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## Teacher Perspectives on the Impact of Tracking on High School Students

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### **Abstract**

*System tracking is a common practice in high schools, whereby students are grouped based on their perceived academic ability. While there is evidence to suggest that tracking can have both positive and negative impacts on students, teachers' perceptions of these impacts are complex and varied. This study examined the diverse teacher perceptions of the impacts of tracking on high school students. Using a qualitative approach, the study interviewed teachers of core subjects to explore their views on tracking and its effects on students' effort, learning, performance, career choices, and dropout rates. The findings of the study suggested that teachers have a nuanced understanding of the potential benefits and drawbacks of tracking. Some teachers believe that tracking can help students reach their full potential by providing them with a curriculum that is tailored to their abilities. Others believe that tracking can lead to inaccurate stereotypes and unequal educational opportunities, particularly for students from marginalized groups. The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers and educators. By understanding the diverse teacher perceptions of tracking, we can better design and implement tracking systems that are fair and equitable for all students.*

**Keywords:** *Teacher perceptions, Tracking System, High school student, United Arab Emirates (UAE), students' performance*

### **1. Introduction and Background**

Many schools across the globe are under immense pressure to educate learners to fit in the constantly changing world. Public high schools in society are entrusted with educating masses of children, and hence it can be challenging to guarantee their success (Ayasrah, 2020). With the high diversity of students in schools as well as the use of diverse teaching strategies, teachers can find it hard to track the academic progress of each learner. One of the main ways of understanding and monitoring performance is through system tracking, where both academic achievement and behavior are tackled. Teachers' perceptions vary regarding the effects of the tracking system among high school students.

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Many of the regulations set in the contemporary education system attempt to eliminate the achievement gap. The disparity in education arises due to different family histories, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural beliefs (Caprio et al., 2008). Therefore, teachers must educate the learners to the best of their ability and ensure their success (Li et al., 2018; Al Mansoor et al., 2023; Alarabi et al., 2022a; Abdulkader et al., 2023). The tracking system was introduced to measure students' performance, where the educators sort them into different groups based on previous academic performance, often measured by grades or standardized test scores (Shields, 2002). Teachers have diverse perceptions concerning the effectiveness of system tracking, as it may disadvantage some of the students (Dost et al., 2020; Ayasrah et al., 2024). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of educators regarding the impacts of the tracking system on high school students.

## **2. Problem Statement**

One of the main issues facing schools is how test scores can be raised to eliminate the achievement gap that appears to be discriminatory. Public high schools have, in the recent past, explored numerous possibilities to address the issue without immediate success. The aggregation of student achievement data indicates that there is a vast difference between students who come from humble backgrounds and those who come from wealthy families (Shields, 2002). The failed attempts to reduce this achievement gap over the years have necessitated further research to understand how teachers feel about it. Teachers from different schools have suggested various strategies such as ability grouping, and homogenous, and heterogeneous grouping, although this has yielded limited success (Shields, 2002). Ability grouping is the most common academic structure where schools track the academic achievement of the students based on their perceived learning capacities. Teachers are often advised to place the students in small groups according to their academic ability, including classes, courses, or curricular tracks (Li et al., 2018).

System tracking is used at a high school level and applied to students who have already been grouped based on their capabilities. Tracking is often preferred because the grouping of students is informal, short-term, and the flexibility of the instructional method (Koo et al., 2016; Aljermawi et al., 2024). System tracking has elicited different opinions from teachers, with many educators blaming its inefficiency (Van Houtte et al., 2013). The proponents of the system argue that tracking ensures students can reach their highest potential because the curriculum is commensurate with their abilities, protects higher-abled students from slow learners, facilitates individualization of instruction, and encourages slow students to become more integrated into the learning process (Van Houtte et al., 2013). On the contrary, the opposing teachers assert that tracking can contribute to the creation of inaccurate stereotypes, which impacts teachers' expectations and unequal education experience because the curriculum developed fails to challenge those with lower abilities. Additionally, tracking impacts learners' perceptions of their academic achievement and behavior, as well as the fact that tracking only benefits highly abled students (Zhao et al., 2015). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the diverse teachers' perceptions of the impacts of tracking among high school students.

