

LIFETRACK POLICY BRIEF
GERMANY

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Findings from the project

The most consequential form of sorting in the German education system happens earlier than in other European countries, at the transition from primary to lower secondary school at age 10-12, when students are selected into different schooling tracks, based on prior academic performance and parental choice. Since reunification, ongoing reforms in lower secondary schooling have increasingly replaced between-school tracking by within-school tracking in most federal states. However, the decisive decision to send or not to send one's children to *Gymnasium*, which is the straightforward pathway to university education and academic titles, has been left untouched. Similarly, the distinction between three different, hierarchically ordered general schooling certificates has not been changed. More subtle forms of educational sorting, such as electives or streams, play a lesser role in Germany. The same is true for informal ways of sorting, for example via prestigious private schools, elite institutions, regional differences in educational opportunities, or via differences in half-day versus full-day schooling.

A lot of previous research has shown impressively that early tracking in Germany contributes to social reproduction by unequal chances for children of similar ability to enter the academic track. The empirical findings of LIFETRACK Germany, which strongly rely on data of the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), highlight additional problems of the German early-tracking system that arise after track selection has occurred, and that policymakers and other stakeholders should be aware of.

First, Henniges et al. (2019) show that the German educational system is more open and flexible than often stated. It offers a multitude of options to correct previous educational decisions via changing tracks in secondary schooling and upgrading one's initial educational attainment through second-chance options. These options are reflected in a vast, complex array of different pathways through the educational system. While mobility within lower secondary schooling plays a minor role, later upgrading parallel to and after vocational education and training (VET) is substantial. Recent literature shows that these second-chance options are again socially selective and do not seem to change the overall association of social background and education substantially. Despite the multitude of pathways, the study by

Henniges et al. (2019) confirms the high degree of formal tracking in lower secondary education and its strong interrelation with later educational trajectories. The results suggest that early tracking and later correction options in Germany remain a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a considerable number of adolescents make use of these options and upgrade their initial track. On the other hand, this requires knowledge and additional resources, which again produces socially unequal participation. Furthermore, later upgrading and correction is more costly than learning early in life: for individuals it requires more effort and longer time in education, for society more resources than channeling investments in earlier education and equal support for all children.

Second, track attendance at the beginning of secondary schooling creates long-term path dependencies that finally lead to different positions in the occupational structure. Traini, Kleinert and Schindler (2021) show that students with similar starting conditions in terms of social background and ability, who were exposed to a lower school track in grade 5, have a lower socio-economic status and are less likely to enter high occupational positions in adult age. These differences are largely explained by final educational attainment. We conclude that in Germany, tracking contributes to social reproduction not only via unequal selection into tracks, but formal and informal restrictions in entering post-school education, which are connected to school tracks, seem to matter as well. Most importantly, access to higher education can only be obtained through the academic tracks of upper secondary education. Many school-based VET programs require an intermediate school degree. In the large sector of firm-based dual VET, school certificates are the most important selection criteria for hiring apprentices, which channel them into different segments of the labour market. Second-chance and correction options cannot counteract these path dependencies. Hence, even if two students started with similar preconditions into secondary education, restrictions create barriers to many segments of post-school education and, as a consequence, to many occupations. One solution to tackle this problem would be to lift formal restrictions to post-school education and replace them with qualitative entry requirements, such as interviews, exams or pieces of practical work. Moreover, already existing programmes combining school-based and vocational education could be strengthened further, for example acquiring *Abitur*

during VET, dual study programmes which combine VET and university education, or tertiary education for employed adults without *Abitur*.

Third, the early, strict selection of students in Germany is based on the assumption that students learn more efficiently when the learning environment is tailored to their individual abilities and needs. Traini, Kleinert and Bittmann (2021) find that students with similar preconditions and skills at the beginning of grade 5 learn more during lower secondary education, when they are assigned to the upper instead of the medium school track. This suggests that tracking does not only conserve previous ability differences, but actively produces scissor effects in learning. It is mainly the average performance level and social background composition of the class, which mediates these effects. Several interpretations seem plausible: students in the higher track might adapt to the higher learning level of classmates, they might learn directly from their peers, and learning might be more important in high-ability, high-background contexts, and these values could have spillover effects on the students under view. Finally, effects of class composition might partially reflect unobserved differences between tracks, for example in curriculum or instructional quality. In practical terms, these results suggest that students, who are “in-between tracks”, profit in terms of learning from making a risky decision—on top of other advantages of the upper track, such as higher social capital or gaining the *Abitur*. Policymakers should consequently pay more attention to intermediate track schools and classes to enable them to cater better for well-performing students.

Publications

Henniges, M., Traini, C., and Kleinert, C. (2019). Tracking and Sorting in the German Educational System, DIAL Working Papers Series, 14/2019.

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Further information

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