

Migration & the Quest for Educational Equity in Germany

Viola B. Georgi

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 argument was to blame students of immigrant origin for the poor performance of the German education system on an international stage. These critics claimed the country’s performance was linked to supposedly weak German language skills of immigrant students, 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

As a result, various measures were taken to tackle these problems. National educational standards were introduced, early childhood education was expanded, and the systematic implementation of all-day schools by 2026 was decided upon.³ Subsequent waves of large-scale educational assessments have shown some improvement.⁴ Nevertheless, the link between educational success and the home remains.

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and recent increases in admission of young refugees into Germany (primarily from Syria in 2015 and Ukraine in 2022) have once again exposed and reinforced the already existing inadequacies and inequalities of the German school system. In recent years, the need for the education system to respond to a diverse student body and provide educational opportunities and prospects has therefore become more urgent.

Although recent opinion polls demonstrate a growing consciousness of social inequalities and discrimination in Germany, as well as greater recognition that immigrants and their families are part of German society, schools nonetheless tend to frame diverse classrooms as a problem or challenge.⁵ This often manifests in stereotyping, bias, and forms of discrimination that hinder the effective inclusion and education of students from particular ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups – including refugee students, Muslim students, students of Roma descent, and students of color. However, there are promising initiatives and programs from both government and civil society that address issues of diversity, democracy, and equality in schools. In this essay, I present a few selected examples of these developments, after outlining relevant dimensions of educational inequality against the backdrop of current immigration policy and demographic trends.

Discussing relevant dimensions of educational equity in German schools requires us to look at the demographic, social, and political composition of German society. Considering Germany from a purely demographic perspective, three developments stand out: German citizens are becoming fewer, older, and more diverse. All three demographic developments are linked to immigration and play a decisive role in the stability of the social system, economic growth, and the future architecture of education in Germany.

Over the last sixty years, Germany has changed from a nation that saw itself as culturally homogeneous to a society that recognizes the diversity created by immigration. A vibrant and far-reaching history of immigration has long been visible in the cityscapes, streets, workplaces, kindergartens, and schools, most especially in urban areas. Nevertheless, it was not until the turn of the millennium that Germany began to more broadly accept this multicultural reality. In times of global conflicts and humanitarian crises, Germany has become an important destination country for refugees and asylum-seekers. In 2015, more than one million refugees moved to Germany from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries

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 percent) or Asian (21 percent) nationality. The largest proportions were Turkish (12 percent), Ukrainian (10 percent), Syrian (8 percent), Romanian (8 percent), and Polish (7 percent) nationals.¹⁸ Due to the Russian war against Ukraine, there are currently also many refugees from Ukraine living in Germany.

Germany today includes not only the Christian cross, but also the Muslim headscarf, the Jewish kippa, and many other religious symbols and practices. Even though Christianity is the predominant religion, with the majority of the population identifying as Roman Catholic or Protestant, there is also a significant

number of Muslim people. Most recently, there were around 5.5 million people of the Muslim faith living in Germany, making Islam the third largest religious community in Germany.¹⁹ In the years after the Holocaust and the end of World War II, only about fifteen thousand Jewish people settled in Germany. Today, there are more than one hundred Jewish communities with about one hundred and seven thousand members. Many of these Jewish people immigrated to Germany in the 1990s from Russia and the former Soviet Union when a special program for Jewish refugees offered protection in recognition of historical responsibility for Jewish life and to revive Jewish communities in Germany.²⁰ Of course, there are also many followers of other religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism.²¹

While Germany benefits from its great diversity, there are also challenges in terms of integration and social cohesion. Ensuring equal opportunities, combating discrimination, and promoting inclusive practices and measures are therefore ongoing efforts, accompanied by a heated debate on how to deal with migration, including more restrictive immigration policies, such as tightening asylum rules and enforcing deportations.

