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The education of recently arrived refugees in Germany: conditions, processes, and outcomes

Around the world, the number of refugees is at a record high. Although most forcibly displaced persons seek refuge within their home country or in a neighboring state (UNHCR, 2020), a large number of refugees have reached Europe in recent years, and many of them have settled in Germany (Eurostat, 2020).

As many refugees were children and adolescents when they arrived in Germany (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018), their successful incorporation into the educational system is of great relevance. This includes, above all, the acquisition of fundamental skills and competences as well as the eventual completion of educational qualifications. In the adult refugee population, most individuals are also quite young (Spörlein, Kristen, Schmidt, & Welker, 2020). To succeed in the labor market, many of them need to acquire further skills and competences as well as educational qualifications by, for example, taking language classes or attending training tailored to the requirements and the structure of the German labor market. The successful educational integration of recently arrived refugees at various stages in their life course is of paramount importance for them and for their receiving society alike.

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Does the education of refugees differ from that of other immigrants?

Scholars from various disciplines have quite thoroughly studied the educational success of immigrants and their offspring and the conditions that facilitate or jeopardize their educational achievement and attainment. However, these analyses have rarely focused on refugees. With the recent surge in refugee migration, this has changed profoundly.

The reasons for leaving their country of origin differ between refugees and other immigrants. Whereas refugees are pushed out of their home countries because of persecution, war or violent conflict, labor immigrants typically emigrate because of perceived economic opportunities in the destination country, such as better-paid and more secure jobs (Chiswick, 1999; Cortez, 2004). In contrast to refugees who often cannot return to their country of origin, labor immigrants usually have the opportunity to move back.

Some scholars have argued that refugee migration is fundamentally different from other forms of migration and therefore has to be treated differently, while others have maintained that refugee migration is simply a form of migration that takes place under special circumstances (FitzGerald & Arar 2018; Kogan & Kalter, 2020). The claim of the latter position is that “the processes underlying the integration of *all* immigrants (including refugee immigrants) are governed by the same basic mechanisms” (Kogan & Kalter 2020, p. 8) and that it is hence possible to subsume the range of conditions that are specific to refugees into existing theoretical models (Kogan & Kalter, 2020).

In this special issue, we take up this ongoing discussion on the educational incorporation of recently arrived refugees. We are interested in the degree to which the processes identified as relevant for other immigrants apply to refugees, and we aim to identify refugee-specific conditions that shape their education in the early period after their arrival. The education of recently arrived refugees could differ from that of other new immigrants for several reasons that are related to the typical obstacles refugees face and need to overcome in order to adjust and succeed (Berry, 1997; Cerna, 2019; McBrien, 2005). These obstacles are linked to the forced nature of refugee migration and related conditions before, during and after migration takes place (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Ryan, Dooley & Benson, 2008). While they still lived in their home country, young refugees were often unable to attend school continuously due to adverse conditions prevalent there, and they had to interrupt their schooling career abruptly when they had to leave (Cerna, 2019; Dryden-Peterson, 2016). During their journey to a safe place, which in many cases was prolonged and involved one or more transitional residences, many refugee children and adolescents attended provisional schools or did not go to school at all (Crul et al., 2019; UNHCR, 2019). Refugees are therefore more likely than other immigrants to have interrupted educational biographies and to enter educational institutions in the destination country at irregular points in time. In addition,

they typically do not speak the language of their destination country when they arrive, and hence, they have to continue their education with hardly any or only very basic skills in the language of instruction. Refugees also suffer from mental stress more often than other immigrants due to traumatic and strenuous experiences in their home country and on their journey to a new destination as well as postmigration stressors (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012; Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005; Hunker & Khourshed, 2020). The resulting mental health problems that continue to impose a burden on their well-being are likely to impede learning developments (Medalia, & Revheim, 2002; Trivedi, 2006). Moreover, some scholars have argued that an insecure legal status in the destination country could hamper refugees' motivation and reduce their inclination to invest in education, and it may also affect the motivation of educators and instructors to support them (Echterhoff et al., 2020; Homuth, Welker, Will, & von Maurice, 2020).

With this special issue on the educational integration of refugees, we aim to contribute to the growing knowledge of their early educational pathways after immigration (e.g., de Paiva Lareiro 2019; El-Mafaalani & Massumi, 2019; Henschel et al., 2019; Homuth, Will, & von Maurice, 2020; Will & Homuth 2020; Wong & Schweitzer, 2017). The German case, with its substantive influx of refugees, seems well suited for this purpose. Recent data collections, which have generated rich information on this population, provide a good basis for such analyses. They allow us to take stock of refugees' educational situation in an important destination country within Europe and to examine how they have fared so far.

