

Evaluating of De-tracking Reforms in the USA and Their Transfer into the Czech Education System

Markéta Holubová

marketa.holubova@pedf.cuni.cz

Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague

Tracking in the USA

- The forms of tracking differ from nation to nation
- 5 distinct types of tracking (LeTendre, Hofer and Schimizu, 2003)
- USA – tracking is applied at upper-secondary school level
- within individual high schools (within-school streaming, Chmielewski 2014)
- “So the tracking is not between schools in most cases but within the schools and it used to be very clear what track you are in. So when I was in high school it was very clear what track you were in. My high school was huge, like I do not know, a thousand students per grade. I knew almost no one in this school because I was with same sixty kids all the way through, then there was a big middle track and then there were kids at the very bottom. We never saw them we did not know who they were.” (Penn State)

History of Tracking in the USA

- The beginning of 19th century – common schools in the USA (no tracking)
- 1821 – Boston started the first public high school
- 1880th – influx of immigrants, school population expanded
- The end of 19th century – Ellwood P. Cubberley (Stanford Graduate School of Education in California) – efficiency in education
- 1940th – James B. Conant – the comprehensive high school (tracking)
- 1980th – De-tracking reforms

The Tracking Wars

- Oakes (2005) Keeping Track
- 1980th – concerns about tracking entered the de-tracking discourse
- “the tracking wars” = interaction among the critics and advocates of tracking and de-tracking
- Tracking is critiqued as providing inadequate and inequitable education to students in lower ability tracks
- Supporters focus on productivity and critics emphasize inequality

De-tracking Reforms

- Burris (2005) Closing the Achievement Gap by De-tracking
- “De-tracking movement in some sense succeeded and in some sense did not, because in some places, for example Carol Burris, that is a truly de-tracked school, in other places they make not too much of a big deal about tracking, you don't know what track you are in, but there are still tracks. There was a very active movement to de-track but I am not so sure it is certainly made or probably help to make tracking more poorest rather than reject tracks but I do not think we have been de-tracked. We have just gotten more opaque rather than transparent about how tracking takes place”. (Penn State)

My Research

- Fulbright visiting scholar at the Pennsylvania State University (Sep 2014-Feb 2015)
- Qualitative research
- 8 interviews (+ school observations) with people who have experience with de-tracking reforms or whose lives are still influenced by tracking strategies
- BRQ – How do de-tracking reforms affect education in the USA? Does tracking still appear in American schools?

Tracking in the USA

- *A lot of new results based on data from PISA (the Program for International Student Assessment) categorize the US as a country with “no tracking” (Chmielewski 2014)*
- **Course-by-course tracking** (very common in the USA), high schools offer courses at varying levels of difficulty in one or more subjects within school
- **Academic/vocational streaming – within-school** streaming in the US
- **Between-school** streaming in the USA (students are sorted into overarching programs) – public testing schools (Stuyvesant High School in New York), magnet schools, charter schools

Stuyvesant High School

- Public testing high school in New York City
- Symbol of excellence in education
- “Stuyvesant is in New York, it is one of five public high schools that you have to take an exam to get into and so it is known as one of these very elite schools and there are other elite schools in New York that are focused on art or focused on math but Stuyvesant has a lot of different things you can focus on science and everything like that, so it is pretty big school compare to some other schools in New York but it is supposed to be a very high quality and high achieving school.” (Penn State)

Delta High School and Charter School

- Two forms of tracking in the USA – formal and informal
- Charter School: students are selected by a random lottery
- “Informal tracking is common. With Delta, what you tend to see is higher family SES (socioeconomic status). Schools like Delta can be a form of tracking because only certain types of parents/students will join them. Sometimes people use the term, "self select", but it can still add up to statistically significant differences in mean parental SES, and thus have effects on student overall social attainment. Charter schools can play a similar role, and also have been implicated as functioning as a re-segregation mechanism in some districts.” (Penn State)
- “Secondly, the curriculum at both Delta and Charters differs significantly from the main public schools. So, some make a curricular differentiation argument. When studying informal tracking, local variability is important.” (Penn State)

