

## Tracking pupils may reduce social segregation in residential neighborhoods and schools

*Perhaps the most common critique of tracking in schools is that it reinforces pre-existing inequalities by segregating pupils from privileged backgrounds away from the rest of the student body. However, in their new research [Gianni De Fraja](#) and [Francisco Martinez-Mora](#) find evidence that tracking may actually reduce neighborhood segregation, as it provides parents with an incentive to keep their children in schools in disadvantaged areas if it means their children will be placed into a top track.*



Our recent theoretical [research](#) uncovers a hitherto unnoticed subtle effect of tracking—the practice of forming classes according to pupils’ ability—in schools. We show that tracking (known as streaming or setting in the UK) may weaken socioeconomic residential and school segregation, that is, it may lessen the tendency of households to choose neighbors of similar income and socioeconomic status and thus promote more socially mixed schools. Given that children share leisure and school time, play, join the local sports team, attend local community events, and later date with their neighbors and school mates, mixing children of different social backgrounds helps those from disadvantaged social backgrounds integrate into society, exposes them to different lifestyles, role models and aspirations, with potentially long term benefits.



Allocation by ability is as controversial a practice as it is widespread, and it generates strong emotions among teachers and parents, as well as heated academic and policy debates. Advocates of tracking emphasize that sorting pupils by ability makes it easier for the whole class to be engaged by appropriately tailored and paced lessons. Conversely, teaching pupils of differing abilities together risks losing some of them and boring others. Those who might find lessons too hard may become disruptive, while moving too slow wastes precious learning time for others.

Opponents, such as the “[detracking American schools](#)” movement, hold that tracking harms the weakest children, often the most vulnerable or those from disadvantaged backgrounds, by perpetuating stigmas, ghettos, and hierarchical stereotypes and thus hampers social mobility and equality of opportunities. Given the well documented correlation between school “readiness” and family socioeconomic background, children from disadvantaged backgrounds will necessarily be overrepresented in low ability classes, and, as a result, receive lower quality education and will have a smaller chance to enter higher education, among other consequences.

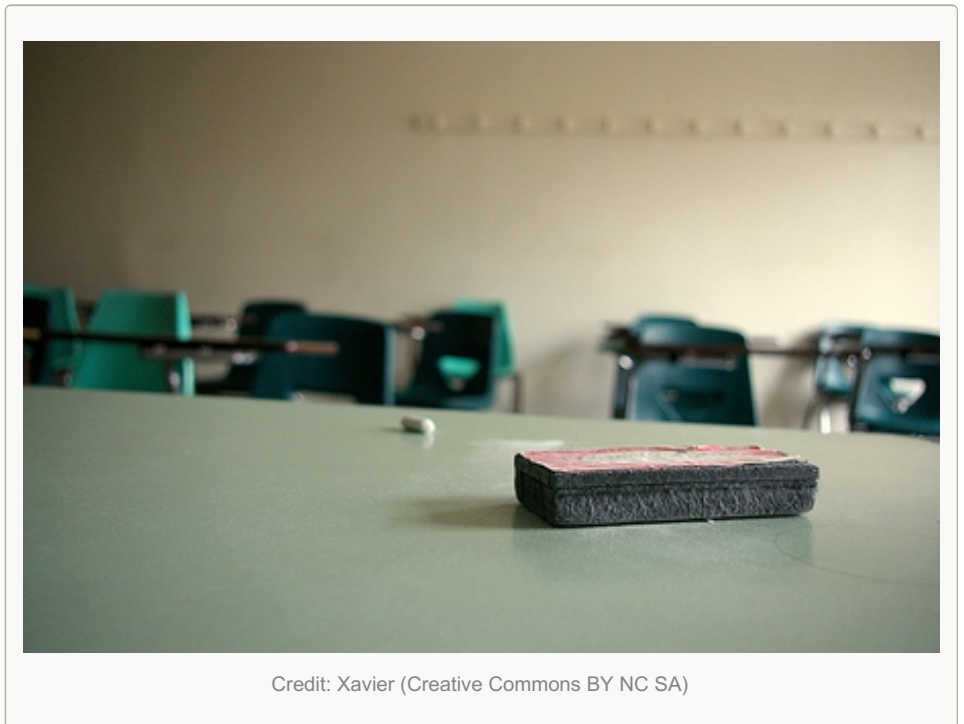


Credit: Daniel Guy (Creative Commons: BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The objection that tracking lowers the quality of the education received by disadvantaged pupils is clearly valid given a school's student population. However, the school's population is not given, but it is determined by the residential composition of the neighborhood, which is the product of the complex interaction between residential choices, the housing market and the education policy itself. Our research explains that, because of this complex feedback loop, when schools track students, households may choose to live in less segregated neighborhoods.

