Migration & the Quest for Educational Equity in Germany

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Germany has undergone a significant transformation from a nation that saw itself as culturally homogeneous to a society characterized by diversity and immigration. The education system, however, continues to struggle to meet the needs of children and young people from diverse backgrounds. This manifests in forms of unequal treatment and discrimination that impede the effective integration and education of students from different ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious groups. This is particularly true for students from nonacademic, low–socioeconomic status backgrounds, as well as for students from immigrant families: categories that frequently overlap. However, there are promising educational interventions and initiatives that address issues of democracy, diversity, and equal opportunity in schools. I provide an overview of select issues in the production and reproduction of inequality in the German school system and in everyday teaching practices, with a focus on including students of immigrant origin.

Issues of educational inequality came back into the public eye in the early 2000s, when the publication of the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment Study (PISA) shook the education system and Germany's general belief in the meritocratic principle. The study found that Germany performed poorly and that the educational success of students was closely linked to their socioeconomic background. The results also revealed the educational disparity between young people with and without a "migration background," a term that has come under criticism because it lumps together people with very different connections to migration.[1]

PISA triggered an important public debate on how to explain these worrying empirical results and how to respond to them. A popular argTEMC nclicwasnd t.p8n0oc-Mien-U

while the poor performance of the education system– which was clearly unable to adapt to the demographic change, for example, for students in need of German as a second language– was hardly questioned.[2]
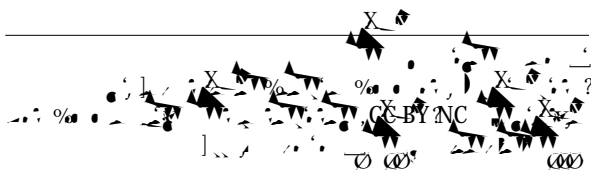
where people were forcibly displaced and escaping political oppression, persecution, and war. Since 2021, over one million refugees from Ukraine have moved to Germany.[6]

Germany is home to roughly 84 million inhabitants. According to the Federal Statistical Office in 2022, 23.8 million people in Germany had a migration background, which means that they or at least one of their parents were not German citizens at birth.[7] This corresponds to a share of almost 29 percent. A slim majority of these (51 percent) were German nationals, while 49 percent were foreign nationals. Considering people with a migration background based on their migration experience, almost two-thirds (64 percent) of them had migrated to Germany themselves, and 36 percent were born in Germany.[8] Many of them trace their family biographies back to the times when the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) actively recruited foreign labor from, for example, Spain, Greece, Turkey, Tunisia, Vietnam, Hungary, Cuba, and Mozambique. These are the children and grandchildren of the "guestworkers" and "contract workers" (most came between the 1960s and the 1980s) who chose not to return to their home countries, but rather to settle in Germany.[9] Every fourth person in Germany today has family experiences connected to migration, which usually means being socialized with a variety of cultural practices, languages, and religious traditions.[10] Hence a growing number of German citizens have ancestors who have not always lived in Germany, or who live transnational lives, commuting between different regions and countries.

After the United States, Germany has become the world's second top destination for migrants.[11] Germany has unintentionally become a country of immigration. As such, German society is renegotiating and adjusting to issues of multiple belongings and identities, participation, and equal opportunity within increasingly diverse contexts. Political scientist Naika Foroutan has described Germany as a "post-migrant society." Based on this analysis, she argues that Germany needs to establish a new national narrative recognizing migration as a common feature of German society in the past, present, and future.[12]

The emerging new self-image of Germany as an immigrant society went hand in hand with migration and integration policy reforms. A new modern citizenship law was introduced in 1999, followed by an immigration law in 2005, which included integration strategies, concepts, and measurements, such as German language, history, and culture classes for newly arrived immigrants. The aging population in Germany has resulted in a shrinking workforce and an increasing demand for social services, health care, and pension benefits. Immigration can help offset the declining workforce as immigrants can fill critical job vacancies. That is why the federal government introduced new immigration acts in 2020 and a reform of the immigration law in 2023 intended to attract skilled immigrants from around the world. The Federal Employment Office presently speaks about the need of attracting four hun-

dred thousand skilled immigrants per year to fill the workforce.[13] Yet in this context, despite the liberalization for skilled workers, there is also a clear tendency to restrict the right of asylum and to reduce the number of asylum-seekers. Thus, there exists a tension between efforts to satisfy Germany's economic needs and efforts to enforce migration control.

