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On the right track: Does senior high school tracking matter?

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Abstract. Instructional effects of tracking could have serious consequences for students and important implications for educational policy and practice. This study aimed to find out whether tracking during senior high school matters when choosing a program in college. For this purpose, descriptive design was employed to address the problem of the study. On the other hand, due to some problems of the study which cannot be addressed quantitatively, there was an element of qualitative method that was used in the conduct of the study. The findings revealed that the majority of the students came from the Academic Track, specifically from the General Academic Strand. Students have a very satisfactory performance but they vary in their performance when grouped according to track/strand. The students from the non-HUMMS strand believe that subject alignment to teacher education and teacher preparation are the problems that they encountered when they are already in the teacher education program. The students agreed that tracking is no longer a factor in choosing a program in college.

Keywords. senior high school, tracking, strand

Introduction

A school system is characterized by tracking when students are allocated, at some stage of their career between primary and tertiary school, to different tracks, which usually differ in the curriculum offered as well as in the average cognitive talent of enrolled students. Some form of tracking is mainly ability grouping or streaming within a fully comprehensive schooling structure, while in another context; tracking takes the form of well-defined separate segments in the education process, typically specializing in general and vocational education (Brunello & Checchi, 2006).

As stated by Chmielewski (2014), despite the very different appearances of tracking, many researchers draw a call for a more comparative study of these practices. Types of tracking have the same purpose of differentiating curricula by students' achievement levels, and both types often have the consequence of segregating students by socioeconomic status and ethnicity, which can exacerbate achievement disparities between these groups. Exactly how similar these achievement disparities are across the types of tracking remains unknown because very little empirical research has compared achievement and segregation in course-by-course tracking.

It could be remembered that in 2016, the first batch of senior high school students in the country were admitted in different tracks and strands in schools. These tracks and strands are

said to be their preparation for whatever program they will take when they decide to pursue college. Graduates of the K to 12 program are expected to have lifelong learning skills, competence to work and be productive, able to coexist in local and global communities, to engage in independent, creative and critical thinking, and have the capacity and willingness to transform others and one's self (RA 10533, 2013). Thus, as early as senior high school, students must be aware of the program that they would like to take in college so that they would enter the track or strand aligned to it. However, in the study of Abarro (2016), he found that that sex, average monthly family income, school preference, occupation of the head of the family, and average scholastic ratings in the preceding years are factors associated with the career track choices of the students. This means that not all students have taken the track or strand they prefer in the first place.

By having two more years in senior high school, the learner is expected to gain mastery of skills for lifelong learning and be prepared for more potent career opportunities (Magtibay & Los Baños, 2019). Philippine Congress (2013) shared that the Department of Education has conducted the National Career Assessment Examination (NCAE) in the basic education. This is to guide students in deciding what career to pursue in higher education. Its goal is to evaluate the student's skills based on a standardized examination. It also provides recommendations on what type of job is suitable for the students. The choice of career tracks of the students plays a great role in the preparations for the Senior High School for these are associated with career preferences (Abarro, 2016). It is believed that whatever is the learner's reason on taking the track, everything they experienced and learned while in the senior high school will be their armor as they proceed to the higher level or when they join the labor force (Magtibay & Los Baños, 2019). However, before the Academic Year 2018-2019 started, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued a reminder when the country welcomed the first batch of senior high school that regardless of the track or strand taken, no senior high school graduate shall be denied acceptance in applying for college entrance examinations (CMO No. 105, s. 2017).

The senior high school program has been the subject of several inquiries to ensure its success and to provide a mechanism of support for its improvement. As the curriculum is multi-faceted, most of the inquiries are centered on the competencies, the mode, and the medium of instruction (Villas, 2019). At present, the first batches of students who are products of senior high school are in their final year in college. In the College of Teacher Education, it is said that the best fit are students from the academic track, specifically the HUMSS stand. But the college has admitted students from the different tracks and strands following CHED's memorandum order. These lead the researchers to look into the effectiveness of the said actions to guide students' progress in their academic endeavors. Accordingly, this paper would like to find out if tracking has something to do with students' performance in college.

According to Chmielewski (2014), the instructional effects of tracking could have serious consequences for students and important implications for educational policy and practice. In previous research, it was shown that different types of tracking have different effects on students' academic self-concept (Chmielewski et al., 2013). Prediction of choice of a career track in senior high school is advantageous for educational institutions since it gives insights that can help them develop vital programs beneficial for students learning in school (Nazareno et al., 2018). Thus, the current study may leave students and parents aware of how senior high school tracking choices influence students' postsecondary opportunities. This paper is expected to provide descriptive evidence on tracking which could be later used as a methodological framework for an analysis of track choice. The significance of the alignment of track in their

college-level may be realized in the end as it can be noted that the improved alignment of K to 12 tracks on tertiary level may contribute many benefits like students' success, financial benefit, and institutional accountability benefits (Magtibay & Los Baños, 2019).

