

Disadvantages of Migrant Children in the German Education System (2008)

Abstract

A sociologist specializing in education explores the “double discrimination” of migrant children in the German school system, since most of them come from the lower strata of society and have only limited German language skills, which hinders their educational advancement.

Source

Doubly Disadvantaged: Migrant Children in the Educational System (2008)

Migrant children have it especially hard in the German educational system. Their migration-related problems are exacerbated by inadequate encouragement and institutional discrimination.

Introduction

Over the past half century, Germany has evolved from a guest worker country to a reluctant country of immigration and is now one of the most important countries for immigration in the modern world. The educational system reflects this development in that increasing numbers of children and youths come from immigrant families: among 15-year-old pupils in 2006, every fifth child and among fourth graders every fourth child and among those under five every third child.^[1] Germany faces the challenge of integrating the growing multi-ethnic segment of its population into mainstream society. If we regard equal opportunities for participation in the life of the host society as the heart of integration, as many scholars^[2] and politicians do, then for migrant children, equal educational opportunities are the key to integration.

[...]

Disadvantages in the development of performance

The international comparative studies conducted in the past decade show that in all of the important countries of immigration in the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), migrant children tend to have more or less serious deficits in reading, mathematics and the natural sciences compared to the native population. Germany, however, is one of the societies in which these deficits are greatest. In the last PISA study, Germany led the list of countries where migrant children had the greatest deficits in the sciences, while in mathematics it was second to last in the OECD in 2003 and in reading skills third to last in 2006. In Germany in 2006, the so-called second generation, that is, young people born in the country of immigration both of whose parents were migrants, was farthest behind in all three areas in comparison to native Germans. Clearly, Germany is not succeeding in promoting and developing the potential of young people of migrant background to the same degree as most other countries of immigration.

Disadvantages in educational participation

It is no surprise that this underperformance has dire consequences for educational participation. It is, however, worth mentioning here that the poor educational opportunities of migrant children can be attributed only in part to their deficient skills; they are also associated with inadequate encouragement

as well as discrimination in the schools. The problems of migrant children begin even before they start school. In 2007, 90 percent of all three to five-year-olds in Germany attended a preschool, but only 64 percent of migrant children. It has been proven, however, that children from uneducated and immigrant families in particular benefit from beginning preschool as early as possible: They are held back less frequently when starting school and their chances of later attending a *Gymnasium* (academic secondary school) are twice as high.[3] The disadvantages begin with the start of school—twice as many foreign children are kept back—and continue with the important setting of their future course at the end of elementary school: Between 1985 and 2006, two-thirds of foreign pupils were assigned to the *Hauptschule* (Germans: 42 percent) and only 9 percent to a *Gymnasium* (Germans: 30 percent).[4] During their school careers, especially during the lower grades, migrant children are forced to repeat a year far more frequently; in the first to third grades they are held back four times as frequently as Germans. They often have to leave the *Gymnasium* and are twice as likely to end up in a *Hauptschule*. Their risk of being assigned to a special needs school for learning disabilities is also twice as high as for German children.[5]

Problems in their educational career are reflected in their school-leaving qualifications: in 2007, 17 percent of foreign pupils left the school system without a *Hauptschule* diploma (Germans: 7 percent), 42 percent gained a *Hauptschule* diploma (Germans: 23 percent); 31 percent a *Realschule* diploma (Germans: 42 percent), 1.5 percent the entrance qualification for technical colleges (Germans: 1.5 percent) and only 9 percent the general entrance qualification for universities (Germans: 27 percent). Although children from migrant families who are qualified to enter university now do so more often than native Germans, they still represent only 8 percent of students, which is only one-third of the figure it should be compared to their proportion of their age group.[6]

The situation is most dramatic in the field of vocational education. Migrant children have been the losers in the growing competition over scarce apprenticeships since the mid-1990s. Their percentage among trainees has fallen steadily with dire and alarming consequences: In 2005, nearly half (42 percent!) of 25- to 34-year-olds had not completed vocational training (Germans: 13 percent).[7] This is a ticking social time bomb: If this “lost generation” does not receive serious assistance, they are destined to end up in unemployment and marginalization and in some cases criminality.