While we determined that tracking may reduce segregation through rigorous mathematical modelling, its intuition is natural enough: parents care about the quality of the education their children receive and they are willing to pay for it, but better off parents are more willing to pay for it, if only because they have more disposable income. Public schools are, of course, free of charge, but to the extent that the ability to choose a school depends on residential choices, for example, because schools have a "catchment area" or other residence based selection criteria, well-off parents are more willing to pay for houses that guarantee a place at a high-achieving school. This prices households of lower socioeconomic background out of good school neighborhoods, ensuring that more children from good socioeconomic background, who are more likely to be "ready for school," attend the good neighborhood school, and further enhances the desirability of—and hence a well-off household's willingness to pay for—houses in those areas. We show that this feedback loop stops only when there is complete stratification by income: children from better off households all live in the same neighborhood and all attend the same school, while children from less well-off households all live in a different neighborhood and all attend the school of that neighborhood.

This is not so when schools track pupils. To see why, consider the simple case where each school has two tracks: the more able students in the top track, the rest in the lower track. Parents from a high socioeconomic background, who are not constrained in their choice of school by their ability to pay for housing, need to choose where to live. When they do so, they take into account the quality of the peer group their children will interact with at each school and the positive correlation between ability and socioeconomic background. If one neighborhood has households of a better social background than another, then high ability children will be in the top track in either school, and so their parents will choose the school in the better neighborhood.



Credit: Xavier (Creative Commons BY NC SA)

Similarly, well-off parents whose children are less academic and will be in the lower track in either school will again choose the better neighborhood. But parents of children of middling ability face a true dilemma: they have to choose between living in a better district, with many other households of good socioeconomic background, where their child is likely to be placed in the low track (because a large proportion of children in that school are more able than him or her), and living in a district with fewer households of high socioeconomic background, but a higher chance that their child is in the top track at school, and thus benefits from a higher ability peer group. Some of these parents might prefer the higher track for their child, even if it means having neighbors of a lower socioeconomic background. If a few choose so, the socioeconomic composition of the neighborhood "improves", encouraging more parents from good social background to move in, further improving the neighborhood and creating a virtuous cycle of socioeconomic desegregation. The end result is neighborhoods and schools with socioeconomic mixing.

Let such strategic behavior be considered beyond the capability of ordinary parents, recall the Texas' “[top-ten percent](#)” policy: this guarantees a place in a state university to pupils in the top ten percent of their school, and Texan parents have [responded to it](#) modifying their choice of school in order to send their children to schools with fewer gifted pupils, where they were therefore more likely to be in the coveted top-ten percent. Other [empirical evidence](#) suggests that social mobility may actually be larger with tracking than without, and uncovers relatively low levels of residential segregation in US cities; this could well be due to the mechanism examined in our theoretical research.

*This article is based on the paper “[The Desegregating Effect of School Tracking](#),” which appeared in the *Journal of Urban Economics*.*

*[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)*

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1fToZzb>

---

## About the authors

### **Gianni De Fraja**- *University of Nottingham*

Gianni De Fraja is Professor of Economics at the University of Nottingham, and part-time professor of Public Economics at the University of Rome “Tor Vergata”. He is a fellow of CEPR. In his policy oriented papers he has studied theoretical aspects of competition among state owned and private firms, the regulation of utilities, and the design of health policies and of education policies.



### **Francisco Martinez-Mora**- *University of Leicester*

Francisco Martinez Mora is a lecturer at the University of Leicester and at Universidad Rovira i Virgili. He is also a fellow of the Spanish research institute CREIP. His research interests include the economics of education, as well as urban and political economics.



- CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 2014 LSE USAPP