

Language, time, and diversity: Ghanaian and Syrian newcomers' perceptions of inequalities and opportunities in Germany's tracked secondary-school system

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ABSTRACT

In Germany, newcomer students are usually directed toward lower-track schools due to perceived language deficiencies, commonly attending preparatory classes primarily offered in such schools. This tracking phenomenon raises questions about educational inequalities and institutional discrimination. Drawing on interview data from Syrian students in North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg and ethnographic data on transnationally mobile Ghanaian youth in Hamburg, this paper investigates how newcomer students perceive their schooling in relation to their German language acquisition. Two themes emerge from our analysis: 'language and time', which captures how students experience preparatory classes as a waste of time while recognizing the linguistic benefits of slower-paced learning environments; and 'language and diversity', which reflects how students value being surrounded by others who are learning German or share similar migration experiences. We analyze these perceptions through the lenses of institutional discrimination and temporalities, and belonging and *Spracherleben* (the lived experience of language), respectively, showing how students simultaneously question and appreciate aspects of their school placement. The paper thus argues for conceptual complexity, whereby experiences of inequalities and opportunities can co-exist in migrant newcomers' educational trajectories.

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1. Introduction

They ['native' German speakers] are able to, let's say, add more seasons [seasoning] to their contributions and we [newcomers] are not fortunate enough yet, even though we have the ingredients, we don't have the seasons [seasoning] to make it delicious and very good.

Kingsley is a bright, hardworking 16-year-old Ghanaian student who attends a *Stadtteilschule*, a comprehensive secondary school, in Hamburg since he migrated to Germany less than a year before this interview. Here he explains differences in linguistic expression between

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newcomers like himself and German-speaking students. Kingsley argues that despite possessing the same ‘ingredients’, meaning knowledge and skills, newcomers’ expressive possibilities in German lack the linguistic ‘seasoning’ to make their class participation as ‘delicious’ as other students’. Despite being allocated to a ‘lower-track’ school compared to the esteemed *Gymnasium*, Kingsley perceives opportunities in his situation: he expresses a sense of belonging at the *Stadtteilschule*, fostered by the presence of other newcomer and migrant-background students, ultimately concluding that he is better off there than at a *Gymnasium*, which ‘born Germans’ attend. Kingsley’s perspective highlights the crucial role language plays in newcomer students’ trajectories within, and perceptions of, Germany’s tracked school system. It also emphasizes the value of youth-centric research that centers students’ own views, by demonstrating the nuance and complexity inherent in their educational experiences.

In Germany, newcomer students in secondary education are typically directed toward schools that are considered ‘lower-track’ relative to the esteemed *Gymnasium* (see [section 2](#)), based on perceived deficiencies in their German language proficiency. There, they attend preparatory classes for about a year to learn German before transitioning to regular classes (Massumi and von Dewitz 2015). While some studies have highlighted positive aspects of preparatory classes as safe spaces (Plöger 2023) and places for targeted language acquisition (Reich 2017), others have noted that they often reinforce systemic barriers (Jording 2022) and, rather than promoting equal opportunities, tend to worsen educational inequality (Heidrich 2024). This practice hence raises concerns of institutional discrimination, as students are placed in a track based on their German language skills rather than their holistic competencies (Gomolla and Radtke 2009), potentially limiting their options for onward progress through the school system.

Kingsley’s interview comes from an ethnographic study on the educational trajectories of transnationally mobile youth between Germany, specifically Hamburg, and Ghana (Ogden 2022). In this paper, we combine data from this study with data from an interview study of Syrian newcomers’ experiences in the Syrian and German education systems, namely in Hamburg and North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW) (Nowikow 2018). Our research interest arises from the complexity described above: the literature highlights both discriminatory and supportive factors in the German approach to schooling newcomer students, yet there is very limited research on newcomers’ own perceptions of their education (Emmerich et al. 2020). Both studies employed a youth-centric perspective (Heath et al. 2009), focusing on the narrated experiences of newcomer students in secondary schools. Within these narratives, themes of inequality *and* opportunity in Germany’s tracked school system emerged. Drawing on an ethnographic sensibility that allows the research focus to evolve in response to what emerges as meaningful in the field (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), we conducted a secondary analysis guided by the following research question: *How do migrant newcomer students perceive inequalities and opportunities in different school forms in Germany’s tracked secondary-school system, in relation to their German language acquisition?*

The following section (2) outlines pertinent information about German secondary education, specifically in the states Hamburg and NRW, and the schooling of migrant newcomers. [Section 3](#) explores the interlinkages between language and two sets of concepts to analyze newcomers’ complex perceptions. First, we discuss language’s role in institutional discrimination through the lens of temporalities, which captures how institutional


discrimination can be differently perceived and experienced over time. Second, we explore the connection between language and belonging through the lens of *Spracherleben*, which captures the lived experience of language as a social and embodied phenomenon. [Section 4](#) outlines our research contexts, sample, and analytical approach. [Section 5](#) presents our analysis, structured around two primary themes. *Language and time* draws on the concept of *temporalities* to explore how students perceive institutional discrimination in relation to their German language skills over time. *Language and diversity* builds on the notion of *Spracherleben* to examine how language shapes feelings of belonging. Both themes reveal coexisting perceptions of inequality and opportunity, reflecting the nuanced and sometimes contradictory ways newcomer students experience their educational trajectories. Finally, the conclusion (6) reflects on our findings' implications for tracked secondary-school systems in Germany.