Differences according to nationality

There are significant differences in educational participation between the various nationalities. Table 2 shows that among pupils from the former labor recruitment countries, the Croatians, Spanish and Slovenians have the best educational opportunities. Bosnians, Greeks, Tunisians and Portuguese are in the middle, while Italians and Turks along with Macedonians, Serbs and Moroccans are in last place. The good educational participation of the Vietnamese and Ukrainians is noteworthy. They attend the *Gymnasium* more and the *Hauptschule* less frequently than Germans. The educational opportunities of children from Iranian refugee families and from Russian families—including many Russian Jews—are good and correspond approximately to those of Germans. Ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe are not included separately in the federal school statistics. In North Rhine-Westphalia they occupy a middle position between Germans and foreigners with respect to their school-leaving qualifications.[8] Thus far, explanations for the differences between the various ethnic groups have been explored only for a few nationalities.

“Underclassing” and Migration

How can we explain the deficits in migrant children’s skill development and educational participation? The research has been fragmentary thus far. What follows will attempt to clear some paths in the bewildering jungle of research findings and contexts. We seek orientation largely from quantitative studies. Two major strands emerge within the causal nexus: class-specific and migration-specific. The

class-specific strand can be traced back to the circumstance that the socioeconomic status of migrant families tends to be lower than that of native Germans; put another way, this means that German society tends to become “underclassed” by migrants. Thus, large segments of young people with a migrant background are confronted with disadvantages in the education system similar to those of native Germans from families of low socioeconomic status. The problem of underclassing is especially acute in the German education system, because both phenomena—the underclassing of society by migrants and the educational disadvantages for children from poorer families— are more extreme in Germany than in other countries of immigration. The migration-specific strand points to problems of integration that arise, independent of socioeconomic status, when people migrate to an alien culture with a different lingua franca and language of instruction, a different education system and in some cases different values and norms.

The weight of the two strands ranges from one- to two-thirds, depending on which skills, aspects of educational disadvantage and migrant groups are being studied. Here are two examples: In the first, the two strands participate equally. Fifteen-year-old native Germans do 96 points better in reading and 93 points better in mathematics than the German-born second generation from immigrant families. These gaps are significant; they correspond approximately to the edge an average *Gymnasium* pupil has over an average *Realschule* pupil. If we then compare native Germans and members of the second generation with the same socioeconomic status, the gap is halved to 48 and 45 points, respectively.

The class-specific strand is a good deal stronger in the second example of educational disadvantage. Native German youths from the old (western) federal states are 2.5 times more likely than youths from migrant backgrounds to attend schools that qualify them to go on to higher education instead of the *Hauptschule*. Where the young people are of equal socioeconomic status, this advantage diminishes by two-thirds to 1.5 times.^[9] What do the individual mechanisms in the two strands look like?

Extreme Unterclassing

The PISA studies demonstrated with quantitative precision for the first time that Germany is more strongly underclassed by migrants than the other modern immigration societies, with the greatest tendency towards a gap in status among immigrants from Turkey.^[10] In some neighboring European countries—the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway and France—the status gap is at most half as great, and in Canada, which for three decades has been pursuing a well thought out migration policy with coordinated integration policies, such status differences barely exist. The extreme tendency towards underclassing is the legacy left to us by the guest worker policy, the long absence of any forward-looking migration policy and the concomitant failures of integration.

[...]

Command of the German Language

The PISA and IGLU studies impressively confirmed what was already known in the 1990s: A knowledge of German as a lingua franca and language of instruction plays a key role in migrant children’s acquisition of skills and educational success.^[11] We have already pointed to the importance of reading skills in class-specific underperformance and educational deficits. However, German language skills also have outstanding significance among the migration-specific causes, which have an influence independent of the migrants’ socioeconomic status.

