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Students of Edgefield Secondary School during a lesson. Since January, each Secondary 1 class at the school has been made up of students from different streams. Classmates take lessons such as physical education, art and music together, while for academic subjects like maths and science, they break into groups by their assigned streams. ST PHOTO: KHALID BABA

Streaming may end, but will parents' behaviour change?

Beware the unintended effects of having subject-based banding, if parents shy away from schools that group students into mixed-ability classes

Kelvin Seah Kah Cheng

For The Straits Times

From 2024, streaming in secondary schools will come to an end.

In its place will come subject-based banding, where students take subjects taught at one of three difficulty levels, based on their abilities and strengths. They are the G3 level (corresponding to today's Express stream); G2 level (corresponding to today's Normal Academic stream), and G1 level (corresponding to today's Normal Technical stream).

At the end of four years in secondary school, students will take a common national examination and graduate with a common certificate, which will show the subjects taken and the levels at which they were learnt. Gone will be the days where students walk down three separate paths and where each student learns all the subjects at a pace designed for a particular path.

MERITS OF SUBJECT-BASED BANDING

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung explained that the move was intended to preserve the benefits of customising education according to the learning pace of students, but yet minimise the downsides associated with labelling and stigmatisation of students assigned to the less demanding streams.

The new subject-based banding scheme is certainly superior to streaming. As Mr Ong noted, people have different strengths and it would be naive to think that a person will be equally strong or equally weak in every subject. The new scheme recognises that an individual's strengths can be heterogeneous across subjects and allows each student to pursue each subject at a pace that is suitable for him.

Under today's streaming, some students in the Express stream might find some subjects unmanageable because they are weak in them, but nevertheless have to pursue the subjects at the Express level, while students in the Normal stream may find some subjects too easy because, even though they have a flair for them, they are compelled to pursue the subjects at a less demanding level. Because curricula will be better tailored to suit each individual, the new scheme is likely to enhance student learning.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES?

A more critical question is whether the new scheme will have unintended adverse consequences.

Indeed, one of the objectives of the recent move is to allow more opportunities for students with different backgrounds and academic abilities to mix in the same classrooms. But how likely will this goal be met?

To answer this, it is essential to recognise that the move will likely prompt certain parents to alter their behaviours. Parents know that peers matter. How an individual behaves, learns and thinks is heavily influenced by his peers.

This suggests that if schools were to take steps to reorganise classes, by mixing students of varying abilities together, we might expect to see parents of higher-performing children flee these schools and try to seek entry into single-stream schools (those that accept only G3 stream students, such as Integrated Programme schools) more fiercely.

That is, if parents believe that interacting with lower-performing children will influence their children adversely, we would expect to see them avoiding schools that encourage mixed-background learning environments.

At the moment, most schools organise learning within a form class, where students are usually grouped based on academic ability. Parents therefore know that if their child is in an Express class, his classmates would also be Express stream students. This serves to lessen concerns over mixing and some parents may, as a result, not mind placing their children in schools that cater to children from all three streams – Express, Normal Academic, and Normal Technical – knowing that classes will ultimately be separated by stream.

With the changes, however, some overly concerned parents may now feel a need to switch their children out of such schools, to avoid the possibility of having them mix with lower-performing peers. Ironically, we might have a situation where the better-performing children and the poorer-performing ones end up clustering separately in certain schools, increasing polarisation and reducing diversity.

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There is already anecdotal evidence that such concerns are real. As Mr Ong noted, some parents had told the principal of Edgefield Secondary School that they would not have sent their children to the school had they known that their children would be mixed with children of other streams in subjects like physical education, art and music.

What if classes were organised by subject bands instead? This way, each student will attend a different class in each subject based on his ability. If so, the problem, though reduced, is still likely to persist.

To see why, consider a student who reads seven subjects at the most demanding level – G3. If classes were organised by subject ability, this student would be placed in a mathematics class with other students who also read maths at the G3 level.

However, some of these peers may also be reading other subjects at lower levels. Again, this might prompt overly concerned parents to try harder for schools that cater exclusively to students reading all subjects at the G3 level. In other words, we may see more strategic sorting of children by academic ability and socio-economic status, especially in G3-only schools, in the future.

While it is understandable that parents may exhibit such behaviour, it is important that they also recognise the value in having their children work well with others, regardless of background. After all, soft skills, including the ability to communicate with others and to lead teams comprising people of different backgrounds, are likely to feature importantly in the future economy. Parents should therefore be cognisant of the value of social mixing when picking schools.

Mr Ong also noted that principals of specialised schools, such as those for only Express stream students, "have to make a special effort to recruit students from all backgrounds, wisely, using their Direct School Admissions".

Whether the changes produce the intended benefits of encouraging social mixing within schools ultimately boils down to how parents will respond to the policy change. It would be timely for policymakers to anticipate these responses and to pre-emptively address them before the scheme officially comes into effect in 2024.

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