Diversity in schools and classrooms appears in differences such as language, ethnicity, religion, competencies, and academic performance. It is important to acknowledge, however, that these differences are not naturally given or “innate,” but can develop or intensify in the course of schooling. These differences are also products of social processes and routines of inclusion and exclusion in schools. Diversity and heterogeneity can thus also be interpreted as products of social and educational inequality.²² It is in this context that we must look at forms of discrimination resulting in experiences of inequality in German schools. I will do this with a particular focus on phenomena connected to immigration, as students of immigrant origin in Germany often face various challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and socioeconomic disparities, which can lead to discrimination and unequal treatment in schools.²³ There is empirical evidence that experiences of discrimination in German schools are made on the basis of ethnic origin, gender, disability, religion or belief, age, sexual identity, social origin, or appearance, from the first day of enrollment to the completion of secondary school.²⁴

From a more general perspective, inequalities and discrimination in the German school system can be divided into the following dimensions:

- *Segregation and tracking*: Institutional discrimination manifests itself in inappropriate school career recommendations that teachers and counselors make based on prejudices and assumptions about students' abilities. It is empirically demonstrated that children of immigrant origin are placed in

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 located, and not on the needs of students. If schools do not have sufficient resources, this can affect their ability to support students who need such resources.
- *Lack of sensitivity to diversity in schools*: Teachers and school administrators do not adequately address the needs of a diverse student body. There is insufficient understanding of how racism and other forms of (structural) discrimination are reflected in everyday school life, curricula, teaching materials, and practices.
- *Stereotyping and bias*: Stereotyping based on ethnicity, race, or nationality leads to students from immigrant families being unfairly judged and treated differently.
- *Bullying and harassment*: Students of immigrant origin, including those newly arrived and those born in Germany to immigrant parents, become targets of bullying due to ascribed non-German or non-Christian backgrounds. This negatively impacts students' mental and emotional well-being, as well as academic performance.
- *Lack of support services*: There are insufficient support services, including German language support, offices for reporting discrimination, programs for parents, and professional development for teachers. This can exacerbate the challenges faced by children with a so-called migrant background.

Beginning with segregation and tracking, various studies show that the label “migration background” is a negative predictor of school success in the German education system.²⁵ Even if other factors could explain the disadvantage of children and young people from immigrant families, the intersections of families' educational backgrounds, associated socioeconomic situations, and German language skills stand out. The first factor is not specific to immigration, but also affects children from low-income families without a migration background. Irrespective of their country of birth and that of their parents, working-class children achieve a lower level of competency and receive a recommendation to attend a Gymnasium, or state-maintained secondary school that prepares pupils for higher academic education, less often than children from families with higher socioeconomic status. Secondary education in Germany is characterized by the division of pupils into the various educational paths and school types responsible for their respective leaving certificates and qualifications.²⁶

Such disadvantages, which are related to the socioeconomic and educational background of families, are pronounced in Germany. Children and young people

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 early assignment of children to different types of schools in Germany should be examined critically, as *de facto* discrimination becomes visible in particular with regard to 1) the transition to secondary schools, 2) the educational achievements of the mentioned social groups, 3) the intersection of different dimensions of discrimination, and 4) the permeability and flexibility of the school system.

To reduce the disadvantages of children and young people from immigrant and socially disadvantaged families in the transition from primary to secondary school in Germany, the following strategies are relevant. First, the development of student competencies must be better promoted based on individual advancement and quality teaching, which is why good teachers are essential. Good teachers need good training that enables them to navigate a “superdiverse” classroom.

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 student. The result showed that students named Murat (a Turkish name) were graded worse than students named Max (a German name).³⁷ Other empirical studies support this finding and show that students with immigrant backgrounds tend to have lower expectations compared to those without a migration background, and that biased grading is common.³⁸ There are findings, accordingly, that students of Turkish origin in Germany are seen as less achievement-oriented.³⁹ For example, another study showed that teachers expected lower learning progress in German classes for students of Turkish origin, even when their language performance, general cognitive skills, and motivation were similar to those of students without a migration background.⁴⁰ These stereotypes are highly problematic, as they play major roles in both implicit performance expectations and in assessment situations. Research on stereotype threats demonstrates that triggering negative stereotypes in assessment situations can lead to poor performance. This means that students do not achieve the results they should given their knowledge and skills.⁴¹

