

THE EDUCATION OF MIGRANTS IN GERMANY: DETERMINANTS IN SECONDARY
SCHOOL TRACK RECOMMENDATIONS AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

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ABSTRACT

Tess Snodgrass : The Education of Migrants in Germany: Determinants in Secondary School Track Recommendations and Educational Attainment
(Under the direction of Rahsaan Maxwell)

The aim and purpose of this paper is to determine why students with a migration background are overrepresented in the lowest secondary school and underrepresented in the highest secondary school in Germany. Through an analysis of previous literature, three different determinants will be evaluated: culture and language, discrimination and socioeconomic status. While previous studies emphasize socioeconomic status as the most important determinant, other parental background factors linked to culture and language should not be ignored. Furthermore, while there is discrimination apparent in the German education system, the factors creating such discrimination also have important links to a student's family. So, this paper will demonstrate why parental background factors beyond socioeconomic status are still critical in the educational attainment of students with a migration background.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

In the late 1990's and early 2000's, OECD publications with findings from the TIMSS and PISA studies highlighted the shortcomings of the German education system and incited calls for reforms. Initiatives were thus set up in order to improve the quality and equality of German education. While there has been some improvement, there is still concern within Germany that the education system is not properly and equally preparing students for the workforce and for their future. In particular, the "question of educational outcomes of immigrants and its determinants" are of concern; therefore a "nation-wide qualification initiative," (Thum, 2013, p. 2) *Aufstieg durch Bildung* (progress by education) was put forth in 2008 in order to address and ameliorate the perceived problems of education of immigrants. Migrants (for the purpose of this analysis, people who have at least one parent who is a non-German national) are considered disadvantaged by the tracking mechanism that characterizes the German education system because they are overrepresented in the *Hauptschule* and underrepresented in *Gymnasium*. We can see that education and integration through education is an important issue in Germany and there have been ongoing attempts for over a decade to address and improve this issue.

Previous literature predominantly addresses whether immigrant background is a major determinant in student's performance in the education system and generally finds different determinants as the reason why there are less successful migrants in the German education system than natives, perpetuating social immobility in Germany. In fact, more recent literature claims that migrants are not, in fact, disadvantaged by the system. In this case, the main

argument is that while migrants make up a large part of the population “disadvantaged” by the education system, this disadvantage is really no different than the experience of native Germans of similar (and often low) socioeconomic status. This disadvantage in the education system is important because of the changing nature of the employment system “towards a service-and knowledge-based society” (Weishaupt, 2013, p. 303). Over the last decades, there has been a change in qualification profiles, largely away from commercial and industrial professions and a greater demand for a higher skilled workforce and university graduates (Weishaupt, 2013). Already in the 1970’s there was a debate about separating the education system and the employment system. Georg Picht noted that “the inescapability of viewing life-opportunities exclusively in terms of chances of working one’s way upwards” (Fuhr, 1997, p. 22) was too deterministic. This is important in light of the relatively unchanged structure and path dependency of the German education system that still sends a considerable amount of young students to the lowest secondary school, which has a leaving school certificate and qualifications that are undervalued and underdeveloped for today’s labor market, as described below.

Section 1.1: Structure of the German Education System

Before moving into an investigation of previous literature about the potential determinants that produce inequalities in the German education system, it is important to explain the structure of the system. What is of particular interest is the transition to secondary schools and the various tracks that are of option for German secondary schooling.

Typically, primary school lasts for four years, or six years in certain *Länder*. At the end of primary school, students are often placed into one of the three secondary schools - *Hauptschule*, *Realschule* or *Gymnasium*. The placement decision is made “by the local educational authorities [often teachers] and parents and is based on children’s measured ability...

mainly referring to pupil's marks in the core subjects of German and mathematics" (Schnepf, 2003, p. 4). Depending on the *Länder*, parents are either entitled to choose a school track recommended by the primary school or not. This placement decision is extremely critical as it will likely determine a student's educational and labor force future. It is important to note that other factors may come into play in these placement decisions, such as teachers' recommendations being influenced by more than just grades and ability, for instance, the perceived parental level of commitment, as well (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015). One of the issues with this placement decision and transition is that if parents do not have a great knowledge of the education system or of the German language, they may inadvertently place their child at a disadvantage and allow them to continue in a track that secures their place in society, generally with a lower level of skills and consequently, a low socioeconomic status.

