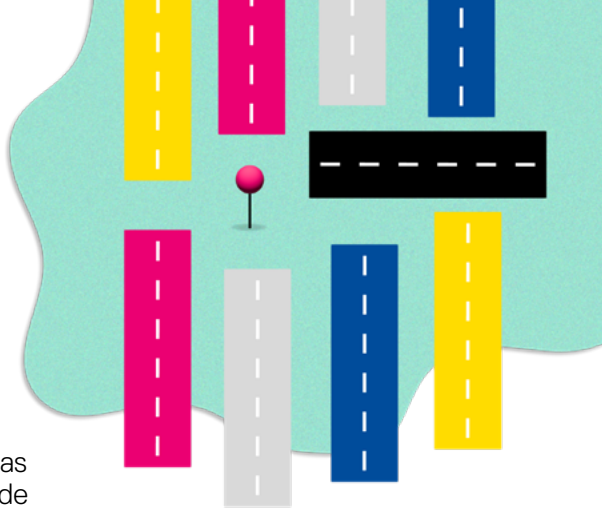

Understanding Streaming and De-streaming:

A Guide for Youth Workers

Streaming has been a part of Ontario's education system for years, but it has raised significant concerns around equity, access, and opportunity. This guide explores what streaming is, why de-streaming matters, and how it impacts students. As you read through, think about how these concepts play out in your work with students, and how you can support them in making informed decisions about their academic pathways.

Essentials/Locally Developed Courses

These courses provide additional support for students needing foundational skills. They're focused on practical learning and help build confidence before students take on more academic courses.

Applied Courses

Applied courses offer a practical approach to learning. They involve hands-on activities and real-world applications of knowledge. They aren't "easier" but are taught with a focus on practical use.

Academic Courses

These courses are more theory-focused and require a strong grasp of abstract thinking, critical analysis, and problem-solving.

Streaming: What Does It Really Mean?

Streaming refers to the practice of dividing students into different groups or "streams" based on their perceived academic ability or potential (i.e., academic, applied, or locally developed). Historically, these streams have been used to separate students into different academic tracks, with certain groups given more access to challenging coursework and others left with fewer opportunities.

Think of a student who is placed in an applied math course because they were perceived as "not a math person." What if that student could thrive in an academic course if given the right support? Streaming limits opportunities for these students, often locking them into a particular academic future based on early decisions.

De-streaming: A New Approach

De-streaming is a policy shift that began in Ontario to remove academic tracking in Grade 9 courses. The idea is simple but powerful: all students—no matter their previous academic history—take the same courses. It's a chance to level the playing field by providing equal access to the same curriculum, resources, and support.

In a de-streamed Grade 9 class, students who once would have been separated into academic or applied math courses now learn together. This doesn't mean the lessons are the same for everyone; it just means all students are given the same opportunity to learn and grow, with tailored support based on their individual needs.

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Objective of De-streaming: Why Does It Matter?

The goal of de-streaming is to ensure equal opportunities for every student, regardless of background, ability, or prior academic experiences. Here's how it benefits students:

Equity for all

De-streaming addresses the systemic inequities that have historically held certain groups back:racialized students, those from lower-income backgrounds, or those who are neurodivergent.

Reflection Question: Can you think of a student you work with who might benefit from de-streaming? Why?

Long-term benefits

De-streaming helps improve long-term outcomes, like graduation rates and self-esteem. Studies show that students in de-streamed environments experience increased engagement, better academic performance, and improved mental health.

Interactive activity: In small groups, brainstorm some ways de-streaming could benefit students in terms of their academic self-image and confidence. Share your ideas with the larger group.

Expanding post-secondary pathways

Students who are streamed into lower-level courses often have fewer opportunities to pursue university or college pathways. De-streaming removes these barriers, ensuring that all students have access to the resources they need to pursue their dreams, whether it's post-secondary education, training, or the workforce.

Why this matters for you and the youth you work with:

Streaming and de-streaming don't just affect students academically—they also influence how they view themselves and their future. As youth support workers, you play a crucial role in helping students navigate this system. Understanding the impact of streaming and de-streaming helps you guide students in making more informed choices about their education, giving them the chance to succeed no matter where they started.