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Newly Arrived Young Migrants in Vocational Preparation Classes: A Qualitative Study of Experiences of Disadvantage in Hamburg's AvM-Dual Classes

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List of Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland	Alternative for Germany (far-right political party)
AV/AvDual	Ausbildungsvorbereitung (Dual)	Vocational Preparation
AvM/AvM-Dual	Ausbildungsvorbereitung für Migrant*innen (Dual)	Vocational Preparation for Migrants
ESA	Erster Schulabschluss	First General School Leaving Certificate
eESA	Erweiterter Erster Schulabschluss	Extended First General School Leaving Certificate
HIBB	Hamburger Institut für Berufliche Bildung	Hamburg Institute for Vocational Education and Training
MSA	Mittlerer Schulabschluss	Intermediate School Leaving Certificate

1 Introduction

N: Good question.

I: Yeah? Why is that a good question?

N: No one has ever... no one has ever asked me. (.)

I: What has no one asked you? If you've been discriminated against? (...)

N: Yes.

(Navid, 651-655)

This response from a young person in a Hamburg AvM-Dual class [1] to the question of whether he had experienced discrimination captures precisely what motivates the present study: newly arrived young people in the German vocational transition system are subject to educational policy measures, institutional assignment processes, and increasingly also scholarly attention – yet their own perceptions of these conditions remain largely unexplored. Following the rise in forced migration since 2015, dedicated educational programs within the vocational transition system were established or expanded for newly arrived young people across all German federal states (Baethge & Seeber, 2016; Braun & Lex, 2016). In Hamburg, this takes the form of the *Vocational Preparation Classes for Migrants* (Ausbildungsvorbereitungsklassen für Migranten, AvM-Dual), which have been established since 2016 as a standard offering at all vocational schools and address all newly arrived school-age young people regardless of their residence status (HIBB, 2024; Sturm & Kruse, 2018). These classes exemplify an institutional response logic that follows a long-standing continuity in the German education system: the response to heterogeneity is separation – managing difference through separate structures, rather than fundamentally adjusting the regular institutions (Karakayali et al., 2017; Massumi et al., 2015). At the same time, the vocational transition sector is the area of the education system in which structural inequalities are most concentrated for young people with a migration background: they are overrepresented there, stay longer than average, and frequently find themselves with limited and unattractive onward pathways (Beicht & Walden, 2017; Seeber et al., 2019). Disadvantages in this context do not arise solely through direct interactions but are often deeply embedded in institutional structures, routines, and assignment logics (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009) – and thus often escape the immediate perception of those affected. That is precisely why the question of whether and how young people perceive, interpret, and evaluate these conditions is equally relevant for discrimination research, educational practice, and political debate. Experiences of discrimination do not arise independently of individual interpretations and cannot be understood without considering the perspective of those who experience them (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023). This thesis, therefore, places the subjective experiential perspectives of the young people at its center and addresses the following research questions:

[1] In the following, the educational program is referred to both as "AvM-Dual" and in the abbreviated form "AvM", with the associated learning groups referred to as "AvM classes."

1) What disadvantages and structural challenges do young people in AvM classes in Hamburg perceive?
2) How do these young people interpret and evaluate these experiences – and to what extent do they identify them as discrimination?

1.1 State of Research

Scholarly engagement with the educational conditions of newly arrived and refugee young people has gained significant momentum since 2015. However, El-Mafaalani and Massumi (2019a) note in their comprehensive overview of the state of research that it still fails to adequately reflect the field's societal relevance. The growing volume of publications shows a clear thematic bias: questions about school integration, language acquisition, and access to education in the general education system are at the center. In contrast, the vocational education sector receives significantly less attention, and refugee participation in vocational training remains one of the least-researched areas (El-Mafaalani & Massumi, 2019a, p. 19; Neises & Granato, 2017, p. 6). Research on preparatory classes has so far mainly focused on the general education sector. Karakayali et al. (2017) demonstrate that separated forms of schooling have long institutional continuity and have been systematically under-researched over decades – a continuity of neglect that makes the young people educated in these classes appear as a low priority in educational policy. This applies to an even greater degree to the vocational education sector and specifically to transitional measures such as AvM-Dual: the classes introduced in Hamburg in 2016 have so far barely become the subject of independent empirical research.

