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“I am not a guinea pig”: An Analysis of Parental Advocacy in the German Detracking Movement

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The last twenty years of PISA data on the German education system have shown that the country’s educational outcomes are some of the most inequitable within the OECD, with a higher-than-average correlation between student background and achievement outcomes. Scholarship has identified the root cause of this inequity as the highly differentiated secondary school system, which is one of a few systems that still track students as young as 10 years old. This scholarship has not, however, evaluated why this system persists, despite evidence of negative outcomes. Even with available research on the negative externalities of Germany’s tracking structure, Germany has made few changes to its intense stratification. The state of Hamburg has, in particular, experienced severe pushback from conservatives and parents when attempting to restructure its school tracking system. Using a discourse analysis of debates on reducing tracking within Hamburg, this paper posits that opportunity hoarding—that is, parents with more social capital maintaining certain advantages through ingrained systems that are theoretically open to all—could be a primary reason that Germany’s between-school tracking system has persisted, despite overwhelming evidence of its harmful effects. This paper will analyze the effects of parental advocacy on the process of reducing school stratification to attempt to explain why Germany is holding on to this traditional tracking system. The findings in this paper have implications for international discussions about opportunity hoarding and about the purpose of public education.

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“I am not a guinea pig”:
An Analysis of Parental Advocacy in the German Detracking Movement

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Contents

Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Background.....	7
Tracking in Comparative International Education Literature.....	11
Parents, Opportunity Hoarding, and Tracking.....	15
Tracking in Germany.....	18
Parents, Opportunity Hoarding, and Tracking in Germany.....	21
Methodology.....	24
Background.....	27
Findings.....	30
<i>Wir wollen lernen</i> Website.....	30
Expense.....	31
Democratic Process.....	32
Holding Back High-Achieving Students.....	32
Online Press and Newspapers.....	34
Holding Back Higher Achieving Students.....	34
Educating a Diverse Population.....	36
Discussion.....	38
Conclusion.....	40
Bibliography.....	44

Abstract

The last twenty years of PISA data on the German education system have shown that the country's educational outcomes are some of the most inequitable within the OECD, with a higher-than-average correlation between student background and achievement outcomes. Scholarship has identified the root cause of this inequity as the highly differentiated secondary school system, which is one of a few systems that still track students as young as 10 years old. This scholarship has not, however, evaluated why this system persists, despite evidence of negative outcomes. Even with available research on the negative externalities of Germany's tracking structure, Germany has made few changes to its intense stratification. The state of Hamburg has, in particular, experienced severe pushback from conservatives and parents when attempting to restructure its school tracking system. Using a discourse analysis of debates on reducing tracking within Hamburg, this paper posits that opportunity hoarding—that is, parents with more social capital maintaining certain advantages through ingrained systems that are theoretically open to all—could be a primary reason that Germany's between-school tracking system has persisted, despite overwhelming evidence of its harmful effects. This paper will analyze the effects of parental advocacy on the process of reducing school stratification to attempt to explain why Germany is holding on to this traditional tracking system. The findings in this paper have implications for international discussions about opportunity hoarding and about the purpose of public education.

Introduction

When Germany first participated in the PISA test—an international assessment that measures student achievement among OECD countries—in 2000, the country expected its students to score high, because of its long history of public education and because it boasts some of the oldest universities in the world.¹ However, in what became known as the “PISA shock,” German students scored well below the OECD average.² These unexpected results showed that levels of inequity in the German school system, or how much a student’s social background determines achievement, were higher than in any other country.³ The reaction to the PISA shock was dramatic in Germany, with one *Gymnasium* principal writing that the results “shattered the self-image of our education system.”⁴ News agencies characterized Germany’s performance as “one of the hardest lessons German education had to face,” a “humiliation,” and a “miserable failure.”⁵

Since 2000 the critiques of the German education system have been vast, but one facet of the system stands out in international comparisons: students in Germany are separated by ability at one of the youngest ages in the world, just 10 years old. Research and journalists have shown that many German politicians and parents have clung tightly to Germany’s differentiated system throughout waves of school reform, despite widespread findings that show that early tracking

¹ Hubert Ertl, “Educational Standards and the Changing Discourse on Education: The Reception and Consequences of the PISA Study in Germany,” *Oxford Review of Education* 32, no. 5 (November 2006): 619–34.

² The OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, was founded in 1961 to bring many western countries (i.e. not Soviet-leaning countries) together. Today, the OECD is comprised of 36 nations, including most of Europe, the Americas, and parts of Asia.

³ OECD et al., *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers*; Raphaela Schlicht, Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen, and Markus Freitag, “Educational Inequality in the EU: The Effectiveness of the National Education Policy,” *European Union Politics* 11, no. 1 (March 2010): 29–59; Petra Stanat et al., “PISA 2000: Overview of the Study” (Berlin, Germany: Max Planck Institute for Human Development, 2002).

⁴ Dieter Smolka, “Die PISA-Studie: Konsequenzen und Empfehlungen für Bildungspolitik und Schulpraxis” [“The PISA Study: Consequences and Recommendations for Education Policy and School Practice”], *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B 41/2002.

⁵ Deutsche Welle, “Germany Assesses Its Education Reform,” DW.com, July 14, 2005; Deutsche Welle, “German Education Failures Linked to Social Background,” DW.com, April 11, 2005.

perpetuates inequity.⁶ While there is a plethora of research examining the negative impact of school tracking in Germany (it exacerbates the gap in socioeconomic achievement rates, inhibits integration of immigrants into wider society, and deprives some students of opportunities to learn), this body of work does not focus explicitly on why attempts to reform the school system have not worked. Responding to this gap in research, this paper hypothesizes that local stakeholders, most notably parents, have endeavored to limit reforms to the tracking system in Germany, and asks why so many Germans continue to support and advocate for Germany's *between-school* tracking system.

Following a review of existing literature and in an attempt to answer this question, I will analyze what arguments were made in opposition to attempted tracking reforms in Hamburg in 2008. This paper will draw on available secondary literature and conduct a discourse analysis of regional German language newspapers to provide a representative picture of how local actors have impacted school-reform debates. This focus on Hamburg will shed light on how and why tracking reforms have made little progress in the last 20 years. Due to state control of the education system, this paper posits that local actors, especially parents, have had a large effect on maintaining the *between-school* tracking system. Though the phenomenon is primarily discussed in the American context, this paper argues that opportunity hoarding could be a crucial reason why many in Germany have resisted detracking. This work will contribute to the field of comparative social stratification by focusing on the German system and analyzing how local stakeholders play a large role in maintaining social stratification.

⁶ The Economist, "Much to Learn: Germany's Education System Is a Work in Progress," *The Economist Online*, March 11, 2010; Becker et al., "Recent Developments in School Tracking Practices in Germany: An Overview and Outlook on Future Trends," *Orbis Scholae* 10, no. 3 (March 2016): 9–25; William H. Schmidt et al., "The Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality: An International Perspective," *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 7 (October 2015): 371–86; Anna K. Chmielewski, "The Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap, 1964 to 2015," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 3 (June 2019): 517–44.

Background

A pedagogical dilemma of all public education is how to provide the best education to a diverse group of students with different levels of ability, preparation, and support. Countries around the world have adopted such techniques as grade levels and ability grouping in order to educate students.⁷ Some research has indicated that dividing students into classes by ability may be more efficient for students and teachers.⁸ However, when taking into consideration the heterogeneity of student populations, including socioeconomic status, language ability, and family structure, most research has found that tracking systems across the globe perpetuate inequity.⁹ In examining the impact of tracking across countries, researchers have shown that timing matters: the later tracks are introduced, the better the outcomes for students.¹⁰ This is primarily because the “influence of family background” is stronger when decisions must be made early in students’ careers.¹¹ Almost all educational systems track (or ability group) students during their secondary education.¹² Likely in response to this research, the last 50 years have shown a steep decline in *between*-school tracking globally, with countries opting instead for course-by-course tracking, or *within*-school tracking.

⁷ Vincent Dupriez, Xavier Dumay, and Anne Vause, “How Do School Systems Manage Pupils’ Heterogeneity?,” *Comparative Education Review* 52, no. 2 (May 2008): 245–73.

⁸ Esther Duflo, Pascaline Dupas, and Michael Kremer, “Peer Effects, Teacher Incentives, and the Impact of Tracking: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Kenya,” *American Economic Review* 101, no. 5 (August 2011): 1739–74.

⁹ Chmielewski, “Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap”; Anna K. Chmielewski, Hanna Dumont, and Ulrich Trautwein, “Tracking Effects Depend on Tracking Type: An International Comparison of Students’ Mathematics Self-Concept,” *American Educational Research Journal* 50, no. 5 (October 2013): 925–57; Michelle Jackson and Jan O. Jonsson, “Why Does Inequality of Educational Opportunity Vary Across Countries?,” in *Determined to Succeed?*, ed. Michelle Jackson (Stanford University Press, 2013), 306–38; Stephen W. Raudenbush and Robert D. Eschmann, “Does Schooling Increase or Reduce Social Inequality?,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (August 14, 2015): 443–70; Schmidt et al., “Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality.”

¹⁰ Dupriez et al., “How Do School Systems Manage Pupils’ Heterogeneity?”; Hanna Dumont, Denise Klinge, and Kai Maaz, “The Many (Subtle) Ways Parents Game the System: Mixed-Method Evidence on the Transition into Secondary-School Tracks in Germany,” *Sociology of Education* 92, no. 2 (April 2019): 199–228.

¹¹ Kai U. Schnabel et al., “Parental Influence on Students’ Educational Choices in the United States and Germany: Different Ramifications—Same Effect?,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 60, no. 2 (April 2002): 194.