On the one hand, there is still a lack of diversity-sensitivity in schools in Germany.⁴² On the other hand, significant progress has been made in educational policies. In 2013, the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs published recommendations on intercultural education in German schools, in which intercultural competence is defined as a key skill for young people, a cross-sectional task for educators, and an important goal of school development and quality. In 2015, the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, migrant organizations, and educational media publishers adopted a joint declaration on the "presentation of cultural diversity, integration and migration in educational media," underlining the importance of being critical and sensitive to the representation of cultural, religious, and other differences in textbooks and educational materials.⁴³ Another example of educational policy creating space and capacity for more equity is the recently passed Act to Strengthen Measures to Promote Democracy, Shape Diversity, Prevent Extremism, and Advance Civic Education, which supports projects across Germany that develop and test new ideas and innovative approaches to promoting democracy, shaping diversity, and preventing extremism.⁴⁴

Researchers are examining the development and implementation of various intercultural and diversity-sensitive practices in schools and classrooms.⁴⁵ These efforts are additionally supported by calls for research proposals from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.⁴⁶ There are also a growing number of stud-

ies that examine structural racism in educational institutions through the lens of critical race theory.⁴⁷ More recently, decolonial and postcolonial ideas have found their way into German educational research, motivating discourse on more radical transformative approaches in education with regard to diversity and inequality.⁴⁸

From a practical perspective, school awards such as “fair@school” as well as school development projects, specific teacher training programs, powerful immigrant parents’ associations, and innovative platforms for educational materials such as the “Migration Lab Germany” make up a vibrant landscape of state-funded programs and civil society initiatives aiming to create an educational environment that responds to Germany’s superdiverse immigration society.⁴⁹ However, looking at some recent studies on curricula and textbooks in German classrooms illustrates the importance of continuously questioning and critically examining these issues within the context of schooling. Research indicates that the reality of the superdiverse German society is not yet adequately represented and reflected in textbooks. In a study I coauthored, we investigated the representation of themes connected to migration in German textbooks. Among other things, we found that global migration is mostly attributed to poverty, integration is seen mainly as something immigrants must achieve, and racism in the host society is entirely ignored. Furthermore, tasks and assignments in textbooks tend to emphasize migrants and their descendants’ differences from Germans without migrant backgrounds, encouraging discrimination against them.⁵⁰ Racist stereotypes are also included in textbooks. A study that examined representations of the African continent, Black people, and people of color in German textbooks showed that curricula and teaching materials are frequently one-sided and associated with negative connotations.⁵¹

Mastering the language of the destination country, which is mostly the language of instruction in school, is key to immigrant students’ educational success.⁵² Many immigrant children arrive in Germany with no or limited German-language proficiency. This hinders students’ abilities to participate fully in classroom activities, understand instructions, and communicate with teachers and peers. As a result, these students may experience academic difficulties and social isolation. Language barriers prevent immigrant children from reaching their fullest educational potentials and can lead to ethnic inequalities at school.⁵³ Mastery of the German language becomes a crucial factor for a successful educational career.

In general, the success of language acquisition depends on three overarching factors: the incentives associated with improved language competencies impacting the motivation, exposure to the language, and learning efficiency.⁵⁴ Besides the effects of individual conditions, access to language acquisition programs for newly arrived children and other opportunities to learn German as a second lan-

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 students and help improve their German, this position is highly disputed. Such policies discriminate against children communicating in their first languages or in their families' language and hence deny the multilingual reality of students' lives, as well as the findings in multilingualism research.

Education scholar Ingrid Gogolin has coined the term “monolingual habitus” to describe such structural exclusion of other languages in German schools. She criticizes the fact that multilingualism is traditionally cast in a problematic light for students who come from immigrant families and speak different languages at home. Historically, the German education system developed a monolingual self-image in the nineteenth century, anchored in the nation-state. Consequently, all structures, processes, and functional mechanisms of the German school system are automatically presumed to be designed for the German standard and educational language.⁶¹ The interest of the public educational system in linguistic uniformity produces educational disadvantages for children who grow up in multilingual environments, as their German language competences are judged on this basis.⁶²