Once students begin their secondary education, there is little room for upward mobility within the system. Students with a migration background end up enrolling in the lowest secondary school track (*Hauptschule*) about twice as often as native Germans (Krause et al, 2014). There is a more equal distribution of students with a migration background versus natives in the *Realschule* and a majority of German natives in the *Gymnasium*, which is the highest secondary schooling track and the only one that can lead to tertiary education. Unfortunately, for those who end up in the *Hauptschule*, "there is a decreasing level of acceptance regarding... qualifications and their sufficiency for transition to the labor market" (Weishaupt, 2013, p. 295). Furthermore, the *Hauptschule* leaving school certificate has been increasingly undervalued over the years as students used to be able to enter vocational training in industrial or technical occupations, but now they face competition in the corresponding labor markets from those with higher leaving school certificates (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015). Thus, the *Hauptschule* is

unfortunately considered more and more the “end of the line” (Surig and Wilmes, 2015, p. 48-49) as far as students’ education goes, i.e. they will not receive further education, including vocational training. Thus, we can see that the perceived educational disadvantage and lack of opportunity for social advancement is cemented into a student's life at a very early age, particularly if they are sent to the *Hauptschule*. There is plentiful evidence that students with a migration background are overrepresented in this lowest secondary school track. However, the question really is, are students with a migration background overrepresented in the lowest secondary schools because they have a migration background or because of other determinants? Furthermore, are native Germans coming from a similar socioeconomic background also more likely to be placed in the lowest secondary schools? These are the questions I will seek to answer in the following sections.

Section 1.2: Migrant Background in Germany

A significant event in German history and for the purpose of this paper about migrants’ performance in the German education system was the arrival of guest-workers. By 1973, the arrival of guest-workers from Southern European countries and Turkey, in particular, was ending. However, the arrival of these migrants to fill positions in low-skilled labor also had the effect of bringing more migrants after the guest-worker period, generally with the help of family reunification policies, as it was recognized that these migrants would stay in Germany. Because these were low-skilled workers, the “negative selection” of guest workers from “relatively low socioeconomic status in their countries of origins” automatically set these people up to be of “comparatively low socioeconomic status” (Krause et al, 2014, p. 761) in Germany. Thus, the issue of migrants having a low socioeconomic status and low-skilled education began. Because the guest-workers were brought in from a low-skilled and low socioeconomic status position, it

has been difficult for their families to climb the social ladder and get out of the lower echelons of society.

Therefore, I hope to highlight how the design of the German education system is perhaps outdated today for the changed labor-market, thus making the tracking system even more likely to replicate disadvantage and social immobility. However, there have also been more recent developments in education policy, which have targeted the discussed disadvantages and may help to remedy inequalities reproduced by the education system. This paper will discuss previous literature, as well as attempt to answer the question of whether or not migrants are more disadvantaged in the education system because of discriminatory, socioeconomic or cultural determinants.

CHAPTER 2: HYPOTHESES - DETERMINANTS IN THE GERMAN EDUCATIONAL TRACKING SYSTEM

Previous literature has explored several different determinants to explain the perceived disadvantage of migrants in the German education system. Earlier in this research area, language and culture, as well as discrimination were prominent explanatory variables but more recent literature points to socioeconomic background as being more telling of what determines disadvantage in the system. The determinants will be further explored below to analyze why migrants are overrepresented in the *Hauptschule* and underrepresented in the *Gymnasium*.

Section 2.1: Culture and Language

A student's cultural background is a possible determinant in this analysis, as the ties to a different culture outside of Germany may affect the level of societal integration and interaction, as well as language ability of a student and their family. Previous studies insist that students' language spoken at home does not affect their performance in school. Yet, an early study by Alamdar-Nieman et al, which is particularly about the education of students with a Turkish migration background, shows that “learning the correct grammar structure and vocabulary is one of the key factors in school success in the receiving country” (1991, p. 157). They highlight that although their study pupils might have a positive self-perception of their language abilities, this perception does not match the “standard of language being used in school that is necessary for the understanding of complex formulations in daily school curricula” (Alamdar-Nieman et al, 1991, p. 157). Furthermore, they trace the underdeveloped language skills of Turkish migrant children to the lack of contact with native German children and a further lack of family

socialization outside of a migrant community. Thus, as we can see that language can be an inhibiting factor in the educational success of migrant students, it is furthermore connected to their family's cultural background and attempts to integrate and socialize with the native community.

Following the publication of the first PISA test results in 2000, the German Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) defined seven fields of action to try to remedy the considerably low performance of German students in comparison to the international averages. One of the fields of action included “the improvement of language competence even at a pre-primary age,” (Weishaupt, 2013, p. 292) signaling the recognition of the German government of the issue of language as a determinant of poorer performance of some students. However, targeted language promotion programs have not effectively been implemented (Weishaupt, 2013). Consequently, we can see that language development is still an inhibiting factor in students’ education and likely provides a disadvantage to students with a migration background.

