

# Educational opportunities are more dependent on social background than ethnicity

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Discrimination by teaching staff does not play a major role in explaining ethnic disadvantages in education. Social background is more significant in this area.  
Credit: allesalltag

Does Germany's education system discriminate against children and young people with a migrant background? What obstacles do they face in reality? Are there differences between groups from different backgrounds? A new anthology co-edited by Christian Hunkler of the Max Planck Institute for Social Law and Social Policy provides an overview of the current state of research in this field. It suggests that a child's social origin has a greater impact on their educational opportunities than foreign origin.

Performance gaps between [young people](#) of immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds are apparent from an early stage in education. Those differing results comprise a recurring theme through the whole system, and this is primarily due to social conditions. Although migration-related factors are also present, e.g. in the area of language, these are, on the whole, less significant than factors associated with social origin. Such are the conclusions drawn by the editors of the newly published anthology "Ethnische Ungleichheiten im Bildungsverlauf" (Ethnic Inequalities in Education).

In summarizing the central findings of the volume, the editors point out clear differences in the performance of different groups. Children of Turkish origin generally achieve far lower results than other immigrant groups, such as first-generation immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This is apparent, for example, in the transition to on-the-job training, with many studies finding transition rates to be far lower among young Turkish men. They tend to do better in large companies, however, indicating that the standardized selection procedures applied in such settings can prevent ethnic discrimination.

Within the education system, individual discrimination in the form of appraisal by teachers does not play a major role in explaining ethnic disadvantages in education. Instead, it is the social backgrounds of pupils that influence their teachers' decisions, generally to the detriment of

children from educationally disadvantaged homes. Of course, this group has a disproportionate weighting of children from immigrant backgrounds.

## **Need for more data and studies**

In addition to these empirical results, the authors point out the glaring shortage of suitable data and studies. There is therefore a particular need for creative study designs such as broad-based field experiments, according to Christian Hunkler of the Max Planck Institute for Social Law and Social Policy: "It's the only way for us to make more comprehensive, reliable predictions about the role of institutional and structural conditions, and to find out how and whether changes or certain measures can have an impact on the educational disadvantages associated with ethnicity." There are indications that the German [education system](#) is struggling to deal with the increasing social, ethnic and linguistic diversity of its student body.

Provided by Max Planck Society

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