

Locked-in vs. locked-out: The heterogeneous effects of a detracking reform

Does prolonged comprehensive schooling affect students of different socio-economic backgrounds differently? I address this question in the context of the Swiss education system. At age 12, every student is assigned to one of two tracks according to prior achievements: approximately 70% to the advanced and 30% to the basic track. How classes are formed in lower secondary school varies across the country. Some students are grouped into classes according to assigned tracks, while other classes contain students of both tracks. I exploit an exogenous detracking reform in a difference-in-differences framework, that changed solely the formation of classes in one Swiss canton. Prior to 2015, classes are homogeneous in tracks, and after the reform classes are comprehensive. Tracks are assigned in both regimes, since they are consequential for further education trajectories and entry into the labor market. Using individual-level register data on all Swiss students from 2011-2020, I find heterogeneous effects along parental education and native language. The probability of assignment to further education entitling students for enrollment at university increased more for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and even tenfolded for students initially assigned to the basic track. Further, I do not find effects on dropout after compulsory school.

I can exclude changes in curricula, teacher quantity and quality, and motivational aspects as mechanisms for my findings. Hence, if teaching is more efficient in tracked classes, the positive peer effect of comprehensive classes dominates the negative efficiency effect of a non-tracked system. Since initially assigned tracks are strongly correlated with socio-economic background, the reform had an equalizing effect on educational attainments of students.