Andreas Ammermueller’s (2007) investigation into why migrant students perform more poorly in the PISA tests also finds links to language. He postulates that “the language that students speak at home indicates the degree to which students and their families are integrated” into the host society and that “about 39% of all immigrants speak a language other than German at home, while Germans always speak German at home” (Ammermueller, 2007, p. 220). Ammermueller (2007) further connects this language and integration issue to the preferences of parents. So, although when a language other than German is spoken at home and students perform more poorly on PISA tests, it is generally assumed that these families and students have a migration background, there is also evidence that students and families with a migration

background do speak German at home. This exemplifies how language is more of an issue with the preferences of parents, although it is connected with a family's cultural and migration background, too.

A study by Simone Schüller about parental ethnic identity and the educational attainment of second generation migrants, also points to parental qualities affecting students' performance. In particular, a student's mother, her identity affiliation and language proficiency is notably telling of the educational attainment of second generation migrants, according to Schüller (2015). This is based off the education assumption that "ethnic affiliation is correlated with the mother's language proficiency" (Schüller, 2015, p. 987). Assuming that ethnic affiliation and culture are somehow related, this is important insofar as how a migrant student will perform in school. Furthermore, if a student's mother is more strongly affiliated with German culture, then the mother's language proficiency will be stronger and in turn, the student will be more likely to be recommended for and enrolled in one of the higher secondary school tracks. The language proficiency of a student's father does not seem to matter as much as the mother's, as mothers are seen as the active manager of their child's educational career. In fact, it is interesting that a father's affiliation with a minority identity is actually beneficial to their child's educational attainment (Schüller, 2015). Moreover, Schüller maintains that parental ethnic affiliation is more important and influential than a family's socioeconomic background on a child's educational attainment (2015).

As has been well noted in this paper already, students with a migration background are more likely to be recommended for and thus to attend a lower type of secondary school, usually the *Hauptschule*. What is interesting to note is that the *Hauptschule* is supposed to be better "equipped to cope with a high degree of heterogeneity (e.g. linguistic heterogeneity and the

special learning needs of pupils with German as a second language),” (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015, p. 41) which certainly provides insight into why so many students with a migration background, who do not speak German at home and who thus have less developed German language skills, are recommended for and attend the *Hauptschule*. Furthermore, in Sürig and Wilmes’s book about the integration of the second generation in Germany, they also find evidence that teachers may be more likely to recommend students for the *Hauptschule*, as they see a lack of a cultural fit between specifically the Turkish parental home and the *Gymnasium*, citing language difficulties and previous experience with failed Turkish students (2015). However, the authors also find evidence that “once children have managed to reach the *Gymnasium* or *Realschule*, they seem to be very likely to complete this school successfully” and that the dropout rate in the *Hauptschule* is actually the highest “with more than 10 per cent of all groups leaving without any qualifications at all” (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015, p. 45). Thus, once again we can see that students’ language skills and how said skills are perceived by teachers, along with cultural factors are important in determining if a student will be recommended for and attend the *Hauptschule*.

While the *Hauptschule* is meant to have more capabilities for dealing with students with less proficient language skills, the fact that a small, yet significant number of students drop out further shows how the *Hauptschule* is the “end of the line” for student’s education and is the most disadvantaged of all the secondary schools, in terms of determining a student’s future. It is an unfortunate reality that even when students may have higher educational aspirations, teachers may recommend them for the *Hauptschule* because of the apparent capabilities to cope with linguistic heterogeneity when ultimately, these students’ language skills probably will not improve greatly.

Finally, an important point to note is that students of a migration background are less likely to attend pre-school education. This is something that is particularly highlighted in the Krause et al (2014) study investigating the native-migrant education gap. In the sample of students in this study, migrants were “about 8 percentage points less likely to attend pre-school education than natives - and almost every native child (about 97%) attends pre-school education” (Krause et al, 2014, p. 782). Pre-primary school education is important as it is a formative period in a child’s life and educational career in developing linguistic abilities. Lüdemann and Schwerdt also highlight attendance in pre-primary education as an important background characteristic that is a determinant in the degree to which second-generation immigrants are disadvantaged in later schooling (2013, p. 468). The later pre-primary school attendance could be linked to the labor force participation of mothers, in particular. As will be discussed further in the third subsection of this chapter, about socioeconomic determinants, migrant mothers may be less likely to participate in the labor force, due to their lower educational attainment. They might also be less likely to send their children to pre-primary education until it is legally mandatory to do so, whether because of a lack of monetary resources to send children to pre-primary school or other, potential cultural factors.