## **3. Purpose of the Study**

Student tracking is not a new phenomenon as it has been used to track the performance of students at different levels of schooling. At the high school level, teachers might be hesitant to

track the academic performance of the learners with the notion that they have matured and are likely to do the right thing. In this case, students' activities, assignments, grades, and overall performance can be tracked using a uniquely designed system. The purpose of the study is to help schools understand the impact on students' tracking based on the perceptions of the teachers. Teachers have diverse perceptions when it comes to tracking, hence the need for research to establish whether there are negative impacts that might affect the learners' performance and future careers. For example, the research will establish whether tracking affects the effort and learning of the students based on the teachers' viewpoints.

Based on the findings, the study will establish whether effort varies across schools based on the tracking procedure. Eventually, the educators will be in a position to ascertain if tracking their students leads to an improvement in their educational experience. Through teacher perceptions, the researchers determined the impact of tracking on different categories of students including below-average, average, and above-average achievers. Tracking caters to a specific learner's ability and its implementation in an inclusive classroom environment might not yield the expected results. The division of students based on their academic ability is detrimental because it causes below-average students to label themselves as inferior. Other impacts include low self-esteem and reduced overall academic performance. Using the opportunities to learn model, the research will investigate how teacher perceptions affect students' performance based on various background factors such as the intellectual capacity of learners, beliefs, effort, and achievement.

#### **4. Study Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine the diverse teacher perceptions concerning the impacts of tracking among high school students. In this case, many studies focus on tracking in schools, particularly high schools, although few provide the teachers' perceptions. Tracking takes different forms, and each impacts students' efforts and achievement differently. Based on the results from the study, the researchers concluded that students' performance differs significantly depending on the level of tracking. For example, those with higher tracks tend to perform better because they put more effort into their studies compared to those in lower tracks. Therefore, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do high school teachers of core subjects perceive the tracking system and its impact on students?
2. How does tracking affect the performance of students in inclusive classrooms from the teachers' perspectives?
3. What are the perceptions of teachers about tracking and equality of educational opportunities?
4. How do teachers see the influence of tracking on students' career choices?
5. Is tracking related to high school students' dropouts?

#### **5. Significant of the Study**

The study will be crucial and beneficial to several stakeholders. The teachers and the school administration will get to understand whether tracking helps improve the achievement of the students. The government and policymakers will have an opportunity to revise the curriculum and make the necessary changes to make sure that no student is disadvantaged from being tracked. Future researchers will also benefit as the current study will provide crucial insights and identify gaps to be studied.

## 6. Literature Review

According to Harb and El (2006), tracking system alignment significantly impacts students' performance because poor alignment means learners cannot achieve their goals based on potential. However, as Egbert (2012) points out, tracking of students may have undesired results as the lower achieving students do not get an opportunity to learn with other students. Ultimately, this leads to inequality, which teachers are increasingly concerned about because some learners do meet their potential while others do not get the opportunity they deserve. Kelly (2007) found out that tracking policies often impact students in different ways. In a stratified study involving 92 high schools, the researchers concluded that tracking affects course-taking and the future achievement of students. As a result, this attracts varying perceptions among educators where they group students based on their abilities and where high-performing learners are separated from low-performing students. Ultimately, the separation minimizes the self-confidence of the low-performing students, and hence teachers disapprove of the tracking system.

Pekkala Kerr et al. (2013), and Archbald and Keleher (2008) indicate that tracking in schools leads to different outcomes. For example, the use of test scores may be effective in all students when focusing on cognitive skills but fail to be comprehensive in understanding performance in logical reasoning or arithmetic skills. Therefore, tracking leads to diverse perceptions among teachers concerning its impact on students. Additionally, Callahan, (2005), and Werblow et al. (2013) found out that tracking has profound effects on a student's achievement. According to their studies, tracking limits opportunities for students, and this significantly determines their probability of dropping out of school. Although inequality in performance is not solely attributed to tracking, the researchers reveal that the concept disadvantages students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. Ultimately, this compels them to drop out of school because they cannot compete efficiently with other students from wealthy families (Kelly, 2008; Ayasrah et al., 2023; Venkateswaran et al., 2024).

