

School Tracking: Diverse Mechanisms, Effects, and Policy Responses Conference Report

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An international conference *School tracking: Diverse mechanisms, effects and policy responses*¹ was hosted by the Faculty of Education of Charles University in Prague in the warm days of 26th and 27th May 2015. The central topic of the conference, as its title suggests, was *school tracking*, which refers to the practice of assigning students to instruction groups on the basis of their ability (Hallinan, 1994). As the conference moderator David Greger suggested at the beginning, the issue of tracking, its mechanisms, effects, implications for equity in education, and adequate policy responses was a hot topic in the USA in the 80s. The debate about tracking in the USA may not seem so lively nowadays but the issue is being widely discussed on our continent, especially in central Europe. The conference was organised by the Institute for Research and Development of Education, for which the topic of school tracking is in the long-term research focus. One of its current research projects is the Czech Longitudinal Study in Education (CLOSE), which aims, besides other goals, at researching the effects of tracking on chosen cohorts of Czech pupils. It is charting their passage through the Czech education system in the long-term. The organisation of the conference was supported by this research project in cooperation with the National Training Fund and CERGE Economic Institute.

After the opening ceremony, in which the dean of the Faculty of Education Radka Wildová welcomed all participants, the floor was taken by the keynote speaker *Adam Gamoran*, a recognized and respected scholar in the field and at the same time, a member of National Board for Education Sciences² appointed by president Obama. His introductory speech *Tracking, De-tracking and Student Achievement: Is there a better way?* framed the whole conference topic. Dr. Gamoran provided a broad overview of current issues and pitfalls connected with tracking and also illustrated possible system changes based on several examples from various countries. Although it may seem logical and effective to track students or pupils according to their abilities, Gamoran says tracking could possibly lead to their separation according to race or social class; homogenous classes lack the diversity that may foster rich discussions. In addition, the inequalities between tracks rise over time. There are,

¹ The conference was supported by GA ČR (National Science Foundation) within a project “The relationships between skills, schooling and labor market outcomes: A longitudinal study” (No. P402/12/G130).

² The National Board for Education Sciences is an advisory body of the Director of Institute of Education Sciences (research arm of the U.S. Department of Education).

according to Gamoran, two possible responses of the educational stakeholders. The first is to reduce the tracking, but at the same time provide challenging instruction to high achievers. The second consists of maintaining tracking but providing a more effective instruction in low tracks. The current research develops promising new directions in both ways, as Gamoran demonstrated on various examples. In the Czech context, where the public opinion is essentially in favour of maintaining the current early selective nature of education system (Walterová et. al., 2010), the second option (the implementation of high standards for low-achieving students) may seem more likely to be accepted.

Other contributions presented at the conference introduced the results of authors' own empirical research on the given topic. This thematically rather narrow and in terms of number of active participants smaller conference with no parallel sections was attended not only by local specialists, but also guests from the United States, Germany, Belgium, and Slovakia, that is from countries with structurally diverse education systems with various level of selectivity and early tracking. This fact echoed in subsequent discussions and turned out to be very beneficial and inspiring for sharing experience and implicit comparisons of the local situation and situation abroad. Presenters could benefit from a high-quality feedback from discussants and other conference participants. Papers³ presented on the first day of the conference were all focused on tracking at the lower-secondary level of education system, whilst the second day of the conference was dedicated rather to tracking at higher levels of education system.

Local policy players may have a significant role in influencing the public opinion towards later school tracking. Bearing this in mind, *Marcela Veselková* from Komenký University in Bratislava analysed how macro-level political narratives of less selective schooling (produced and advocated e.g. by OECD or UNESCO) influenced the political communication of Czech and Slovak educational stakeholders. Deeper analyses of non-cognitive outcomes of tracking are still scarce in the Czech Republic. *David Greger* from the Institute for Research and Development of Education endeavoured to fill this knowledge gap. He focused on the analysis of pupils' academic self-concepts, which are formed not only by their individual academic performance, but also by the average performance of their peers in the classroom or the school. In literature, this is referred to as the Big Fish Little Pond Effect. Based on the analysis of PISA and TIMSS data, Greger confirmed the validity of BFLPE model in the Czech Republic, nevertheless many questions still remain, and Greger pointed out also his future research directions. Germany is a well-known example of a country with highly selective education system tracking pupils directly after primary school. *David Becker* from Deutsches Institut für Internationale Pädagogische Forschung provided an insight into Berlin de-tracking reform, in which previous multiple tracks were reduced to the two-path system with academic (Gymnasium) and non-academic (Integrierte Sekundarschule) tracks. He evaluated the reform influence on parental