¹² Kai Maaz et al., “Educational Transitions and Differential Learning Environments: How Explicit Between-School Tracking Contributes to Social Inequality in Educational Outcomes,” *Child Development Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (August 2008): 99–106.

Many countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Finland, phased out their purely academic/vocational streaming and moved towards a comprehensive school model in the 1970s.¹³ Germany, other German-speaking countries, parts of Eastern Europe, and the Netherlands have maintained this early tracking system, with students separated among schools by demonstrated ability.¹⁴ These countries are slowly trending towards some methods of *detracking* by “delaying the onset of tracking or enrolling a greater share of students in the academic track.”¹⁵ While both methods further entrench societal inequities, they do so to varying degrees.

Tracking in the German education system separates children into distinct schools at some of the earliest ages around the globe. The German education system divides students at age 10 or 12 based on the assumption that four or six years of comprehensive primary school allow all students to reach the same level of achievement. Historically, the lowest performing students (those destined for low-status vocational jobs) are sent to the *Hauptschule*, while students who have the grades for and aim for higher-status blue-collar jobs study for a couple of years longer at the *Realschule*. Students who aspire to university attend *Gymnasium* in order to earn an *Abitur* (see Figure 1¹⁶). In any given cohort, about 30% of the students move on to *Gymnasium*, of which about 80% will receive an *Abitur* and continue on to university.¹⁷ Due to the federated nature of the German education system, this basic tripartite model, in which students are separated into one of three schooling types around the end of grade 4, is not uniform across the country. In fact, recent examinations of this system have shown that while “an echo of this model is discernable in many

¹³ Anna K. Chmielewski, “An International Comparison of Achievement Inequality in Within- and Between-School Tracking Systems,” *American Journal of Education* 120, no. 3 (May 2014): 293–324.

¹⁴ OECD, ed., *Netherlands 2016: Foundations for the Future*, Reviews of National Policies for Education (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2006), 64.

¹⁵ Chmielewski, “Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap,” 520.

¹⁶ Maaz et al., “Educational Transitions and Differential Learning Environments,” 100.

¹⁷ Schnabel et al., “Parental Influence on Students’ Educational,” 181; Maddalena Davoli and Horst Entorf, “The PISA Shock, Socioeconomic Inequality, and School Reforms in Germany,” Policy Paper Series (Frankfurt, Germany: IZA Institute of Labor Economics, August 2018).

of the German states,” it no longer exists anywhere in its “pure” form.¹⁸ For instance, since German reunification in 1990, many former eastern states have developed a two-tier system, based on a combination of the East German and West German systems. In some states with lower population, the bottom two tiers have been combined into one.¹⁹ In response to worries about segregation, many states adopted an additional track in the 1960s and 1970s: the *Gesamtschule*, which is similar to comprehensive schools in the United States. In all but two states, the *Gesamtschule* (also known as the *Gemeinschaftsschule*) is available for those who protest the differentiated system; however, this comprehensive school is offered as another track, rather than replacing the original tracks.²⁰

In addition to these public options, the states subsidize alternative private schools such as Waldorf

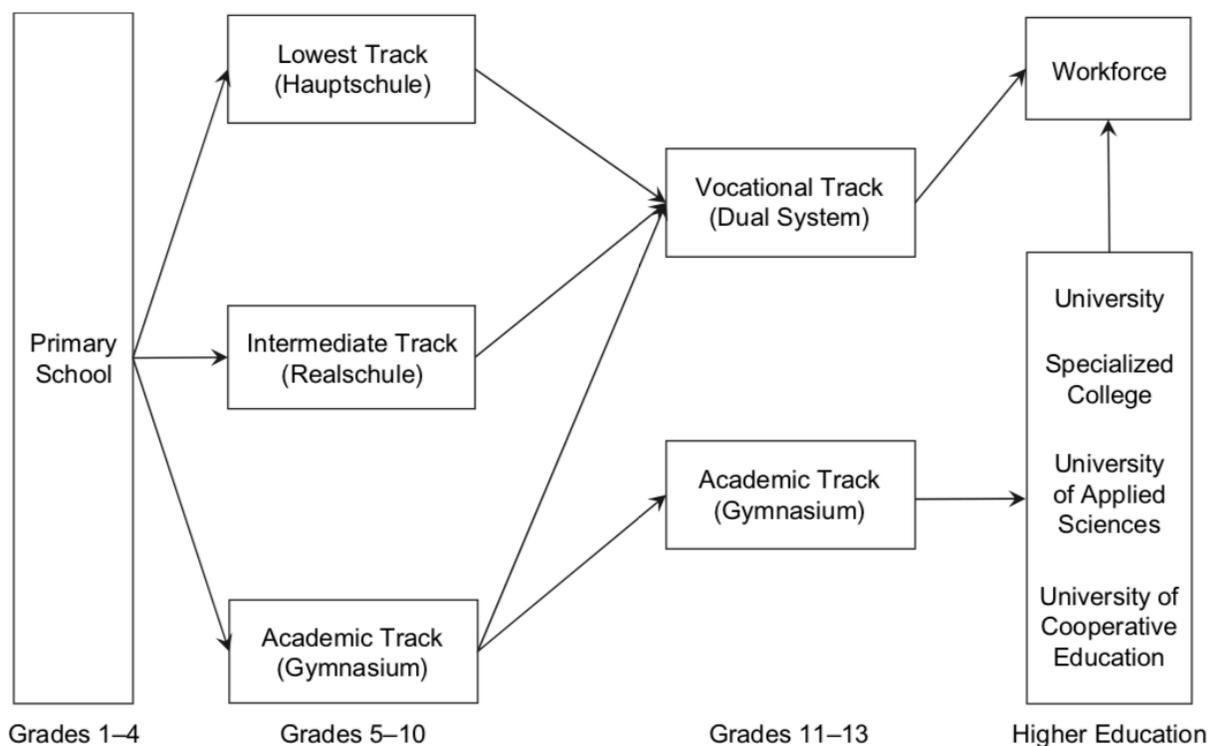


Figure 1. The German educational system.

Note. The figure presents a simplified version of the rather complex German educational system. Arrows symbolize the main educational pathways. For reasons of clarity, comprehensive and multitrack schools are not included.

¹⁸ Becker et al., “Developments in School Tracking Practices in Germany,” 13.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Handbook Germany, “School: Which School Is the Right One?” *Neue deutschen medienmacher*innen*, accessed December 7, 2019.

and Montessori; these schools are generally comprehensive or even multilevel classrooms, but educate less than 9% of German students.²¹

With increasingly diverse populations, this system does little to level the playing field for students, and by many accounts exacerbates already-present inequities. Managing the heterogeneity of student populations becomes exceedingly challenging in countries where school systems must contend with an influx of students from racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities. Eurostat reported that in 2017 Germany received the largest total number of immigrants (917,000), followed by the United Kingdom (644,000).²² Research in Germany over the last decade, particularly timely due to the 2013–2015 refugee crisis, has shown that students' socioeconomic and immigrant backgrounds significantly impact student achievement.²³ While Germany does not collect ethnic background in official statistics, PISA uses parents' income, migrant status, and language spoken at home to determine discrepancies in outcomes. Germany's changing demographics have significantly affected how classrooms must be structured to not only prepare students for success in 21st-century careers but also promote integration in a rapidly changing population.

Even though comprehensive school alternatives exist in 14 of the 16 German states, the tracking system has persisted. There is substantial research on tracking and consolidation practices in Germany (see Becker et al. for a thorough analysis), but this body of work does not focus explicitly on why reform movements have not worked. In this regard, Dumont et al. provide a possible explanation: parents have a large effect on school systems.²⁴ Literature on tracking in

²¹ Deutsche Welle, "Private Schools: Why Does Germany Allow Them?," December 12, 2017, DW.COM, accessed December 7, 2019.

²² Eurostat, "Migration and Migrant Population Statistics," March 2019.

²³ Forschungsbereich beim Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration (SVR-Forschungsbereich), "Schule als Sackgasse? Jugendliche Flüchtlinge an segregierten Schulen," 2018; David Carey, "Improving Education Outcomes in Germany," OECD Economics Department Working Papers, May 15, 2008.

²⁴ Dumont et al., "The Many (Subtle) Ways Parents Game the System."

Germany is vast, but the concept of “opportunity hoarding,” a theory of group behavior that is often discussed in American education, is less readily available.

To analyze the impact of schooling on societal stratification, this paper examines the literature on how between-school tracking systems foster inequity in opportunity and entrench socioeconomic divides both internationally and specifically in Germany.²⁵

Tracking in Comparative International Education Literature

While many international school systems share numerous similarities, ways of managing students’ heterogeneity (the differences in ability among students) take many forms around the world. Individual schools manage heterogeneity by grouping students according to age and ability and even by moving students out of their school entirely due to “low performance, behavioral problems or special needs.”²⁶ Chmielewski et al. (2013) identifies three types of tracking systems: within-school streaming, between-school streaming, and course-by-course tracking. Between-school streaming, as occurs in Germany and Austria, divides students by interest and ability into separate schools. Within-school streaming, according to Chmielewski, occurs when students choose from multiple tracks (often thematic) within a school and take all of their classes within that track. This is common in such European countries as Belgium, Portugal, and Luxembourg. Course-by-course tracking occurs when all students attend one school but can choose to take classes at varying levels; often some classes serve as prerequisites for others, creating tracks within the school. This is the most common form of tracking in the United States, which has a system of comprehensive middle and high schools that are often heavily tracked internally.²⁷ This paper will primarily use the terms

²⁵ This literature focuses specifically on Germany’s experience with between-school tracking, not including analysis of other forms of tracking systems within the country, such as the intricacies of school tracking after some states have instituted a Gesamtschule or the tracking that exists in private schools.