One consequence of this ambivalence in integration policy is the fact that immigrants and their descendants still do not have the same opportunities to participate in relevant areas of society, such as labor, housing, politics, and education.[14] Given the evolving political architecture that is preparing Germany for future immigration needs— while migration for the purposes of labor and asylum are happening every day— it is not surprising that the education system must be readapted and reshaped to meet the needs of migrant children and their families.

Germany's society has become superdiverse. Anthropologist Steven Vertovec coined the term "superdiversity" attempting to capture the interplay of the broadly defined linguistic, religious, ethnic, and cultural resources that characterize late modern societies in a globalized world. These resources include "different immigration statuses and associated entitlements and limitations of rights, different labor market experiences, discrete gender and age profiles, spatial distribution patterns, and mixed local responses of service providers and residents."[15]

Germany has, of course, always been culturally influenced by contributions from various ethnic and linguistic groups. The sixteen German *Länder* are home to a wide range of cultures, traditions, and languages.[16] As for linguistic diversity, German is the official language, but there exist several regional dialects and officially recognized minority languages other than German.[17] Germany shares its borders with nine other countries, and many of those living near the borders tend to speak the language of their neighbors. Furthermore, immigrant communities contribute to the linguistic landscape as many of them speak their native languages alongside German. Multilingualism is the order of the day in Germany.

Due to immigration past and present, Germany has a significant immigrant population. In 2022, 12.3 million people or 15 percent of the population had a foreign nationality. Most foreigners were of European (69 pero

lower courses or segregated classes, which can limit their educational opportunities and reinforce inequalities.

- *Unequal distribution of resources*: The distribution of resources for schools is often based on the neighborhoods or communities where the school is lo-

from immigrant families are more often affected by social disadvantage because a significant number of them grow up in families with a lower level of education and socioeconomic status, as poverty tends to be inherited in Germany.[27]

The transition from primary to secondary school has far-reaching effects on the educational and occupational biographies of adolescents in Germany. The transition represents a critical point for the reproduction of inequality, as the highly stratified German school system separates students according to their educational achievements early on. The type of school a student will attend in Germany is based on academic performance, teacher recommendations, and parent preferences. A peculiarity of the German school system is that the first transition takes place after the fourth grade, or after the sixth grade in Berlin and Brandenburg, which is substantially earlier than in most other countries.[28] Students must qualify for different types of public education after elementary school. Their competences in different subjects are assessed when they are between nine and eleven years old. Based on their grades, students receive a recommendation for a certain school type. Most students attend the secondary-school track that their elementary school teachers recommend. While the recommendation is not legally binding, they are skewed in favor of families with a high socioeconomic status. It is at this point of transition in the school system that children from low–socioeconomic status, low–academic achievement, and immigrant families are disadvantaged, not least because newly arrived families in particular lack institutional knowledge of this highly stratified and opaque school system.[29] Empirical data show that assuming the same performance, children with such family backgrounds are less likely to be recommended by their teachers to attend a university-bound school track than are children from more privileged families.[30]

It is important to note that social background not only influences the transition to secondary school, but also significantly impacts students' school careers. Formal access to education should be based on equal opportunities and non-discrimination, and all children should have equal access to school. The ear1 (tla5.333.7 8 (ansi73n

Yet a recent study on teacher training in Germany reveals that teacher training needs to be redesigned to meet the demands of contemporary German society.[31] At the moment, Germany is experiencing a glaring teacher shortage, which exacerbates these educational inequalities. Students who need special support cannot be provided for accordingly.