The Ministry of Education (MOE) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) uses several tracking, which will form the conceptual framework of the study to understand teacher perceptions of these tracking systems on high school students. In public schools, there are various streams that students need to choose from including the general and advanced streams where students continue learning in different grades (Cobley et al., 2009; Alarabi et al., 2022b; Tairab et al., 2020). The advanced stream can be applied to third language and creative art academies. The range of scientific subjects differs where students involved in advanced tracking receive more in-depth instruction in math and sciences (Alabidi et al., 2023; Hamad et al., 2022; Taha et al., 2023). The elite stream on the other hand is developed mainly for academically outstanding learners (Al Abidi et al., 2022). The main goal is to make sure that the curriculum emphasizes math and science in developing analytical, reasoning, and problem-solving skills among students (UAE, 2018). Other tracking systems include academics of Islamic culture and sports academies, which are either advanced or general and the teacher uses Arabic to teach the students (UAE, 2018). Additionally, the agricultural sciences academy applies the general stream while the aviation maintenance academy uses both the advanced and general stream (Alarabi et al., 2022b; Tairab et al., 2020). The various tracking stream helps in determining the performance of students (Biewen & Tapalaga, 2017). Teachers have diverse perceptions while applying the above tracking streams to establish the performance and achievement of students (Alarabi et al., 2022a). Hence, it will be essential to understand how their perceptions impact their self-esteem and performance.

General academic tracking has experienced significant changes over the years. The tracking system has been formalized in the country and provides guidelines for classroom assessment. In this case, Clarke (2012) asserts that several system-wide materials as well as resources are utilized by teachers to carry out assessment activities. For example, the scoring criteria has been in existence for many years and the MOE in the UAE acknowledges it as the basis for tracking the performance and achievement of learners at different levels of schooling.

The tracking system has faced criticism across the country, mainly from educators for numerous reasons. For instance, the practice is deemed to be of poor weak quality due to issues like uneven application of standards for students' academic performance and grade inflation (Marks & Al-Ali, 2016). High school students are assessed in various mandatory subjects and the results are used to certify their completion of the cycle and selection to institutions for higher learning Clarke (2012); Habis et al. (2023). There are often very limited options for students who do not perform well by the end of their high school education, which indicates that tracking can disadvantage certain learners as Clarke (2012) points out.

## **7. Methodology**

### **7.1 Method and Instrument**

This study aimed to explore the teacher perceptions of students on whom a tracking system is applied. Therefore, based on the educators' insights on the impacts of tracking students, the findings of the study will be useful in determining whether the system impacts students' achievement. The utilization of the qualitative methodology is deemed useful in this study because it provides information that contrasts teachers' perceptions of the tracking system. Most qualitative researchers reproduce views that contribute to describing or answering questions about specific experiences or perspectives of participants toward certain practices, beliefs, or events (Mahmoud & Willmott, 1998).

### **7.2 Participants**

During the study, 5 female teachers volunteered to take part. The teachers were selected on two criteria: accessibility and purposiveness. The 5 participants were accessible because they taught in the same school and were available during the time of research. In addition, the selected teachers were teaching core subjects such as math, Arabic, Science, and English. Purposeful sampling was important in this study because it helped in selecting individuals who were information-rich or knowledgeable concerning the purposes of the research. The teachers were expected to have first-hand experience in teaching track system students.

### **7.3 Data Collection**

The research adopted a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews were used. The interviews took place by phone and data was collected individually. The study sought permission from the teachers to record their responses so that they could be used during analysis. During the interview process. The validity and reliability of the content is determined by the similarity between the responses of the five individuals.