2. German secondary education and the schooling of migrant newcomers

In Germany, education policy is determined at state level, meaning school systems vary throughout the country. Traditionally, most German states organized education in hierarchical tracks with three distinct secondary-school forms. While the two 'low-level' (Schofield 2010) tracks, *Hauptschule* and *Realschule*, prepare students for vocational training, the higher-track *Gymnasium* leads to the *Abitur*, the qualification required to enter university. The tracked system is characterized by early segregation (at age 10), ability grouping, and curriculum differentiation, resulting in large achievement and qualification gaps between different tracks. Students from migrant families and low socioeconomic backgrounds have always been overrepresented in the lower levels of the secondary system (Schofield 2010).

Since the 1970s, many states (*Bundesländer*) have attempted to address educational inequality through school reforms. For example, all German states now have comprehensive schools, which combine various tracks and where students can either earn their *Abitur* or transfer to a *Gymnasium* to do so. But all states still have multiple school forms perceived in a hierarchical fashion, due to political (rather than pedagogical) reasons (Tillmann 2015): the existence of the *Gymnasium* seems untouchable as it provides social distinction for the upper classes (Bourdieu 1987). However, the number of school forms and the qualifications they offer differ greatly between states, which the comparison between NRW and Hamburg aptly demonstrates (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Secondary school forms in North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg at time of data collection (2018–2019), ordered by perceived prestige, showing the highest qualification offered and the year of schooling in which it is obtained.

	North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)		Hamburg	
Prestige	School type	Highest qualification offered	School type	Highest qualification offered
 Highest ↑ ↓ lowest	<i>Gymnasium</i>	<i>Abitur</i> in Grade 12 ¹	<i>Gymnasium</i>	<i>Abitur</i> in Grade 12
	<i>Gesamtschule</i>	<i>Abitur</i> in Grade 13	<i>Stadtteilschule</i>	<i>Abitur</i> in Grade 13
	<i>Sekundarschule</i>	Intermediate certificate in Grade 10*		
	<i>Realschule</i>	Intermediate certificate in Grade 10		
	<i>Hauptschule</i>	Intermediate certificate in Grade 10		

¹But mandatory cooperation with schools offering the *Abitur*, to which students from *Sekundarschule* can transfer after Grade 10.

2.1. School systems in North Rhine-Westphalia and Hamburg

The comparison between the two states featured in this paper highlights how differing structures can influence newcomer students' access to educational opportunities. Two factors are particularly relevant for our sample: which qualifications are attainable at a given school, and how that school is perceived in terms of academic prestige.

NRW offers multiple secondary school types. In addition to the academically prestigious *Gymnasium*, which leads directly to the *Abitur*, the system includes *Gesamtschule*, *Sekundarschule*, *Realschule*, and *Hauptschule*. Both *Gymnasium* and *Gesamtschule* offer lower- and upper-secondary education, with *Gesamtschule* allowing access to various qualifications—including the basic certificate (after Grade 9), the intermediate certificate (after Grade 10), and the *Abitur* (after Grade 13)—depending on student performance. By contrast, *Sekundarschule*, *Realschule*, and *Hauptschule* provide only lower-secondary education and culminate in basic or intermediate school-leaving certificates. *Sekundarschulen* combine tracks of *Realschule* and *Hauptschule* within a single institution and are required to cooperate with *Abitur*-granting schools. Overall, the NRW system remains highly differentiated and complex, especially when compared to Hamburg's more integrated model.

Since 2010, Hamburg has had only one secondary-school form besides the *Gymnasium*: the comprehensive *Stadtteilschule*. An important advantage in Hamburg—regarding equal opportunities—is that the *Abitur* is available in both school types. In *Stadtteilschulen*, students can attain either the basic or intermediate school-leaving certificate in Grades 9 or 10, respectively, or they can obtain the *Abitur* in Grade 13, one year later than *Gymnasium* students.

While *Gymnasium* remains the most prestigious track, distinctions among the other school types are significant. Comprehensive schools such as *Gesamtschule* and *Stadtteilschule* are less esteemed than *Gymnasien* but still provide access to the *Abitur*, thus offering broader educational opportunities than *Sekundarschule*, *Realschule*, or *Hauptschule*. In this paper, we use the term 'lower-track' schools in comparison to the *Gymnasium*, while acknowledging the significant differences in prestige and qualification pathways within this category.

2.2. Student demographics across school types

Although the student population in German schools has become significantly more diverse in recent decades, and an increasing proportion of students now attends a *Gymnasium* (Van Ackeren et al. 2024, p. 75), track-related inequalities persist. Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and those with a so-called 'migration background' are less likely to attend a *Gymnasium* (78). Moreover, these two factors are often co-present (90), highlighting their intersectionality. This pattern is reflected in both NRW and Hamburg.

In the school year 2018/19 (during data collection), 36.9% of students in NRW had an 'immigration history'²; 88.1% had German nationality (MSB NRW 2019, 172). Notably, while 56.8% of *Hauptschule* students have an 'immigration history', this is true for only 29.4% of *Gymnasium* students. The difference becomes even clearer regarding citizenship: 32.6% of *Hauptschule* students do not have a German passport versus just 5.5% at the *Gymnasium* (MSB NRW 2019, p. 13).

In Hamburg, despite both school types providing the *Abitur* for the past decade, they continue to have different levels of academic prestige, reflected in their respective student populations. Students at *Stadtteilschulen* tend to exhibit greater socioeconomic, ethnic, and linguistic diversity compared to those at *Gymnasien*. In the school year 2019/20,³ approximately 10% of *Gymnasium* students and 30% of *Stadtteilschule* students came from low-class backgrounds (BSB 2020, p. 102). This proportion was inverted for upper-class students. Furthermore, during the same academic year, around 55% of *Stadtteilschule* students but only 40% of *Gymnasium* students had a ‘migration background’ (105).