Second, progress should be systematically monitored over time and framed with school-based support structures. Third, because parents play an important role in school transition decisions, they need better information and advice from teachers and mentors, who can cater to their specific needs as newcomers are systematically disadvantaged and confronted with a complex school system full of peculiarities.[32] Immigrant parents in Germany are generally interested in the educational success of their children across all social milieus.[33] So it is not surprising that the use of mentors to advise parents on how to navigate the German school system and support their children's educational development has proven to be particularly effective.[34]

Finally, structural changes are required, including expanding comprehensive schools in which students are not separated at an early stage, but rather learn together over a longer period of time. A key demand remains to make educational pathways more flexible so that early educational choices or failures do not become permanent obstacles for students.

It is in this context that de facto segregation needs to be addressed, as it is no longer a marginal phenomenon at German schools. The segregation of students with and without a migration background is particularly visible in urban areas. A study by the Research Unit of the Expert Council on Integration and Migration reveals that in large cities, about 70 percent of migrant children attend an elementary school where migrants represent the majority of the student body. For children without a migration background, the figure is only 17 percent. It is also noteworthy that around 40 percent of all elementary school children with a migration background study in classes with so-called low achievers. Among children without a migration background, the figure is only 5.7 percent. This segregation negatively influences the acquisition of competences and skills of young people from immigrant families, as their academic performance is impaired by their often lower-performing classmates.[35]

In summary, three factors are primarily responsible for the educational disadvantages of students of immigrant origin: residential segregation in German cities, parental school choice, and unequal access to the academically advanced tracks in Germany's secondary schools. However, there is also empirical evidence that points to the importance of teachers' attitudes toward students from immigrant families and students' experiences of discrimination, which hold negative impacts on their socioemotional, behavioral, relational, and academic adjust-

ments. The effects of direct, indirect, interactional, and structural discrimination on young people have only become a topic of public concern, discussion, and research in Germany in recent years.[36]

Immigrant students might be evaluated lower because of teachers' prejudices or unconscious stereotypes. This can affect these students' school careers and future opportunities. An experimental study tested whether teachers show bias when grading students' German dictation depending on the name of the stu-

ies that examine structural racism in educational institutions through the lens of critical race theory.[47]

guage impact the language acquisition process. Studies indicate that attending preschool supports the language acquisition of immigrant children, particularly those who have limited linguistic exposure outside of institutional contexts.[55] This is particularly true for refugee children, who temporarily stay in collective housing with their families and have little exposure to German. Although preschool plays an important role, schools have an enormous responsibility for teaching German as a second language and creating a school culture that welcomes and supports multilingualism. Therefore, learning to deal with linguistic diversity in professional contexts must be integrated into teacher training as a cross-sectional task, and should be obligatory across the country. In some, but not all, German states, the qualification to teach German as a second language has already become anchored in teacher training.[56]

In debates about migration and schooling, multilingualism is too often perceived as a problem or even a threat to social cohesion, and an obstacle to the integration of immigrants. This can lead to an unequal distribution of educational opportunities and discrimination.[57]

While multilingualism is a reality in Germany, only a few schools offer resources that do justice to the linguistic diversity in classrooms. In these schools, we find, for example, signs, labels, and student projects in different languages; course offerings to study heritage languages; parents' evenings with translations into other languages; school libraries featuring books in different languages; and family languages skills of students being actively used for learning in the classroom. In short, multilingualism becomes visible and tangible as a valuable resource in these schools. This way forward can be backed by empirical evidence demonstrating that a positive attitude toward multilingual children's fluid linguistic repertoires and the use of translanguaging strategies are highly important for the linguistic, cognitive, and socioemotional development of multilingual students.[58]