³ Selected presentations are available at the conference website <http://pages.pedf.cuni.cz/uvrv/schooltrackingconference2015/> for download.

150 aspirations, teacher recommendations and transition of pupils into tracks with regard to their socio-economic status. First day was then concluded by *Lore van Praag* from Gent University who focused on the pupils' self-appraisal and its determination by the track pupils are in.

The second day of the conference, *Hana Voňková* demonstrated the anchoring vignette method in a quantitative survey of ICT knowledge and skills among students based on self-reporting. The responses may reflect not only the actual level of knowledge and skills but also the self-assessment style. Two students with the same level of actual knowledge and skills level may give different self-assessments but the anchoring vignette method helps to adjust self-reports' differences in scale usage. *Filip Pertold* from CERGE-EI (Centre for Economic Research and Graduate Education-Economics Institute) investigated the problem with peers' pre-secondary-school smoking, as the empirical findings based on data from Czech Republic reveal a high level of youth smoking. The research results show that male youth smoking is significantly affected by classmates, while female youth smoking is not. The following presenter was *David Münich* also from CERGE-EI institute with presentation of *Inefficient School Matching Mechanisms: The Case of the Czech Republic*. At first he described the model of entrance examinations at high schools in the Czech Republic. According to Münich's opinion, different models of entrance exams promote unequal opportunities for students with worse socioeconomic status. The fourth presenter, *Jana Straková*, focused on the current issue of apprenticeship education in the Czech Republic and its relation to the labour market demand. Straková dealt with the length of apprenticeship study and highlighted the question whether or not students acquire sufficient knowledge and practical skills for the labour market. Another problem is that education system allocates students into academic, vocational and apprenticeship tracks that provide different quality of knowledge and skills. Data analysis pointed out that apprentice students tend to acquire lower general skills compared to academic or vocational students. In conclusion, the question is how to deal with unequal education requirements in different tracks. The last contribution, *Evaluation of Detracking Reforms in the USA and Their Transfer into the Czech Education System*, was presented by *Markéta Holubová*. In the first part she described the detracking of US education system at elementary schools (ISCED level 1 and 2). The analysis emphasized the marginal correlation between family's socioeconomic status and place of residence. Holubová confirmed that education in the United States does not support early selection unlike Czech education system. In conclusion, in both countries (USA and CZ) students from ethnic minorities are overrepresented in low tracks. This contribution closed the official part of the conference. An unofficial part of the conference continued with a commented city walk tour through the centre of Prague.

Methodologically very diverse papers were based on content analysis of documents (Veselková), secondary analysis of large-scale research data (Greger, Straková, Pertold), own quantitative survey (Becker, Voňková), qualitative ethnographic study (Van Praag) or in-depth interviews (Holubová). This list documents wide possi-

bilities of research approaches towards tracking, and although the conference was oriented rather on factual matters, methodological aspects and critical evaluation of the employed methodology were often stressed in consequent discussions.

On the third day, Adam Gamoran's presentation *Inequality is a problem: What is our response?* was held at the American centre in Prague. The presentation reflected the significant issue of increasing differences among the outcomes of children in the USA. Adam Gamoran suggested approaches to improving quality of education system through health care programs, high quality early childhood programs, family-school cooperation programs and socio-psychological interventions.

To conclude, the conference contained many interesting presentations covering a wide range of theoretical and empirical perspectives focused on sorting students into different tracks. As conference participants, we agreed that the topic of tracking is still not discussed enough by the public, therefore more effort should be made to disseminate the research findings in this field. We consider the lecture of a recognized researcher that was available for free to a wider public at the end of the conference a good start.

References

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