Outline of the special issue

This special issue presents quantitative-empirical research on the education of recent refugees in Germany, considering the relevant conditions, processes, and outcomes. This collection of papers approaches the topic from the perspectives of different disciplines, including educational science, sociology, and psychology. Its contributions address various stages of educational careers and a range of indicators of educational outcomes, such as daycare attendance in early childhood, the school achievements of secondary school students, and the transitions of adolescents and young adults after the completion of an initial vocational preparation course. In the first set of papers, the authors examine the conditions that are relevant to refugees' educational integration. The second set of contributions focuses on populations of mostly younger adult refugees. They explore the education these refugees have acquired in their countries of origin and how these educational resources shape their postmigration pathways. The outcomes under study include the acquisition of the destination language and labor market participation.

The empirical analyses presented in the papers use a range of current datasets that include samples of recent refugees in Germany. Some of these datasets provide information on refugees of different heritage countries in substantial numbers,

while others include smaller, usually more targeted samples, such as refugees of certain origins or refugees living in specific geographic areas. Although a few of the contributions make use of longitudinal data sources, they mostly rely on cross-sectional analyses. In some cases, the data collections were started only recently and do not yet provide longitudinal information on the measures of interest. In other cases, the focus on the initial wave of a longitudinal survey is due to the research interest, for example, when the goal is to describe the educational resources or credentials refugees attained in their country of origin. Some of the databases used in the studies presented in this volume also allow for comparisons with other recent immigrants (first generation), with second-generation immigrants, and/or with Germany's majority population, whereas others focus exclusively on refugees. Table 1 summarizes the various data sources on refugees analyzed in this special issue and indicates which empirical study draws upon which data set.

This collection of papers contributes to the current state of knowledge in at least three ways. First, it takes stock of the educational situation of refugees in Germany a few years after their arrival. Second, it identifies the conditions that facilitate (or hinder) their educational integration. Third, it provides insights into the question of whether the processes identified for other immigrants apply to refugees in similar ways or whether there are differences.

In the first paper, 'The role of socioeconomic, cultural, and structural factors in daycare attendance among refugee children', *Christoph Homuth, Elisabeth Liebau and Gisela Will* examine early education. They ask whether a range of conditions known to be relevant predictors of daycare participation matter for refugee children as well. For their analyses of refugees, they use data from the *IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees* and from the ReGES study (*Refugees in the German Educational System*); for the comparison with children from other immigrant families and with children from majority families, they use the *German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)*. The analyses show that although a considerable proportion of refugee children receive early education, they attend daycare centers less often than children in either comparison group. The main result of the study is that a range of well-established factors that contribute to participating in early childhood education are relevant for refugee children as well. Most notably, children of employed mothers are most likely to be enrolled in early education. Refugee-specific conditions, in contrast, such as those associated with refugees' legal status or their living situation, seem to be largely unrelated to daycare participation.

The second paper, 'Mathematics and science proficiency of young refugees in secondary schools in Germany', by *Stefan Schipolowski, Aileen Edele, Nicole Mahler and Petra Stanat*, draws on data from the *IQB Trends in Student Achievement 2018* study, which assessed a representative sample of ninth-grade students in Germany. The authors examine the mathematics and science achievement of refugee students in comparison to other first-generation students, second-generation students, and ninth graders whose parents were born in Germany. Similar to the first paper, the study asks whether factors that are known to account for ethnic educational disparities also matter for refugee students. The findings re-

Table 1: Data sources on refugees included in this special issue

Data source	Refugees	Comparison group/s	Year	Sample size	Geographic area	Data used in
<i>IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees</i>	Various origins	--	Yearly data collection since 2016	Ca. 6,700 adults, ca. 6,000 children	Germany	Homuth, Liebau & Will
<i>Refugees in the German Educational System (ReGES)</i>	Various origins	--	Bian-nual data collection since 2018	Ca. 4,800 (ca. 2,400 in the preschool cohort)	Bavaria, Hamburg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saxony	Homuth, Liebau & Will
<i>IQB Trends in Student Achievement 2018</i>	Various origins	First-generation and second-generation immigrants and students whose parents were born in Germany	2018	Ca. 45,000 (thereof ca. 900 refugees)	Germany	Schipolowski, Edele, Mahler & Stanat
<i>Recent Immigration Processes and Early Integration Trajectories in Germany (ENTRA)</i>	Syrians	Recent immigrants from Italy, Poland and Turkey	2019 and 2020/21 (two waves)	Ca. 4,600 (ca. 1,300 Syrians)	Five cities/urban areas in Germany	Kristen & Seuring
<i>Refugees and their early Integration in Society and Education (RISE)</i>	Various origins	--	2017, 2018, 2019, and 2021 (four waves)	Ca. 600	Baden-Württemberg	Maué, Diehl & Schumann
<i>Qualifications, Potentials and Life Courses of Syrian Asylum Seekers in Germany (QPLC)</i>	Syrians	--	2017	Ca. 300	Bavaria	Hunkler, Edele & Schipolowski