Education prepares students for their position and roles in society. The current study leans on the conflict theory of educational stratification. School stratification is viewed as a relevant institutional device reinforcing the intergenerational persistence in educational achievements across different social classes. Collins (1971) relates education to occupation by using conflict theory. He also uses Max Weber's concept of status groups to point out that schools prepare the young to fit an occupational position commensurate with their status in society. It is believed that the type of education students receive seals their future status because their education is viewed as appropriate preparation for future jobs.

It is on this premise that the researchers would like to pursue this study. This study is expected to add to the existing literature that reinforces the concern that tracking may substitute an implicitly unequal system for an explicitly unequal one. The results of this study may suggest processes in different contexts with different institutional tracking structures. Further, this will also provide the basis for future researches that would examine variation in tracking practices in more detail and would collect curricular data to examine gaps between tracks and to observe changing achievement over time.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was to find out whether tracking during senior high school matters when choosing a program in college. Specifically, this tried to:

1. identify what track/strand the CTE students come from;
2. determine the performance of the CTE students according to the track/strand that they came from;
3. test if there is a significant difference among the performances of the CTE students when they are grouped according to track/strand;
4. explore the challenges that students from other tracks/strands encounter in entering the education program given that Academic track, specifically HUMSS strand, is said to be the best fit for teacher education; and
5. examine whether tracking is still a factor in choosing a program in college based on students' perceptions.

Methodology

Descriptive design was employed to address the problem of the study. On the other hand, due to some problems of the study which cannot be addressed quantitatively, there was an element of qualitative method that was used in the conduct of the study. The respondents of the study were the 103 juniors from the College of Teacher Education. The researchers have decided to select respondents at the year level since these students have already taken more units of education courses. With this, the researchers would be able to out if students who were from the academic track, specifically the HUMSS strand, would outperform students from other tracks and strands.

To identify the track/strand the students came from and their academic performance based on their tracks/strand, frequency and percent were used. To test if there is a significant difference among the performances of the CTE students when they are grouped according to track/strand, ANOVA was used. However, interview questions were used to explore the challenges that students from other tracks/strands encountered in entering the education

program given that the HUMMS strand was said to be the best fit for education. The same was used to examine whether tracking is still a factor in choosing a program in college based on students' experiences. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing their responses.

Results and Discussion

Track/Strand Where the CTE Students Come From

Uncertainty is an unavoidable as well as career decision entailing unexpected outcomes (Konon, 2016). Choosing a career is crucial especially among students in secondary or in middle school. In making decisions in career selection, one has to undergo an intricate process and forcefully open-minded person to choose his specialty, practice, and location of the educational institution (Cheema et al., 2017). Table 1 shows the track/strand chosen by the students when they were in Senior High School. It can be noted that the majority of the students in the College of Teacher Education came from the Academic Track (90 or 87.38%), specifically from the General Academic Strand (46 or 44.66%) and Humanities and Social Sciences (31 or 30.10%).

Table 1. Track/strand where the CTE students came from.

| Track/Strand | Frequency | Percent |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| <i>Academic Track</i> | | |
| Accountancy, Business and Management (ABM) | 4 | 3.88 |
| Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) | 9 | 8.74 |
| Humanities and Social Science (HUMSS) | 31 | 30.10 |
| General Academic Strand (GAS) | 46 | 44.66 |
| <i>Technical-Vocational-Livelihood Track</i> | | |
| Home Economics | 3 | 2.91 |
| Industrial Arts | 3 | 2.91 |
| Agri-Fishery Arts | 2 | 1.94 |
| Information and Communications Technology (ICT) | 3 | 2.91 |
| <i>Sports Track</i> | 2 | 1.94 |
| <i>Arts and Design Track</i> | 0 | 0.00 |
| Total | 103 | 100 |

It can also be gleaned from the table that few of the students came from the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood track (11 or 10.68%), only 2 or 1.94% from the Sports track, and none of the students came from the Arts and Design track. This could be associated with the fact that almost all of the senior high schools in the province offer the General Academic Strand and none of them offer the Arts and Design Track. Thus, it could be concluded that the track/strand choice of the students would also depend on the availability of such in the senior high school where they were enrolled.

Performance of the CTE Students According Track/Strand

Almerino et al. (2020) noted that in relevant domains, the implementation of policies, strategies, and other initiatives are evaluated using performance evaluation methods. Similarly, in education, the effectiveness of introduced programs is reviewed in the same way.