36 to 40 percent of the skills gap in mathematics, the natural sciences and reading between native Germans and German-born migrant youth of equal status is related to whether or not the migrant families speak German at home. And young people who have themselves migrated to Germany even develop the same skills as native Germans of equal status if their families speak German (2006).^[12] When

elementary schools recommend children for the *Realschule* or *Gymnasium*, as well as when children have to repeat a grade, nearly half of the disadvantages of equal-status migrant children may be attributed to their insufficient German language skills. In contrast, fifteen-year-olds with a migrant background and the same social status and German language competence have the same chance of attending a *Realschule* or *Gymnasium* as native Germans.[13]

Ethnic Concentration

Not all of the disadvantages affecting migrant children are the consequences of underclassing and deficits in German alone. Which additional migration-specific causes play a role has not yet been sufficiently explained. The possibilities are both schooling factors—such as inadequate encouragement, more or less deliberate discrimination or high proportions of migrant children in schools and classrooms—and familial factors such as age of arrival in Germany, how long children and parents have lived in the country, intentions to return, openness to or isolation from German culture and society. The following influences have been explored quantitatively in more detail: The effects of the concentration of migrant children in certain schools or classes evidently differ between the *Hauptschule* and elementary school: While in the *Hauptschule* performance development slows somewhat with rising proportions of migrants,[14] in the elementary schools this effect exists only when the proportion of migrants is extraordinarily high at more than 80 percent.[15] An orientation towards German culture and society (circles of friends, media use, music preferences, eating habits) promotes educational success.[16]

Institutional Discrimination

Some mechanisms of so-called institutional discrimination have also been documented. In an illuminating qualitative study, Frank-Olaf Radtke and Mechthild Gomolla show that decisions by teachers and school principals regarding important transitions—the beginning of school, transfers to special schools for the learning disabled and recommendations for further schooling at the end of elementary school—are also influenced by criteria that have nothing to do with performance, to the detriment of migrant children. For example, specific organizational interests such as the over- or underpopulation of individual schools or their desire to remain in existence play a role. Language deficits are incorrectly interpreted as overall learning problems and the like.[17]

Quantitative studies confirm discrimination in elementary school. Native German children with the same socioeconomic status and reading skills are 1.7 times more likely than migrant children to be recommended for the *Realschule* and *Gymnasium*, while the latter are kept back a year 1.6 times as often. There is also empirical evidence that migrant children receive somewhat worse grades in elementary school even when their test results are the same.[18] No additional discrimination has been documented for secondary school. There are no longer any differences in the distribution of 15-year-olds among the *Gymnasium*, *Realschule* or *Gesamtschule* (comprehensive school) if we control for social status and reading performance, and grading in the ninth grade is fair and based on performance.[19]

Conclusion: Double Disadvantages

In conclusion: Migrant children have it especially hard in the German education system; they are doubly disadvantaged. As a result of the strong tendency to the underclassing of German society by migrants, many of them encounter the same problems as native German children from socially deprived families, which are particularly marked in Germany in comparison to other societies. This is exacerbated by the bicultural migration situation, growing up and living in a “different,” “alien” cultural and social environment. These difficulties are also more pronounced in Germany than in many comparable societies of immigration. Educational and integration policy thus faces a great challenge. It is a matter not just of equal opportunities, but also of efficiency, the necessity for society to develop and utilize the population’s slumbering potentials in an optimal fashion.