### **7.4 Data Analysis**

The guiding questions analysis technique was applied in the study. The technique entails the reformulation of the guiding questions and literature shared by the participants during the research taking into account the context of the different experiences. In the study, responses from the interviews were analyzed and similarities were identified.

## 8. Finding

High school teachers have different perceptions of the student tracking system and its impact on the students.

According to teacher A, “I think the tracking system is well-weighed for the students, in terms of coursework and examinations. Each student can be assessed according to their needs. This minimizes possible stress and encourages relations between teacher and student.”

Scholars also claim that tracking leads to appropriately paced instructions hence all the students attain maximum learning. In an interview with teacher B on the teacher’s perception of the student tracking system and its impacts on the student, he claimed that this system provides them with the right curriculum and instructions appropriate and specific to the needs of the students. It also ensures that these instructions are delivered using an effective procedure. Tracking is also thought to improve the relationship between a student and the teacher.

Teacher C said “The tracking system helps in observing many factors such as behavior, potential problems/barriers in learning as well as short-term and long-term learning barriers (special needs, misconceptions, dyslexia, etc)

According to Rimm-Kaufman (2019), maintaining a healthy student-teacher relationship has positive impacts and long-lasting implications not only on the student’s academic performance but also on their social development. This will lead to the student attaining higher levels of achievement as compared to those with conflicting relationships with the teacher. According to the teacher, students have different capabilities in class with some students thriving well while others struggling. Teacher B agrees that student tracking positively influences the student’s performance.

He said, “... because the teacher knows the level of his students and so he uses the appropriate methods, strategies, and techniques in teaching them.”

Teacher C claimed, “Keeping track of learners’ performances assists when introducing teaching and learning techniques that are designed to help students overcome intellectual and emotional barriers that keep them from progressing. By keeping track, you can identify which methodology will be successful for the learner.”

It is through student tracking that the teacher identifies and comes up with new methods and techniques to help students understand better according to their abilities. Teacher A, however, thinks that student tracking creates an environment whereby the class flows at a pace that suits every student although this could encourage malice among some students. According to Livingstone (2010) grouping students according to their academic ability could make the students self-label themselves as inferiors when comparing themselves with the higher performing colleagues. This could affect the self-esteem of these students which in turn lead to reduced academic performance among these students.

In an interview, when asked about the effect of student tracking on equality of educational opportunities, teacher A claimed that it leads to unequal educational experiences.

Teacher A said “Speaking for myself, I do think it leads to an unequal educational experience. This is because, while stretching advanced students, and encouraging their creativity, it is common that those students who fall behind, are just being taught the basics of the curriculum. I do not believe many students can fully comprehend the curriculum if it does not allow them to think creatively for themselves.”

According to Burris and Garrity (2019), ability tracking has heavily influenced educational equity. Lower-track students experience a less rigorous curriculum compared to their higher-performing colleagues (Alhosani et al., 2023). This could make them unable to complete the prerequisite courses needed for them to join higher-level courses.

The teacher in the interview claimed that the reason for inequality in educational opportunities could be that "...while stretching advanced students, and encouraging their creativity, it is common that those students who fall behind, are just being taught the basics of the curriculum. I do not believe many students can fully comprehend the curriculum if it does not allow them to think creatively for themselves."

Teacher B disagrees with this line of thinking and claims that despite some teachers thinking of student tracking unequal learning opportunities to students, many of them still believe that student tracking provides equality in education.

He said, "...as long as students receive the kind of education that suits their developmental stage."

Teacher C on the same issue thinks that student tracking is a tedious and time-consuming system. When a class has many students, it becomes difficult to keep track and differentiate for each student.

There exists a weak link between career choices and student tracking. However, the bright students have their set targets, just like the weak-performing students, but unlike the weaker students, the performers have a higher chance of following their career goals. According to the interview, the stretching students would have a higher range of career choices as compared to lower-level students. Teacher C claims that student tracking systems are beneficial to students as they help them understand themselves better. He adds, "Their goals are more realistic, it makes them aware of their skills (strengths and weaknesses) and can visualize a more realistic career choice for themselves."

