FOR** learning) but that doesn't have to mean test. It could be a task with a rubric or a rich open-ended activity that gives you plenty of assessment information re. what the students bring to the table for this topic.

- It features the kids working with their 'home' teacher for the bulk of the unit so they know the kids (mathematically but also emotionally/socially).

- It has the kids working on mainly open-ended problems and activities that allow them to come into the activity at their own level. This means all the kids doing the same task – no self-esteem issues. It also means any assessment info gained from lessons can be compared/moderated far more readily.

- With the kids working together on the same task the crucial role modelling that is lost in streaming comes right to the fore.

- It has a healthy reliance on the teacher collecting on-going/formative assessment (**AS** learning) so that when the unit of work reaches the 2/3 or 3/4 stage the teacher, AND THE KIDS, have the knowledge of where each kid is at.

When you get to the fishbone stage – where you now want to offer some designated lessons to the top, middle, and low groups - I would recommend that you don't stream as such but offer three different workshops for the kids. Title these workshops – as in give a brief description of the content for the workshops (from the titles the kids will very quickly ascertain that they are hard, medium and relatively easy) – top, middle and low. Except now the kids can read the titles/descriptions and sign up to the workshop/s that suits them.

For example: Place Value unit for Grade 4. At the 'fishbone' stage of the unit of work, offer -

WORKSHOP 1: Working with numbers from 1 billion to decimals to thousandths. Comparing, ordering, and using the 4 operations with decimals.

WORKSHOP 2: Working with numbers to one million. Comparing, ordering, and saying numbers to 1 million. Working with decimals to tenths (0.1).

WORKSHOP 3: Working with numbers to ten thousand (10 000). Comparing, ordering, and saying numbers to ten thousand. Relating place value to measurements like metres, kilograms and litres.

Each workshop title should be on a large piece of paper and the kids told they have a limited amount of time to sign up (usually a day or an afternoon). They should also be told that the teacher/s have the right to veto if a choice has been made that doesn't match the formative assessment and/or where it's apparent you're only going into that group because your best friend is in there.

My experience says that well over 90% of kids choose the appropriate workshop – kids know, they get it.

This giving of choice/allowing the student to have a voice is very powerful. You're telling the kids that you trust them and that they are independent and responsible. Kids respond very, very well – from lower to upper primary and into secondary. Offering workshop choices is a very effective way to go.

NB. Don't put any teachers' names alongside the workshop options. You don't want it turning into a popularity poll.

I recommend only doing the fishbone for BIG units of work. By BIG I mean units of work where you are dedicating 10 + lessons to the unit.

Typically, this would apply to:

- * place value
- * addition and subtraction
- * multiplication and division
- * fractions/decimals/percentages
- * time

The fishbone can finish with a post-unit assessment (**OF** learning).

Good open-ended problems and activities that help you cope with the range of abilities in your classroom from the start of the units up to 'the fishbone' stage are readily available:

Open-Ended Maths Activities by Sullivan and Lilburn

Mathematics Assessment For Learning - Rich Tasks and Work Samples by Ann Downton, Rose Knight, Doug Clarke and Gerard Lewis

Open-Ended Maths Tasks by Emry, Lewis and Morfett

Challenging Mathematical Tasks by Peter Sullivan

Teaching and Assessing Through Open-ended Activities by Lilburn and Sawczak

Number Sense series (if you have them or can get them!) by McIntosh, Reys and Reys

Maths On The Go, Books 1 and 2, by me!

So there is a considered, worthwhile, and sound alternative to streaming. It is a compromise, but it is considerably better than streaming.

Streaming is elitist. It's highly detrimental to the self-esteem of kids. It promotes lazy teaching. It's an open admission that you can't handle the range of abilities in your classroom, a skill fundamental to being an effective teacher.

It does significantly more harm than good. It's bloody un-Australian and that should be a damning label.

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