NOTES

- [1] Winfried Bos et al., *IGLU 2006* (Münster and New York, 2007), p. 254; Oliver Walter and Päivi Taskinen, "Kompetenzen und bildungsrelevante Einstellungen von Jugendlichen mit Migrationshintergrund," in PISA-Konsortium Deutschland (eds.), *PISA 2006* (Münster and New York, 2007), p. 346; Statistisches Bundesamt, *Bevölkerung und Migrationshintergrund* (Wiesbaden, 2008), p. 60.
- [2] See, for example, Hartmut Esser, *Integration und ethnische Schichtung* (Mannheim, 2001); Rainer Geißler, "Einheit-in-Verschiedenheit. Die interkulturelle Integration von Migranten - ein humaner Mittelweg zwischen Assimilation und Segregation," *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, 14 (2004): 287–98.
- [3] See Informationsdienst des Instituts der deutschen Wirtschaft 30 (2008), p. 1; Rolf Becker and Nicole Biedinger, "Ethnische Ungleichheit zu Schulbeginn," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 58 (2006): 276; Jens Kratzmann and Thorsten Schneider, *Soziale Ungleichheiten beim Schulstart*, DIW (Berlin, 2008), pp. 24–5; Rolf Becker and Patricia Tremel, "Auswirkungen vorschulischer Kinderbetreuung auf die Bildungschancen von Migrantenkindern," *Soziale Welt*, 57 (2006): 414.
- [4] See Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung (eds.), *Bildung in Deutschland* (Bielefeld, 2006), p. 151; Heike Diefenbach, *Kinder und Jugendliche aus Migrantenfamilien im deutschen Bildungssystem* (Wiesbaden, 2008), p. 63.
- [5] Julia Ann Krohne et al., "Sitzenbleiben, Geschlecht und Migration," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 50 (2004): 385; Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung, p. 152; H. Diefenbach, p. 65.
- [6] Calculated according to figures in Statistisches Bundesamt, Fachserie 11, Reihe 1, Schuljahr 2006/07 (Wiesbaden, 2007), p. 251; Wolfgang Isserstedt et al., *Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Studierenden in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2006* (Bonn and Berlin, 2007), p. 253.
- [7] See 7. Bericht der Beauftragten der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration über die Lage der Ausländerinnen und Ausländer in Deutschland (Baden-Baden, 2007), p. 229.
- [8] Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, *Ausländische und ausgesiedelte Schülerinnen und Schüler. Schuljahr 2006/07* (Düsseldorf, 2007), p. 30.
- [9] See OECD, *Die OECD in Zahlen und Fakten 2007* (n.p., 2007), p. 257; Jürgen Baumert and Gundel Schümer, "Familiäre Lebensverhältnisse, Bildungsbeteiligung und Kompetenzerwerb im nationalen Vergleich," in Deutsches PISA-Konsortium (eds.), *PISA 2000. Die Länder der Bundesrepublik Deutschland im Vergleich* (Opladen, 2002), p. 198ff.
- [10] Hartmut Esser, *Sprache und Integration. Die sozialen Bedingungen und Folgen des Spracherwerbs von Migranten* (Frankfurt/M., 2006), p. 318.
- [11] On this, see in particular H. Esser.
- [12] O. Walter and P. Taskinen, p. 349.
- [13] Wilfried Bos et al., *IGLU* (Münster, 2004), p. 211; J. A. Krohne et al., pp. 388–89; Jürgen Baumert and Gundel Schümer, "Familiäre Lebensverhältnisse, Bildungsbeteiligung und Kompetenzerwerb," in Deutsches PISA-Konsortium (eds.), *PISA 2000. Basiskompetenzen von Schülerinnen und Schülern im internationalen Vergleich* (Opladen, 2001), p. 374.
- [14] Petra Stanat, "Schulleistungen von Jugendlichen mit Migrationshintergrund," in Jürgen Baumert et al. (eds.), *Herkunftsbedingte Paritäten im Bildungswesen* (Wiesbaden, 2006), pp. 189–219.
- [15] Hans Brügelmann, *Schule verstehen und gestalten* (Lengwil, 2005), chap. 26.
- [16] See Felix Büchel and Gert Wagner, "Soziale Differenzen der Bildungschancen in Westdeutschland," in Wolfgang Zapf et al. (eds.), *Lebenslagen im Wandel* (Frankfurt/M., 1996), 92–3; Bernhard Nauck et al., "Intergenerationelle Transmission von kulturellem Kapital unter Migrationsbedingungen," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 44 (1998): 714–15.
- [17] Frank-Olaf Radtke and Mechthild Gomolla, *Institutionelle Diskriminierung* (Opladen, 2002).
- [18] See W. Bos et al., p. 11; J. A. Krohne et al., p. 388; Cornelia Kristen, "Ethnische Diskriminierung in

der Grundschule?," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 58 (2006): 89–90; Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung, p. 165.
[19] J. Baumert and G. Schümer, p. 374; Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung, p. 165.

Source: Rainer Geißler and Sonja Weber-Menges, "Migrantenkinder im Bildungssystem: doppelt benachteiligt," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung,
<http://www.bpb.de/apuz/30801/migrantenkinder-im-bildungssystem-doppelt-benachteiligt?p=all>.

Translation: Pam Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Disadvantages of Migrant Children in the German Education System (2008), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5311>> [July 10, 2025].