2.3. Migrant newcomers in German education

Immigration has been an integral part of German society since the 1950s, with the large-scale recruitment of so-called ‘guest workers’. While these *Gastarbeiter’s* children were initially taught in separate schools from German children, preparatory classes were introduced in the 1960s to teach students who were judged to not yet have sufficient German language skills to join mainstream education (cf. Plöger 2023). Preparatory classes mainly teach German but generally also include subjects like Math, English, and Social Sciences. Preparatory classes usually do not offer official diplomas comparable to those of regular classes (MSB NRW 2024b).

The implementation of preparatory classes varies, not only between states but also within them (Emmerich et al. 2020). Historically, these classes were primarily established in lower-track schools. Yet, since the increased immigration to Germany since 2015, they are also present at *Gymnasien* in many states (for Hamburg, see Fürstenau 2017). Legal regulations at the state level ‘strongly influence [newcomers’] chances of attending a higher school track (Gymnasium)’ (Will et al. 2022, p. 1). This underscores the significant role played by the state where newcomers live in determining their educational trajectories. While newcomers in NRW are likely to attend a *Haupt- or Realschule* (Emmerich et al. 2020, p. 140), where they cannot complete the *Abitur*, newcomers in Hamburg are assigned more frequently to *Stadtteilschulen* than to *Gymnasien* (BSB 2020, p. 106) but can complete the *Abitur* regardless of which school form they attend.

3. Institutional discrimination and belonging through the lens of language

Our analytical framework aims to capture migrant newcomers’ perceptions of inequalities and opportunities in the German secondary-school system by engaging with the literatures on institutional discrimination and belonging. However, further concepts were necessary to make sense of the complexities and seeming contradictions emerging in participants’ perceptions over time and across different themes and contexts. In this regard, the concepts of temporalities and *Spracherleben* (the lived experience of language) help capture and explain how language acquisition and use shape newcomers’ perceptions of educational inequalities and opportunities.

3.1. Institutional discrimination and temporalities

In educational migration research, the school placement of newcomers has frequently been interpreted through the lens of institutional discrimination (Jording 2022; Plöger 2023). Following sociologist Rodolfo Alvarez (1979, p. 2), we define institutional discrimination as a

set of social processes through which organizational decision making, either implicitly or explicitly, results in a clearly identifiable population receiving fewer psychic, social, or material rewards per quantitative and/or qualitative unit of performance than a clearly identifiable comparison population within the same organizational constraints.

In the German context, the research on institutional discrimination began with Gomolla and Radtke's (2009) foundational study on exclusionary and disadvantageous school placement. Regarding newcomer students, the study revealed that preparatory classes in the school system of a major city in NRW between 1980 and 1990 were almost exclusively established in *Hauptschulen*, i.e. low-track schools. Consequently, even high-achieving students with perceived deficient German language skills were allocated to *Hauptschulen*, making German proficiency the primary placement criterion and limiting access to more advanced educational instruction and higher qualifications. Until today, the overrepresentation of newcomer students in lower-track schools prevents them from attaining the *Abitur*—the essential university entry certificate (for NRW, Emmerich et al. 2020). While some states formally allow reallocation after the transition to regular classes—suggesting potential upward mobility—this remains rare in practice. Emmerich et al. (2020) show that in NRW, newcomers' school transitions primarily lead to placement in lower-track schools, rather than offering pathways toward higher-track schools (for Hamburg see BSB 2020, p. 147). This reflects a broader pattern of limited upward permeability within the tracked system (Schofield 2010).

Despite criticisms that preparatory classes contradict inclusive educational practices by institutionally discriminating against migrant-background and newcomer students (Karakayali et al. 2017), other scholars have also highlighted their role as safe spaces. Preparatory classes enable migrant newcomers to enter the German school system without immediately facing its full (and demanding) regulations (Plöger 2023). Furthermore, they provide an environment conducive to guided language acquisition, addressing specific language needs rather than immersing students in regular classes without adequate support (Reich 2017).

We build on this conceptualization of institutional discrimination by focusing on two structural mechanisms shaping newcomers' educational opportunities. First, we consider the assignment of students to school types that do not provide a direct path to the *Abitur*. Second, we examine the role of preparatory classes. In addition, we do not conceptualize institutional discrimination solely in terms of formal access to qualifications but also attend to its symbolic dimension. For example, while *Stadtteilschulen* in Hamburg formally offer access to the *Abitur*, the automatic placement of newcomers in these schools—rather than in *Gymnasien*—reflects and reinforces social hierarchies.

It is within this complexity that we draw on the concept of temporalities to explore how newcomers' perceptions of unequal treatment in the German secondary-school system are shaped by their experience of time. Temporalities, as discussed by Mazzucato and Ogden (2025), shift the focus from viewing time as a linear sequence or measurable duration, 'to focusing on how time is experienced (Collins and Shubin, 2015)—in pace (e.g. fast or slow), duration (e.g. long or short), and non-linear formats (e.g. how an imagined or aspired-to future shapes the present and vice-versa)'. A temporalities lens allows us to delve into how students perceive and experience their educational trajectories over time, which can change and thus might sometimes appear contradictory. Newcomers can perceive elements of their

language education in German schools as a source of inequalities at certain moments but later come to appreciate the same structures as providing opportunities. We thus analyze newcomers' shifting perceptions of their structural conditions through the lenses of institutional discrimination and temporalities, paying attention to expressions of (un)fairness, (in)justice, and (lack of) opportunity, as experiences of discrimination are rarely articulated explicitly as such (Gomolla and Radtke 2009, p. 85).