Current Situation of Within-School Tracking in the USA

- Loveless (1998) The tracking and ability grouping debate
- Now tracking is more mysterious in American high schools
- “It becomes much more murky how students are placed and even what the tracks are. For example this high school has probably five tracks but you do not know it. Because there is a “gifted program”, there is “high honors”, there is “honors”, there is “college prep”, there is something else, so sort of high tracks. And you hear “honors” and you think they must be very good but then you find out no, no, no, it is “high honors” which is REALLY good.” (Penn State)

Importance of High Tracks

- Preparation for SAT – standardized test widely used for college admissions in the USA
- Formal “advanced placement” tracks within US high schools (AP courses)
- offer college-level curricula and examinations to high school students.
- ... “the schools they have low achievement they do not offer AP classes, so even best students at the poor school could not have the opportunity to take this. Some of the low achieving students, who are often minority students in middle or good schools, maybe do not get offered to take that class, maybe they do not get invited to take it or the guide counsellor says: “Oh, I do not think you can do that”. So that is why the tracking would come in.” (Penn State)
- “At Stuyvesant, I know that my niece is taking an AP class and she is only in her second year. So when she told me that I was like: “Oh, my gosh, she is like a baby taking this college level course and it is really hard.” (Penn State)

Tracking advantages high-SES students

- “This system is probably better than the strict tracking, but it also continues as always to advantage people who know the system and know how to make the system work.” (Penn State)
- ... “and there are the parents who are maneuvering if they know they can maneuver”... (Penn State)
- “It did not matter as much fifty years ago because most people were not finishing high school but now it matters. So that parental knowledge really matters.” (Penn State)

Minority Students in Lower Tracks

- Roslyn A. Mickelson (2001), *First- and Second-Generation Segregation*
- ... “if you walk into a classroom and see bunch of white kids you know it is an upper tracked class, if you see bunch of brown kids you know it is a lower tracked class in the same building.” (Penn State)
- “I am okay with the idea that human intelligence varies and human achievement varies. People are not the same, people have different interests, motivation, opportunities in whatever you want but I am not okay at all with the idea that variation maps very tightly onto race and economics, so in this country achievement is not randomly distributed across all demographic groups.” (Penn State)

It matters where you live

- “Because the schools in Scarsdale are very desirable and the schools in Bronx are not desirable. So if you gonna move to a wealthy school system, you will get essentially very different form of education for your kid. There will not be mass of behavioral issues, there will not be fighting in the school, there will not be issues of security, there will not be issues of acting out, all the parents will be on board to make sure their little Susie is doing her work, the kids are very well prepared by years and years of excellent pre-school, they come in either reading or ready to read, they know their shapes, they know their colors, they know their numbers. So their kinder garden is not like the kinder garden five miles away, their eighth grade is not like the eighth grade five miles away and their high school is not like that. So you can say it is tracked also by buildings.” (Penn State)

General Public Perception of Tracking

- “You might have a student who is in a very advanced English class but in very medium Math. It depends on the school, the tracking is sort of a **bad word**, it is **not** viewed as a **positive thing**, so they might not say that is a tracking.” (Penn State)
- “So the consensus is that the low tracks are bad ... you cannot go anyway you want with low tracks, low tracks are just generally bad for the kids in them.” (Penn State)

Educational Reforms in Europe

- There is an effort to get rid of academic/vocational streaming and replace it with more informal within-school tracking
- Lucas's theory of "effectively maintained inequality" (2001)
- Reforms that replace academic/vocational streaming with course-by-course tracking may be trading an explicitly unequal system for an implicitly unequal one (Chielewski 2014)

Conclusions

	United States of America	Czech Republic
Education System	Implicitly unequal system	Explicitly unequal system
Tracking	Informal	Formal
Public General Perception	Tracking is bad	Tracking is good

Conclusions

- In both countries minority students mostly appear in low tracks (in the CR no research evidence)
- With increasing immigration into the CR will have to solve the same problem as the USA (EC, Education and the Integration of Migrant Children, 2008), Integration or “White Flight”
- USA and CR – no doubt high-SES students are in high tracks, important parental impact
- In the USA there is a consensus that tracking is bad (Sociology of Education for undergraduate students)
- Clarity of entrance test – in the USA are standardized
- In Europe American education system referred to as more equitable (Chmielewski 2014) – there is no early tracking

Thank you for your attention!

marketa.holubova@pedf.cuni.cz