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## On the wrong track: How tracking is associated with dropping out of high school.

Werblow, J., Urick, A., & Duesbery, L.

*Equity & Excellence in Education*, 46(2), 2013, 270-284.

*Karen Villegas*

## *Review*

Werblow and Duesbery's research serves to assess the outcomes of low track students in the education system. The study found that low track students are 60% more likely to withdraw from high school than high track students. This study is different in that it confirms that statement in a way past research has not by interpreting academic tracking as an individual student-level predictor of school dropout through a nationally representative sample. Tracking refers to the way in which schools organize students to increase the homogeneity of instructional groups. Schools sort students into courses that are representative of their ability such as college preparatory or vocational. Those in college preparatory courses are considered the "higher track" while those in vocational courses are considered the "lower track."

Tracking has its advantages in that it serves as an effective classroom management tool and allows students to learn in an environment suited to their assessed performance. However, much research accounts for the negative effects of tracking particularly for students in the low track (Oakes, 1985). In the past, research has attempted to correlate the outcome of low track students with an increased likeliness of dropping out, but these studies have not conclusively tied the two factors together. Therefore, the significance of this article lies in its methods; by examining the data through a nationally represented model, accounting for school level differences, and successfully incorporating data from minority populations, the research increases the association between low tracked students and the act of dropping out of school.

The methodology at work in the study consists of applying variables

to the multilevel model through a three-step process. Researchers tested the variables to determine whether or not they served as a viable technique, student level predictors were then added to include track and school variance, and student level predictors were added once more to account for estimated variance after controlling for school effects. Screening variables is a common practice in all research experiments; however, because researchers were focused on creating a nationally representative sample, some advantageous variables such as literacy were ignored. Student level predictors then accounted for the correlation between low track students and dropping out. The predictors included school variance to account for significant differences between schools. Lastly, by adding student level predictors a second time, any additional variance was accounted for as well. The screening of these variables aided in creating a nationally representative student sample to support the idea that students placed in the lower track have an increased likelihood of dropping out.

Compared to other studies, the data is more conclusive because of the nationally representative sample that forms the crux of the research at hand. According to the researchers, “prior to the use of these multilevel models, student-level data were either aggregated at the school level or school-level data were disaggregated to the student level, which could lead to inaccurate results.” By creating a nationally representative sample, these school/student differences were minimalized. Other studies attempt to associate this correlation within a particular school district; hence, their data set represents only that area. However, by incorporating a nationally representative sample, this study was able to expand its data to the national level so that its findings are not limited to one area. Therefore, regardless of varying demographics, school policies, test scores, etc., the study showed that tracking affects all types of schools and negatively jeopardizes the future of low track students.

Furthermore, by addressing the problem at the school level phenomena, the data accounts for the differences between schools to allow for

results representative of all schools. Through this approach, the authors evaluated various schools to observe their success or failure in decreasing the likeliness of dropping out. In a sense, this study addressed the correlation between low track students and the act of dropping out through two perspectives: the nationally representative model and the school-level phenomena. The nationally representative sample made the data set broad to account for more schools. By including an analysis of the schools themselves, the researchers were able to narrow specific factors pertaining to individual schools. By doing this, the authors found that schools with a more positive academic climate, defined as a high moral and a focus on learning, display a decrease in the probability of student drop out.

Furthermore, the study explains that academic tracking disadvantages students who are Latinos, have individualized Education Plan (IEPs), or come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These populations are successfully accounted for through the methodology. Before resending results from the program, researchers compared the percentages of each ethnic group in the college track against the vocational track to identify racial inequities. By doing this, the study found that Hispanics are the most underrepresented student population in the college preparatory track. Latinos account for 32.6% of the college preparatory track, where as the remaining percentage of the Latino population falls into the vocational track. Students in the college track have a drop out rate of 24% yet the drop out rate of low track students increases to 76%. Addressing these populations is significant in that it gives a voice to minority communities. By highlighting the racial education gap, it places pressure on schools to address the needs of students of color. More so, because these minority groups usually fall into the lower track, it forces schools to address the inequities between tracks such as teacher experience, curriculum requirements, and class engagement.

Although the qualitative data employed by the study was properly supported, the school climate conclusion was not. The premise of their argument focuses on, “Schools with more positive school climate, higher mo-

rale, and more of a focus on learning and academic expectations have less dropout” (10). Although they explain that statement in the literature, their nationally representative sample cannot fully support the statement because the data is purely quantitative. The school level differences could potentially address that statement but that portion of the data is also quantitative. This portion of the methodology could have been better addressed by conducting interviews or an ethnographic observation to account for school climate. This is a qualitative statement that cannot be confirmed without diligent observation of the schools.

The exclusion of the ‘growth in reading’ variable is another limitation of the study. This variable would have served as a significant control, with reading as a prerequisite for academic success. More so, this would have accounted for the track placements of English Learning Students (ELS) with the likeliness of dropping out. ELS students are another minority group that is commonly discarded from data sets due to their residual effect. However, their experience is essential to hold schools accountable to the importance of effective bilingual education programs. This variable would have made the data set more dynamic and accounted for students that are generally excluded from this drop out correlation. By including this variable, the study could have also accounted for the success of some bilingual education programs over others when assessing school climate.

Additionally, nationalizing the data fails to account for the effect of other tracks. Nationalizing the data condenses the various types of tracks into two narrowed categories: “college preparatory” and “vocational”. By doing this, the data does not account for the other types of tracks that fall between the two extremes. For example, this includes the middle track, students who are taking grade level proficient courses. More so, some students are placed in two different tracks by course, where they may be strong in English but weak in Math. Perhaps future work can address outcomes for students that are not tracked into college preparatory or vocational tracks to help expand on the varying effects by specific tracks.

Although it has many limitations, Werblow and Duesbery’s methodology shows that students from the lower track are at a higher risk for school dropout despite school/student differences. The study suggests “that the mere placement of a student into an academic track greatly influences the likelihood that a student will dropout” (12), and this correlation makes the study significant. The study focuses attention to this issue and forces society to address the problems by asking questions that can provide potential solutions. More so, this research challenges schools so that they move away from disengaging curriculum and focus on creating a more stimulating learning environment.