To address one of the aims of the current study, the academic performance of the student depending on the track/strand they belonged to when they were in senior high school is presented in Table 2. As the data disclose, all of the students have very satisfactory performance. It is found that the students from the Humanities and Social Science (HUMSS) strand have the highest mean grade of 89.17. On the other hand, the Accountancy, Business, and Management (ABM) and Home Economics strands from the Academic Track and Technical-Vocational-Livelihood Track respectively have the lowest mean grade of 85.33.

In the study of Almerino et al. (2020), when they tried to measure the scholastic abilities of the students from different tracks/strands, the general trend can be observed that the ABM and STEM programs are on top of all the other programs in the overall test. Second, the GAS and HUMSS programs obtained average scores in most of the tests except for reading comprehension, whereas the TVL got below-average scores in most of the subsets.

According to Guill et al. (2017), ability grouping or tracking during secondary schooling is widespread. Previous research shows academic track schools are more successful than non-academic track schools in teaching mathematics, reading, and foreign languages. Reasons include a more favorable student composition and higher instructional quality. However, there is less evidence that track differences are even large enough to differentially affect the students' cognitive development.

Table 2. Performance of the CTE students according track/strand.

| Track/Strand | Mean Grade | Interpretation |
|--|-------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Academic Track</i> | | |
| Accountancy, Business and Management (ABM) | 85.33 | Very Satisfactory |
| Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) | 87.63 | Very Satisfactory |
| Humanities and Social Science (HUMSS) | 89.17 | Very Satisfactory |
| General Academic Strand (GAS) | 88.30 | Very Satisfactory |
| <i>Technical-Vocational-Livelihood Track</i> | | |
| Home Economics | 85.33 | Very Satisfactory |
| Industrial Arts | 88.00 | Very Satisfactory |
| Agri-Fishery Arts | 88.00 | Very Satisfactory |
| Information and Communications Technology (ICT) | 86.67 | Very Satisfactory |
| <i>Sports Track</i> | 86.00 | Very Satisfactory |
| <i>Arts and Design Track</i> | | |

Difference among the Performances of the CTE Students When Grouped According to Track/Strand

To determine if the students vary in their performance when grouped according to the track/strand they came from, Analysis of Variance is presented in Table 3. The data reveal that the students vary in their performance when grouped according to track/strand ($p=.022$). This

implies that the students from the Humanities and Social Science (HUMSS) strand of the Academic Track outperformed students from other tracks/strands.

Similarly, Guill et al. (2017) found in their study that the academic track students showed considerably higher intelligence scores than their counterparts at the non-academic tracks and slightly higher scores than students at the comprehensive schools. Their results underline the importance of a cognitively stimulating learning environment in school to support students' cognitive development.

However, according to Almerino et al. (2020), due to contradictory results in the current literature with regard to the role of new learning initiatives in facilitating successful K-12 implementation, it would be difficult for both scholars and stakeholders to evaluate the overall performance of the program in the country.

Table 3. Difference among the performances of the CTE students when grouped according to track/strand.

| Performance | Mean Square | F | p-value | Interpretation |
|--------------------|--------------------|----------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Mean grade | .773 | 2.385 | .022 | Significant |

Challenges that Students from Non-Academic/HUMMS Tracks/Strands Encountered in Entering the Education Program

Out of the 72 participants of the study who are not from the HUMMS strand, 46 or 63.89% (or 44.66% of the total respondents) said that they have not encountered a problem given the track or strand that they came from. They believe that all of them in the college are experiencing the same difficulty regardless of the track or strand they were in back when they were in senior high school. They also stressed that though they are not from the strand intended for teacher education, they can go with the flow and can keep up with those who are products of the HUMMS strand.

With this, the responses of the 26 respondents were analyzed and the researchers had come up with the themes as shown in Table 4. As the data reveal, 18 or 69.23% of the respondents believe that they encountered problems because there were courses that the students from HUMMS have taken which they think are essential as preparation in the teacher education program. One of them agreed with this and said, “Opo, dahil may ibang lessons sa HUMSS strand na tini-take na makatutulong sa pagbuild ng future teachers (*Yes, because there are other lessons in the HUMSS strand that are being taken that will help build future teachers*)”. Another one seconded, “Opo, merong mga topics sa ibang subject na nakuha na ng mga nasa HUMMS strand na hindi ko pa nakuha, kaya kailangan kong magbasa-basa pa tungkol doon upang makasunod (*Yes, there are topics on subjects taken by those from the HUMMS I haven't took up, so I need to read more about that to keep up*)”.

As mentioned by (Abarro, 2016), the track/strand that students have taken up when in senior high school provides recommendations on what type of job is suitable for them, that is, the choice of career tracks is associated with their career preferences. Magtibay and Los Baños (2019) added that the track/strand they students have taken will serve as their armor as they proceed to the higher level or when they join the labor force.