3.2. *Belonging and 'Spracherleben'*

Referring to May (2011, p. 368), we define belonging as 'a sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings'. Such surroundings, however, can include not only concrete people and places but also, 'more symbolic spaces such as [...] an educational track' (Van Caudenberg et al. 2020, p. 431). Additionally, the dynamic nature of belonging aligns with Cuervo and Wyn's (2014, p. 903) emphasis on belonging as not a fixed status, but a process shaped by young people's connections to 'people, places, and issues that matter to them', which can change over time. This conceptualization of belonging as dynamic and multidimensional allows us to analyze how students might develop seemingly contradictory senses of belonging.

In our analysis, we specifically look at the role language plays in shaping newcomers' sense of belonging in school. With the German concept of *Spracherleben*—the lived experience of language—the linguist Brigitta Busch describes the engagement of multilingual speakers with processes of 'recognition/non-recognition, belonging/exclusion, power/powerlessness' (2016, p. 92, our translation). *Spracherleben* thus refers to the subjective, embodied, and situationally shaped experience of language and language use, inherently connected to feelings of belonging. May (2011, p. 370) states that 'a sense of belonging can emerge [...] if we can go about our everyday lives without having to pay much attention to how we do it'. In terms of language, this raises the question to what extent newcomers feel they can learn without constant awareness of 'how to speak'.

4. Methodology

As noted above, this paper combines data from two qualitative studies in two German states and with newcomer students from two countries: Ghana and Syria. In both studies, inequalities and opportunities organically emerged as salient themes for the participants. The data on Ghanaian youth come from ethnographic research on their transnational mobility and educational trajectories between Ghana and Hamburg, conducted by Ogden (2022). Data were collected over 14 months through multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Hamburg and various regions of Ghana in 2018–2019. The study involved 20 young people aged between 15 and 25, but in this paper we focus on the seven newcomer participants, meaning they had migrated to Germany and entered the Hamburg school system between the ages of 14–17. Fieldwork was conducted in German and English, according to the interlocutors' preferences. Verbal informed consent was obtained from participants throughout the research (Cutcliffe and Ramcharan 2002).

The data on Syrian youth come from an interview study on the influence of migration and former school experience on Syrian newcomers' perceptions of their educational

environment in Germany, conducted by Nowikow (2018). In 2018, she conducted semi-structured interviews with nine Syrian students aged 14–19, who were assigned to secondary schools in Hamburg and NRW. The selection criteria were: having grown up in Syria and attended at least one school there, being at least 14 years old at the time of the interview, currently attending a secondary school in Germany, and demonstrating sufficient proficiency in the German language to conduct the interview in German. It is important to acknowledge that the inability of the young Syrian newcomers to conduct the interviews in their first language may have influenced their participation and the nature of their responses. As Heller (2008) notes, language use in research settings is embedded in dominant language ideologies, which often privilege monolingual, standard-language performance. This may have led our participants to align their responses with perceived linguistic norms or to avoid expressing linguistic insecurity, thus influencing how freely and fully they shared their experiences. At the same time, the use of German did not prevent participants from critically reflecting on their educational trajectories or from questioning structural decisions that shaped their experiences and opportunities, as is evident below. Written informed consent in German or Arabic was obtained from all participants. Where necessary, we translated original quotes in German from both studies to English for this paper.

4.1. The sample

For this paper, we analyzed data from all nine Syrian (four in Hamburg; five in NRW) and the seven Ghanaian newcomers (all in Hamburg). During fieldwork, the Ghanaian newcomers were aged 16–21. They had been in Germany between 6 months and 4 years, with some still attending preparatory classes at *Stadtteilschulen*, while others had since transitioned to regular classes, most at *Stadtteilschulen* but some also at *Gymnasien* (see Ogden et al. 2025 for more detail on their educational trajectories). During fieldwork, two of the seven completed the *Abitur*; the other five were aiming to do so. The Syrian participants were aged 14–19 at the time of data-collection, having been in German schools for 2–3 years. Upon arriving in Germany, all attended preparatory classes. Those in Hamburg attended a *Stadtteilschule* (two preparing for the Grade 10 school-leaving certificate and two for the *Abitur*). Meanwhile, all five participants in NRW were in the *Hauptschul*-track of a *Sekundarschule*, preparing for the Grade 10 school-leaving certificate.

Our sample is thus composed of young people with different migration histories and from distinct migrant communities who share the experience of being newcomers to the German education system. Ghanaian migration to Germany has a long history. Following earlier waves of Ghanaian migration to Germany for education and later to seek asylum amidst political and economic crisis, since the 1990s Ghanaians have arrived in Germany mostly through family reunification (Mörath 2015), which applies to all our Ghanaian participants. Most came from affluent or resource-rich backgrounds in Ghana (Ogden 2024), though they are working-class in Hamburg. In contrast, those from Syria fled amid the war, with or without their families. Since 2011, around 920,000 Syrians have sought protection in Germany, with 270,000 living in NRW, Germany's largest state, at the end of 2022 (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). Some of our Syrian respondents had attended private secondary schools in Syria but were forced to leave unexpectedly, leading to educational interruptions due to stays in other countries or delays in accessing school in Germany. This

combined sample thus enriches our study by exploring questions of inequalities and opportunities in education for newcomers from diverse backgrounds and within different German secondary-school systems.

4.2. Data analysis

We conducted a secondary analysis (Houben and Eckert 2022) of the two data-sets, which involved reexamining the data from both studies through a shared analytical lens. Our secondary analysis was collaborative, including the two researchers who collected the data and utilizing the benefits of reconstructing new contextual meanings through the triangulation of perspectives among researchers with diverse academic backgrounds and practical experiences. This includes expertise in areas such as inclusion and exclusion in preparatory classes (Plöger), transnational education trajectories (Ogden), language education and multilingualism (Fürstenau), and secondary teaching at a *Gymnasium* in Hamburg (Nowikow).