²⁶ OECD et al., eds., *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education*, 61.

²⁷ Chmielewski et al., “Tracking Effects Depend on Tracking Type.”

between-school tracking (to refer to such countries as Germany) and course-by-course tracking (to refer to systems like that in the United States).

Tracking in the United States originated in the efficiency movement and anti-immigrant sentiment at the turn of the 20th century, which designed schools to prepare students efficiently for their societal roles.²⁸ Recent economic research has argued that differentiating students—by age, skill, language, or other factors—remains the most efficient way to educate students for these varied roles. A widely cited, randomized study in Kenya, which assigned first graders to one of two classes either by previously demonstrated ability or by randomization, concluded that all students, no matter the level, benefited from tracking.²⁹ Further, the study found that for whatever disadvantages there were to lower-tracked students being grouped with lower-achieving students, these detrimental effects were offset by teachers being able to tailor the classroom curriculum to the level of the students.³⁰ Other researchers have argued that the reasons for these various forms of differentiation are not just to make it easier for teachers to design curriculum, but also “to legitimize the different positions [students] will hold in the labor market.”³¹ Furthermore, these researchers theorize that schools play a role in both “dividing and uniting” students, as school systems form the basis of social cohesion within a society, but varied employment opportunities require “a hierarchical division of labor.”³² It is important to keep in mind that in the Kenya study, the relative homogeneity of the entire population of first graders is not discussed; while a homogenous population could benefit from ability grouping, heterogeneous populations will likely have externalities that tracking does not account for. Looking at school systems from the point of

²⁸ Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

²⁹ Duflo et al., “Peer Effects, Teacher Incentives, and the Impact of Tracking.”

³⁰ Esther Duflo, Pascaline Dupas, and Michael Kremer, “Can Tracking Improve Learning?,” *Education Next* 9, no. 3 (summer 2009).

³¹ Dupriez et al., “How Do School Systems Manage Pupils’ Heterogeneity?,” 246.

³² *Ibid.*

view of efficiency, however, ignores many other effects of tracking on students, especially given that students are not interchangeable.

The Kenya study is an outlier, as almost all other research on tracking shows that differentiating students increases academic inequalities and negatively impacts student motivation. Importantly, the specific type of tracking has a large effect on student achievement. One of the most frequent comparisons in student outcomes is between comprehensive schooling (as in the United States) and differentiated school systems (as in Germany). The comparative education field has for decades referred to the U.S. school system as “comprehensive” because students are rarely tracked between schools and they can, theoretically, enroll in any class of their choosing within their school building. Dupriez et al.’s study, operating under the commonly mistaken belief that comprehensive means untracked, found that comprehensive school systems are largely more egalitarian than differentiated ones.³³ However, U.S. scholarship on tracking, beginning with the seminal work by Jeannie Oakes, has shown that tracking is ingrained within the culture of America’s comprehensive school system.³⁴ Among other effects, the U.S. tracking model results in educators treating students differently, lower-tracked students feeling alienated from school and dropping out at higher rates, and depriving students of access to content knowledge.³⁵ Chmielewski challenges international research that has long considered educational systems like that of the United States to be comprehensive and therefore contain no tracking.³⁶ Chmielewski, the first scholar to compare course-by-course tracking with between-school tracking, found that socioeconomic segregation occurs within both systems but is more pronounced in the between-

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Oakes, *Keeping Track*.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Chmielewski, “International Comparison of Achievement Inequality.”

school tracking model than the course-by-course tracking model.³⁷ Nevertheless, in both systems, after placement in a certain track, students are often given unequal educations, thereby exacerbating underlying inequities.

Parents' education levels, socioeconomic status, and immigrant status all have an impact on student achievement, regardless of the design of the tracking system, and parents' background also has a large influence on student track assignment.³⁸ Schmidt et al.'s review of literature on tracking concludes that internationally, "nearly all studies have found that tracking exacerbates SES inequality."³⁹ Chmielewski found that over roughly the last 50 years, SES achievement gaps have increased in nearly 100 countries.⁴⁰ Research attributes this development to both population and economic trends: due to global migration, populations of students enrolled in schools have become more diverse and standards of living are increasing worldwide, which has been shown to correlate to a larger SES achievement gap.⁴¹ Raudenbush and Eschmann found that while SES discrepancies in achievement were small in childhood, as children progress in a school system, "high-SES students tend to benefit more from schooling."⁴² Outside of the traditional school day, unequal household expenditures on childcare and private tutoring are on the rise, contributing to greater achievement disparities among SES groups.⁴³ Research shows that by dividing students into different groups based on prior achievement, the system is deciding which children may learn certain information. One major inequity in education due to tracking is content exposure, or the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Schnabel et al., "Parental Influence on Students' Educational Choices."

³⁹ Schmidt et al., "Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality," 372.

⁴⁰ Chmielewski, "Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap."

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Raudenbush and Eschmann, "Does Schooling Increase or Reduce Social Inequality?," 465.

⁴³ Chmielewski, "Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap."

opportunity to learn.⁴⁴ Opportunity to learn is important in understanding tracking as “the separation of students into different courses with different content exposure tends to mirror background inequalities.”⁴⁵

Parents, Opportunity Hoarding, and Tracking

While there is research consensus that students’ backgrounds play a role in track assignments and that those assignments exacerbate already-existing social inequities, parents play a more active role than much education research gives them credit for. Recent scholarship has highlighted the fact that tracking is also successfully influenced by parental advocacy, what researchers have referred to as “opportunity hoarding.”⁴⁶ Researchers have found that rational choice theory and parents’ own educational experiences, not just student achievement, impact student tracks.⁴⁷ Maaz et al. came to a similar conclusion, identifying explicit links between the transition to secondary education and student backgrounds.⁴⁸ The majority of research shows that parental influence, parent educational attainment, and SES and immigrant backgrounds play a significant role in determining track enrollment.⁴⁹

To conceptualize how parents indirectly and directly impact student achievement, it is important to understand the concept of social capital. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defined social capital as membership in a group in which each member is supported by “collectively-owned

⁴⁴ Schmidt et al., “Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality”; The concept of “Opportunity to Learn” is cited in Schmidt et al. and attributed to John Carroll; Chmielewski, “The Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap.”

⁴⁵ Schmidt et al., “Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality,” 372.

⁴⁶ Amanda E. Lewis and John B. Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴⁷ Schlicht et al., “Educational Inequality in the EU.”

⁴⁸ Maaz et al., “Educational Transitions and Differential Learning Environments.”

⁴⁹ One anomaly is Becker et al. (2016), which argues that track assignments are based predominately on achievement, though “social class and also ethnicity also play a role” but “one that is much less important than achievement.”

capital.”⁵⁰ James Coleman built on this definition, identifying one key component of social capital as “information channels.”⁵¹ Social capital often refers to access to information, and in the context of school choice and student outcomes, insider information on a school can be key. In the United States, for example, information about which schools have better academics, which teachers are more dedicated, and even which schools give more to their athletic teams can all help parents make decisions about the schools their children should attend. While not condemning parents for advocating for their children, Ball and Vincent use the term “grapevine knowledge” to refer to how parents use informal social networks to gather and exchange information in the context of school choice.⁵² Their analysis show that middle-class parents often try to supplement their own knowledge of a school system by contacting other parents, while working-class parents seem to reject information they gather through the grapevine, relying on their own beliefs about their children’s strengths, weaknesses, and needs.⁵³

In many education systems, resources such as high-quality teachers, teachers’ individualized attention, and higher-level classes are scarce and prized goods. Opportunity hoarding occurs when parents with more social capital are able to acquire a disproportionate amount of these scarce resources. Charles Tilly developed the concept *opportunity hoarding* in 1998 to refer to a mechanism of social inequality that “operates when members of a categorically bounded network acquire access to a resource that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network’s modus operandi.”⁵⁴ Since Tilly,

⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, edited by Nicole Woolsey Biggart (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002): 280–91.

⁵¹ James S. Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988): S95.

⁵² Stephen J. Ball and Carol Vincent, “‘I Heard It on the Grapevine’: ‘Hot’ Knowledge and School Choice,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 19, no. 3 (September 1998): 377–400.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Charles Tilly, cited in John L. Rury and Argun Saatcioglu, “Opportunity Hoarding,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism* (American Cancer Society, 2015), 1–3.

the concept of opportunity hoarding has evolved to mean “maintaining advantages through existing mechanisms (such as the education system) ostensibly open to everyone.”⁵⁵ In the context of education, this means that, “Simply by using resources at their disposal, members of the top quintile of students are able to out-compete those below them in social and economic status.”⁵⁶

Specifically in the context of tracking, opportunity hoarding manifests in that middle-to-high-SES students “hoard access” to the higher tracks, which generally occurs when middle-to-high-SES parents advocate for preferential treatment for their children.⁵⁷ Because of school choice in the United States, opportunity hoarding occurs at the horizontal level: parents can choose school districts and advocate for their students to enroll in specific classes, but all students will essentially receive the same graduation qualification (though some high school diplomas are unofficially worth more than others). Alfie Kohn writes of how parents with social capital and the desire to increase their children’s chances of attending a good college block data-driven school reforms, such as dismantling tracking systems in the United States, in order to maintain their children’s competitive edge.⁵⁸ Parents typically do so by overriding school decisions about their students’ course enrollment, following up with teachers if their children are struggling, and protesting any school reform that attempts to change the tracking system that benefits their children—in other words, acting as the “squeaky wheel.”⁵⁹ Lewis and Diamond argue that in the United States, white parents do so in order to help their children access “higher quality educational experiences” because they may feel that their children are *entitled* to the higher-level course, and to keep their

⁵⁵ Rury and Saatcioglu, “Opportunity Hoarding,” 2.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Sean Kelly and Heather Price, “The Correlates of Tracking Policy: Opportunity Hoarding, Status Competition, or a Technical-Functional Explanation?” *American Educational Research Journal* 48, no. 3 (June 2011): 565.

