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Article

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Success Despite Starting Out at a Disadvantage: What Helps Second-Generation Migrants in France and Germany?

by Ingrid Tucci, Ariane Jossin, Carsten Keller, and Olaf Groh-Samberg

The educational and employment trajectories of migrant children in France and Germany are extremely diverse. The few successful ones dominate the public eye. Yet successful biographies of young adults with a migration background are in no way a negligible exception. However, the picture is different in the two countries: while in France more migrants’ descendants manage to reach their (secondary?) general qualification for university entrance, in Germany they are overrepresented particularly at the Hauptschule (general secondary school). It is, however, considerably more difficult for these young people in France to gain a long-term foothold in the labor market, while in Germany they often take the chance to acquire a vocational qualification and have better job opportunities.

As part of a three-year research project, the question examined was which social and institutional factors can stabilize educational attainment and professional orientation. On the basis of qualitative interviews, which were conducted with young adults with a migration background in four disadvantaged areas of Berlin and Paris, it is possible to name three factors that play an important role in the success and/or the stabilization of early educational and employment trajectories: the support provided by significant third parties, entry into milieus which are more socially and culturally diverse, and the prospect of a “second chance.”

As countries with a high number of migrants, Germany and France are both faced with the task of integrating migrants and their children as well as possible. The civil unrest of November 2005 in the French suburbs showed how seriously the experience of social inequalities, discrimination, and segregation can jeopardize social cohesion. Now, it is essential on both sides of the Rhine to prevent ethnic and cultural differences from being reinforced.

Different Education Systems...

Research conducted to date already shows that, on average, migrant children in both countries have lower qualifications than their peers without a migrant background.¹ At the same time, international comparative studies have proven that institutional frameworks have an impact on the opportunities for participation of the second-generation.² This can also be backed up by a comparison of the German and French education systems. In Germany, children do not normally go to school until the age of six and are placed in different school tracks relatively early—after the primary level. This institutional separation is frequently cited as a reason for the particularly pronounced educational inequalities between children with different social and ethnic backgrounds.³

In France, on the other hand, children normally start attending pre-school at a considerably younger age—at three at the latest—and not only go through elementary school together but also the subsequent collège right up until the age of 15. At the end of collège, an “orientation” takes place in France as well, and thus separation into different educational pathways. Some of the students follow the general educational trajectory and others the vocational one. After their first year at grammar school, those who follow the general trajectory will prepare either for the general higher education entrance qualification or the technical high-school diploma. In the vocational trajectory, short practical training courses are provided, as well as a vocational school-leaving certificate. In contrast to the vocational training in Germany, the short professional training courses in France are however considered to be for “dropouts” and seen as inferior. This debasement was further reinforced through the political objective that 80 percent of all students should obtain the baccalauréat (secondary-school leaving certificate), which has led to different forms of the French baccalauréat, ranging from the general one (bac général) to the technical one (bac technologique) and the vocational one (bac professionnel).

Despite the above-mentioned differences in the educational systems, in both countries there is a similarly sized share of less than 15 percent of young adults who have obtained no school or vocational qualifications at all. Young people in Germany can obtain some of the qualifications they did not manage to acquire at school within the framework of the “transition system” or training schemes run by the employment office. Numerous schemes and programs are targeted at young people with a migration background in particular.

1 The research project entitled “A Franco-German Comparison of Professional Strategies and Status Passages of Young Adults with a Migration Background” is jointly funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the French National Research Agency (ANR). Many thanks to Lisa Crinon, Florian Mönks, Wenke Niehues, Tim Sawert, Agnieszka Sommer, and Deniz Yildirim for their hard work on the analyses.

2 Trajectories are considered to be successful if the respondents themselves are satisfied with their life course, also in retrospect, because they have achieved a certain social stability (obtaining a qualification, entering gainful employment, etc.).


4 When studying for the technical high-school diploma, the grammar school students acquire practical knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge. The baccalauréat technologique is comparable to the German Fachabitur (technical highschool diploma which serves as a qualification for entrance to universities of applied sciences) but this baccalauréat theoretically opens all doors to university education. However, graduates often have difficulty advancing. (see Blöss, T. and V. Erlich, “Les nouveaux acteurs de la sélection universitaire: Les bacheliers technologiques en question.” Revue française de sociologie, 41 (4) (2000): 747-775.)