While this is also perceived as a disadvantage for native students, migrant students might be more unlikely to start pre-primary school as early as native students due to their cultural and socioeconomic background. In combination with being in a family which does not speak German at home, later pre-primary school enrollment is yet another disadvantage for the development of linguistic abilities and cultural integration that could be inhibiting students with a migration background from achieving a higher secondary school recommendation at the end of primary school.

Hypothesis 1: Migrant culture and language skills are important determinants in a student's educational track placement in Germany.

Section 2.2: Discrimination

It is evident that discrimination may be a determinant in the lower performance of migrant students in the German education system. However, it is important to note that discrimination may not only come from the host society and native citizens but also from within a migrant family due to cultural factors. This would signal that it is not solely native-migrant discrimination that is disadvantageous to the performance of migrant students, but discriminatory factors within and amongst migrant societies, whether it be gender discrimination or even self-discrimination, meaning that these societies wish to withhold from interaction with a host society in order to preserve their own culture.

There are certainly arguments made that there are more native Germans in the highest secondary school than students with a migration background with the same abilities. However, as presented in the previous section, this could be due to a belief on the teacher's end that students with a migration background would be better off in a *Hauptschule* because of the perceived abilities to cope with linguistic heterogeneity. Additionally, this could also be due to a teacher's potential belief that students with a migration background would not culturally fit well in the *Gymnasium*. If either of these two factors are true, then there is certainly evidence of discrimination coming from teachers when they make a secondary school recommendation, even if they believe that a student would be better off in a lower level school because of their perceived linguistic or cultural (disadvantageous) background.

A study done by Lüdemann and Schwerdt (2013), looking at migration background and educational tracking, does indeed find that second-generation immigrants are more likely to receive a recommendation for the *Hauptschule*. In fact, they note that:

“male second-generation immigrants are 6.8 percentage points more likely to receive a recommendation for the lowest secondary school track...[and] female second-generation immigrants are 6.1 percentage points more likely to be recommended for the lowest secondary school track, even after controlling for reading and mathematics achievement” (Lüdemann and Schwerdt, 2013, p. 456).

The fact that Lüdemann and Schwerdt also find that this difference between natives and second-generation immigrants does not remain significant after controlling for general intelligence for females, but it does remain significant after controlling for general intelligence for males would point to sex-based discrimination, but not necessarily discrimination based on migration or cultural background (2013). Furthermore, Lüdemann and Schwerdt point out that this discrimination is likely based on socioeconomic background, but more importantly that “student achievement does not perfectly determine track attendance... [as] although students attending a higher school track have, on average, higher cognitive skills, there are students with identical cognitive skills that attend lower secondary tracks” (2013, p. 460). This could, in fact, point to potential positive discrimination in the recommendations for secondary school track.

In fact, a study done by Krause et al (2014) investigating the native-migrant gap does find evidence of possible positive discrimination in favor of migrants. They find an “advantage exhibited by migrant children over similar native children in terms of upward mobility throughout secondary schooling,” (Krause et al, 2014, p. 780) particularly when including a measure of cognitive ability. However, this is limited to upward mobility throughout secondary schooling and university attendance, i.e. moving from *Hauptschule* to *Realschule* or *Realschule* to *Gymnasium* and then onto university after being initially placed in one of the lower secondary school tracks. So, while there may be more opportunities for migrants to move up through the

schooling system, this does not necessarily negate the fact that migrants are more likely to be placed in lower secondary school tracks after primary school compared to the placement of native Germans.

There are indeed other findings similar to this, but again, it is important to note that these findings highlight a higher leaving school certificate for migrant children compared with native children with similar skills - this does not necessarily mean that they were not placed into a lower track to begin with, just that by the end of their schooling, they had been able to move up within the secondary schools to attain a higher leaving school certificate. Nonetheless, this is important insofar as the recommendation and initial secondary school attended does not always determine one's leaving school certificate and future in the German education system. While we cannot entirely negate the fact that there may be some kind of discrimination in the secondary school track recommendation, at least there is evidence of positive discrimination allowing migrants to have the potential for upward mobility within secondary schooling and into tertiary education.

It should also be noted that in Sürig and Wilmes's study on second-generation migrants in Germany, particularly from a Yugoslavian or Turkish background, the feelings of not being accepted or of being discriminated against were generally more prevalent amongst students with a Turkish background (2015). Sürig and Wilmes focused on these two migration background groups in Berlin and Frankfurt, so it is not necessarily representative of students with a migration background in Germany as a whole, but it is nonetheless interesting and highlights discrimination in a way that other studies did not address. In both Frankfurt and Berlin, respondents with a Turkish background did not feel accepted at school and they felt discriminated against at school more often than respondents from the other two groups -

