

Does Educational Tracking Affect Performance and Inequality? Differences-in-Differences Evidence across Countries*

Abstract

Even though some countries track students into differing-ability schools by age 10, others keep their entire secondary-school system comprehensive. To estimate the effects of such institutional differences in the face of country heterogeneity, we employ an international differences-in-differences approach. We identify tracking effects by comparing differences in outcome between primary and secondary school across tracked and non-tracked systems. Six international student assessments provide eight pairs of achievement contrasts for between 18 and 26 cross-country comparisons. The results suggest that early tracking increases educational inequality. While less clear, there is also a tendency for early tracking to reduce mean performance. Therefore, there does not appear to be any equity-efficiency trade-off.

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Keywords: Tracking, streaming, ability grouping, selectivity, comprehensive school system, educational performance, inequality, international student achievement test, TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS.

Eric A. Hanushek
Hoover Institution
Stanford University
CESifo and NBER
Stanford, CA 94305-6010, United States
Phone: (+1) 650 / 736-0942
hanushek@stanford.edu

Ludger Wößmann
Ifo Institute for Economic Research
at the University of Munich and CESifo
Poschingerstr. 5
81679 Munich, Germany
Phone: (+49) 89 / 9224-1699
woessmann@ifo.de

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