This opportunity does not exist in France, or only to a very limited extent, partly because the egalitarian principle of the French Republic precludes special schemes to support migrants and qualification schemes provided by what are known as missions locales⁶ have a more limited range.

... Unequal Educational Opportunities

The education systems and social policy frameworks are different in both countries. Indeed, they also lead to different educational trajectories. Using longitudinal data and pattern recognition processes, it is possible to study and group educational trajectories and initial career paths with regard to typical patterns. Tables 1 and 2 show how the groups from the different countries of origin studied are distributed along the different trajectories.⁷

France: Many Children of Immigrants Heading Towards Their School-Leaving Certificate

As can be seen from Table 1, children of North African and Sub-Saharan migrants in France are overrepresented in the less prestigious vocational trajectories of the education system (Trajectory 3). They themselves often perceive this career path as frustrating or forced upon them.⁸ They are just as frequently represented in the technological trajectory of the general educational trajectory (Trajectory 3), which gives some of them access to university. In the more prestigious trajectory, which leads directly to university via the baccalauréat général, however, they are somewhat underrepresented (Trajectory 1); while one-fifth of them follow this educational trajectory, almost 40 percent of young people without a migration background achieve the baccalauréat général.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trajectory no.</th>
<th>Brief description of the trajectory</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Maghreb</th>
<th>Sub-Sahara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>General maturity certificate and university</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Technical high-school diploma and university</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Technical high-school diploma</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Short vocational training course</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Deferred vocational training course</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Early school leaver</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Panel des élèves du second degré, 1995; DEPP; calculations by DIW Berlin.

In France, only half as many descendants of immigrants as young people without a migration background manage to obtain the general higher education entrance certificate and then go directly to university.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trajectory no.</th>
<th>Brief description of the trajectory</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Turkey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Attendance of grammar school</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Transfer to grammar school</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Transfer from grammar school to intermediate school (Realschule)</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Attendance of intermediate school</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Transfer from general secondary school to intermediate school</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>General secondary school followed by vocational training</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>General secondary school with transitional problems</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Attendance of comprehensive school</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: SOEP 1984-2009; calculations by DIW Berlin.

In Germany, over half of all students of Turkish origin end up in the general secondary school and subsequently struggle with transitional problems.

Germany: A High Number at General Secondary Schools, Few Gaining University Entrance Qualifications

As far as educational trajectories in Germany are concerned, what stands out is the strong overrepresentation of children of Turkish migrants in the general seconda-
ry school tracks with subsequent problems entering vocational training and the labor market (Trajectory 7): for children of Turkish migrants, the share is around 50 percent, compared to only around 15 percent among young people without a migration background. For the tracks of the Hauptschule (general secondary school) or the Gesamtschule (comprehensive school) followed by vocational training (Trajectories 6 and 8), young people of Turkish origin are proportionally represented. But only around 5 percent of them are on the Gymnasium (grammar school) track—for children without migration background, this figure is 22 percent. Nevertheless, 6 percent (as opposed to 12 percent of young adults without a migration background) switch to a grammar school during the course of their education. Overall, it is apparent that children of Turkish migrants are represented in educational trajectories with a move to a different type of school (regardless of whether this is to a higher or lower level) considerably less often than children without a migration background.

Overall, a high degree of ethnic segregation can be seen in the German education system. The French education system offers the chance of an academic education with the *baccalauréat technologique*. At the same time, in France, there is however, also a strong overrepresentation of young people of North African and Sub-Saharan origin in the trajectory “Early school leaver” (Trajectory 6), which indicates that in the French education system, it is difficult to catch early school leavers and to give them a second chance.

### The Transitions into the Labor Market of the Descendants of Immigrants Also Vary

While the ethnic segregation is significantly greater in the German education system than in France, this difference can surprisingly no longer be seen with regard to entry into the labor market. At least two important differences between the countries are clear from the results in Tables 3 and 4.

### Descendants of Immigrants in Germany are More Successful at Entering the Labor Market than in France

In France, a particularly precarious career path (Trajectory 6) becomes clearly evident, characterized in the long term through repeated phases of unemployment and precarious employment: around 23 percent of young adults of North African origin and 16 percent of young adults of Sub-Saharan origin end up on this path. For young adults of French origin, this figure is 14 percent. Furthermore, children of North-African and Sub-Saharan immigrants in France frequently end up in conti-

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9 Young people in this trajectory leave school at the age of around 14 or 15, that is, without any qualifications.