Another issue related to dealing with linguistic diversity is that the German education system privileges the European languages traditionally and most frequently taught at school.[59] English, Spanish, and French are given a higher status than languages spoken by many immigrants, including Turkish, Arabic, Russian, and Polish. Students who speak the latter languages at home seldom have the chance to systematically study them at school. There are, however, a growing number of schools that offer optional heritage language classes for immigrant students. So far, grades obtained in these classes can be used for school careers in only some federal states (such as North Rhine-Westphalia). This recognition of the family languages in the curriculum seems desirable to compensate for linguistic educational inequality.[60]

Some schools insist that only German be spoken in the classrooms, the hallways of the building, and even the schoolyard. Often based on the argument that

such a language policy in schools would support the integration of immigrant stu-

accompanying language support. The resources of the individual schools determine what can be offered. The partially or completely separate schooling of newly arrived students can lead to educational inequalities and social marginalization because "separate classes install a spatial division between newcomer and other students, segregating them into different classrooms, sometimes even in different buildings."[67] A European comparative study criticizes the schooling of refugee students in Germany for not providing them with an equal chance to succeed in school compared to students not of immigration background. This points to the fact that most refugee students who arrive after elementary school go to the vocational school types, while only a small proportion of students not of migration backgrounds attend Haupt- or Realschule (general or "real" school).[68]

As migration and relocation will permanently bring children and young people to Germany who enter the education system without any knowledge of German, it is urgent to develop, evaluate, and establish effective models of schooling that guarantee the best educational chances for the most students. Tailoring educational programs to the respective needs and competences of newly arrived students can only be implemented with more resources for schools. An example of good practice is the social index for schools aiming at distributive justice. This school-specific social index is intended to contribute to a more targeted allocation of certain resources to schools. In this model, schools that are under particular pressures– for example because they have a high number of students who are at risk of poverty, need German language support, or come from refugee families– can receive more funding to support their challenging work.

The state governments in Germany that have already implemented an index– including Hamburg, Bremen, and North Rhine-Westphalia– follow the principle of treating unequal things unequally, because the school social index identifies existing social challenges and supports schools according to their respective needs. The school-specific social index is an important tool to establishing more educational equity and equal opportunities.

According to the results of the OECD study "The Resilience of Students with an Immigrant Background: Factors That Shape Well-Being," students with a migration background report frequent unequal treatment in school. These experiences have negative effects on their mental and emotional well-being, as well as their academic performance, and thus prevent school and social resilience.[69]

Visible minorities, as well as Muslim people, experience discrimination more frequently in Germany.[70] These results are also true for adolescents in these groups.[71] It seems that students of color, as well as students with Muslim, Sinti, and Roma backgrounds, are at particular risk of being discriminated against.[72] Some typical situations include, for example, worksheets for history classes containing discriminatory vocabulary, such as the N-word, or teachers who criticize Muslim girls for wearing headscarves. This is the reason why ADAS, a ground-

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[8] See Destasis Databank, "Population: Migration in Times of Demographic Change," https://www.destatis.de/ DE/Themen/Querschnitt/Demogra scher-Wandel/Aspekte /demogra e-migration.html (accessed August 27, 2024).

[9] At the time, Germany was still divided into the East and West. The reuni cation took place in 1990.

[10] See Statistisches Bundesamt [Federal Of ce of Statistics], "Pressemitteilung Nr. 162" [Press Release Number 162], April 12, 2022, https://www.destatis.de/ DE/Presse/Presse mitteilungen/2022/04/ PD22_162_125.html and Statistisches Bundesamt [Federal Of ce of Statistics], "Bevölkerungsstand," [Population Level], https://www.destatis.de/ DE /Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Bevoelkerungsstand/aktuell-quartale .html .

[11] See United Nations International Organization for Migration (UN IOM), *World Migration Report 2022* (UN IOM -

/ EN/publikationen/2016/national-minorities-minority-and-regional-languages-in
-germany.pdf.

[18] See Statista Research Department, https://www.destatis.de/ DE/Themen/Querschnitt
/Demogra scher-Wandel/Aspekte/demogra e-migration.html (accessed August 28,
2024).

[19] "Religious Composition by Country, 2010–2050," Pew Research Center, December 21,
2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/feature/religious-composition-by-country
-2010-2050.