Yugoslavian and native German (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015). The subjects for this study were between the ages of 10 and 15, so they were in the different secondary school tracks. What is perhaps most interesting about these findings, although they do not tell us anything about secondary school track recommendations, is that “the more pupils from a migrant background were in the same class, the less accepted the interviewees felt in their midst” (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015, p. 64). Furthermore, about “90 per cent of the second-generation Turks who reported being treated unfairly on a regular basis had been in classes in which half or more of the pupils were of foreign origin” (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015, p. 65). This is interesting because it seems that within schools, there may be more migrant-migrant discrimination than native-migrant discrimination. If this is true at the secondary school level, it could very well be true at the primary school level, too. If this is the case, then it could be very telling of the underrepresentation of students with a migration background in the *Gymnasium*, as this could signify a sort of double disadvantage. Such a double disadvantage could be described as students being discriminated against by other students of a migration background and thus also feeling less motivated to perform well or advance in school. If students feel discriminated against at school, it is probably unlikely that they will put sufficient effort into their schoolwork. This is mostly hypothesizing, but it is also not far-fetched that discrimination felt at school weighs on one’s psyche and thus could cause intellectual developmental problems.

Finally, gender-based discrimination within families with a migration background should be considered in this section. Again, this is something that is likely mostly applicable to Turkish families, according to the research done for this paper, but it is interesting nonetheless. Alamdar-Nieman et al reported in their study about the educational conditions of Turkish migrant students in German schools that family and parental preference for the education of children is very much

differentiated by gender (1991). As the authors noted, “Turkish girls reported that their parents had fewer educational aspirations for them than they had for themselves and fewer aspirations than for Turkish boys” (Alamdar-Nieman et al, 1991, p. 158). Furthermore, Turkish girls were less likely to be encouraged to socialize than boys, which is important insofar as socialization, particularly with native Germans, would likely improve linguistic skills. This demonstrates that there is potential discrimination within Turkish families, in particular towards girls. However, we have also seen that girls with a migration background generally perform better than boys. What is probably important then, is who - native Germans or other children with a migration background - boys are encouraged to socialize with. So perhaps the lack of encouragement to socialize is favorable for the performance of girls with a Turkish migration background - but this is largely speculation. Either way, this does not tell us anything about secondary school track recommendations; however, it could point to a negative effect on girls’ psyche, which could affect their performance in school, but it could also work in the opposite way.

An interesting contrast to the Alamdar-Nieman et al findings on potential internal discrimination within Turkish families and low expectations for children’s educational attainment is that Turkish parents actually have high educational aspirations for their children. This comes from a more recent study with the finding that when children are given multiple recommendations for a secondary school track, they never went to *Hauptschule* (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015, p. 42). So, Sürig and Wilmes postulate that if given the choice, Turkish parents will send their child to the higher recommended secondary school track (2015). Although Alamdar-Nieman et al highlighted a potential gender-based discrimination within Turkish families insofar as they have lower expectations and aspirations for girls than for boys, Sürig and Wilmes’s finding is particularly important for parental influence on a child’s secondary school

track. However, it would also be important to know how many students were given a choice between *Hauptschule* and a higher secondary school track, to determine if that result is robust.

So, while there is evidence of some native-migrant discrimination in the education system, there is also evidence of discrimination coming from within migrant communities. The discrimination coming from within migrant communities can certainly be considered a result of cultural background, as well. However, it seems that even over cultural background, this internal discrimination is more related to parental background and preferences. Thus, discrimination may be important in a different way than the more traditional native-migrant discrimination that is often considered prevalent.

Hypothesis 2: Native-migrant discrimination is a negative determinant in a student's educational track placement in Germany.

Section 2.3: Socioeconomic Status and Education

Although it is true that students with a migration background are much more likely to be recommended for and to attend the lowest secondary school than students with native German parents, several studies conclude that this is due more to socioeconomic status of a student's family than to a student having a migration background. Several authors agree that when controlling for socioeconomic background of a student's family, the native-migrant gap essentially disappears in terms of a student being tracked into the lowest level secondary school (Krause and Schüller, 2014; Krause et al, 2014; Lüdemann and Schwerdt, 2013). As stated by Lüdemann and Schwerdt, the "differences between natives and second-generation immigrants in regard to secondary school track recommendations become insignificant once we additionally control for students' socioeconomic background" (2013, p. 457).

A study by Schnepf (2003) traces the inequalities in secondary school attendance to the educational attainment of parents. If the parents of a student have a higher level of education, they will be “more likely to ignore a primary school recommendation than parents from a lower educational background” (Schnepf, 2003, p. 10). Parental educational attainment is likely to affect their socioeconomic status, which, according to Schnepf has a significant impact on the likelihood of a child attending a *Gymnasium* (2003, p. 17). What’s more is that even when a child’s ability is controlled for, the secondary school that they attend apparently only decreases slightly when testing for parental education (Schnepf, 2003, p. 18). Thus, the educational attainment of a student’s parents seems to be very influential on the type of secondary school that a child attends.