⁵⁸ Alfie Kohn, “Only for My Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 79, no. 8 (April 1998): 568–77.

⁵⁹ Lewis and Diamond, *Despite the Best Intentions*, 92.

children out of classes with lower-achieving, often minority, students.⁶⁰ While Lewis and Diamond focus on one school in their ethnography, tracking and opportunity hoarding are rampant in racially diverse schools across the United States. Since Tilly, the body of literature on opportunity hoarding in the United States has grown quickly, but this discussion of the relationship between social capital and tracking occurs almost exclusively in the United States.⁶¹

Tracking in Germany

In the previous section we have seen how different national educational systems manage heterogeneity, how tracking perpetuates inequities within a society, and how and why parents, especially in the United States, have worked to maintain these tracking systems. In this section, I will discuss how these three themes manifest within Germany's school system.

Germany's traditional tripartite *between*-school tracking model has for generations divided students at approximately 10 years of age into one of three types of schools. In the last few decades, there has been an increase in types of schools in Germany, and consequently an increase in the ways in which Germany manages students' heterogeneity. Despite increasing diversity in school systems, PISA data from the past two decades show that Germany's method of dividing and teaching students has had significant negative outcomes and that Germany is an outlier among the OECD countries. For instance, 2012 PISA results showed that a "more socio-economically advantaged student" in Germany scored 43 points higher on that year's mathematics test than a "less-advantaged student," which was equivalent to more than a year's difference in schooling.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁶¹ Simon Cheng, Leslie Martin, and Regina E. Werum, "Adult Social Capital and Track Placement of Ethnic Groups in Germany." *American Journal of Education* 114, no. 1 (November 2007): 41–74.

⁶² OECD, *PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science* (OECD, 2014), 4.

A similar discrepancy (42 points) was present in science results from 2015.⁶³ Also in 2015, PISA data showed that “16% of the variation in student performance in science is attributed to differences in students’ socio-economic status” (notably, a decrease of 4 percentage points since 2006).⁶⁴ Further, PISA analysis has shown that parental education level can be significantly correlated to student achievement; in Germany, while most adults attain the same level of education as their parents, downward mobility (achieving a lower level than one’s parents) is more common than upward mobility.⁶⁵ The available PISA data has sparked other studies, which have drawn similar conclusions. Schnabel et al. test the hypothesis that “in Germany, SES effects on academic achievement become more pronounced over the course of schooling” and found a high correlation between parents’ SES and the type of school their children attended.⁶⁶ Furthermore, Schnabel et al.’s paper concludes that after controlling for other major factors, socioeconomic background had a significant effect on all career-related decisions in Germany, showing that tracking effects extend beyond the end of school.⁶⁷

The tracking system has greater effects on all vulnerable populations, but especially on immigrants who do not speak German fluently. Regarding immigrant status, PISA results have shown discrepancies in achievement levels when comparing immigrant students to non-immigrant students, indicating that schools are unsuccessful not only in significantly reducing the effects of student background on achievement, but also in facilitating integration. Between 2003 and 2012, Germany made some progress in reducing the gaps between immigrant and non-immigrant student achievement, but inequalities nevertheless remain.⁶⁸ In Germany students with a migrant

⁶³ OECD, *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, PISA (OECD, 2016), 4.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ OECD, *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, Education at a Glance (OECD, 2014).

⁶⁶ Schnabel et al., “Parental Influence on Students’ Educational Choices,” 187.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ OECD, *PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do*, 4.

background scored on average 72 points lower (OECD average: 43), almost two grade levels, than non-migrant students.⁶⁹ When considering SES and language spoken at home, this difference shrinks to 28 points (OECD average: 19).⁷⁰ PISA results from 2018 show—not surprisingly given Germany’s struggles to deal with SES differences in students—that “performance differences” when comparing migrant and non-migrant students are higher than the OECD average.⁷¹ Furthermore, OECD country-based work from 2008 through 2017 found that Germany struggles with supporting students from “disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds” and that the effects of SES are “exacerbated by the increase in immigration.”⁷²

Germany’s tripartite tracking system often keeps students from different backgrounds from attending schools together, thereby increasing the homogenization of certain groups and inhibiting integration.⁷³ OECD research has shown that integration of immigrant students into schools is hindered by tracking, “as students with an immigrant background have poor German skills and lower education levels” and thus are separated into the lower tracks.⁷⁴ Analyses of PISA data have found that there is a relatively large “performance variation between schools” due to Germany’s between-school tracking system.⁷⁵ As previously discussed in the international context, one proposal for reducing this inequity and supporting social cohesion in Germany has been to reduce stratification in the school systems, which would ideally lead to greater opportunity to learn.⁷⁶ The extent to which stratification and tracking impacts student outcomes is based on “age of first tracking/selection, number/type of programs, between-school segregation, selection policy, and

⁶⁹ OECD, “Table B1.7 - Results (tables): Immigrant Background, Student Performance and Students’ Attitudes Towards Science,” in *PISA 2015 Results*; OECD, *PISA 2015*, 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ OECD, *Education Policy Outlook 2018: Putting Student Learning at the Centre* (OECD, 2018), 222.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 224.

⁷³ Carey, “Improving Education Outcomes in Germany.”

⁷⁴ OECD, *Education Policy Outlook 2018*, 224.

⁷⁵ OECD, *PISA 2012 Results*, 4.

⁷⁶ Carey, “Improving Education Outcomes in Germany.”

types of courses.”⁷⁷ Although the system has not made massive overhauls in how it manages differing abilities and backgrounds, Germany has slowly begun to acknowledge that the education system must deal with increasing heterogeneity, with one scholar for the OECD even writing that *Heterogenität* (heterogeneity) has become a buzzword of current educational debates.⁷⁸ In some classrooms in Germany, children’s development has begun to be considered individually, rather than in comparison to other children in the classroom.⁷⁹

While many have acknowledged that significant reforms to the German education system are needed, few have proposed reforms that include dismantling the system that is primarily responsible for the inequities. The two primary arguments in favor of maintaining the tracking system were and still are these: students need more time to study for the secondary school exit examination (*Abitur*), and the system does not need to be dismantled because it is relatively easy to switch tracks.⁸⁰ Considering these counterarguments, this paper still hypothesizes that one reason tracking reforms have not been implemented as a solution to unequal educational achievement has been the resistance of influential parents in the German education system.

Parents, Opportunity Hoarding, and Tracking in Germany

Although the scholarship on parental involvement and opportunity hoarding has primarily focused on the United States, the theory translates to the Germany system. In Germany, opportunity hoarding could be said to occur vertically, as parents have a significant role in the decision about which school-leaving certificate students will receive. In almost all highly selective and stratified

⁷⁷ Schmidt et al., “Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality,” 372.

⁷⁸ OECD, *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Meeting the Challenge*, Educational Research and Innovation (OECD, 2010).

⁷⁹ OECD, *Educating Teachers for Diversity*, 212.

⁸⁰ Schnabel et al. found that for students in *Gymnasium*, 75% are “certain to move on to the *Oberstufe* at the end of Grade 10” but of *Realschule* students, “only 11% seriously consider this option,” showing that switching tracks is infeasible for most students (p. 192); see Directorate for Education and Skills, “Germany (Baden-Württemberg),” System Note, Innovative Learning Environments (OECD, n.d.), for further information on track permeability.

systems, parents maintain influence over the tracking decision: they have the option to reject higher placements or push for higher track placements (an option typically chosen by higher SES parents).⁸¹ This paper does not argue that parents directly *buy* a better public education for their children, but that parents' actions, and thereby student outcomes, are related to their backgrounds, and that the push of higher SES parents for higher track placements limits the availability of these options for other students.⁸²

Building on the idea of social capital, Cheng et al. posits that parents' social capital, dependent on ethnicity, impacts track placements in Germany.⁸³ Cheng cites previous research showing that Turkish parents (the largest ethnic minority in Germany) rely more on teacher recommendations for track placement than do German parents, suggesting that Turkish parents do not advocate for their students to be placed in higher tracks; rather, they follow teacher recommendations.⁸⁴ Dumont et al.'s analysis of the Berlin school system supports these findings, holding that students' social backgrounds impact student achievement, which thus affects teacher-assigned grades, teachers' track recommendations, and track enrollment.⁸⁵ Further, research has shown that all educational systems, but especially Germany's, "implicitly accept influences of family background on the students' pathways" by leaving tracking decisions for the most part up to parents.⁸⁶

The "grapevine of knowledge" is present in some accounts of the German tracking system as well. One of Cheng et al.'s primary conclusions is that interethnic friendships (among Germans and non-Germans) have a critical impact on the track placement of immigrant children—upholding

⁸¹ Jackson and Jonsson, "Why Does Inequality of Educational Opportunity Vary Across Countries?"

⁸² Marcus Tamm, "Does Money Buy Higher Schooling?," *Economics of Education Review* 27, no. 5 (October 2008): 536–45.

⁸³ Cheng et al., "Adult Social Capital and Track Placement."

⁸⁴ Cheng et al., "Adult Social Capital and Track Placement," 46.

⁸⁵ Dumont et al., "The Many (Subtle) Ways Parents Game the System."