[20] Yfaat Weiss and Lena Gorelik, "Die russisch-jüdische Zuwanderung" [The Russian-
Jewish Immigration], in *Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* [Histo -
ry of Jews in Germany from 1945 to the Present Day], ed. Michael Brenner (C. H. Beck,
2012), 379–418.

[21] Sarah Kanning, "Glaube und Frieden" [Faith and Peace], August 14, 2019, Deutschland.de,
https://www.deutschland.de/de/topic/leben/religionen-in-deutschland-zahlen-und
-fakten.

[22] Katharina Walgenbach, *Heterogenität– Intersektionalität– Diversity in der Erziehungswissenschaft*
[Heterogeneity–Intersectionality–Diversity in Educational Science] (Verlag Barbara
Budrich, 2017), 29.

[23] See Deutsches Jugendinstitut [German Youth Institute], *DJI-Kinder- und Jugendmigrationsre-
port 2020: Datenanalyse zur Situation junger Menschen in Deutschland* [DJI Child and Youth
Migration Report 2020: Data Analysis on the Situation of Young People in Germany]
(wbv Publikation, 2020).

[24] See Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes [Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency], *Diskri-
minierung an Schulen Erkennen und Vermeiden. Praxisleitfaden Zum Abbau von Diskriminierung
in der Schule* [Recognizing and Avoiding Discrimination in Schools. Practical Guide to
Reducing Discrimination in Schools], 4th ed. (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes
[Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency], 2019), https://www.antidiskriminierungsstelle
.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/Leitfaeden/leitfaden_diskriminierung
_an_schulen_erkennen_u_vermeiden.pdf

each Federal state (*Bundesland*) has its own Ministry of Education that sets its own education program, schools, and standards. This means that the schooling system varies across Germany.

29 See Claudia Diehl, Christian Hunkler, and Cornelia Kristen, eds., *Ethnische Ungleichheiten im Bildungsverlauf: Mechanismen, Befunde, Debatten* [Ethnic Inequalities in Education: Mechanisms, Findings, Debates] (Springer VS, 2016); and Cornelia Gresch, "Ethnische Ungleichheiten in der Grundschule" [Ethnic Inequalities at Elementary School], in *Ethnische Ungleichheiten im Bildungsverlauf* [Ethnic Inequalities in Education], ed. Diehl, Hunkler, and Kristen, 475–515.

30 Hanna Dumont, Kai Maaz, Marko Neumann, and Michael Becker, "Soziale Ungleichheiten beim Übergang von der Grundschule in die Sekundarstufe I: Theorie, Forschungsstand,

[45] See Ingrid Gogolin, Viola B. Georgi, Marianne Krüger-Portratz, et al., eds., *Handbuch Interkulturelle Pädagogik* [Handbook of Intercultural Pedagogy] (Julius Klinkhardt, 2018); Annika Braun, Sabine Weiß, and Edward Kiel, "Interkulturelle Schulentwicklung an Grundschulen" [Intercultural School Development in Elementary Schools], *Zeitschrift für Bildungsforschung* [Journal of Educational Research] 8 (2018): 121–135; Yasemin Karakaşoğlu, Mirja Gruhn, and Anna Wojciechowicz, *Interkulturelle Schulentwicklung Un-*

[53] Claudia Diehl, Christian Hunkler, and Cornelia Kristen, eds., *Ethnische Ungleichheiten im Bildungsverlauf: Mechanismen, Befunde, Debatten* [Ethnic Inequalities in the Educational Process. Mechanisms, Findings, Debates] (Springer VS, 2016).

[54] See Barry R. Chiswick and Paul Washington Miller, "The Endogeneity Between Language and Earnings: International Analyses," *Journal of Labor Economics* 13 (1995): 246–288.

[55] For example, Oliver Klein and Birgit Becker, "Preschools as Language Learning Environments for Children of Immigrants: Differential Effects by Familial Language Use Across Different Preschool Contexts," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 48 (2017): 20–31.

