

## *Unobserved effects in teacher decisions at educational transitions - Bias or anticipation of future performance? An experimental analysis*

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Until now, research on educational transitions mainly focused on the educational decision-making of students and their parents - the so-called secondary effect of social origin (Boudon 1974). However, teacher's decision about the tracking placement of their students should not be underestimated in educational systems with binding teacher decisions. As has been already discussed by Bowles and Gintis (1976) or Erikson and Jonsson (1995), teachers could have an important gatekeeper function if their decisions are biased against students of lower social background. However, another explanation could be statistical discrimination - teachers take other student's characteristics into account in their decision-making process in cases in which student's grades do not clearly support the choice of a specific track. These characteristics however might correlate with ascriptive factors like social background or sex and therefore it might give the impression that teachers are biased while they only anticipate future student's performance. This potential mechanism could explain why higher social background students have, on average, a higher probability of getting a recommendation for a higher track placement: Teachers may anticipate that they will receive more support from their parents in case they struggle in the higher track (e.g. Buchmann et al. 2010). The fact that female students have, on average, a higher probability of getting a recommendation for a higher track even when controlling for grades (see e.g. Helbig 2010 for the case of Germany) might, inter alia, be caused by a similar mechanism: On average, female students have a higher self-discipline in comparison to boys (e.g. Lee Duckworth / Seligman 2006) which increases their chances of a successful completion of the higher track.

In our contribution, we examine with survey experiments if teachers favour female students and students of higher social background because of a general bias or because of statistical discrimination in anticipation of future performance. We do this by letting teachers decide about track placement for hypothetical students, which are on the threshold of a recommendation for the higher performance track. In our vignettes, we do not only manipulate sex and social background, but we add or omit information that could potentially correlate with sex and social background: Is it to be expected that parents will support their child with tuition if need be? Does the student have a high self-discipline? These analyses are not only valuable because they might provide answers to several long-time questions in research on educational inequality, but also because they present a novel research approach by measuring the decision-making of teachers directly and therefore making it possible to test a theory. Additionally, our contribution presents a methodological innovation in survey experiment research due to our implementation of mediation effects.