We extracted coded interview sequences relating to newcomers' perceptions of schooling inequalities and opportunities from both data-sets. While coding the data inductively and thematically, we first developed four categories: 'Time', 'Language', 'Diversity' and 'Relationship with teachers'. Second, we started to relate the coded interview segments to each other. In doing so, we realized that the category 'language' played a central role and that the young people related their language acquisition process to aspects of 'time' and 'diversity'. Hence, 'language' became the main category, with 'time' and 'diversity' as linked sub-categories.⁴ This led to the following research question: *How do migrant newcomer students perceive inequalities and opportunities of different school forms in Germany's tracked secondary-school system, in relation to their German language acquisition?*

5. Analysis

We explore how language emerges as a pivotal factor shaping newcomer students' perceptions of inequalities and opportunities within the German tracked secondary-school system. Their accounts reveal how language is deeply intertwined with two additional dimensions: time and diversity. Given the complexity of their perspectives, which may initially appear contradictory, we analyze their experiences through the lens of two key concepts: temporalities to examine newcomers' perceptions of institutional discrimination in relation to the interplay between language and time (5.1), and *Spracherleben*, the lived experience of language, to investigate the relationship between language and diversity in shaping newcomers' sense of belonging (5.2).

5.1. Language & time

Newcomers held nuanced perspectives regarding their language education in Germany, perceiving time in language learning in flexible and layered ways: as both a scarce resource—where preparatory classes in low-track schools feel like a 'waste of time' and an instance of unequal treatment—and as an abundant, elastic opportunity, such as when they appreciate having more time for language learning in regular classes at lower-track schools.

5.1.1. Learning (only) German as a waste of time

When discussing their experiences in preparatory classes, some newcomers expressed frustration that these classes focus primarily on German language acquisition. Jamileh, a 16-year-old Syrian student who attends a *Sekundarschule* in NRW, explains:

So, since grade 9, I got grades, because refugees are for two years in Germany only allowed to learn German in school. They are not allowed to get grades, too. But I said, if I get [grades], it would be better. If someone wants to see my certificate for example, then I have a grade. That is good.

Jamileh's reflections point to the limitations of preparatory classes, where, for up to two years, newly arrived students in NRW are 'only allowed to learn German' without receiving grades or diplomas. Her use of 'only' highlights frustration over the narrow focus on language, at the expense of other subjects. She also emphasizes the importance of grades for proving her progress, which she seems to perceive as a critical delay to achieving recognized milestones in the German system. Through a temporal lens, this experience reflects how the rigid focus on language learning elongates her pathway to educational validation, making time seem both restricted and delayed in her pursuit of broader academic and social integration.

Newcomers not only criticize the exclusive focus on German language acquisition but also express frustration with its perceived low academic level and limited progress. Hana, an 18-year-old Syrian student, also attending a *Sekundarschule* in NRW, highlights this concern:

I could actually do much more than what we are learning. [...] So in class, we were learning A1, and I then got B1 German textbooks and did the exercises.

Hana's proactive approach—seeking out higher-level materials on her own—suggests that the restricted pace of learning in preparatory classes can feel like a hindrance, with time in this setting appearing as a resource that needs to be accelerated. Her choice to work with B1 materials independently underscores her desire to move forward at a pace better suited to her abilities and aspirations, rather than being held back by the slow, generalized curriculum intended to serve all students in the class.

Their critiques align with broader concerns in the literature about preparatory classes and their role in perpetuating institutional discrimination—understood here not as a subjective claim by students, but as structural processes that systematically limit a particular population's access to educational recognition and rewards (Alvarez 1979). Here, the restricted structure of preparatory classes may delay students' academic progress regardless of individual ability, and thereby reproduce unequal conditions within the education system.

While Jamileh's and Hana's remarks implicitly suggest that they perceive the preparatory class as a 'waste of time,' this phrasing was used explicitly by others, including Isaac, a 21-year-old Ghanaian student who attends a *Stadtteilschule* in Hamburg and had previously attended prestigious private schools in Ghana, where he was a successful student from a highly educated and professional family. He explains that, immediately following the year in a preparatory class at a *Stadtteilschule*, he contacted Hamburg's school authority:

So, I was going to school and then I went to the Schulbehörde [school authority], because I thought they have wasted already one year of my time, studying German.

Isaac directly expresses his frustration with the year spent ‘studying German’, viewing this near-exclusive focus on language acquisition as a waste of his time. In response, he sought options for accelerating his future educational path. Based on his Ghanaian school reports, the school authority recommended Isaac to attend a *Gymnasium*. However, despite his frustration that the pace of preparatory classes was too slow, he ultimately decided to stay at the *Stadtteilschule* following his transition to regular classes, explaining that he imagined the pace of learning at a *Gymnasium* to be too fast. How can this seeming contradiction be explained?

5.1.2. Having more time to learn (German) at lower-track schools

The *Gymnasium* was described by newcomers in our sample as a type of school where lessons are ‘treated very fast’ and where the teachers do not pay special attention to the linguistic needs of newly arrived migrant students. Isaac felt that learning would be ‘in a haste’ and he would have to ‘hurry up’ at the *Gymnasium*. Another Ghanaian newcomer, Ella (19), who had transitioned from a *Stadtteilschule* to a *Gymnasium* in Hamburg, similarly argues that the *Stadtteilschule* is ‘more relaxed, you don’t have the stress’ (cf. Ogden et al. 2025). These differences in pace of learning are to some extent due to the additional year used for the *Abitur* at *Stadtteilschulen*, as Isaac explains:

I had the opportunity also to move to a *Gymnasium*. But then I was like, *Gymnasium* is more in a haste to complete, because instead of three years, you use two years. And then I wanted to take my time, because of the language.

