

Session 5
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Education and employment

One of the most consistent findings in social science is that individuals who have completed more schooling obtain higher levels of employment and earnings. However, most of the content of formal schooling does not address specific preparation for work. Most individuals eventually do receive some kind of professional, technical, or vocational education. But generally people who earn higher salaries receive their vocational education at a later stage of their education.

This leads to various forms of tracking or streaming at earlier stages of schooling, especially at the secondary level. Some students in secondary education receive vocational training for occupations that are relatively less well paid. Other students, who will later prepare for managerial or professional occupations, avoid any technical training in secondary school and devote their attention to academic or general subjects required for entry into tertiary education. Secondary technical or professional studies may include some education in workplaces: e.g. alternance, or full-blown apprenticeship where students have the status of actual employees in the enterprise.

The separation of academic/general from technical/vocational streams in secondary education creates problems. It intensifies social stratification because children from lower-income families and racial or linguistic minority groups tend to be disproportionately assigned to the vocational track. Lack of access to tertiary education limits their future life chances. Substantial numbers of young people who complete an academic or general secondary diploma begin tertiary education but do not finish, and then lack technical skills and knowledge for employment.

Students who complete a vocational or technical secondary diploma also may not be well prepared for employment, especially in educational systems where secondary technical education is not connected with actual workplaces. Separation of theory from application in the curriculum of secondary education contributes to disengagement and low achievement of students who are not interested in learning academic subjects for their own sake and do not see how these subjects are relevant to their lives.

To address these issues, some educational systems have tried various remedies:

- Creating technical or professional credentials and diplomas at secondary and tertiary levels that are intended to have greater “parity of esteem” with academic or general diplomas: e.g. *bac professionnel*, *berufsabitur*.
- Providing greater opportunity for students who complete a secondary vocational or technical course to enter tertiary education: e.g. *IUT*, *Fachhochschulen*, polytechnics
- Creating programs of study that include all academic or general subjects required for university, and a sequence of vocational or technical courses and experiences including work-based learning. “Career academies” in the US are an example, with good evidence of positive outcomes for students. (See <http://casn.berkeley.edu>) New “Common Core” standards in the US, intended to make all high school graduates “college and career ready”, may encourage further replication of these integrated pathways.