

Chapter 10

Examining the Impact of Tracking on Long-Term Student Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this chapter is to review the literature dealing with the impact of tracking on long-term student outcomes, such as postsecondary education attainment and earnings potential. As a result, this chapter will examine whether the goals of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 have been met: that is, preparing CTE students for the workforce as well as for postsecondary education. This particular legislative initiative is critical since it was the first endeavor to expand the historical goal of preparing students solely for the workforce. The discussion ends with an articulation of future trends for practice and research.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

Vocational education and academic education has traditionally constituted two separate trajectories stratifying students with low academic promise into vocational education and students with strong academic promise into academic education, along with administering distinct curricula (Castellano, Stringfield, & Stone, 2003; Gordon, 2008; Lewis, 1998; Lynch, 2000; Plank, 2001; Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2008). As a result, vocational education and academic education had separate

funding sources and had different objectives (Bragg, 1999; Castellano et al., 2003; Gordon, 2008; Gray, 1999; Gray & Herr, 1998; Lynch, 2000; Plank, 2001; Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2008). According to Lewis (1998):

The practice of dividing the curriculum into academic and vocational aspects, and treating the latter as a default for and those deemed to be ill-suited to the former, has been an enduring staple of educational systems across the globe...those who pursue the vocational route thereby effectively forfeit the opportunity to go on to university and then on to high-status jobs. (p. 284-5)

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However, current educational legislation and comprehensive school reform (CSR) efforts are attempting to re-structure entire schools to promote an increasingly integrated system of CTE and traditional academic education (Castellano et al, 2003; DeLuca, Plank, & Estacion, 2006; Gordon, 2008; Hudson & Hurst, 1999; Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2008). As a result, the objectives of CTE (formerly known as vocational education) have transformed to not only preparing students for the workforce, but for postsecondary education attainment as well (Association for Career and Technical Education [ACTE], 2006; DeLuca et. al, 2006; Gordon, 2008; Hudson & Hurst, 1999; Scott & Sarkees-Wircenski, 2008; Stone & Aliaga, 2005). Despite this recent phenomenon, little research has been rendered examining CTE's impact on students' educational outcomes (Fletcher, 2009; Kulik, 1998). Kulik (1998) indicated the pressing need that exists to study CTE student outcomes by stating, "To decide whether vocational education shortchanges students, we must first know what its results are and whether they differ from results of other programs." (p. 7)

The objectives of this chapter are first to provide a background discussion of federal legislation leading up to the current Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006 that has and continues to shape the goals and direction of CTE. Second, this chapter reviews the literature regarding tracking and long-term student outcomes. Third, this chapter articulates future trends related to tracking, as well as implications for further research.

10.2 BACKGROUND

With the establishment of public schools in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (during the industrial age), philosophical debates proliferated around the issue of classical and practical education programs (Gordon, 2008; Scott & Sarkees-

Wircenski, 2008). Soon after, the enactment of the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 was instituted. This legislation was the first time the federal government supported and provided funding for vocational education (Jacobs & Grubb, 2003; Stasz & Bodilly, 2004) and marked the initiation of ongoing involvement in its programs. It called for the separation of vocational education from all other curricula in comprehensive high schools. Accordingly, the legislation mandated that vocational education have a separate state board distinguished from the State Board of Education. According to Gordon (2008), "The impact of this separation has been felt through subsequent decades in the development of separate training programs, separate teacher organizations, and separate student organizations" (p. 88). In addition, the objective of vocational education was to prepare youth and adults for the workforce.

The federal government has had a tremendous role in enacting educational legislation since the 1950s (Umpstead, 2008). During the 1950s, legislative initiatives centered around the issue of providing all students with educational opportunities regardless of race, ability, or gender (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). In fact, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case was pivotal in setting the precedent for equal educational rights for all citizens, and marked the end of segregated schools (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005); therefore, this case overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* separate but equal policy. During this time, the Civil Rights movement was occurring. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was enacted to encourage states and local school districts to provide supplemental educational services to schools with large enrollments of economically and educationally disadvantaged students (McDonnell, 2005). In addition, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 mandated that all students have access to the general education curriculum (Courtade & Ludlow, 2008).

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