Even though Isaac considers learning German within the preparatory class a ‘waste of time’, he takes the opportunity to spend more time in a regular class at the *Stadtteilschule* ‘because of the language’. Isaac’s perspective highlights the temporality of his educational experience. During the preparatory class, he perceives time as slow and unproductive due to its narrow focus on language alone, wishing to accelerate this phase. However, once in regular classes, he values the opportunity of having more time at the *Stadtteilschule*, which he perceives as more conducive to German language development than the more academically selective *Gymnasium*.

Syrian student Jamileh also critiques the focus on learning ‘only’ German in the initial years of her schooling in Germany, while also acknowledging the linguistic benefit of a slower pace of learning in regular classes:

Sometimes I think ‘Why am I not in *Realschule*?’ But sometimes I think, if I’m in *Realschule*, I can’t learn German quickly and get grades and so on. And sometimes I say, it is good actually that I’m in *Hauptschule*. Because it’s easy, not so hard. German, I still have many problems, also in the lessons.

Jamileh attends a *Sekundarschule* in NRW that consists of several tracks, including tracks for *Hauptschule* and *Realschule*. She is assigned to the *Hauptschul*-track, an allocation she questions here. The rhetorical question, ‘Why am I not in *Realschule*?’, implies Jamileh’s belief that, academically, she could succeed in a more-demanding setting. This remark might reflect a perceived mismatch between her abilities and her institutional placement—pointing to broader dynamics of institutional discrimination, in which the allocation of educational opportunities and rewards is shaped less by individual abilities and more by her belonging to the specific population of newcomers. However, her focus shifts to her

German language skills, which she still perceives as a barrier to her academic progress. Like Isaac, she problematizes that the higher academic level of *Realschule* would not allow her to learn German ‘quickly’ and to ‘get grades’. This temporal dimension of her experience—where the focus on language acquisition in the early stages of schooling shapes her view of what is ‘good’ for her—reflects her ongoing struggle with her German language skills. Therefore, while she expresses frustration at her current placement, she also sees the relative ease of the *Hauptschule* as an advantage for her current needs.

Syrian student Khaled (19), who is in Grade 12 of a *Stadtteilschule* preparing for the *Abitur* at the time of interview, also expresses frustration with his school placement:

I find [my placement in a Stadtteilschule] disappointing. I’ve been here [in Germany] for two years and still haven’t had the chance to really thrive. I wasn’t here from the 5th grade, when the separation [into different tracks] occurred. That’s not my fault, and it needs to be taken into account.

Khaled feels that his school placement did not sufficiently account for his individual circumstances and abilities, but instead constrained his educational opportunities and rewards based on his status as a migrant newcomer and the timing of his arrival in Germany. Entering the system after the standard tracking decision had been made, he perceives himself as excluded from the full range of educational pathways available to others.

5.2. Language & diversity

While placement in lower-track schools may reflect broader patterns of institutional discrimination, it can also foster social environments in which newcomer students experience a sense of belonging—particularly when surrounded by students with similar experiences or characteristics. In this section, we analyze their perspectives through the lens of *Spracherleben*, focusing on how the experience of language acquisition and use shapes migrant newcomer students’ sense of belonging in German schools.

5.2.1. Participation in ‘migration schools’ vs. ‘German schools’

Our participants had strong perceptions about who attends a *Gymnasium* and who attends lower-track schools. While they consider that mostly white and ‘native’ German students attend a *Gymnasium* and therefore commonly call them ‘German schools’, they regard *Stadtteilschulen* or *Sekundarschulen* as ‘[im]migration schools’. These distinctions are not only related to the ethnic and racial profiles of the student bodies of each school form, but also to the role of language in their schooling. As Razan, a 17-year-old Syrian student attending a *Sekundarschule* in NRW, points out, oral participation is a crucial component of grading in German schools:

[H]ere in Germany you have to speak too much for oral [participation] because is 60 percent [of your grade]. [...] you have to always raise your hand, raise your hand and speak too much and give many information. And if not, I don’t get good grade in Germany.

This quotation illustrates how, in Razan’s experience, the expectation of frequent oral contributions in class is tied to academic success in the German education system, as participation can account for a significant proportion of students’ grades. Razan’s frustration with this form of assessment that relies on oral fluency in the German language was a

common challenge referred to by our participants, for whom active verbal engagement in a language they are still mastering can be a source of exclusion. Her experience highlights the intersection of language proficiency and academic evaluation, as language is not just a tool for communication but a key determinant of academic success. The challenges this might pose for newcomer students are further emphasized by Kwaku, a 21-year-old Ghanaian student attending a *Stadtteilschule*, when imagining the environment at a *Gymnasium*:

[Y]our participation [counts 60%]. So imagine if you don't feel comfortable raising your hand in class and everything, when you go for a presentation or you try to say something with your broke Deutsch, it's gonna be weird.

Kwaku's concern about his self-perceived 'broken' German underscores the emotional weight language holds in academic settings and how it is closely tied to a sense of belonging. The fear of being judged for his language skills at a *Gymnasium* makes Kwaku feel uneasy at the prospect of attending such a high-track school, in contrast with his comfort at the *Stadtteilschule*, where the cultural and linguistic diversity of the student body, in his perception, provides a more inclusive environment. Kwaku's explanation highlights how his (imagined) *Spracherleben*—meaning his (imagined) lived experience of using the German language—within the two distinct school settings directly influences not only his academic success but also his emotional well-being and sense of belonging in school.

