

2025/26

Tracking is common in Switzerland

Tracking is a good way to educate each students adequately, emerging research suggests that its long-term effects merit closer attention.

This document is authored by S.Hupka-Brunner,PhD and D. Hanappi, PhD

Produced and edited by Doris Hanappi, PhD and Medea Fitzlaff, MA, Jacobs Center for Productive Youth Development UZH

Funding Acknowledgement

This Policy Brief was supported by the European Commission action HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01 for the project LEARN (Longitudinal Educational Achievements: Reducing iNequalities), Grant Agreement 101132531.

Funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Programme HORIZON-CL2-2023-TRANSFORMATIONS-01 Grant Agreement 101132531 and co-funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) grant agreement number 10108849 and the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI)

LONGITUDINAL EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS: REDUCING INEQUALITIES

LEARN

There seems to be a high level of confidence in educational tracking in Switzerland, and the division of pupils into different lower secondary levels after primary school is generally considered to be fair and appropriate. However, given that the aim of this tracking is to homogenize the student body in terms of competencies at each school level, it is surprising how much overlap there in skills between the different school types at the end of compulsory schooling exist (Gomensoro and Meyer 2021).

The driving force behind this allocation is the hope that the alignment of students' cognitive abilities with the educational content taught in the corresponding school type, which is achieved through tracking, will enable better support for all students (Hupka-Brunner 2017). Furthermore, tracking is seen as having little consequence, as the Swiss school system is perceived as permeable, which is primarily associated with the widespread vocational training system: Since the VET reform in 2004 (with its motto “No degree without a connection”) it is theoretically possible to work your way up from a two-year certificate program to a three- to four-year apprenticeship to a vocational diploma, thereby gaining access to tertiary education. This hampers discussion about an adaequate structure of the school system.[1]

Experts in the relevant field, in contrast, highlight the empirical consequences of this tracking for later pathways (Bauer and Riphahn 2006; Felouzis and Charmillot 2023) and emphasize that the (theoretically existent) permeability is not realized as often. Moreover, the specific context of the respective school most times is neglected. But as Gomensoro et al. could (submitted) show, school context as well as type of school at lower secondary schooling highly influence students chances to enter Gymnasium. Additional analyses show that the chances to enter VET are also strongly influenced by the type of school attended during lower secondary (Gomensoro et al. 2025; Sacchi and Meyer 2016).

“While the international discourse in education policy has come to advocate open, permeable education systems allowing for mobility and "second chances" throughout the entire educational career, TREE results show how the heavily tracked, segmented and segregated Swiss education system provokes an unnecessarily large number of discontinuous educational pathways and premature dropout” (Meyer 2016)

Nevertheless, the very complex structure of the organization of the lower secondary education in Switzerland needs to be analysed in its regional embeddedness. The different forms of tracking (between school tracking, within school tracking) in Switzerland raise the question if they also differently effect the following pathways.

When it comes to political measures, the challenge lies not only in closely monitoring existing structures, but also in reaching a consensus among the key players (teachers, parents, economy) that is capable of developing viable solutions which, are compatible with national standards and take specific local circumstances into account.

NOTE
Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

References

Bauer, Philipp, and Regina T. Riphahn. 2006. ‘Timing of School Tracking as a Determinant of Intergenerational Transmission of Education’. Economics Letters 91(1):90–97.

Felouzis, Georges, and Samuel Charmillot. 2023. ‘Tracking and Educational Inequality: A Longitudinal Analysis of Two School Reforms in Switzerland’. British Journal of Sociology of Education 44(4):738–63. doi:10.1080/01425692.2023.2203359.

Gomensoro, Andrés, Marieke Heers, Chantal Kamm, and Sandra Hupka-Brunner. 2025. ‘The Impact of Tracking in a Stratified Education System on Idealistic Educational Aspirations in Migrant and Native Families’. Research in Social Stratification and Mobility 97:101022. doi:10.1016/j.rssm.2025.101022.

Gomensoro, Andrés, and Thomas Meyer. 2021. TREE2 Results: The First Two Years. Bern: TREE. doi:https://doi.org/10.48350/160406.

Gomensoro, A., Hanappi, D., Heers, M.; Hupka-Brunner, M. & M. Daum (submitted): Social Origin and Institutional Context in Educational Trajectories: Evidence on access to the academic path from the Swiss tracked System. Country report.

Hofmann, Riikka. 2024. ‘The Four Paradoxes That Stop Practitioners from Using Research to Change Professional Practice and How to Overcome Them’. Education Sciences 14(9):996. doi:10.3390/educsci14090996.

Hupka-Brunner, Sandra. 2017. ‘Hoffen Auf Passung? Homogenitätsfiktion Und Ihre Folgen’. Pp. 201–17 in Bildungsverläufe von der Einschulung bis in den ersten Arbeitsmarkt. Theoretische Ansätze, empirische Befunde und Beispiele, edited by M. P. Neuenschwander and C. Nägele. Wiesbaden: Springer.

Kraft, Matthew A. 2020. ‘Interpreting Effect Sizes of Education Interventions’. Educational Researcher 49(4):241–53. doi:10.3102/0013189X20912798.

Meyer, Thomas. 2016. Bildungsgrenzen Im Spiegel Der Panel-Studie TREE. Bern: TREE.

Sacchi, Stefan, and Thomas Meyer. 2016. ‘VET Entry in Switzerland Via “Bridging Solutions”: Stepping Stone or Dead End?’ Swiss Journal of Sociology 42(1):9–39. doi:10.1515/sjs-2016-0002.