More specifically, it seems that a mother’s educational attainment is more important than a father’s education, similar to a mother’s linguistic abilities and cultural integration being more important than a father's as far as influencing the secondary school track attendance and educational attainment of a child (Thum, 2013, p. 14). The educational attainment of a student's parents is likely linked to their parent's labor force participation. Accordingly, similar results can be found in Boll and Hoffmann’s (2015) study looking at the work-force participation of parents. If a mother has participated in the labor force at any point during the time a child is between age 7 and 15, then the child is likely to have a better educational outcome or a higher leaving school certificate (Boll and Hoffmann, 2015, p. 22, p. 25). Furthermore, if a mother is involved in “a lot of housework” during the time a child is between the ages of 7 and 9, a child is less likely to perform well in the education system (Boll and Hoffmann, 2015, p. 19-20). Boll and Hoffmann attribute this to a “role model” situation; if a student’s parents, and in particular their mother, is involved in the labor force, then they provide a better example for students to strive for and thus,

they will attain a higher leaving school certificate (2015, p. 28). What is even more interesting is that Boll and Hoffmann maintain that labor force participation is actually more important than generated income (2015). While this study does not focus on secondary school recommendations, it does generally show that students with both parents, and particularly mothers, participating in the labor force will have a higher leaving school certificate than students without both parents participating in the labor force. Other studies have shown that while there is the possibility for upward mobility within the secondary school system, in reality, this does not happen very often. So, we can deduce that socioeconomic background matters for student's secondary school recommendation, and parental, specifically maternal, participation in the labor force is most important within the factors determining socioeconomic background.

While migration background in itself has been largely discredited as a determinant in the higher likelihood of students with a migration background being recommended for a lower secondary school track, the lower socioeconomic background that migrants generally have can help explain why this recommendation pattern has continued. It is however, important to note that more recent PISA results show that the influence of family background “has somewhat reduced over time between 2000 and 2009” (Krause and Schüller, 2014, p. 3). Still, there has been strong evidence that parental educational attainment, participation in the workforce and the consequential socioeconomic status of a family is largely influential on students' secondary school recommendations. However, it is also important to note that the socioeconomic status of native students similar to that of students with a migration background seems to be equally as deterministic on their secondary school recommendations.

Hypothesis 3: Socioeconomic status and parental background (including labor force participation and educational attainment) are the most important determinants in a student's educational track placement in Germany.

CHAPTER 3: EVIDENCE

This paper has attempted to investigate, through an analysis of previous literature, whether or not, or to what extent students with a migration background are disadvantaged in the German education system, particularly at the point in which they are sorted into different secondary school tracks. This is of particular interest considering the changing nature of the German labor market and the ongoing overrepresentation of students with a migration background in the lowest secondary school, the *Hauptschule*, which has a leaving school certificate that has become increasingly undervalued over the last decades. While many recent studies highlight socioeconomic background as the most important determinant in a student's secondary school track recommendation and thus, a student's future educational attainment and labor market participation, other determinants are still important to consider in the larger picture of German society and the German education system.

Section 3.1: Analysis of Hypothesis 1

Although culture and, particularly, language have largely been disregarded as important determinants in a student's secondary school recommendation and educational future, it should still be considered relevant, according to previous studies, including OECD PISA data. The language spoken at home, which is often different than the language of instruction for a student with a migration background, is likely still a determinant in a student's performance in primary school, which thus affects the recommendation they will receive for secondary school. A recent publication about education in Germany reveals only "partial success in the removal of social disparities in acquiring educational skills," and in particular German vocabulary and grammar

skills (Hasselhorn et al, 2014, p. 16). The national publication connects differences in linguistic competence, as early as age 5, to differences in social background; the unfortunate reality is that “the dependence of academic performance on social factors is still average or higher than the international average,” which is what makes this issue so disconcerting (Hasselhorn et al, 2014, p. 16). The fact that this national publication makes a distinct connection between social background and linguistic skills lends legitimacy to my theory that language is still a very important determinant in the tracking and educational attainment of students with a migration background in Germany.

Thus, we can already see how language skills can be an inhibiting determinant in the learning abilities of students, likely those with a migration background, in Germany. As noted above, language is one of the core subjects taken into account when determining a student’s secondary school track placement. Also noted above are the majority of students with a migration background being placed into the lowest secondary school. This supports my assumption that less developed German language skills are probably at least part of the reason why so many more students with a migration background are sorted into the *Hauptschule*.