⁸⁶ Schnabel et al., "Parental Influence on Students' Educational Choices," 194.

the theory that informal networks have a large effect on student achievement.⁸⁷ Dumont et al.'s findings suggest that language barriers and immigrant backgrounds play a substantial role in track assignment as well.⁸⁸ LeTendre et al.'s ethnographic study of Germany's education system shows that parent-teacher conferences at the end of grade 4 in Germany "provide parents with a fairly strong sense that they have a major role to play in the placement of their child in secondary tracks,"⁸⁹ giving parents one more way in which they can have a large impact on their students' tracks.

Perhaps not surprisingly, parents of students who attend *Gymnasien* are overall in support of the tracking system, whereas parents whose children attend one of the lower tracks report lower levels of satisfaction with the tripartite system. Overall, respondents in LeTendre et al.'s ethnographic study recognized that non-ethnic Germans were disproportionately enrolled in *Real- and Hauptschule*; ethnic Germans viewed the root cause of this as "foreign students" not having a strong command of the German language, rather than systemic inequities. LeTendre et al. found that most German respondents supported the highly differentiated system as long as they believed the tracks were fairly determined. Given data provided by PISA, it is clear that these tracks are not determined fairly, as they fail to consider structural inequities. "The cultural dialogues in German," the study found, "obscure how current practices of tracking create obstacles for immigrants, minorities, and families in the lowest socioeconomic strata." LeTendre et al.'s work shows that parents in Germany have a large role in buying into and perpetuating the tracking system, as

⁸⁷ Cheng et al., "Adult Social Capital and Track Placement," 46.

⁸⁸ Dumont et al., "The Many (Subtle) Ways Parents Game the System."

⁸⁹ Gerald K. LeTendre, Barbara K. Hofer, and Hidetada Shimizu, "What Is Tracking? Cultural Expectations in the United States, Germany, and Japan," *American Educational Research Journal* 40, no. 1 (January 2003): 65.

predominately high-SES parents are those who champion the system, resting on widely held beliefs that the differentiation process is fair.⁹⁰

Largely missing from the German discussion of tracking is a thorough analysis of how parents explicitly hoard educational opportunities. While Dumont et al. do not explicitly include language of social capital, using Cheng's and LeTendre et al.'s analyses, it can be argued that informal informational networks and parental advocacy—in other words, opportunity hoarding—have a large impact on secondary-school tracking in Germany. Especially given research that shows that non-ethnic Germans and low-SES families often enroll in lower tracks, it is a logical hypothesis that many parents in Germany, similar to those in the United States, make decisions to ensure their students a competitive advantage. While previous research shows how parents understand the tracking system, it does not analyze how parents in Germany have reacted to attempted reforms to this system. The case study that follows attempts to do just that.

Methodology

Responding to gaps in the research, this paper hypothesizes that parental influence in German school systems has been one reason tracking reforms have not been implemented as a solution to inequities in achievement. Further, this paper investigates why a significant number of politically active Germans are still in support of this tracking system, in spite of all its shortcomings. In answering this question, I focus on the 2008 reform movement in Hamburg, due to the very successful and visible opposition parent group that formed during that movement, and employ a discourse analysis. Put simply, discourse analysis analyzes “the use of language in social context.”⁹¹ Moreover, discourse analysis endeavors to examine conversations in their social

⁹⁰ LeTendre et al., “What Is Tracking?,” 68, 72, 77, and 78.

⁹¹ Neil Salkind, *Encyclopedia of Research Design* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2010), 368.

context and scrutinize the running conversation among groups of stakeholders.⁹² Discourse analysis has been used in the American context as a method to better understand how parents react to changes in their children's schools.⁹³ The primary limitation of this methodology is that conducting a representative survey is infeasible. Another limitation is that a discourse analysis does not purport to represent speakers' true intentions, but rather critiques words used in a broader social context. This methodology nevertheless allows us to better understand public opinion in the school reform debate and engage with a group of actors that are not traditionally included within policy analysis.

The primary sources used for this paper were blogs, newspaper articles, and the comment sections of newspaper articles. The first part of this analysis focuses on the blog of the parent activist group *Wir wollen lernen* (We want to learn, or WWL), as it provides a direct look into their rhetoric and reasoning, which can serve as evidence of how some of Hamburg's parents portrayed their resistance to change. The WWL website was designed for Hamburg parents to learn more about the referendum and why parents were opposing it. WWL's site includes blog posts and campaign videos posted by members of the group from late 2009 until April 2016. For this analysis I culled blog posts from the WWL site from its inception until the referendum.⁹⁴ I focused on 25 of the 43 available blog posts; these 25 included original content and were explanations of reasons against the reform. Of these 25, six specifically focused on the group's reasoning to vote against the reforms and seven were direct quotes from supporters of the group. The 18 I did not include were radio spots, videos, posters, links to other articles, or were posted since the referendum.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Alexandra Freidus, "'A Great School Benefits Us All': Advantaged Parents and the Gentrification of an Urban Public School," *Urban Education* 54, no. 8 (October 2019): 1121–48.

⁹⁴ "Start," *Wir wollen lernen!*, 2010, <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/>

The second part of this analysis includes articles from the national newspaper *Die Zeit*. I focused on *Die Zeit* because it covered the political developments in Hamburg from fall 2009 until summer 2010 extensively and operated a robust comment section, another resource for identifying primary source discourse. I performed a key word search of “Hamburg Schulreform” (Hamburg school reform) and “Wir wollen lernen” (we want to learn) in order to identify articles that generated a discussion of the reforms. Following this, the comments section of three *Die Zeit* articles were analyzed, amounting to over 500 comments.⁹⁵ I chose these three articles because of the large debates they sparked in the comment section. Of these 500 comments, I identified comments that were against the reforms and analyzed those for the ways in which commenters explained their resistance to the reforms, as that is the focus of this paper. I did not undertake a comprehensive review of arguments for and against the reforms. There are limitations on the reliability of online comments as evidence: the most radical in belief tend to comment, commenters do not comprise a representative sample, and “people say things a little differently [due to] the apparent distance” in online forums.⁹⁶ However, the benefit of the comments section is that it provides reasoning not controlled by the parent activist group, thus adding to the body of available knowledge on how people conceptualized their resistance to the reforms.⁹⁷ Following the design of discourse analysis, this paper does not take these comments for truth, but rather uses them to conceptualize how people from Hamburg (and around Germany) were reacting to the proposed reforms. Furthermore, I do not endeavor to look at the arguments for and against, but rather have

⁹⁵ Christian Bangel, “Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune und Wachmannschaften,” *Die Zeit*, July 18, 2010, sec. Gesellschaft, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/schulreform-verantwortung>. Reinhard Kahl, “Schulstreit: Angst vor der Individualität in Hamburg,” *Die Zeit*, February 6, 2012, sec. Gesellschaft, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-02/hamburg-schulreform>. Deutsche Presse-Agentur, “Referendum in Hamburg: Schwarz-Grün verliert den Schul-Volksentscheid,” *Die Zeit*, July 18, 2010, sec. Gesellschaft, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/hamburg-schulreform-volksentscheid>.

⁹⁶ Freidus, “A Great School Benefits Us All,” 1127.

⁹⁷ It is important to note that *Die Zeit* makes strong attempts to keep the comments section on-topic and respectful. *Die Zeit* will shorten or redact parts of comments that are off-topic or blatantly untrue.

focused my attention on the arguments against the reform, in order to understand how parents conceptualized their resistance to the reforms—the driving question of this paper.

For this analysis I read the three types of sources, identifying themes that resonated with the secondary literature and cataloging new themes that were repeated often in the sources. I used these three diverse sources in order to triangulate the themes and therefore gain a deeper understanding of how Hamburg parents were conceptualizing the school reforms. Using various source types also allowed me to identify convergences and divergences among the rhetoric. Through the use of these techniques, I was able to draw conclusions on how parents have reacted to and impacted detracking movements in Germany.

Background

Both of my children got very good grades and got to a Gymnasium that no one could get to without a recommendation. It was performance that counted, not parents' money.⁹⁸

From the moment that the stronger students have to educate the weaker students, any hope for intellectual development is over, for students on both sides.⁹⁹

To analyze the relationships between some German states proposing structural reforms since the PISA shock and certain reforms to the tracking system being vehemently opposed by parents, this section of the paper focuses on the discourse around the state of Hamburg's attempt at detracking. To address the larger question of why enough Germans are still in support of this tracking system for it to persist, this analysis will consider the following questions: How did parents explain their

⁹⁸ All German translations are my own. Aside from frequently used terms, I have translated for meaning, rather than word-by-word. For longer quotes I will provide translations in the footnotes. The original reads, "Meine beide Kinder kamen glatt durch bis zum Abitur mit ganz passablen Noten einer Schule, auf die ohne Empfehlung niemand gelangen konnte. Dort zählte die Leistung, nicht das Geld der Eltern." WIHE, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune Und Wachmannschaften*, February 15, 2010, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-02/hamburg-schulreform?page=5#comments>.

⁹⁹ The original reads, "In dem Moment, wo stärkere Schüler die Schwächeren beschulen müssen, ist es aus mit den hohen Gedankenflügen - auf beiden Seiten." Carsten G., Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune Und Wachmannschaften*, February 13, 2010, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-02/hamburg-schulreform?page=3#comments>.

resistance to change? Does this resistance constitute opportunity hoarding? I will first present a background of the detracking debate in Hamburg, then the discourse surrounding the debate, and finally an analysis of what the discourse means for Germany and the nature of education.

