



Discussion point: labelling

How have you (or people you know) been labelled at school?

What effects did this labelling process have? (for example, did it demoralise you or spur you on to prove the label was incorrect?).

What do your experiences tell us about the nature and effectiveness of labelling processes and self-fulfilling prophecies?

teachers that absence correlated with lower attainment (which is not too surprising, all things considered).

Another, less obvious form of inclusion/exclusion is ability grouping (a general label for practices such as streaming, setting and banding). **Harlen** and **Malcolm**'s wide-ranging 'Setting and Streaming' (1999), for example, concluded educational performance was affected by many school processes – 'class size, pupil ability range, teaching methods and materials ... and teachers' attitudes towards mixed-ability teaching'.

Hallam, **Ireson** and **Hurley** ('Ability Grouping in the Secondary School', 2001) noted how setting, for example, had both benefits for pupils (minimising disruptive behaviour) and disadvantages (stigmatising lower set pupils, the association between lower sets and unemployment, higher sets and good exam grades). They also noted a familiar trend in this type of research (from **Nell Keddie** 'Classroom Knowledge', 1971, onwards) – teachers giving 'more creative

work and privileges to higher set students while restricting lower sets to tedious, routine tasks'.

Hallam et al's research highlighting how high and low set pupils attracted different stigmatising labels ('thick', 'dumb', 'boffin', 'clever clogs') relates to ideas about:

- **Pupil subcultures.** As an explanation for differential achievement, this idea has a long and respectable history (see, for example, **David Hargreaves**' 'Social Relations In A Secondary School' (1967) and **Pete Woods**' 'The Divided School' (1979) – the latter noting the existence of *pro* and *anti* school subcultures, from ingratiating, compliant pupils, through ritualists 'going through the motions' to outright rebels).

More recently, **Martin Johnson** (*Failing School, Failing City*, 1999) has described schools in Northern Ireland where some pupil subcultures were marked by 'hostility and indifference' to learning, which correlated with high levels of absence and lower levels of educational achievement.

Finally, **Colin Lacey** ('Hightown Grammar', 1970) noted streaming and setting created the belief, even among relatively successful grammar school students, they were failures when compared to their peers. Thirty years later, **Power** et al ('Education and the Middle Class', 2003) found much the same sort of subcultural labelling process at work when they noted how successful middle-class students labelled themselves as failures for their inability to match the achievements of some of their high-flying peers.