Notes. Sample size refers to the number of cases available in the respective data set (in case of longitudinal data, in the first measurement). It is not necessarily equivalent to the analysis samples used for the empirical studies.

veal that refugees attain considerably lower achievement scores than students from all other groups, including other first-generation immigrants. In line with a variety of well-established results on achievement gaps between immigrant and majority students, refugees' socioeconomic background and, most importantly, their destination-language skills largely account for the observed disadvantages. Again, conditions known to be key determinants of immigrants' educational success seem to be driving educational disparities for refugees in the early period after their arrival.

In the third paper, ‘Young refugees in prevocational preparation classes: Who is moving on to the next step?’, *Elisabeth Maué, Claudia Diehl and Stephan Schumann* concentrate on students in prevocational preparation classes, which were set up specifically for refugees. Due to the large share of adolescents and young adults among recent refugees, this educational stage is of particular relevance. The smaller longitudinal dataset of the RISE study (*Refugees and their early Integration into Society and Education*) covers four measurement points. It was tailored to capture the educational decisions individuals make after completing a prevocational preparation class and allows for investigations into the transition from a preparatory educational program into regular educational pathways or into trajectories outside the education system. The authors find that the vast majority of students attending a prevocational preparation class remain in education. Almost two-thirds of the sample moves on to a regular educational pathway, approximately one-third repeats the prevocational preparation class, and only a few individuals leave the educational system. Refugees’ destination-language skills and contacts with Germans who are supporting them predict transitions into regular education. Similar to the achievement of ninth graders, these findings emphasize that becoming proficient in the language of the destination country is key to succeeding in the educational system.

The fourth contribution, ‘Destination-language acquisition of recently arrived immigrants: Do refugees differ from other immigrants?’, is the first of the set of papers addressing the education of adult refugees. *Cornelia Kristen and Julian Seuring* use data from the first wave of the ENTRA project (*Recent Immigration Processes and Early Integration Trajectories in Germany*), whose sample includes Syrian refugees as well as other new arrivals from Italy, Poland, and Turkey. The authors describe the levels of proficiency new immigrants display shortly after arrival. Emanating from a well-established model of language acquisition (Chiswick & Miller, 2001), they consider a variety of conditions that are known to foster language learning. Their findings reveal that the majority of recent immigrants improve their German language skills after arrival, with refugees’ learning curve being steeper than that of other recent immigrants. They further demonstrate that the same conditions accounting for language acquisition among other immigrants matter for refugees as well. The authors conclude that language learning is a general process, with exposure to the destination language emerging as crucial for acquiring proficiency. At the same time, they show that compared to other recent immigrants, refugees seem to benefit more from certain forms of exposure, such as attending language courses.

The concluding fifth contribution, ‘The role of educational resources in the labor market integration of refugees: The case of Syrian asylum seekers in Germany’ by *Christian Hunkler, Aileen Edele, and Stefan Schipolowski*, is based on data from the *Qualifications, Potentials and Life Courses of Syrian Asylum Seekers in Germany* (QPLC) project, a study of adult refugees from Syria. The data collection covers several indicators of educational resources, including a test of scientific knowledge. Because other studies have also employed this test, it is possible

to compare the results of refugees to the results of the German resident population. The authors describe a selection of the educational resources Syrian refugees possessed when they came to Germany and examine how these resources shape their labor market participation within 1.5 years, on average, after their arrival. The findings reveal a high share of Syrian refugees with interrupted educational biographies. Nevertheless, the association between degrees acquired in Syria and scientific knowledge is very similar to the corresponding association in the German comparison sample. The results further indicate that premigration educational resources play a pivotal role in refugees' labor market integration, as individuals with higher test scores had a higher likelihood of being employed. In contrast, refugee-specific conditions, such as those associated with an insecure legal status, are unrelated to this outcome.