The state of Hamburg, home to 1.8 million people, serves as an excellent example of parents reacting to proposed school reforms. Hamburg is a wealthy city-state, one of three in Germany, located in northern Germany, and well known for its active port. It's also a region that is actively being transformed through immigration. In 2009, 43.9% of Hamburg's under-18 population had a migrant background. While Hamburg has the highest rate of students taking the highest school-leaving exam, students with a migrant background are much more likely to drop out of secondary school and to repeat grades, a trend that can be seen around Germany.¹⁰⁰ Data from 2004 show that Hamburg spent the least of any German state on education, even though Hamburg's GNP per capita is the highest in Germany.¹⁰¹

Likely responding to the PISA shock, in 2008, a coalition-government of the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the center-left Green Party (Greens) proposed a series of education reforms aimed at lessening the inequities in Hamburg's school system.¹⁰² Notably, the Hamburg government was able to secure a consolidation of the two lower tiers of schools (*Hauptschule* and *Realschule*, along with the existing *Gesamtschule*, combined to form the *Stadtteilschule*).¹⁰³ While the merging of the two lower tracks attracted little debate in Hamburg,

¹⁰⁰ Jeff Bale, "Spectator Democracy: An Intersectional Analysis of Education Reform in Hamburg, Germany," *European Education* 48, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 23–42.

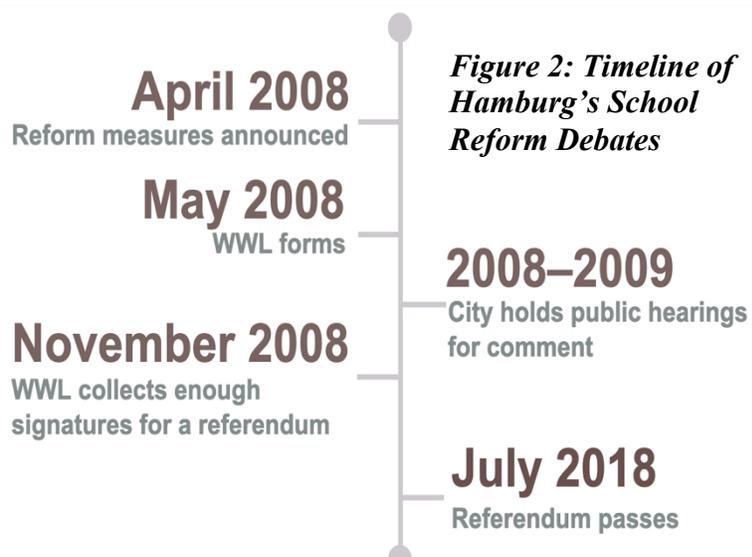
¹⁰¹ Ralph Rotte and Ursula Rotte, "Recent Education Policy and School Reform in Bavaria: A Critical Overview," *German Politics* 16, no. 2 (June 2007): 292–313.

¹⁰² In terms of tracking, German political parties have opposing opinions: the Christian Democratic Union (center-right) tends to support early differentiation and the traditional tracking system, the Social Democrats (center-left) are usually in favor of moving towards comprehensive schools, and the Greens (center-left) tend to support detracking as well.

¹⁰³ The newly created *Stadtteilschule* also include a *Gesamtschule*, making the choice in Hamburg between two school buildings, but multiple tracks. Students who attended the *Gesamtschule* track would still have the option to work towards an *Abitur*. For further descriptions of the government's successful reforms and the organization of

a second proposal, delaying the beginning of the *Gymnasium* and extending primary school from grade 4 to grade 6 (age 10 to age 12, respectively) under the plan of “longer learning together” (*längeres gemeinsames Lernen*) caught the public’s attention.

Although this reform was an attempt to mitigate what research has shown to be some of the detrimental effects of early-onset tracking,¹⁰⁴ the reaction to the latter of these two reforms was swift. An opposition parent group known as *Wir wollen lernen!* (We want to learn! or WWL) formed in spring 2008 in stark opposition to this plan for “longer learning together.” The group, led by lawyer and later-CDU politician Walter Scheuerl, was comprised of Hamburg’s elite: wealthy parents from the west end of the city.¹⁰⁵ From its inception, WWL framed itself as a grassroots party. For over two years this parent group organized to halt the proposed extension of



primary school, gathering enough signatures to call a referendum. Their aim was to educate Hamburg residents on the issues at stake and ensure that enough citizens voted against the proposed reforms in the June 18, 2010 referendum.

Over the course of just over two years (see figure 2), WWL galvanized parental opposition, drawing primarily from a base of CDU (conservative) and Free Democratic Party (center-right)

Hamburg’s school system today, see Bale “Spectator Democracy” (English) and *Schulentwicklungsplan für die staatlichen Primarschulen, Stadtteilschulen und Gymnasien in Hamburg 2010–2017* from the Behörde für Schule und Berufsbildung (German).

¹⁰⁴ Bale, “Spectator Democracy.”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

voters.¹⁰⁶ On July 18, 2010 WWL proved successful, winning the referendum to overturn the state proposal to extend primary school until age 13, with 55.9% of the vote.¹⁰⁷ In an analysis of the referendum, Bale found that voter turnout was only 40% (regular elections in Hamburg usually attract 56% participation¹⁰⁸); more importantly, Bale found that in wealthier Hamburg districts 60% of residents voted, whereas only 25% voted in poorer districts, further showing who WWL's voting base was.¹⁰⁹

Findings

To analyze how people, and parents in particular, argued against the proposed reforms in Hamburg, I focused on the most influential parent group's website and found arguments against the reforms in the comment sections of online articles. For this section, the findings from the site and the comment sections are delineated, so as to show how the rhetoric differed between the platforms. Within each primary source type, the common themes have been separated out, in order to make clear how the different actors argued for the continuance of the tracking system in Hamburg.

Wir wollen lernen Website

The WWL created several arguments that proved successful in galvanizing opposition to extending primary school. The first concern was that the proposed reforms eliminated the parents' right to choose a school for their child (*Elternwahlrecht*).¹¹⁰ It can be inferred that WWL members were primarily worried that teachers would not place their children in the *Gymnasium*. Inherent to their argument was that teachers alone could not know the potential of their students as well as parents

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁷ *Die Zeit*, "Schwarz-Grün verliert den Schul-Volksentscheid."

¹⁰⁸ German Federal Government, "Voter Turnout," Gut Leben in Deutschland, 2018, <https://www.gut-leben-in-deutschland.de/indicators/democracy-and-freedom/voter-turnout/>.

¹⁰⁹ Bale, "Spectator Democracy," 24.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

could.¹¹¹ In April 2010, the Hamburg state government announced a compromise: parents could be included in choosing which school the child would attend, but within one school year, the teacher could alter that decision if it proved to be an unsuitable match. The second concern was with the “longer learning together” plan, which would move school assignment from age 10 to age 12, the quality of education for all children would be impeded. Some reasoning seemed to be more extreme than others: for instance, the WWL argued that teachers making this decision when students were 12 (or going into the “damned grade 7,” as WWL often referred to it in the context of puberty) was irresponsible as teachers would have to make the decision when students would be so affected by the throes of puberty that the students would have “no way to prove themselves” and teachers would have the wrong impression of the students’ capabilities.¹¹² Even with the government’s concession of the one-year grace period, WWL preferred that grade 4 remain the year of decision and that the decision remain a conversation among parents and teachers.¹¹³ Further arguments against this change in school structure centered around (1) expense, (2) a lapse in the democratic process, and (3) holding back high-achieving students.

Expense

The assumed costs were a major point of issue that WWL took with the reforms. A campaign video put out a month before the election told Hamburg residents that they must vote no in order to “prevent a dangerous experiment with [the] Hamburg schools and the estimated 1 billion Euros in expensive school conversions instead of in the education of our children.”¹¹⁴ The reforms, to them, were a waste of taxpayer money. There was a common argument that the funds would be better

¹¹¹ “Elternwahlrecht in Klasse 6? Nein!,” *Wir wollen lernen* (blog), April 12, 2010, <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/319/pseudo-elternwahlrecht-in-klasse-6/index.html>.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ “Briefwahl,” *Wir wollen lernen* (blog), May 20, 2010, <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/211/briefwahl-2/index.html>.

spent in the earlier years in order to even out the playing field, rather than later on.¹¹⁵ However, it is unclear whether WWL would have supported transitioning all of these funds to early childhood education.

Democratic Process

Although the reforms had been drafted by a democratically elected coalition, invocations of the rights of the people and a breakdown of the political process are another continuity throughout WWL's reasoning. One blog post describes the group's self-proclaimed purpose: "We stand for civil democracy in our city."¹¹⁶ In a more explicit call to action, a July headline read: "So fight together with us."¹¹⁷ A third seems to hail WWL as bringing democracy back to the city: "WWL has made education policy tangible in Hamburg. Through the practice of democracy and the people's legislative process, it has been made clear that the people no longer need to be excluded from the political process."¹¹⁸ WWL argued that the CDU government was reneging on a campaign promise due to the coalition government and that the will of Hamburg parents was therefore being ignored. They saw the referendum as the chance to override the decisions of the coalition government, which had sullied the CDU's campaign promises. Following the referendum, many in Germany questioned whether this issue of school reform should have been eligible for the referendum, especially since only 40% of Hamburg residents ended up voting in the referendum.¹¹⁹

Holding Back High-Achieving Students

Despite the vast amount of research on the subject, WWL rarely mentions what the research on "longer learning together" (or delayed onset tracking) has to say. One blog post outlined the

¹¹⁵ "Warum keine Primarschule?," *Wir wollen lernen* (blog), May 11, 2010, <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/391/warum-keine-primarschule/index.html>. "Cornelia Wurm, 39 Jahre," *Wir wollen lernen* (blog), July 17, 2010, <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/995/cornelia-wurm-39-jahre/index.html>. "Warum der Volksentscheid?," *Wir wollen lernen* (blog), April 20, 2010, <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/565/warum-der-volksentscheid/index.html>.