While many studies have adequately disregarded the effect of language ability on a migrant student's educational attainment, there is still evidence that not only a student’s language ability but that of their parents’, or more specifically their mother’s German language proficiency, has an important influence on the secondary school type they attend. Students would probably be more likely to attend a higher secondary school track if their parents spoke German at home. They would, consequently, be more likely to have a higher German language proficiency, which would then lead to better performance in primary school and a higher secondary school recommendation because German is one of the main subjects that influence the

recommendation. So, the German language skills of both students and parents are important in a student's performance and tracking in the German education system.

Furthermore, parental cultural affiliation does have merit, if we consider the way in which students educational future is determined. Particularly in the *Länder* where parents have more say in the secondary school track their child attends, a mother, once again considered the active manager of a child's education, who knows more about the German education system will probably be more aware of the potential disadvantage of attending *Hauptschule* on her child's future. Furthermore, if said mother also has a proficient command of the German language, she will probably communicate better with teachers and be more apt to help her child with homework. Thus, it is interesting that we can trace a child's performance in school to their mother's cultural affiliation and language skills, which, if better integrated into German language and society will have beneficial effects on a child's educational career and secondary school track placement.

Consequently, cultural background and more specifically language are still important determinants in the secondary school track placement in the German education system. These determinants are influenced by parental background factors and even more specifically maternal characteristics and linguistic ability are more important than paternal characteristics.

Section 3.2: Analysis of Hypothesis 2

Discrimination seems to be less relevant than other determinants. On the one hand, discrimination is difficult to measure and to evaluate. Although there has been some potential discrimination observed from both teachers in the German school system, as well as from Turkish families, it does not seem that discrimination based on migration background is generally an influential determinant in the secondary school track recommendations and

secondary schools attended. In almost every area where there seems to be evidence of discrimination, there is also counter-evidence. The fact that a student might be tracked into the lowest secondary school, the *Hauptschule*, because teachers may believe that this school is better equipped to handle linguistic heterogeneity, and that a student with a migration background would be deemed unfit to attend a *Gymnasium* because of cultural background factors points to the potentially discriminatory nature of the German education system and the tracking mechanism in general. But, it would seem that the reasons behind some of these tracking decisions are meant to be in the best interest of the student and their needs.

While discrimination in general is not an overwhelming determinant in a student's secondary school track recommendation, there is enough evidence to show that, based on linguistic ability and socioeconomic background, students both feel more discriminated against and experience some kind of discrimination whether at the time when they are given a secondary school track recommendation or during primary or secondary school in general. So, the discrimination itself is not as important as linguistic ability and socioeconomic background being the sources of discrimination. However, there also may not be enough research done on the feelings of discrimination for students with a migration background in primary school, perhaps because at such a young age, discrimination may not be a fully understood concept. Several different discriminatory factors were evaluated, yet discrimination does not seem to be an overly telling determinant as far as migrant performance in the education system. But it does indeed seem that any discrimination experienced in the educational tracking system is more generally linked to other determinants, such as socioeconomic background and parental linguistic skills. While migrant background and socioeconomic status are important, the double disadvantage that

discrimination being linked to these determinants creates for migrants is the worst, meaning that migrants from a low socioeconomic background suffer the most in the German education system.

Section 3.3: Analysis of Hypothesis 3

Many researchers hypothesize that students' performance in school is largely dependent on their parents' background and education. Parental socioeconomic factors may well play into the perceived disadvantage that migrants have in the German education system, particularly at the point in time when they are tracked into one of the three different secondary schools. This could be particularly true in Germany, as parents have a say in the chosen track that their child studies in (the extent to which depends on the federal state). The analysis of previous literature shows how important parental decisions/ involvement in a child's education is particularly deterministic "in a system which imposes critical choices early in a child's educational career" (Schüller, 2015, p. 968). This is exemplary of the path dependency relevant in the German education system since generations, despite the changing labor market.

Furthermore, even when socioeconomic similarities are present between natives and migrants, students with a migration background have an extra disadvantage, not because of their migration background per se, but because of the preferences or characteristics of their parents. Still, it seems that having a migration background is important in the secondary school track recommendation only as far as the migration background is likely linked to a lower socioeconomic status. This is, in fact, not surprising, considering the numbers of migrants that have come to Germany over the past decades to fill low-skilled labor positions. Furthermore, the structure of the German education system, allowing little upward mobility throughout secondary school further cements the decisions made early on in a student's educational career, which likely reflect the socioeconomic background of a student's family.