[56] Barbara Baumann, "Sprachförderung und Deutsch als Zweitsprache in der Lehrerbildung–ein Deutschlandweiter Überblick" [Language Support and German as a Second Language in Teacher Training–A Germany-Wide Overview], in *Deutsch als Zweitsprache in der Lehrerbildung* [German as a Second Language in Teacher Training], ed. Michael Becker-Mrotzek, Peter Rosenberg, Christoph Schroeder, and Annika Witte (Waxmann, 2017), 9–26.

[57] İnci Dirim and Paul Mecheril, "Die Sprache(n) der Migrationsgesellschaft" [The Language(s) of the Migration Society], in *Migrationspädagogik* [Migration Pedagogy], ed. Paul Mecheril, María Do Mar Castro Varela, İnci Dirim, Annita Kalpaka, and Claus Melter (Beltz, 2010), 99–116.

[58] See Joana Duarte, "Translanguaging in Mainstream Education: A Sociocultural Approach," *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 22 (2) (2019): 150–164; and Ofelia García, Susana Ibarra Johnson, and Kate Seltzer, *The Translanguaging Classroom: Leveraging Student Bilingualism for Learning* (Caslon Pub, 2017).

[59] Students who aim at Abitur, which is a precondition for entering universities, have to learn two foreign languages (English and another language taught in school) at an advanced level.

[60] See RfM-Discussion initiated by Dita Vogel about recognizing heritage languages in German schools, "RfM-Debatte 2020," Rat für Migration, July 8, 2020, https://rat-fuer -migration.de/2020/07/08/debatte-3-sprachen-sind-genug-fuers-abitur

[61] Ingrid Gogolin, *Der Monolinguale Habitus der Multilingualen Schule* [The Monolingual Habitus of the Multilingual School] (Waxmann Verlag GmbH, 1994).

[62] Hans H. Reich, "Kindertageseinrichtungen als Institutionen Sprachlicher Bildung" [Day care Centers as Institutions of Language Education], *Diskurs: Kindheits- und Jugendforschung* [Discourse: Journal of Childhood and Adolescence Research] 3 (3) (2008): 251.

[63] Havva Engin, "Die Bildungsintegration von Geflüchteten Kindern und Jugendlichen in das Deutsche Bildungssystem" [The Educational Integration of Refugee Children and Young People into the German Education], in *Flüchtlingskrise: Integration als Leitungsauf-*

65 Ibid.

66 See Marcel Crul, "Refugee Children in Education in Europe: How to Prevent a Lost Gen
eration?" Sirius Network Policy Brief, Issue No. 7 (Sirius Network, 2017), 6.

67 Henrike Terhart and Nora von Dewitz, "Newly Arrived Migrant Students in German
Schools: Exclusive and Inclusive Structures and Practices," *European Educational Research
Journal* 17 (2) (2018): 301.

68 Crul, "Refugee Children in Education in Europe"; and Simon Morris-Lange and Tessa
Schneider, "Dead End Schools? Refugee Teenagers and School Segregation in Germa
ny," in *Educating Adolescents Around the Globe: Becoming Who You Are in a World Full of Expec-
tations. Cultural Psychology of Education, Vol. 11*, ed. Meike Watzlawik and Alina Burkholder
(Springer International Publishing, 2020), 149–171.

69 Lucie Cerna, Ottavia Brussino, and Cecilia Mezzanotte, "The Resilience of Students with
an Immigrant Background: An Update with PISA 2018," OECD Education Working Pa
pers 261 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Publishing, 2021).

70 Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes [Federal Antidiscrimination Policy], "Benachteil
igungserfahrungen von Personen mit und ohne Migrationshintergrund" [Experiences
of Disadvantage among People with and without a Migration Background], https://
www.antidiskriminierungsstelle.de/SharedDocs/forschungsprojekte/DE/Expertise
_BenachteiligErfahrungen_MigrantInnen.html