The schooling of newly arrived students – especially refugee children who have entered German schools in great numbers since 2015 due to the civil war in Syria and 2022 due to the war in Ukraine – represents a major task.⁶³ This applies to the assignment procedure, the assessment of students' academic performances, and the identification of learning, mental, or social disabilities, as refugee children typically face the challenge of starting or continuing their school careers in completely new contexts and languages. The majority of newly arrived students at the secondary level are educated in separate preparatory classes.⁶⁴

Models of schooling for newcomers vary depending on the German states, municipalities, and respective schools. Many municipalities offer so-called preparatory, welcome, or international classes for one or two years before students are transferred to regular classes. This means new students are taught in separate classes (the “parallel model”). They are generally transitional in the sense that they aim at integration into the mainstream class. The curricula in these classes are not standardized across Germany, and many schools solely rely on German language lessons and some subject-oriented teaching.⁶⁵ Overall, findings indicate that attending such preparatory classes can have a negative impact on school success, as the teachers are often not qualified to teach the target group, the students do not interact with others, and the transition to mainstream classes is not professionally supported.⁶⁶ Some schools partially integrate the newly arrived students: they participate in preparatory classes but, for example, also attend physical education, art, and music lessons with other students.

In other municipalities, meanwhile, students of immigrant origin attend the standard classes (learning through immersion) with – or sometimes without –

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-

breaking civil society initiative, was founded in 2015. ADAS documents and combats discrimination in schools, empowering and supporting those affected by discrimination in a variety of ways, including legally.⁷³

Antidiscrimination projects can contribute to addressing, eliminating, and preventing discrimination at school. An example of a nationwide initiative fighting racism at schools is “School without Racism – School with Courage.” This network, founded in 1995, consists of about four thousand schools across Germany, and addresses racism with a whole-school approach, inviting everybody in the school community to engage. Students in these schools are encouraged to examine racism in its various forms and develop projects to prevent and combat these “isms,” including anti-Semitism and antiziganism (anti-Romani sentiment). Together they seek answers that strengthen belonging and solidarity, aiming to make students from diverse backgrounds feel welcomed, recognized, and respected in the school community.⁷⁴

I have presented some initiatives and interventions aimed at creating more inclusive and equitable educational environments – from education policy to civil society initiatives and school development – but despite these efforts, many challenges remain related to structural discrimination and inequalities in German schools. Regularly monitoring efforts to combat these inequalities is therefore necessary. Finally, it is important to emphasize that individual measures alone are not sufficient to reduce educational inequality in the long term. To achieve a sustainable reduction in educational inequality in Germany, all areas of education must be included and dovetailed with one another.⁷⁵