¹¹⁶ "Warum der Volksentscheid?" April 20, 2010.

¹¹⁷ "Jetzt neuen Flyer auf Türkisch herunterladen!," *Wir wollen lernen* (blog), July 16, 2010, <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/951/jetzt-neuen-flyer-auf-turkisch-herunterladen/index.html>.

¹¹⁸ "Erfolge," *Wir wollen lernen* (blog), <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/erfolge/index.html>.

¹¹⁹ Bale, "Spectator Democracy."

pedagogical reasons, as WWL conceived of them, against delayed-onset tracking. First, WWL held that by the end of grade 4, one to one-and-a-half years of learning differences already exist between students, a gap that would not be closed by another year or two of comprehensive primary school. Second, high-performing students would feel stunted by two more years of primary school. Third, there would not be enough time for the *Gymnasium* to teach all of the required information for the college entrance exam if the number of years were shortened. WWL also stoked fears of Hamburg's test scores (i.e. PISA) falling (Hamburg scored high on PISA among other German states) due to there not being enough years of *Gymnasium*. Their argument culminated in the claim that all student achievement is higher when students are separated, though this claim was not backed by research.¹²⁰

While WWL seemed primarily concerned with the fate of the high-achieving students—even selling children's shirts that read *Ich bin kein Versuchskaninchen* (I am not a guinea pig)—the parent group made limited attempts to argue that socioeconomically disadvantaged students would be harmed by the reforms as well. For instance, they argued that the *Stadtteilschulen*, which were a new conglomerate of the *Realschule*, *Hauptschule*, and *Gesamtschule*, would better be able to support students who were behind than teachers who were charged with working with students of all levels in the “longer learning together” model.¹²¹ Without much explanation of their logic, WWL argued that by eliminating parents' right to choose, the decisions teachers would subsequently make would further entrench social disparities, rather than counteracting them, thereby deepening the social divisions of the city.¹²² While the WWL's claim simplifies the process by which a student is placed into a secondary school (even if the parent's right to choose were

¹²⁰ “Warum keine Primarschule?,” May 11, 2010.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

eliminated, there is often an entrance exam), WWL attempted to co-opt the arguments of those in favor of the reforms (reducing social stratification) to their own advantage.

One observable trend of WWL was their concern that if “longer learning together” were implemented, wealthier parents would “flee” to specialized schools that would start secondary school in grade 5. Similar to “white flight” in the United States, WWL foresaw disadvantaged parents struggling to move to neighborhoods that had the specialized schools or being able to afford private schools that WWL assumed would emerge following the reforms.¹²³

Online Press and Newspapers

The WWL arguments also found their way into the local press, with local and national newspapers covering WWL and neutrally taking their arguments at face value, though not necessarily agreeing with WWL. Opinion editorials were overwhelming in favor of the reforms, but commenters were often split on the issues, engaging in heated debates. Among those in the comment section who were in favor of the referendum, some of their concerns were in line with the arguments made by WWL, while other arguments were more original. A few commentators acknowledged the desire to reinstate the parents’ right to choose a school for their children, but the majority of the comments concerned the negative effects these reforms would have on higher-performing students (the commenters taking this reasoning further than WWL) and sometimes included mentions of children with migrant backgrounds in the school system, a group WWL did not mention.

Holding Back Higher-Achieving Students

In contrast to WWL’s arguments, few commenters mention the cost of the reforms. However, similar to WWL’s argument that early childhood education should prepare students before primary

¹²³ Ibid.; “Klaus Kamlah,” *Wir wollen lernen* (blog), May 19, 2010, <http://www.wir-wollen-lernen.de/923/klaus-kamlah/index.html>.

school, one commenter held that it was the responsibility of parents alone to make sure their children were ready for school.¹²⁴ Another commenter argued that it was a “law of nature” that children from “better-off” families are generally more successful academically,¹²⁵ insinuating that the extra two years of primary school would not help level out achievement disparities. These comments, among others, point to an expectation of self-sufficiency and an assumption that the state is not responsible for providing every child with the resources needed to achieve their highest potential.

Notably, commenters approached the impact of these extra two years of primary school on higher-achieving students more directly than WWL. For example, one person wrote that having “less educated” students in the classroom would distract the teacher’s attention from the “more educated” children. While this commenter remarks that “children from socially disadvantaged families can still achieve great things,” he concludes by saying that the reforms would hurt the “more educated” children most of all.¹²⁶ One commenter saw the rigid structure as natural, comparing the structure of schooling to music: “Would we want musicians of the philharmonic practicing with any low-level musicians?”¹²⁷ A commenter objected to the reforms on the grounds that “more intelligent” students should not just be used to help raise up the level of other students.¹²⁸ Another furthered this argument by saying that higher-performing students should not be used as “free teaching assistants” and that “longer learning together” would only be a step

¹²⁴ K2K87, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune Und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/hamburg-schulreform-volksentscheid?page=4#comments>.

¹²⁵ WIHE, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune Und Wachmannschaften*, February 15, 2010.

¹²⁶ Frank1994, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune Und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/schulreform-verantwortung>.

¹²⁷ Gerhard Kemme, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune Und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/schulreform-verantwortung?page=8#comments>.

¹²⁸ Synelly, Comment, *Angst Vor Der Individualität in Hamburg*, February 12, 2010, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-02/hamburg-schulreform?page=2#comments>.

backwards for higher-performing students.¹²⁹ Furthermore, one commenter, falsely equating the plans of “longer learning together” and comprehensive schools (which would extend all the way to graduation, rather than just the two extra years proposed in the Hamburg plan), wrote: “I know about the comprehensive schools. If I had intelligent children, I would not want to enroll them there. If I had stupid children, it would be fine with me, of course!”¹³⁰ One commenter even pleaded: “Do you believe that 6 years of learning together would really even out the social and mental differences? Please think about the kids that don’t come from poor homes.”¹³¹ These commenters and the parents involved in WWL seemed to believe their status in the school system was being jeopardized and worried about what would become of *their* children.

Educating a Diverse Population

Another observable trend is that while WWL does not touch on the theme of children from migrant backgrounds in any of their blogs or literature—perhaps deliberately, as they were attempting to represent all of Hamburg’s citizens—some commenters saw the status of these children as integral to the debate. The question of language learning is important in the tracking debate, as the inability to speak German fluently heavily determines into which track students are sorted. Some commenters saw students’ inability to speak German fluently as the fault of parents and not the responsibility of the schools to remedy.¹³² Another commenter saw migrants as the reason comprehensive schooling could not work in Germany; they argued that while comprehensive schooling may work in Canada and Finland with their racial and ethnic homogeneity, Germany

¹²⁹ Arinari, Comment, *Angst vor der Individualität in Hamburg*, February 14, 2010,

<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-02/hamburg-schulreform?page=2#comments>.

¹³⁰ Biljana, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010,

<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/schulreform-verantwortung?page=4#comments>.

¹³¹ Arinari, Comment, *Angst vor der Individualität in Hamburg*, February 14, 2010.

¹³² Stillfloating, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010,

<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/schulreform-verantwortung?page=6#comments>; Hickey, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010,

<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/schulreform-verantwortung?page=15#comments>.

would go the way of France and the United States, likely referencing highly tracked comprehensive schools or even perceived “race wars” within schools.¹³³ Bringing in an argument of self-reliance, one commenter ignored the social barriers for socioeconomically disadvantaged children, claiming that the German education system was and is permeable to “talent” from the “lower classes.”¹³⁴ In response to a *Die Zeit* opinion article that argued that those who would be most affected by the changes to the school system could not vote in the referendum (referring to non-German citizens), one commenter argued that these people had “freely immigrated” to Germany and implied that it should not be the responsibility of the school system to teach the children German, as “the majority [of migrants] do not consider it necessary to learn to speak German properly or to speak to their children in German.”¹³⁵ This commenter concludes: “The school system cannot make up for that.”¹³⁶ As may be expected in comments, as opposed to WWL’s platform, commenters were more willing to mention hot-button migrant issues and support for higher-achieving students.

Although there were extremes of commenters who blamed migrant children’s difficulties in the school system on their lack of talent, the majority of those against the reforms in Hamburg did not acknowledge the difficulties that existed with adapting the tripartite school system to an increasingly diverse population. Despite all of the available statistics on inequitable outcomes, commenters and WWL did not focus on maintaining the system because it kept migrant students out of the *Gymnasium*, but rather because it kept their students in the *Gymnasium*. Whether consciously or not, commenters and WWL were ignoring the disadvantages that many students begin school with and perpetuating the narrative that through hard work, any system is permeable.

¹³³ Gauss, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/schulreform-verantwortung?page=8#comments>.

¹³⁴ Moral_majority, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010, <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/schule/2010-07/schulreform-verantwortung?page=15#comments>.

¹³⁵ Stillfloating, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune Und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Discussion

This case study has shown that through the tracking system, parents in Hamburg who had more social capital were able to use specific language and political maneuvering in order to maintain certain advantages through ingrained systems that were theoretically open to all. The most resounding evidence for this is how WWL and commenters justified their support of the tracking system by highlighting the needs of higher-performing students. *Der Spiegel* summarized WWL's argument concisely: "In [WWL's] view, [longer learning together] would hamper high-performing students and disadvantage weaker students."¹³⁷ Among the commenters against the reforms, their concerns were clearly for the children who were already benefiting from the system, not for those being hurt by it.