The lower track most land in manual jobs because they are mostly preparing for basic skills. According to teacher D, student tracking has no negative effects on student career choices but rather helps them in making more informed decisions about their career choices. According to the study, lower-level students have limited interest in post-secondary degrees and also have little interest in science-based courses. Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2019) think that most of the lower students do not even consider science-related careers when thinking about their future. This brings the need to find out the cause of this unfavorable outcome. They suggest the need to implement educational policies that promote and enhance equal opportunities for every student that indicate the necessary skills for a certain career. In high schools, the population of students enrolling for mathematics courses consists of a lot of whites (more than half of the population) as compared to black students. Therefore, the use of student tracking would bring the notion that most black students are low-level students hence within school segregation.

Different factors trigger students to drop out of school. According to Fernandez-Suarez et al. (2016), the increase in school dropouts is alarming hence the need to cause it. They claim that most students dropping out of school display socioemotional issues. Dropping out of school is the last stage of the dynamic and multidimensional process of disengagement from school.

In an interview, when teacher A was asked about the effect of student tracking on student dropout, she said "Yes. Although many factors will influence this, I do believe that tracking is related to the incompleteness of the course. Namely due to the unequal experience it gives.

Teacher C backed up his colleagues and claimed that student tracking is one of the reasons contributing to student dropouts in the UAE. Sagenmüller (2019) thinks that factors such as demotivating school environments contribute a lot to students dropping out of school. However, she describes this factor as having two motivations, external and internal motivations. The external factor involves the student developing the feeling that the school environment is not innately motivational while the external factor is concerned with poor peer collaboration, fear of isolation, and lack of social cues. Students grouped in the lower level will fear being isolated and segregated by their colleagues in the higher level which affects the relationship between the students. This makes the student feel isolated and hence drop out of school.

Sagenmüller (2019) also associates school dropouts with other factors like lack of student support and continuous failure in different courses. Lack of support from fellow students is a factor that surpasses the teacher's capacity and difficulty of courses. This could be factors related to the school management. This factor could also be explained by considering the student tracking system. A low-level student may lack support from his colleagues on the basis that they take too much time to understand. These high-performing students fail to give the lower-level student the support he needs and end up feeling isolated and unwanted in the class. The student would end up dropping out of school. She however negates the fact that school tracking could lead to school dropouts by claiming that a student may also drop out of school if they lack quality time with the teacher. Student tracking is considered one of the ways to create a strong relationship between a teacher and a student. With this strong relationship, school dropout would be minimal. Scholars also believe that the students' experience improves to a higher degree when the teacher and the school authorities take an individualized approach. Teachers should treat students as individuals with the need to be nurtured not widgets who have blindly assembled in a classroom.

In an interview with teacher D, he claimed that there is no existing relationship between student dropout and student tracking. "No, in my opinion, tracking does not correlate with student drop-out. Tracking is only there to identify problems."

## **9. Discussion**

### **Relation of the Qualitative Interviews and the Literature**

Different students have different learning abilities, some students are quick to understand while others need individualized attention. To accommodate every student and their needs, most schools have adopted a tracking system where students are grouped according to their academic abilities in a subject or all subjects. An interview with teacher A proved that grouping students ensures that their needs are dealt with. He claimed that "...Each student can be assessed to their needs..." In tracking (also known as ability grouping) students are ranked as being either average, normal, or below average. The system of tracking has been used in the UAE since 2017. The system was used to cater for the high inflow of immigrants into the public schools and the system aimed to offer an education that took care of the children's limited understanding of the native language and also their limited preparation as compared to the natives. According to Barrington (2018), the system of student tracking is now less strict with tracking being applied just for certain subjects or lessons.