Reshaping the educational architecture toward greater educational equity in Germany to serve the country’s superdiverse population remains an urgent task. Eventually, most children from immigrant families will stay in Germany and become part of the postmigrant social fabric. The question of their equal participation in education, and in all areas of society, is critical for Germany’s democratic future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Viola B. Georgi is Professor of Diversity Education and Director of the Center for Diversity, Democracy, and Inclusion in Education at the University of Hildesheim, Germany. Her research interests are migration and memory studies, civic education, educational media, school development, and teacher education. She is the editor of the *Handbuch Interkulturelle Pädagogik* (with Ingrid Gogolin, Marianne Krüger-Potratz, Drorit Lengyl, and Uwe Sandfuchs, 2018) and, since 2021, the book series *Migration, Diversity, und Bildung* (with Yasemin Karakaşoğlu).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ “Migration background” is a concept developed by the Federal Statistical Office in 2005 to distinguish between people with foreign citizenship and people with links to more recent migration experiences but German citizenship. A person is considered to have a migrant background if they or at least one of their parents did not acquire German citizenship at birth. Since 2005, the Federal Statistical Office has recorded “migration background” in the microcensus with the aim of mapping social change through migration and using the statistical data for political decisions on integration measures. Meanwhile the category “migration background” has been widely used in statistics and research. However, it has also been criticized for its shortcomings and problematic implications as it lumps together very different people with and without migration experience. I will use the category in this essay whenever I refer to studies that work with it.
- ² See Yasemin Karakaşoğlu and Wolfgang Nieke, “Benachteiligung durch kulturelle Zugehörigkeit?” in *Bildungsforschung und Politikberatung. Schule, Hochschule und Berufsbildung an der Schnittstelle von Erziehungswissenschaft und Politik* [Educational Research and Policy Advice. School, Higher Education and Vocational Training at the Interface of Educational Science and Politics], ed. Michael Weegen, Wolfgang Böttcher, Gabriele Bellenberg, and Isabell van Ackeren (Juventa, 2002), 199–218.
- ³ See Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth, “Legal Right to Full-Day Care from 2026 Decided,” <https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/aktuelles/alle-meldungen/rechtsanspruch-auf-ganztagsbetreuung-ab-2026-beschlossen-178826> (accessed August 27, 2024).
- ⁴ See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators,” September 16, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e4292276-en>.
- ⁵ The 2021 report of the Expert Council on Migration and Integration states that immigration is increasingly perceived as an enrichment, and immigrants are recognized and fundamentally granted the right to participation. See Expert Council on Migration and Integration (Sachverständigenrat Für Integration und Migration [SVR]), *Normalfall Diversität? Wie das Einwanderungsland Deutschland mit Vielfalt umgeht* [Diversity as the Norm? How Germany, a Country of Immigration, Deals with Diversity] (Sachverständigenrat Für Integration und Migration, 2021), https://www.svr-migration.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SVR_Jahresgutachten_2021_barrierefrei-1.pdf. See also Viola B. Georgi and Yasemin Karakaşoğlu, eds., *Allgemeinbildende Schulen in der Migrationsgesellschaft. Diversitätssensible Ansätze und Perspektiven* [General Education Schools in the Migration Society. Diversity-Sensitive Approaches and Perspectives] (Kohlhammer, 2023).
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- ¹⁶ The federalist principle with sixteen Länder (counties) is an acknowledgment of the regional structure that has evolved through Germany’s history. It shall support the division of power, guarantee diversity, competition, and community-based politics.
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- ²⁸ The Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung–BMBF) is responsible for the overall German education system. However,

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.

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- ³⁰ Hanna Dumont, Kai Maaz, Marko Neumann, and Michael Becker, “Soziale Ungleichheiten beim Übergang von der Grundschule in die Sekundarstufe I: Theorie, Forschungsstand, Interventions- und Fördermöglichkeiten” [Social Inequalities in the Transition From Elementary School to Lower Secondary Level: Theory, State of Research, Intervention and Support Options], in *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft, Sonderheft 17 Herkunft und Bildungserfolg von der Frühen Kindheit bis ins Erwachsenenalter: Forschungsstand und Interventionsmöglichkeiten aus Interdisziplinärer Perspektive* [Journal of Educational Science, Special Issue 17, Origin and Educational Success From Early Childhood to Adulthood: State of Research and Intervention Options From an Interdisciplinary Perspective] 24 (2014): 141–165.
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- ⁷³ ADAS (Anlaufstelle für Diskriminierungsschutz an Schulen) [Contact Point for Protection Against Discrimination in Schools], <https://adas-berlin.de> (accessed August 28, 2024).
- ⁷⁴ See Schule ohne Rassismus – Schule mit Courage [School without Racism, School with Courage], <https://www.schule-ohne-rassismus.org> (accessed August 28, 2024). The network has been criticized more recently for suggesting that there is a school without racism. The argument is that racism is always present in schools, and even if the school community fights it, schools can never get rid of it. However, schools can become critical and sensitive to racism. See Annette Kuhn, “Es gibt keine Schule ohne Rassismus” [There Is No School without Racism], February 20, 2021, Deutsches Schulportal, <https://deutsches-schulportal.de/schulkultur/es-gibt-keine-schule-ohne-rassismus>.
- ⁷⁵ Kai Maaz, “Ansätze zur Verminderung von Bildungsungleichheiten” [Approaches to Reducing Educational Inequalities], Online Dossier Bildung Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung [Online Dossier Education by Federal Agency for Political Education], <https://www.bpb.de/themen/bildung/dossier-bildung/322534/ansaeetze-zur-verminderung-von-bildungsungleichheiten> (accessed August 15, 2023).