What is most surprising about these findings is that in the debate over school tracking, limited mention is made of migrants, a group that needs special attention due to language barriers. Across Germany, the usual outcome for students who cannot speak German well is to be sent to the lowest-track school, historically the *Hauptschule*. In Baden-Württemberg one report concludes that this decision is often reached "with little or no consideration for the intellectual potential [students] might have."¹³⁸ In Bayern, statistics show alarming differences for students with migrant backgrounds and ethnic-German students. For instance, while 35% of German students attend *Gymnasium*, just 10.4% of non-German students do.¹³⁹ Furthermore, even when controlling for socioeconomic background, a child from a German family is more than twice as likely than a migrant student to receive an intermediate or higher education certificate.¹⁴⁰ These statistics call

¹³⁷ *Der Spiegel* Panorama, "Volksentscheid: Hamburger Schmetter Schulreform Ab," *Spiegel.de*, July 18, 2010, <https://www.spiegel.de/lebenundlernen/schule/volksentscheid-hamburger-schmetter-schulreform-ab-a-707179.html>.

¹³⁸ Directorate for Education and Skills, "Germany (Baden-Württemberg)," System Note, Innovative Learning Environments (OECD, n.d.). p. 1

¹³⁹ Rotte and Rotte, "Recent Education Policy and School Reform in Bavaria."

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

into question the claim made by one commenter: “The German education system was and is permeable to talent from the lower social classes.”¹⁴¹ Rather, language proves to be a large determinant of which track students will end up in, which has nothing to do with students’ intellectual ability. While ideally the tracking system would be dismantled or start times would be pushed back so that students could have more time to reach a baseline of knowledge, given parents’ hesitancy to reform the tracking system, extra support for students who do not speak German is perhaps the intervention that should be expanded upon until tracking reforms can take place.¹⁴²

While not mentioning migrants might have been a deliberate political tactic by the WWL, German parents seemed less concerned with reforming the education system to work better for more children and more concerned with their students getting the best education and having the best opportunity for finding a suitable job. Although the German elite may want to keep certain groups (those whom they deem less capable or who do not speak German fluently) away from their children on the basis that they will slow their children down, there is little evidence to show that German parents are deliberately acting to keep migrant students out of their classrooms. When students with a migration background are mentioned, the rhetoric generally centers around the system being permeable to talent and a lack of understanding of how the system ingrains inequities. Further research would be needed to understand whether parents truly believe the system is permeable, as a discourse analysis does not show that.

The parent group *Wir wollen lernen* has been the focus of this analysis, as the group serves as a prime example of how parental activism can inhibit school reform. WWL framed themselves

¹⁴¹ Moral_majority, Comment, *Hamburger Schulreform: Zäune Und Wachmannschaften*, July 19, 2010.

¹⁴²As stated in Rotte and Rotte, “Recent Education Policy and School Reform in Bavaria,” in order to improve language skills of 87,000 students of foreign nationality, in Bayern they developed a special language class to identify students who need extra support in learning Germany during the transition from kindergarten to primary school. They have also tried to involve mothers in these language courses in order to address the lack of German being spoken at home. Funding for this has been limited to 220 classes for 90,000 foreign students.

as “the people,” the ones who would represent what is best for all children in Hamburg. Their existence—and more importantly the lack of a prominent counter-parent movement—shows how important parental activism is when school reform gets taken out of the domain of politicians and put into the hands of parents. Parents as local political actors are able to garner so much credibility because they are directly related to those who will be affected by reforms. But they are also able to exert immense pressure against reforms that they perceive to be against their interests. This is one reason why there must be a multitude of parent groups, if there are to be any.

Conclusion

We have examined the case of Hamburg, in which a democratically elected coalition government in 2008 passed education reforms that would push back the year of tracking students from age 10 to age 12 and eliminate the parents’ right to choose a track for their child in an effort to reduce the stark tracking system, which has been proven to increase inequitable outcomes and social stratification. Upset about the possible change in societal structure, a group of Hamburg’s wealthier parents were able to halt these reforms through calling for a referendum, by arguing most saliently the following themes: the government was acting undemocratically, parents would have to move to private schools if school choice were taken away, schools could not be expected to deal with students who were not fluent in German, and these reforms would hurt higher-performing students. As the case study with Hamburg shows, certain parent groups react most swiftly when they perceive a disadvantage to (those whom they believe to be) higher-performing students.

The current tracking system in Germany allows for certain groups to maintain access to the higher tracks. In the case of Hamburg, this reform played on the more affluent parents’ fears: fears of their children falling behind and fears of their historic role in society being taken away. It is

worth reiterating that aside from Duflo et al.,¹⁴³ research overwhelmingly agrees that such stark tracking systems can be detrimental to all students and, to an even greater degree, society at large.¹⁴⁴

Outside of this case study, Germany has made some gains in detracking in recent years, showing how governments can persist in the face of public opposition to create reforms for the greater good of society. For instance, the comprehensive schools (*Gesamtschulen*) were introduced in Baden-Württemberg through an amendment to the education law in April 2012. Importantly, different levels of secondary school degrees are offered and all schools can choose to transition to become comprehensive schools.¹⁴⁵ Further analysis could compare this case with the failed attempt at detracking in Hamburg; it could be hypothesized that parents more often get involved when reforms attempt to change the *Gymnasium* and generally ignore reforms that are added on as options (as in the case of the *Gesamtschule* in Baden-Württemberg) or are a consolidation of lower tracks (as was the case with the *Stadtteilschule* in Hamburg). Despite researchers finding in 2014, fourteen years after the PISA shock, that all German students had made significant improvements in academic achievement and that achievement levels for “low performing, low socioeconomic status and immigrant students” had also markedly increased, there was still a substantial disparity. While some reform has come to the lower levels of the tracking system, the *Gymnasium* is the only level of schooling that has not changed due to PISA-inspired reforms.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, detracking of

¹⁴³Duflo et al., “Peer Effects, Teacher Incentives, and the Impact of Tracking.”

¹⁴⁴Chmielewski, “Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap”; Chmielewski et al., “Tracking Effects Depend on Tracking Type”; Jackson and Jonsson, “Why Does Inequality of Educational Opportunity Vary Across Countries?”; Raudenbush and Eschmann, “Does Schooling Increase or Reduce Social Inequality?”; Schmidt et al., “Role of Schooling in Perpetuating Educational Inequality”; Dupriez et al., “How Do School Systems Manage Pupils’ Heterogeneity?”; Dumont et al., “The Many (Subtle) Ways Parents Game the System”; Schnabel et al., “Parental Influence on Students’ Educational Choices in the United States and Germany”; Maaz et al., “Educational Transitions and Differential Learning Environments.”

¹⁴⁵ Directorate for Education and Skills, “Germany (Baden-Württemberg).”

¹⁴⁶ Christine Sälzer and Manfred Prenzel, “Looking Back at Five Rounds of PISA: Impacts on Teaching and Learning in Germany,” *Solsko Polje* 25, no. 5 (January 2014): 53–72.

the lower tracks across Germany is far from complete. As of 2018, five of the 16 states in Germany still had *Hauptschulen*,¹⁴⁷ the lowest track, which gives students a school-leaving certificate that is widely considered useless.¹⁴⁸

This analysis of the German system also has implications for education around the world. Today's education policy landscape often considers how to design schools and school systems for educating students for the 21st century. Whether reformers want to consider it or not, designing schools for the modern age must include grappling with how to best educate students from diverse backgrounds and dealing with the public opposition to such reforms. Some have argued that persistent inequities in education could lead to “increased socioeconomic polarization of trust in the legitimacy of educational institutions.”¹⁴⁹ Germany provides an excellent example of a country that has recently had to face the challenges of educating an increasingly heterogeneous student population. As such, a burgeoning conversation about *Heterogenität* has much to do with the end goal of developing the “social and democratic skills [in children] that a pluralistic society needs to flourish.”¹⁵⁰ Research has shown that within the European Union, educational inequality is a direct contributor to societal inequalities, which in turn impacts how well democracies function.¹⁵¹ Perhaps what most needs to be interrogated in Germany before any more reforms are attempted is what the purpose of education is. Is the purpose to create a school system that prepares students for a divided workforce, with little mobility and highly specialized workers? Or is the goal for

¹⁴⁷ Davoli and Entorf, “The PISA Shock, Socioeconomic Inequality, and School Reforms in Germany.”

¹⁴⁸ Rotte and Rotte, “Recent Education Policy and School Reform in Bavaria“; Alexander Schulze, Rainer Unger, and Stefan Hradil, “Bildungschancen und Lernbedingungen an Wiesbadener Grundschulen am Übergang zur Sekundarstufe I” (Wiesbaden, Germany: Projektgruppe Sozialbericht zur Bildungsbeteiligung, Amt für Soziale Arbeit, Abteilung Grundsatz und Planung, 2008).

¹⁴⁹ Chmielewski, “Global Increase in the Socioeconomic Achievement Gap,” 539.

¹⁵⁰ OECD, *Educating Teachers for Diversity*, 213.

¹⁵¹ Schlicht et al., “Educational Inequality in the EU.”

schooling to provide a level playing field? The answer to this question may determine the future of detracking.

Additionally, to facilitate equitable detracking reforms, education reformers must learn how to anticipate parental resistance and productively engage with it. When considering policy options that may allow for detracking to take place in the future, it is important to acknowledge that parents react most strongly when there are proposed changes to the highest tracks or when they feel as though educational opportunities are being taken away from their own children. As we have seen in Hamburg, and as is likely the case in all of Germany, parents do not oppose the creation of comprehensive schools when they are viewed as optional, but they do oppose any changes being made to the *Gymnasium*, the track that indicates success. How can Germany reform its schools while keeping parents' faith in public education? Being able to answer this question may be integral to successful school reform in the future. Furthermore, in future detracking efforts, policy reformers should focus on proposing new educational opportunities rather than framing their reforms as limiting parents' current options. Finally, when parent activists do arise, efforts should be made to elevate other parents' voices as well.

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