Kingsley, who introduces this concern in the opening quote of the paper and who attends a *Stadtteilschule* in Hamburg, elaborates on what would make him feel uncomfortable about attending a *Gymnasium*:

I think everyone's even going to laugh at you because it [newcomers' speech in German] is going to sound very, very, very, very funny to them, because they are, let's say, born Germans.

Kingsley knows that 'born Germans' often attend the *Gymnasium* and fears that they would laugh at his or other newcomers' participation in German as it would 'sound [...] very funny to them.' Kingsley therefore does not aspire to attend a *Gymnasium* even though he states in the interview he believes has the necessary 'ingredients,' meaning knowledge and skills, to do so. His concern highlights how language, especially in an educational setting where oral participation is vital, is closely linked to the lived experience of belonging or exclusion. The anticipated reactions of native German speakers shape Kingsley's *Spracherleben*, influencing his academic trajectory.

5.2.2. *Feeling alone vs. feeling normal*

Our data further highlight how diverse and shared backgrounds influence newcomer students' sense of belonging as they navigate the challenges of feeling either isolated or integrated within the school environment. When Jamileh arrived in Germany in 2015, she was one of the first refugees from Syria at her *Sekundarschule* in NRW. Looking back, she recalls how isolated she felt at first:

And you feel alone here, when you don't know anybody, and nobody helps us and nobody understands us. And I guess we were the first refugees who were here, from Syria. Yeah, and then after two months or so, I got a friend who was also from Syria and she came to my class and we learnt German together.

Again, we see how German language proficiency is tied not only to academic success but also to a deeper sense of belonging or exclusion. Despite this early loneliness, over time Jamileh found a Syrian friend in her class. This friendship provided emotional support and created a shared understanding that allowed Jamileh to feel less alone and improve her German language skills. The benefits for language acquisition of friendship with other students of Syrian or other migrant background is also mentioned by other Syrian newcomers, attending a *Sekundarschule* in NRW, like 15-year-old Nazim (“My [immigrant] friend also helped me a bit to learn German and stuff, that’s why I can [speak it] now.”) and 14-year-old Salah – (“[There] were friends who could speak a bit of German. They translated for me.”).

Nana, a 14-year-old Ghanaian student attending a *Stadtteilschule* in Hamburg, also highlights the positive impact that friendships with other students who are learning German can have on language acquisition. While Jamileh recalls the support of a specific friend who shared similar experiences, Nana refers more generally to the value of learning with other newcomers:

Well, the thing is, if you learn alone, it will be hard for you to learn it [German]. But, when you have friends who you are learning with, it will be easier.

Having other newcomer friends who are also learning the language, and who in some cases may speak the same heritage language, helps foster a sense of normalcy and belonging, as Kwaku puts it when talking about his experience in regular classes at a *Stadtteilschule*: ‘Like, I felt normal [there], like, I didn’t feel lost [...]. Because there are a lot of Africans there’. In both Nana’s and Kwaku’s cases, having friends who are also learning German—or even just share a similar migrant background—nurtures a sense of belonging that might not be present in more homogenous educational settings.

While many participants’ sense of belonging was enhanced by the presence of other newcomer and migrant-background students at school, the role of white German students in such environments also facilitated such belonging. Ahoufe, a 20-year-old Ghanaian student, is completing a bilingual *Abitur* by taking some classes at a *Stadtteilschule*, which she describes as an ‘immigration school’, and others at a *Gymnasium*, where she is ‘the only Black girl in the *Oberstufe* [upper-secondary level]’. The white German students at her *Stadtteilschule* ‘really have, like, a lot of time with Africans or with people from a migrant background, so they really know how to feel comfortable, how to move with them’. The comfort of her white German classmates is reflected in Ahoufe’s own feelings about the *Stadtteilschule*, where she feels far more comfortable than at the *Gymnasium* with classmates who have less exposure to diversity in the classroom.

Our participants’ experiences underscore the importance of diversity in fostering a supportive learning environment, where students can share challenges, resources, and strategies, ultimately feeling less isolated and more ‘normal’ in their educational journey, both because of the presence of others ‘like them’ and of white German students accustomed to diverse school environments. The diversity within these generally lower-track schools, thus plays a crucial role in shaping newcomer students’ sense of belonging through their experience of language—their *Spracherleben*—providing the necessary emotional and linguistic support to thrive.

6. Conclusion

While existing research emphasizes the risk of institutional discrimination faced by migrant newcomer students, particularly through their placement in preparatory classes at low-track schools that limits their onward educational opportunities, our study sought to understand how newcomers themselves perceive the tracked German secondary-school system. Our findings reveal that newcomers' perceptions of school tracking are multi-layered and dynamic. Both Syrian and Ghanaian students expressed frustration with preparatory classes after first entering the German secondary-school system, due to these classes' lack of grades and diplomas, low academic level, and disconnectedness from subject content. Some students also questioned their automatic placement in lower-track schools, asserting that their skills and knowledge could enable them to succeed in higher-track schools, revealing perceptions of unequal treatment and an academic mismatch to the educational track they were assigned to. Previous studies (e.g. Hargreaves and Al-Waeli 2023) highlight similar sentiments among newcomer students elsewhere, emphasizing the feeling of injustice associated with placement in lower tracks—a pattern that can be interpreted as a form of institutional discrimination, as such placements are often guided by systemic criteria, e.g. German language proficiency, rather than individual ability. However, newcomers in our sample also noted opportunities offered by this same system at later stages of their schooling, such as providing a slower-paced environment that allowed them more time to catch up academically to their German-speaking peers and consolidate their language skills.