Once again, the secondary school that a student attends is largely linked to their parents. Similar to language spoken at home having a substantial impact on a student's linguistic skills and thus their secondary school track placement, the education and labor force history of a student's parents is linked to what secondary school they attend. While there is promising evidence of parents being positive role models through higher educational attainment and active labor force participation and thus positively affecting their children's educational attainment, reality shows many students with a migration background are still at a particular disadvantage. Going back to Sürig and Wilmes's study on second-generation Turkish and Yugoslavian immigrants, the percentage of maternal education in particular is rather low (2015). Once again, this is not representative of all students with a migration background, but the fact that Turkish immigrants are the largest group of immigrants in Germany allows these results to still be considered relevant and important. That said, "more than 70 per cent of the mothers of the second-generation Turks never attended school or went only briefly," (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015, p. 58) although the Yugoslavian mothers generally had at least a basic education. This could help to explain why it is more likely for students with a migration background, particularly Turkish children, to receive a recommendation for the *Hauptschule* (Sürig and Wilmes, 2015, p. 40). Once again, this could be because the teachers see such students with a migration background as unfit and lacking proper support at home to succeed in higher levels of secondary school because of the lower maternal educational attainment and lower socioeconomic background.

When looking at the country of birth of students' mothers and fathers, it does seem to be true that students with a mother or father from a different country than Germany have a significantly lower level of reading compared to students with German-born parents, according to OECD PISA data. Furthermore, students who have a mother with a very low level of

education completion seem to be at a much greater disadvantage in Germany compared to the OECD average. The disadvantage is less noticeable for students who have a father with a low level of education, however, the data is not as complete for father's education as it is for mothers'. Thus, within the socioeconomic background we see specifically maternal characteristics as determinants in the disadvantaged position of migrants in the German education system. Low maternal educational attainment likely translates into little to no work-force experience for mothers', which has been proven to be negatively influential on a migrant student's educational attainment. The finding in Boll and Hoffmann's study that labor-market participation is even more important than household income is interesting insofar as socioeconomic status should not be viewed as solely monetary, as it is also characterized by workforce participation and educational background. Again, here, it might be notable that low levels of education are not necessarily a factor only relevant for migrants. So, the hypothesis that migrants are not necessarily more disadvantaged than natives when controlling for parental education levels and socioeconomic status could prove to be true, as well. It is just perhaps more likely that students with low socioeconomic status and undereducated mothers, in particular, have a migration background.

Conclusion

Overall, I have determined through my analysis of previous literature that discrimination is the least important determinant in the tracking of students in the German education system. Not that discrimination does not exist, but that it is more generally influenced by parental background characteristics spanning from cultural and linguistic to socioeconomic. The educational attainment and labor force participation of parents is largely telling of socioeconomic background and can also be linked to parental linguistic skills. To a large extent, linguistic

disadvantage and discrimination can indeed be linked to a student's parents and more specifically, to their mother's background.

The disadvantage in the German education system for low socioeconomic status students and migrants is still considered a rather perplexing issue, according to a 2014 publication from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. This publication connects children with parents who have an interest in education and children who do not have a migration background as being more apt to navigate and succeed in the education system; this is again connected to early experience with non-parental care (generally in a pre-school) and more educational stimulus at home (Hasselhorn et al, 2014, p. 11). The publication also notes that social disparities largely dissipate after lower secondary school, but the fact that migrants are still overrepresented in the *Hauptschule* furthers my argument that parental background factors, including migration, socioeconomic status and language skills are inhibiting determinants in the performance of migrants in the German education system. Furthermore, while there is substantial participation in continuing education programs, "the disparities between participating social groups have not been reduced significantly" and people with a migration background in particular are being left behind (Hasselhorn et al, 2014, p. 11). This is important insofar as it seems that the German education system is almost doubly disadvantageous to people with a migration background because of the early point in time secondary school tracks are chosen, and the low participation rates in early education and continuing education. Despite efforts to remedy this perceived inequality in the education system, it ultimately demonstrates a certain path dependency in the German education system, which has seen little structural change.

However, an interesting trend found in my research was how important maternal educational attainment, linguistic ability and labor force participation seems to be on a student's

overall educational attainment and secondary school track recommendation. So, it is one of the main conclusions of this paper that while socioeconomic status and cultural background are telling determinants of a student's educational attainment, it is more specifically determined by a mother's characteristics than a father's. As migrant mothers are generally not as educated and therefore less likely to participate in the labor market as native mothers, migrants are at a double disadvantage. That said, in order to improve the educational performance and achieve better overall leaving school certificates for children with a migration background, more emphasis should be put on women's and girl's educational attainment and labor force participation. This has already been initiated in Germany with labor force activation policies, particularly targeting women, but more emphasis could be put on the linguistic training and labor force participation of women, as well as pre-primary school attendance by all children, particularly those with a migration background.

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