

Perpetuating exclusion: path dependency in the persistence of tracking in Swiss lower secondary education

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In many industrialized countries, students are allocated to different types of education at some point in their educational careers. Switzerland is one of the countries that opts for particularly early differentiation and tracking: After primary school, children are assigned to one of several tracks in lower secondary education. The number and permeability or rigidity of these tracks varies across between and sometimes even within cantons. While some regions of Switzerland are moving towards more permeable structures in lower secondary education, many cantons and municipalities continue to adhere to the most rigid tracking systems. In these systems, students are grouped by ability into two or three distinct tracks with either higher or lower academic requirements. All subjects are taught separately within each track, and students remain in these separate "spaces" throughout their lower secondary education.

These spaces, however, are not as homogeneous as intended in terms of students' abilities: empirical research has long shown that tracking is only partly based on students' abilities, but also to a large extent on social characteristics such as socioeconomic status, gender, and migration background (Felouzis & Charmillot 2017). As the different tracks of lower secondary education offer differently favorable learning environments (Angelone 2019) and provide access to or close off different pathways of upper secondary education, the track attended has a major impact on further educational and career opportunities (Hupka-Brunner & Meyer 2021), as well as on the social position of individuals: Advanced tracks prepare students for the socially prestigious and highly selective baccalaureate schools that provide direct access to universities, while the lowest track is stigmatized and offers only uncertain prospects of securing an apprenticeship (Meyer et al. 2023).

Tracking at lower secondary level can therefore also be understood as a form of exclusion - exclusion from certain educational pathways, occupations and social positions. Yet the most rigid tracking model is still widespread, even legally prescribed in some cantons, and sometimes still largely unquestioned in educational practice. This paper asks and seeks to understand why actors perpetuate forms of school organization that have been shown to produce exclusionary and disadvantaged spaces - and what factors can lead to change.

The paper employs a theoretical framework based on Mahoney's (2000) concept of path dependency. This approach allows for an explanation of the persistence of rigid tracking models through four different mechanisms (functional, utilitarian, power, and legitimation) and identifies potential opportunities for change within each mechanism.

The analysed data were collected as part of an ongoing SNSF research project and consist of 19 problem-centred interviews with school principals and representatives of the education administration from 7 cantons as well as various political and administrative documents documenting, for example, reform efforts and corresponding arguments. The analysis combines theory-oriented coding and strategies of content-structuring qualitative content analysis with a focus on identifying and reconstructing different mechanisms of path dependency.

Initial findings suggest that several mechanisms contribute to the persistence of rigid tracking in lower secondary education, which perpetuates exclusionary spaces and the reproduction of educational inequalities. These mechanisms include actors' perceptions of a close and functional link between lower secondary and upper secondary tracks, as well as objections to possible costs of structural reforms. Furthermore, the maintenance of rigid tracking is influenced by status interests of elite groups, such as parents, teachers, and politicians. In addition, powerful narratives about upholding traditions, beliefs in the benefits of ability segregation, skepticism about scientific evidence, and the value of the school class as a community contribute to the persistence of exclusionary spaces and the reproduction of educational inequalities.

The paper proposes that the interplay between these powerful narratives and beliefs, organizational structures, and status interests result in "entangled forms of power" that perpetuate these exclusionary spaces. Meanwhile, the data also offer insights into potential avenues for change towards lower secondary structures that reduce educational inequalities.

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