### Table 3

**Entry into the Labor Market between the Ages of 18 and 25—France**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trajectory no.</th>
<th>Brief description of the trajectory</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Maghreb</th>
<th>Sub-Saharan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Grammar school attendance followed by university studies</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Longer educational trajectory followed by entry into the higher labor market segment</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Short educational trajectory followed by entry into the higher labor market segment</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Longer educational trajectory followed by entry into the precarious labor market segment</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Short educational trajectory followed by entry into the precarious labor market segment</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Short educational trajectory with long periods of unemployment and positions in the precarious labor market segment</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Panel des élèves du second degré, 1995, DEPP; calculations by DIW Berlin.

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In France, significantly more young people with Maghreb or Sub-Saharan roots end up in the precarious labor market segment or unemployed after a short educational trajectory than do young French people without a migration background.
nuously precarious employment (Trajectory 4) even after a longer educational trajectory.

In Germany, around 40 percent of young adults of Turkish origin initially end up in the precarious labor market segment (Trajectory 4) after vocational training as well. For young adults without a migration background, this figure is approximately one-third. However, 15 percent of migrant children still manage to advance into the higher labor market segment (Trajectory 3), as opposed to 22 percent of their peers of German origin. Furthermore, 11 percent of the second-generation migrants choose the longer educational trajectory with university studies (Trajectory 1).

Therefore, an ethnic disadvantage can be seen in both countries—albeit at different points in young people’s lives. While it does not clearly emerge in France until the transition into the labor market, ethnic segregation in Germany becomes apparent at an early point in the education system. Vocational training in Germany facilitates the transition into the labor market: here, too, no precarious, significant pattern can be seen like in France. There is, however, a cluster of young adults not in employment (Trajectory 5) in Germany only, comprising mainly of women, who neither had work nor were looking for work throughout most of the period under study.

Table 4

Entry into the Labor Market between the Ages of 18 and 25—Germany

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trajectory no.</th>
<th>Brief description of the trajectory</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Turkey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Grammar school attendance followed by university studies</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Grammar school attendance followed by vocational training and entry into the labor market</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Vocational training followed by entry into the higher labor market segment</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Vocational training followed by entry into the precarious labor market segment</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Short educational trajectory followed by inactivity</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Factors Leading to Successful Careers

In both the English-speaking and German-speaking worlds, a number of studies on educational climbers with a migration background have been published over the past few years. These studies verify the particular role of higher educational aspirations in migrant families, as well as the significance of social capital in the form of social control, discipline and normative expectations. On the basis of the results of our qualitative study conducted in Berlin and Paris (box 2), at least three factors for the successful educational and employment trajectories of second-generation migrants can be named:

- support provided by “third parties” who take on the function of a mentor,

Young Women of Turkish Origin Cannot Draw on Their Workforce Potential in Germany

In the cluster of inactive persons, women of Turkish origin in particular are overrepresented. Specific gender stereotypes might play a role here, as well as individual orientations with regard to starting a family.

This result points to the particular difficulties faced by many young women of Turkish origin and to the consequent unused workforce potential.

The quantitative results clearly show that although successful educational and employment trajectories for the descendants of migrants in both countries are rarer than for their French or German peers, these are still not a negligible exception. The qualitative view of the biographies of young adults with a migration background who have completed a relatively successful educational or labor market career makes it possible to identify what factors in their lives have played a role here.
Box 2

**Quantitative Analyses: Data and Methods**

The analyses for Germany are based on the data of the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). The SOEP is a longitudinal study that has been conducted annually since 1984 and carried out on behalf of DIW Berlin by the fieldwork organization TNS Infratest Sozialforschung in Munich. The most recent SOEP data used for the project are from 2009.

For France, the basis for analysis of educational pathways was the panel des élèves du second degré 1995 (DEPP), and the Enquête Génération 1998 conducted by Céréq was used for processes of entering the labor market. The studies went up to 2002 and 2005, respectively. Second-generation migrants were either born in Germany or France and their parents migrated, or they themselves migrated before the age of 12. A qualitative survey was conducted in addition (see box 3). Respondents were from the same generation also observed in the quantitative studies.

