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Mixed Track Schools Do Not Level the Playing Field

Early tracking in education is a well-known driver of inequality. Mixing tracks in a selection of schools seems like an obvious fix. But research shows that higher-SES students more often use the opportunity for upward mobility that such schools offer.

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When policymakers want to tackle inequality in education systems that sort students into separate academic tracks at an early age, a popular answer is to combine tracks together under one roof. If a child is placed in the wrong track, a school that houses multiple tracks supposedly gives them a second chance. This is the idea behind Gesamtschulen in Germany and broad bridge classes (brede brugklassen) in the Netherlands, schools that mix pre-vocational, general, and academic streams, at least at the start of secondary school. It should be noted, however, that these initiatives exist alongside systems where single-track schools remain. The Gesamtschulen in Germany operate next to independent Gymnasiums, and broad schools in the Netherlands coexist with schools that offer only pre-vocational or only academic tracks.

The appeal of this solution is understandable. Educational systems with early and rigid tracking, found in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and Hungary, among others, are characterized by larger inequalities by socioeconomic background in educational outcomes (Strello et al., 2021; Terrin & Triventi, 2023; Van De Werfhorst, 2019). If the tracks are the problem, combining them seems like a natural, and politically attractive remedy. It promises fairer outcomes without changing the system as a whole. But do broad schools really work to decrease inequality?

A few studies on the Dutch case lead to the conclusion that broad schools, within an otherwise tracked system, are not a very hopeful solution to improve equal opportunities. The opportunities that broad schools offer, namely to move 'upwards' in the system, are disproportionately taken by students from advantaged backgrounds (Bles et al., 2026; Van De Werfhorst, 2021). These studies used the regional supply of different types of schools to get to the causal estimates of the type of school students attend, broad or small. One study showed that small prevocational schools reduce the chance to obtain a diploma higher than the prevocational exam, but more strongly so for high-SES students (Van De Werfhorst, 2021). Another study focused on 'stacking': the opportunity to enrol higher tracks midway after having finished a lower track. Stacking is happening more in broader schools, as one would expect. But this opportunity to move up in the system is, again,

mostly taken by students from advantaged backgrounds (Bles et al., 2026). These findings fit sociological theories of educational decision making, as educational aspirations and ambitions must be seen in relation to the family goals of avoiding downward mobility (Van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007). Certainly, in the Dutch system, where track enrolment is strongly determined by earlier academic performance and less by parental choice, broader schools within an otherwise tracked system will offer opportunities especially for students from advantaged backgrounds. Given that early tracking is so clearly predictive of inequality of educational opportunity, broader schools may not be the solution to solve the problem of early tracking. Instead, policy makers may want to consider more rigorous ways to reduce early tracking in educational systems.

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