Table 4. Challenges that students from other tracks/strands encounter in entering the education program.

| Challenges that Students Encountered | Frequency | Percent |
|---|------------------|----------------|
| Subject alignment to teacher education | 18 | 69.23 |
| Teacher preparation | 8 | 30.77 |
| Total | 26 | 100 |

The thematic analysis also found that 8 or 30.77% of the respondents suppose that they do not have the necessary preparation as the students from HUMMS have. A respondent said, “At first, I found it hard to be in a field that I am not competent and to compete with other students since most students from HUMMS strand have experienced to be in the field of teaching during their immersion.” This is supported by another respondent who answered, “Mas lamang po sila kasi nag-immersion na yan sila sa mga school. May alam na sila kung paano ba talaga maging isang teacher (*They have the advantage because they are already immersed in schools. They already have the idea on how to be a teacher*)”.

In line with this, Palafox et al. (2018) mentioned that secondary education was once viewed as academic preparation for the entrance of higher education, but today, one of its major thrusts is to help the students develop skills that will help the students to land on a job.

Students’ Perceptions on Whether Tracking is Still a Factor in Choosing a Program in College

Though the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) already issued a reminder that regardless of the track or strand taken, no senior high school graduate shall be denied acceptance in applying for college entrance examinations, students were asked if tracking still matters. As shown in Table 5, the majority of the respondents (89 or 86.41%) believe that it is no longer a factor. One of the respondents said, “Hindi na po, kasi sa experience ko may mga classmates ako na galing sila sa HUMSS, TechVoc, at ako sa general academic strand, pero same kami na sa iisang course lang (*Not anymore, because in my experience I have classmates who are from HUMSS, TechVoc, and I in the general academic strand, but we are the same in the same course*).”

Another statement from one of the respondents supports this when he said “No, because based on my experience, even though I took the sports track in SHS then education in college, I didn't have any problem with that, actually what I learned in sports, I applied to education which is the PE subject, that's based from my experience.” Also, one of them comprehensively answered, “No, tracking is not a factor in choosing a program in college. Based on what I remember, tracking is just a choice made by the students as to whether they want to continue their education in college or simply work after graduating senior high school. Students who choose a career track or sports are still continuing their education in college. Furthermore, some of the senior high school strands that we receive do not correspond to the college courses that we take. Also, some institutions do not consider the tracks and strands that we receive in senior high school as long as we pass the college entrance examination and meet their grade requirements. As a result, tracking is not a consideration for me when selecting a college program.”

Though most of them said that tracking does not matter anymore, still some believe that it does (14 or 13.59%). This is supported by one of the respondents who said that “Yes,

because there are concepts that are specialized only on a specific track. It is advisable to take the track, the one that suits their abilities.” Another respondent seconded, “Opo dahil kung align po yung track na tinapos ay mas magiging madali po ang pag-aaral dahil nadaanan na ‘yung prerequisites kaya po di mabibigla pag nag-college na dahil familiar na lalo na po about sa concepts (*Yes, because if the completed track is aligned, it will be easier to study because you have already passed the prerequisites, so you won't be surprised when you go to college because you are familiar, especially about concepts.*)”

With the findings of the study, students must be reminded that professional life and future achievement are a result of the appropriate choice of career (Ahmed et al., 2017) and that uncertainty is an unavoidable as well as career decision entailing unexpected outcomes (Konon, 2016).

Table 5. Students’ perceptions on whether tracking is still a factor in choosing a program in college.

| Students’ Perception | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Yes, tracking is still a factor | 14 | 13.59 |
| No, tracking is no longer factor | 89 | 86.41 |
| Total | 26 | 100 |

Conclusions

In line with the findings of the study, the researchers concluded the following:

1. Majority of the students came from the Academic Track, specifically from the General Academic Strand.
2. The students have a very satisfactory performance regardless of the track/strand they came from.
3. The students vary in their performance when grouped according to track/strand.
4. The students from the non-HUMMS strand believe that subject alignment to teacher education and teacher preparation are the problems that they encountered when they are already in the teacher education program.
5. The students agreed that tracking is no longer a factor in choosing a program in college.

Recommendations

The following are recommended based on the findings of the study:

1. Curriculum planners including, head teachers, department heads, principals, and policy makers including the Department of Education officials may consider few revisions on the senior high school curriculum to make the stakeholders see the relevance of tracking as a preparation for students’ future careers.
2. Career guidance may be given intensively and be implemented in school by integration of career plans in the curriculum that can help students in making sound decisions in career selection.
3. It is further recommended for a more detailed assessment review, which includes qualitative means in soliciting data for deeper understanding to support the quantitative data provided in the current study.

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