



The optimism trap: Migrants' educational choices in stratified education systems[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Immigrant children's ambitious educational choices have often been linked to their families' high level of optimism and motivation for upward mobility. However, previous research has mostly neglected alternative explanations such as information asymmetries or anticipated discrimination. Moreover, immigrant children's higher dropout rates at the higher secondary and university level suggest that low performing migrant students could have benefitted more from pursuing less ambitious tracks, especially in countries that offer viable vocational alternatives. We examine ethnic minority's educational choices using a sample of academically low performing, lower secondary school students in Germany's highly stratified education system. We find that their families' optimism diverts migrant students from viable vocational alternatives. Information asymmetries and anticipated discrimination do not explain their high educational ambitions. While our findings further support the immigrant optimism hypothesis, we discuss how its effect may have different implications depending on the education system.

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1. Introduction

In this study, we examine ethnic minority students' choice between academic-track and vocational-track education; mechanisms driving differences between ethnic minority students and native students; and the implications of these differences in stratified education systems.

There is abundant evidence that educational choices are highly consequential for future education and long-term labor market prospects (e.g., Heath et al., 2008, p. 218). Several studies document that conditional on performance and social class, ethnic minority students often choose more ambitious academic tracks than their native peers (e.g., Jackson et al., 2012).¹ With regard to explaining these 'ethnic choice effects', hereafter EC effects, most research has focused on just one

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¹ We use the term "ethnic" to refer to groups that are "defined socially as sharing a common ancestry in which membership is therefore inherited or ascribed whether or not members are currently physically or culturally distinctive" (Bonacich, 2001). We focus on the educational choices of second-generation migrants. In line with the previous literature (e.g., Jackson, 2012; Heath and Brinbaum, 2007), we refer to them as "second-generation ethnic minority students" or, shortened, "minority students".

explanation, namely that migrants are more optimistic and, therefore, aim higher for their offspring's education (e.g., [Heath and Brinbaum, 2007](#); [Kao and Tienda, 1995](#); [Salikutluk, 2016](#)).

Literature has focused less on the alternative mechanisms, when assessing migrant students' educational choices. First, immigrant families may have less or biased information regarding different educational options (e.g., [Kao and Tienda, 1998](#)). This is especially the case when living in countries with more stratified education systems, that are more complex particularly at the secondary level. This argument goes beyond general knowledge of alternative pathways. In contrast to native students, second-generation students' families might have less information and contacts for acquiring vocational training positions. Moreover, another information bias concerns the perceptions of students' academic performance. Systematically overestimating performance, such as attributing bad grades to migration background, could also result in the observed EC effects. Beyond information asymmetries, a second alternative mechanism is anticipated discrimination (e.g., [Heath and Brinbaum, 2007](#)). This may result in immigrant students making more ambitious choices, such as continuing to higher tertiary education to compensate for (anticipated) discrimination in the labor market. Thus, migrants' optimism could be driven partly by a lack of information or by anticipated discrimination. We argue that research on either mechanism must therefore incorporate all mechanisms together in order to examine their relative (net) importance.

Beyond the lack of evidence on the described individual mechanisms, the implications of EC effects for different populations in different education systems remain unclear. While it is plausible that ambitious choices benefit students in comprehensive education systems, it may not hold true for low performing students in stratified education systems, especially if they often cannot realize their high ambitions. The latter systems usually provide viable vocational education paths. Moreover, employers put more emphasis on (completed) certificates and degrees (e.g., [Allmendinger, 1989](#)). Although tertiary dropout is not associated with labor market disadvantages in general, tertiary dropouts in countries with highly stratified education systems show significantly lower employment rates at ages 25–44 years ([Schnepf, 2017](#)). Hence, low performing students may have benefitted more from pursuing the viable vocational alternatives that are available in these countries. In France and Germany, for example, the dropout rate at the tertiary level is almost twice as high for second-generation migrants' compared to their native counterparts (e.g., [Brinbaum and Guégnard, 2013](#); [Burkhart et al., 2011](#)).

To address these research questions, we study the educational choices of low achieving students at the end of lower secondary schooling in Germany. Using data from the National Educational Panel Survey ([Blossfeld et al., 2011](#)), we compare second-generation migrant students with native students.² At this stage in German education, students at the lower level secondary schools are faced with the decision to either continue the general, academic track education or to pursue dual vocational education and training (hereafter “dual VET”).³ Similar to countries with more comprehensive education systems, most highly prestigious professions, which are associated with higher incomes (e.g. lawyer, medical doctor, etc.), require a university degree. However, in contrast to other countries, Germany also offers viable vocational alternatives that provide access to stable employment outcomes and can potentially allow for above-average income and status ([Kalter, 2006](#); [Becker, 2011](#)).

Our results show strong EC effects for low performing students in Germany's stratified secondary education system. These EC effects are largely driven by immigrant optimism. We find no evidence that the EC effects are due to a lack of necessary information about acquiring a dual VET position or biased information on their academic performance (i.e. information asymmetries). Furthermore, we can show that while minority students more often expect discrimination by employers, the anticipation of such disadvantages also does not explain their choices (i.e. anticipated discrimination).

Our findings make two contributions to the international literature on educational choices. First, our results provide stronger support for the universal application of the immigrant optimism hypothesis by applying it to low performing students in stratified systems. Second, we discuss the implications for these students in stratified education systems. Migrant families' motivation for upward mobility may result in more pressure on offspring to avoid viable vocational alternatives, that could provide smooth school-to-work transitions and stable employment, in favor of more traditional academic tracks. Therefore, these students may underestimate the benefit of viable vocational alternatives while simultaneously facing greater risks of dropping out before completing higher tertiary degrees. Optimism can, thus, be a “trap” for low performing minority students. This ‘optimism trap’ ties directly into the discussions at the international level about the value of vocational skills in a ‘college-for-all’ era where the benefits of college may be overstated for some groups ([Rosenbaum, 2001](#); [Rosenbaum et al., 2010](#)).

2. Ethnic choice effects

The literature on educational inequality has highlighted two causal pathways linking the social or ethnic background of students to their educational achievements. First, familial activities and resources affect student performance. Performance, in turn, is a key predictor for educational transitions at crucial branching points. The second pathway is via educational choices. At given levels of performance, members of status-defined or ethnically defined groups have been found to make

² We exclude first-generation migrants from the analyses because they are found in too small numbers in the data to distinguish between origin contexts.

³ Dual VET refers to the most common vocational training arrangement in Germany. Apprentices receive on-the-job training in companies but are subject to state regulations and must attend part-time school-based training in public so-called ‘Berufsschulen’, while they hold training contracts with the employer.

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