While the educational trajectories take into consideration the sequence between the different educational pathways from the age of 11 to 18 (inclusive), for the labor market pathways a distinction is drawn between phases of education/training, time not in gainful employment, unemployment, and employment between the ages of 18 and 25 (inclusive). As far as employment is concerned, the labor market segment is taken into consideration by taking information on employment status, pay level, and qualifications required (the latter applying only to Germany) into account. The trajectories were calculated on a monthly basis. The method of sequence analysis is used to examine the trajectories. This method, used for example for analyzing DNA, makes it possible to determine the similarity of individual trajectories. The resulting matrix, indicating the distance between the individual trajectories, is subsequently subject to a hierarchical cluster analysis on the basis of Ward’s algorithm. Similar patterns are grouped using this process, and thus typical trajectories identified.

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**Support from Third Parties Increases Motivation**

Migration researchers have discovered that individual commitment and support provided by the family is often not enough for success at school and professional success. It is also important for people outside their family to intervene in the life course of young people with a migration background. Our study confirms this result: many of the young adults we interviewed who have a higher qualification mention the support provided by a mentor when they were at school, or later, when speaking about their professional orientation. For example, this is what a 30-year-old man of Algerian origin from La Goutte d’Or (Paris) says:

“I took my **baccalauréat** later by going to night school and at the same time I carried on doing a lot of sport [...] and also suffered an injury. And then I met an extraordinary man, an incredible osteopath. Someone with a big heart, who said to me that I had tremendous abilities and he thought I could make a good osteopath. As I had passed my **baccalauréat**, I...”

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1. Direction de l’Évaluation, de la Prospective et de la Performance.
2. Centre d’Études et de Recherches sur les Qualifications.
started training to be an osteopath. It takes a very long time, five years. [...] I’m sticking at it and battling on, so I’ll have a better future!"

On the other hand, young people who are stuck in a problematic career frequently complain that they never had a teacher who paid them any attention.

A mentor gives young people personal backing and makes them more self-confident and motivated. For instance, a young woman of Palestinian origin (21 years old) from Gropiusstadt (Berlin) reports on a similar experience with a teacher:

“So, I have to say, to begin with, we’re new here—so I was really on my own, isolated. But because of my teacher, who noticed, okay, so my teacher was really [said with emphasis] lovely, you know. I love her [laughs]. And she noticed I had problems and then she sent me on this course, where I also made some friends [...] Then when I broke my arm and my leg, too, I saw her. And I went ice skating with her, too [laughs] and I saw her there. [...] She really helped me loads. Gave me a lot of personal support. She also went to the hospital with me, visited me, gave me books to read and stuff. So I felt like I was getting a lot of support. You know, because she was the only one who noticed, ‘Okay, this girl needs help’. But mainly she was my class teacher.”

This young woman of Turkish origin (aged 20) from Nord-Neukölln (Berlin) reports on a similar experience with a teacher:

“So, as I said, just before I left school […], at that time, I wasn’t exactly the type that teachers would like [laughs]. But when I was in elementary school, there was this one teacher I had. I’m still in touch with her. I still see her. And I still use things she taught me. Still some words… so, when I use it, I think: ‘Ah, I got that from her!’ She’s just great. […] I often argued with her. Well, not really argued but we had differences of opinion. But now I know she’s worth her weight in gold. I know how much she’s taught me. And that maybe I wouldn’t be the same person if it wasn’t for her. She taught me a lot and, um… She was a teacher and we talked a lot about my future. And she just said ‘You could do this, you could do that’. I think I’ve got it from her this, this interest in cultures. I’ve got it from her, I think, because she traveled a lot. And just—she’s a very important person for me. A very important teacher.”

What is particularly interesting here is that such supportive people frequently come from another social and geographical environment and open doors to another world for young people.