A temporalities lens helps us untangle this complexity: while newcomers criticized preparatory classes for slowing down academic progress at a time when they felt in a rush to educationally adapt and progress, they welcomed the slower pace of regular classes at lower-track schools. Regarding their *Spracherleben*—their experience of language use—the Syrian and Ghanaian newcomers in our sample felt more comfortable participating in lower-track schools where not all students speak German fluently, which they understand is expected at the *Gymnasium*. The diverse student bodies in lower-track schools, including fellow newcomers also learning German, other migrant-background students, and white German peers accustomed to diverse environments, played a crucial role in shaping newcomers' sense of belonging. This resonates with previous findings about the influence of peers on student achievement (Russell and Mantilla-Blanco 2022; Schofield 2010).

Taken together, our analysis shows that, while newcomer students perceive institutional discrimination through the inequalities encountered in their educational trajectories, they also recognize and leverage the opportunities available to them. This is notably true for the Ghanaian student in Hamburg who actively chooses the *Stadtteilschule* over the *Gymnasium* and for the student who attends both school forms in parallel (cf. Ogden et al. 2025). Here, a significant difference between the two states' school systems comes into play: the students in Hamburg allocated to a *Stadtteilschule* have a direct pathway to the *Abitur*, while all participants in NRW were assigned to the *Hauptschul*-track of a *Sekundarschule* (see section 4). Although theoretically, they can transition to a school offering the *Abitur*, they face barriers in doing so.

Our findings call for a critical review of policy and practice surrounding the integration of newcomer students, and also reinforce fundamental criticisms of the German tracked school system. First, our participants' critiques of specific aspects of preparatory classes (e.g. not receiving grades or perceived low academic level) point to structural conditions

that warrant closer examination, while their appreciation of aspects of the social learning environment (e.g. learning with other newcomers) highlights elements they view as effective. Second, in relation to regular classes, many newcomers who are learning German perceive the high importance of oral participation for grading as a burden. In the context of linguistic diversity, oral participation in the majority language should not be the most important form of knowledge presentation. Third, our findings highlight the potential academic benefits of social belonging fostered by shared experiences—particularly with other students learning German. While *Gymnasien* in some states are technically quite diverse (e.g. 40% in Hamburg, see section 2), our participants *perceived* lower-track schools like *Stadtteilschulen* as spaces where students with linguistic and educational biographies like theirs were more common and accepted. Their reflections thus support critiques of the social segregation produced by the tracked school system and the call for more inclusive school forms, like comprehensive schools where all qualifications, including the *Abitur*, are accessible. The broader implementation of such schools has so far been limited in Germany, since they have largely been established alongside, rather than in place of, existing school forms—reflecting the enduring ‘sanctity of the *Gymnasium*’ (Tillmann 2015, our translation). Beyond this broader critique of structural tracking, it is equally important to consider how the specific needs of newcomer students can be addressed within all school types, including *Gymnasien*. This includes fostering opportunities for social belonging through interaction with peers who share similar linguistic or biographical experiences, and reconsidering assessment practices—like the emphasis on oral performance.

By unpacking newcomer students’ multilayered and dynamic perceptions, our study emphasizes the significance of a youth-centric approach to educational structures and policies. While research on newcomers’ education often employs quantitative large-scale approaches or investigates the perspectives of school actors like teachers, a youth-centric approach elevates students’ voices and recognizes their capacity for keen observation of their educational environments (Emmerich et al. 2020), even in contexts of such institutional complexity. Therefore, we gain insight into their awareness of processes of social distinction and how they navigate the school system strategically (cf. Ogden et al. 2025). Our participants’ perceptions were multi-faceted, shaped by disparities in the educational systems they encounter across German states, differences between their experiences within Germany and their countries of origin, and differing backgrounds such as social-class positioning and access to community resources (Ogden 2024). Yet, despite their differences, the Ghanaian and Syrian participants identified the same aspects, indicating that these represent general challenges and opportunities for newcomer students more broadly.

While offering valuable insights, our study also faces methodological limitations. The original research design was not tailored to our current research question but emerged from an ethnographic approach that responds to the field itself. Accordingly, the findings are not intended to be representative but instead offer situated perspectives that open new avenues for further exploration into the complexities of language, institutional discrimination and belonging within the education of newcomer students. In particular, the perspectives from newcomers attending *Gymnasien*, which applied to only two of our participants, could add meaningful nuance to the dynamics described here. Further research could also investigate how school placement decisions shape actual qualification outcomes across different educational systems. Moreover, our data highlight the relevance of peer relations in shaping students’ sense of belonging—an avenue that deserves

further attention. Likewise, the role of teachers emerged as a central but yet underexamined factor: our interviews suggest that teachers can significantly influence how students perceive their educational trajectories, particularly in terms of whether they are encouraged and supported in pursuing higher qualifications. By addressing these issues, we can work toward creating a more inclusive and equitable educational environment that allows all students to make use of their ‘ingredients’—regardless of the ‘seasoning’.

Notes

1. In 2019/20, *Gymnasien* reverted to a nine-year curriculum (*Abitur* in Grade 13) unless they actively opted to maintain the eight-year curriculum (*Abitur* in Grade 12). This central reform responded to the wishes of most students, parents, and teachers (MSB NRW 2024a). Our data was collected before this reform, when students at the *Gymnasium* completed their *Abitur* in Grade 12.
2. Having an ‘immigration history’ (NRW) or a ‘migration background’ (Hamburg) is applied to students who either are a) not born in Germany, or b) have at least one parent not born in Germany, or—only in NRW—c) speak a non-German family language (MSB NRW 2019; BSB 2023). For consistency, we use the term *migration background* throughout the paper.
3. While data collection in Hamburg took place in 2018/19, official student demographic data for that school year were not available; the figures reported here are from the closest available school year.
4. The category “relationship with teachers” constituted a standalone category, the analysis of which exceeded the scope of this paper. It remains for future research.

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