In high schools, this system is used to categorize students into different levels such as basic, honors, and college preparation groups. Other schools use another technique known as the



ability grouping which is less permanent and less formal compared to the tracking system. Ability grouping is done within a classroom and does not last beyond a year. The grouping is done by a teacher according to a certain lesson or subject. Teachers work hard to ensure that all the state plans in their lesson plans have been covered (Piopiunik, 2014). However, this does not mean that the students are learning the skills, have understood them well, or can apply them. The teacher has to come up with a student tracking system to keep track of which students have understood or are learning and who have not. These systems enable teachers to know when to re-teach a certain lesson and on what topic they have to slow down. It also helps the teacher reflect on their work and its effectiveness and impact on the student. According to teacher B, the system helps them give the right instructions to the students as well as “offer suitable support” to the students.

Research by Guill and Grohlich (2013) has indicated that student tracking increases student performance especially in mathematics and in languages. Teacher B agrees with Guill and Grohlich (2013) that “teachers agree that the results show that the tracking system shows positive effects on students of inclusive education because the teacher knows the level of his students and so he uses the appropriate methods, strategies, and techniques in teaching them.” Increasing a student’s cognitive abilities is not a lesson taught in school just like problem-solving skills. A student’s cognitive ability involves his intelligence, how the student understands complex ideas, learns from experience, how the student reasons, they adapt to a given environment, and how they solve problems through reasoning (Greiff et al., 2014; Ayasrah et al., 2023). Tracking comes in different shapes and forms making it hard to know how good or bad it is. Over some years, tracking has lost its strength in the United States but some countries like the Netherlands are still practicing it. If well applied, a teacher can cater their lesson towards a given ability level of the students. This enables low and normal-achieving students to be able to learn at their comfortable rate without being left behind. Teacher A disagrees with this in that the tracking system does not bring any kind of equality among the students. However, teacher B thinks that student tracking helps students get the kind of education they require hence providing equal educational opportunities to the students. This has recorded a great difference when it comes to the student’s academic achievements, especially for the high-performing students.

Grouping students according to subjects enables them to get instructions according to their abilities in those subjects. This ensures that students have continuous learning by their abilities as well as addressing self-esteem issues which may be brought by grouping low-performing students with high-performing ones in the class. A student’s achievement highly influences their self-esteem (Guill et al., 2016; Ayasrah et al., 2024). and therefore student tracking should be designed in a way that promotes academic achievement. Teacher A thinks that student tracking has contributed to students dropping out of school due to self-esteem issues. This occurs when low-level students are grouped with high-level students. Other researchers claim that the effect of student tracking of their performance is ambiguous. This is because, on one hand, tracking would positively influence the performance of the student as the teacher faces more homogenous classrooms hence adjusting their teaching style to fit the student’s abilities and also employ various pedagogical techniques, while on the other hand track placement may affect the socioeconomic status of the student and hence lower the equality of opportunities.

## **10. Recommendations**

In light of the findings presented in this study, the following recommendations are put forth for policymakers and educators: Firstly, there is a need for additional research on the repercussions of

tracking students from diverse backgrounds. Future investigations should delve into how tracking impacts students with varying backgrounds, including those from marginalized communities, individuals with disabilities, and students belonging to low-income households. Secondly, it is advisable to devise tracking systems that exhibit greater adaptability and inclusivity. Upcoming tracking frameworks should be crafted to enable students to transition between tracks based on their unique needs and progress. Finally, there is a call to provide teachers with professional development opportunities about tracking. Some educators may lack awareness of the most recent research findings on tracking or the optimal strategies for implementing tracking systems. Subsequent professional development initiatives should furnish teachers with the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively support students across all tracking levels.

## 11. Implications

The study's findings have several important implications. First, the study shows that tracking can create unfair educational opportunities for students. Policymakers should keep this in mind when making educational policies and programs to ensure that all students have access to high-quality education, regardless of their tracking placement. Second, schools need to be mindful of the social and emotional effects of tracking and implementing support systems to deal with any negative impacts on students. Third, schools should give students comprehensive information about different career paths and make sure that tracking decisions do not unnecessarily restrict their future options. Finally, open discussions about the impact of tracking systems can lead to informed decisions and collaborative efforts to improve educational practices.

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