The Experience of Other Social Milieus in Districts and Schools Has a Positive Impact

The neighborhoods in which the interviews with the young adults were conducted are characterized by an above-average share of migrants and features indicative of problems such as higher unemployment and poverty.13 Although the socio-spatial segregation in France is more pronounced than in Germany, leaving their neighborhood is a striking experience for many of the young adults in both countries. In many cases, this just means short trips to other districts, but what is more formative is the move to schools with a higher social and cultural mix, which are also normally in the relevant districts. This change of school may be associated with a change of address or a transition to another form of school at secondary level, in France often when students decide to take different subjects. Here, too, the influence of third parties is frequently observed. This is what a young man of Lebanese origin (20 years old) from Gropiusstadt (Berlin) says:

“[My fiancée] helped me write my applications. She always motivated me. She said to me, ‘If you go to school in Neukölln again, where there are really only foreigners, you won’t make anything of yourself.’ She was right as well because I wanted to go to one really, too. What I wanted myself, was to go to a school where I didn’t know anybody, so I could do my own thing. I don’t go to school to make friends. I go to school to get a qualification. Yes. And, well, then she took me there and that was very good—very good for me. Because I’m easily distracted from school.”

Surprisingly, many of the young adults interviewed report a very restricted geographic mobility over a long period of time—which sometimes continues—and that it was not until later that they discovered the world outside their neighborhood. Frequently, they did not dare to go anywhere else, it did not occur to them to do so, or they simply did not have the opportunity. This phenomenon of late discovery of a world outside their own environment, which is more pronounced in France, is expressed vividly as a 19-year-old Algerian man from La Goutte d’Or recalls an almost caricature-like trip to Disneyland:

SUCCESS DESPITE STARTING OUT AT A DISADVANTAGE: WHAT HELPS SECOND-GENERATION MIGRANTS IN FRANCE AND GERMANY?

Gaining School and Vocational Qualifications at a Later Stage: a “Second Chance” Lacking in France

The comparison of the French and German systems has revealed an important mechanism in the life of young adults. The German transition system has no real equivalent in France, where vocational training is integrated into the school system. Partly because of this, young adults who are seen to be having difficulties along their educational pathway in France are relatively quickly left to their own devices. They then distance themselves as far as possible from state institutions, particularly school. This distancing is intensified through the memory of France’s colonial past.

In France, young adults under 26 are not entitled to welfare benefits. Within the framework of training schemes provided by the missions locales, they can normally only receive a low level of financial support. At the same time, state measures to combat the high level of unemployment among young people are adopted regularly. The most recent of these measures is the CIVIS program (Contrat d’Insertion dans la Vie Sociale) which offers shorter training courses and is geared towards young adults under 26 years of age whose level of education is no higher than the school-leaving certificate.
The interview passage also shows the ambivalence of the transition system and the training opportunities it offers: although the preferences of young people are not always met and frequently they also have no clear career prospects, it provides a considerably better alternative to them finding themselves on the street.

**Conclusion**

In both Germany and France, young people with a migration background more frequently follow precarious career paths than young adults without a migration background. Nevertheless, this report shows that the educational and employment trajectories of this population are diverse. There are advantages and disadvantages to be found in both education systems: it is easier for the descendants of immigrants to access academic education in France, while Germany is more successful at guaranteeing institutional ties for young people who are facing problems. They are given a second chance through the opportunity of obtaining school qualifications or acquiring professional skills at a later date.

The fact that—although they are pressured into the less prestigious educational pathways—young men and women of Turkish and Arabic origin in Germany do not develop a distance to school institutions, as is the case in France for men and women of North African or Sub-Saharan origin, should be seen as promising. Therefore, in Germany there is an urgent need for action to allow the children of immigrants to enter higher educational trajectories or, after passing through the transition system, to sandwich-course training and work experience, and there is a very good chance that they will also make the most of these opportunities.

Along with the institutional infrastructures, social networks also play a role that is not to be underestimated in setting the biographical course at an early stage of life. Through the help, for example, of a teacher or a mentor, or also through entering another social milieu and neighborhood—for educational purposes or also due to a change of address—young people who grow up in disadvantaged and ethnically segregated districts are motivated, and encouraged to have more confidence in their own abilities. It appears that the school system and teachers can have a great impact on the life course of second-generation migrants—even outside the classroom. What is of importance here is not so much the role of educator, but the attention which a student receives from a “mentor.” This attention does not necessarily have to come from a teacher.

**Keywords**: Migration, integration, second generation, education, labor market, trajectories

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15 The transition system in Germany has sometimes been criticized. See, for example, Baethge, M., H. Solga, and M. Wieck, Berufsbildung im Umbruch. Signale eines überfälligen Aufbruchs (2007). Our analysis focuses on comparing the French and German systems.

16 In our sample, the vocational training leads to qualifications such as cook, painter/varnisher, security agent or cleaner.