Conclusions

The papers presented in this special issue provide multifaceted findings on refugees' educational integration a few years after their arrival. Overall, there are many reasons for optimism. A large proportion of students in vocational preparation courses remain in education and move on to a regular educational pathway (Maué et al.). Adult refugees also seem to make substantial progress in acquiring German language skills (Kristen & Seuring). However, in some respects, refugees lag behind other first-generation immigrants as well as second-generation immigrants and the majority population. Refugee students, for instance, show lower achievement scores in secondary school (Schipolowski et al.), and adult refugees have fewer educational resources at the time they arrive in Germany than the German reference group (Hunkler et al.). These findings are in line with those reported for other outcomes, such as the distribution of refugees across school tracks, where they are overrepresented in low tracks and underrepresented in higher tracks (Henschel et al., 2019; Will & Homuth, 2020), or in the labor market, where despite growing employment rates, substantial gaps remain (Brücker, Kosyakova, & Schuß, 2020).

As many of the empirical contributions presented in this volume examine the conditions of educational success and education-related outcomes, they point to factors indicating how to support and facilitate refugees' educational integration and overcome their initial disadvantages. Several papers emphasize that destination-language learning is crucial – in particular, in the early years after arrival – in order to develop a good foundation for gaining proficiency (Hartshorne, Tenenbaum, & Pinker, 2018; Kristen, Mühlau, & Schacht, 2016). For example, Schipolowski and colleagues show that German language skills account for a large proportion of refugee students' achievement gap in secondary school. They are also essential for the transition from special preparation classes into regular education pathways (Maué et al.). The findings of Kristen and Seuring further suggest that exposing refugees to the destination language, especially in the form of struc-

tured instruction, is a promising route to support language learning. Their findings corroborate the importance of easily accessible and high-quality language instruction.

In line with previous findings, the presented studies additionally indicate that the socioeconomic and cultural resources refugees bring with them are important for their educational success (Homuth et al.; Maué et al.; Schipolowski et al.) as well as for their labor market participation (Hunkler et al.). Even though these resources were acquired in the refugees' countries of origin, they apparently continue to be relevant. However, socioeconomic resources seem to matter less for refugees than for other immigrant populations (Schipolowski et al.). This result could be related to differences between societies in the distribution of educational qualifications. As most refugees come from countries in which the level of education is considerably lower than in Germany (Spörlein et al., 2020), it might be difficult to compare their educational resources directly. For example, having a medium-level degree in a country where the number of people reaching this qualification is low means something different than in a country where the majority acquires at least a medium-level degree (Spörlein & Kristen, 2019). In relative terms, then, the former have a higher level of education than the latter. Information on educational resources in terms of their relative rather than their absolute level is rarely considered in empirical analyses. Nevertheless, these distributional differences and the hidden characteristics underlying this selectivity might contribute to the observed differential associations between (premigration) socioeconomic resources and (postmigration) educational outcomes.

One of the major conclusions emanating from this special issue is that the conditions known to be the major drivers of educational success and of other education-related aspects of immigrants' incorporation also apply to refugees. Forced immigrants differ from other immigrants in their starting conditions, for instance, in their initial language skills or in the resources they bring with them, but their educational integration seems to be affected by similar factors. This is not to say that refugee-specific conditions, such as interrupted educational careers or the experiences of trauma and stress, are insignificant and do not merit our attention. The presented studies may have assessed these conditions insufficiently, or these conditions may be more relevant for other outcomes than those examined here, for instance, psychological adaptation. Moreover, the possibility that these aspects gain in importance and that their consequences become increasingly visible over the course of time cannot be ruled out. However, for the time being, the findings presented in this special issue consistently indicate that we should not lose sight of the more general processes.

Some of the limitations in this collection of papers on refugees' early educational integration point to avenues for future research. For example, the presented contributions mostly rely on cross-sectional analyses and therefore provide snapshots of refugees' situations in the education system and beyond, rather than determining educational trajectories or developments in education-related outcomes. However, again, many of the datasets on which the papers draw are longitudi-

nal (see Table 1). Future analyses, therefore, will be able to follow refugees' pathways over time, allowing for causal interpretations. Another avenue for progress relates to the evaluation of the potential effects of educational policies or institutional conditions. Such endeavors may, on the one hand, evaluate the consequences of implementing specific measures aimed at supporting integration, such as language-support programs. On the other hand, they may compare the integration of immigrants in educational settings between countries (e.g., Koehler & Schneider, 2019) or between regions that differ in their specific policies or institutional conditions. The various data sets represented in this special issue provide important resources for pursuing such undertakings, which will continue to further our knowledge of the prerequisites, processes, and outcomes related to refugees' education.

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