Where research on vocational preparatory measures for migrants exists, it shows a strong functional orientation. The focus is on labor market policy issues – for example, how the integration of refugees into dual vocational training can be successfully achieved from an employer's perspective (Scheiermann, 2022), what challenges exist in access to vocational training (Seeber et al., 2019) or how vocational orientation processes proceed (Reinke, 2022; Wehking, 2020). El-Mafaalani and Massumi (2019a, p. 19) critically note that the education of refugees is increasingly being reduced to aspects of utility and employability – not only in policy, but also in research. By focusing primarily on the question of how young people can be integrated into vocational training and the labor market as smoothly as possible, research reproduces the very same vocational orientation logic that is criticized about the education system itself – namely, that hardly any academic qualification pathways are envisioned for refugee young people and that the transition into employment appears to be the dominant onward option (Korntheuer, 2016, pp. 263–264). The question of how the young people perceive and evaluate these structures themselves hardly arises in this research landscape.

This blind spot is also reflected in the only institutional report on AvM-Dual to date that includes student voices. While the report by the *Hamburg Institute for Vocational Education and Training* (Hamburger Institut für Berufliche Bildung, HIBB) on the pilot phase of the program contains occasional critical notes – such as references to boredom or demanding homework (Sturm & Kruse, 2018, pp. 58–59) – structural criticism or experiences of disadvantage are entirely absent. Instead, statements such as *"The teachers are always kind to their students"* (Hiba, quoted by Sturm & Kruse,

2018, p. 58) or *"I think AvM is good because there is no discrimination at all"* (Moktar, quoted by Sturm & Kruse, 2018, p. 59) dominate. The fact that such statements are published as representative student feedback points to how limited the attention to student perspectives has been in existing engagements with AvM-Dual – and underscores the need for an independent empirical perspective.

Research on discrimination in the education system has likewise barely explored the perspectives of these young people. The concept of institutional discrimination has been developed and empirically tested primarily in the general education sector (a.o. Fereidooni, 2011; Gomolla & Radtke, 2009; Jording, 2022; Karakayali et al., 2017). While its applicability to vocational transitional measures is theoretically plausible (Korntheuer, 2016, pp. 44–45), it has been empirically realized only to a limited extent. Qualitative studies that reconstruct experiences of disadvantage and discrimination from the perspective of students in such classes are largely absent in the German context (El-Mafaalani & Massumi, 2019a, p. 28; Jording, 2022, p. 23).

This thesis addresses this multifaceted research gap. By using qualitative methods, it empirically captures the subjective perspectives of students in Hamburg's AvM classes regarding their experiences of disadvantages and discrimination, thereby contributing to a research field that has largely remained in the shadows despite its relevance to educational policy.

1.2 Structure and Scope of the Thesis

To answer the research questions outlined above, the thesis begins with a contextual embedding of the research field (Chapter 2). To systematically understand the experiences of the interviewed youth, the central inequality dynamics of the German education system are examined – particularly the close linkage between social origin and educational success, as well as the institutional inertias and separation logics that shape the handling of migration within the German school system (2.1). Following this, the vocational transition system is introduced as the part of the education system where programs like AvM-Dual are institutionally situated (2.1.3). The chapter concludes with a descriptive-analytical presentation of the Vocational Preparation Classes for Migrants (AvM-Dual) in Hamburg – the concrete institutional context in which the interviewed young people are situated and which the present thesis focuses on (2.2). Chapter 3 develops the theoretical and conceptual framework of the thesis. Drawing on a broad sociological conceptualization of discrimination (3.1), the central levels of discrimination – structural, institutional, and interactional – are conceptualized and analyzed in their mutual entanglement (3.2). This framework is complemented by an intersectional perspective (3.3) as well as an in-depth engagement with the subjective perception, interpretation, and coping with discrimination (3.4). This theoretical foundation is necessary in order to analytically situate and interpret the empirical findings. Chapter 4 presents the research design and methodological approach of the study. The semi-structured interviews as the data collection method and the content-structuring qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2024) as the analytical procedure are introduced (4.1). In addition, the field access and the sample are presented (4.2), and the entire research process, as well as the researcher's own role, are reflected upon (4.3). The empirical findings are presented in Chapter 5 along three analytical levels that follow the theoretical distinction between experience, interpretation, and action:

perceived disadvantages and structural challenges (5.1), interpretations and evaluations of these experiences (5.2), as well as the young people's responses, coping strategies, and perceived spaces of agency (5.3). In Chapter 6, the findings are theoretically contextualized and discussed in light of existing research. The discussion is guided by the two research questions. First, AvM classes are analyzed as an institutionally structured transitional space (6.1), before the young people's subjective perception and (non-)identification of discrimination are examined (6.2). Finally, the findings are synthesized and related back to the research questions (6.3). Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with a summary of the central findings and an outlook on open questions and future research perspectives.

With regard to the thematic delimitation, it should be noted that the present thesis places the subjective experiential perspectives of the young people at its center and does not aim to provide an objective measurement of discrimination. Structural and institutional conditions are taken into account insofar as they constitute the interpretive framework for individual experiences; however, a systematic analysis of school organizational or educational policy governance processes lies outside the scope of this study. Equally, no claim to completeness can be made regarding all possible dimensions of discrimination; the focus lies on migration-related, linguistic, and residence law-related axes of difference, although their entanglement with further categories is intersectionally reflected upon. It should further be noted that the present thesis does not aim to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of AvM-Dual against one another or to evaluate the program in its entirety. It is not denied that AvM-Dual can also offer positive experiences and development opportunities for young people. The focus, however, is deliberately placed on the perceived disadvantages and structural challenges of the young people – not because positive experiences are to be excluded, but because this perspective has been largely absent from existing engagements with AvM-Dual.

2 Contextualization of the Research Field

Schools are not only institutions for knowledge transfer and personality development but also central places for negotiating societal belonging, norms, and the distribution of opportunities (El-Mafaalani, 2023). Despite its inclusive function, the German education system exhibits pronounced structural deficits. To analyze perceived disadvantages and experiences of discrimination that do not occur in a vacuum but are inevitably embedded in institutional and societal structures, it is necessary to gain an understanding of those structural conditions. The following chapter, therefore, serves to contextualize the research field in order to adequately situate the empirical findings within the structural framework of the German education system. First, the structural conditions and inequality dynamics of the German education system are examined, which substantially shape the educational biographies of newly arrived young people (2.1). This is followed by an introduction to the Vocational Preparation Classes for Migrants (AvM-Dual) in Hamburg as the institutional context in which the interview participants were situated at the time of data collection or had been situated immediately prior (2.2). The central objectives, organizational structures, and curricular features of the AvM-Dual classes are to be outlined in a descriptive-analytical manner in order to describe the institutional conditions within which the

experiences of disadvantage and discrimination examined in this thesis arise. This contextualization thus forms the basis for understanding the empirical findings presented later.

2.1 The German Education and Vocational Training System

The German education and vocational training system not only reflects societal structures but also actively contributes to the reproduction of unequal opportunities. In order to situate the experiences of the young people interviewed in this thesis structurally, three interrelated levels are examined in the following. First, it is analyzed how social origin structurally influences educational opportunities and which mechanisms contribute to the reproduction of inequality (2.1.1). Building on that, it is considered how migration is negotiated within the German education system and which institutional inertia and separation logics are at work (2.1.2). Finally, the vocational transition system is brought into focus as the institutional framework in which these mechanisms are most concentrated for newly arrived young people and in which programs such as AvM-Dual have emerged (2.1.3).

2.1.1 Social Origin and Educational Inequality

In international comparison, hardly any other OECD country shows a stronger determination of educational opportunities by social origin than Germany. Class membership and parental level of education substantially predetermine children's educational success (Wößmann et al., 2023). This close coupling is not a coincidental byproduct of individual performance differences, but the result of structural features of the German education system – in particular its early-selecting and highly stratified school system, which does not reduce social disparities but rather entrenches them (El-Mafaalani, 2012, p. 25). Once assigned, educational paths are difficult to correct: those who are directed to a lower school track early on have limited opportunities to change that path later. Early educational decisions structurally restrict later options and thus contribute to the long-term solidification of social inequalities (Bellenberg et al., 2004; El-Mafaalani, 2012, p. 27).

Central to these reproductive processes is access to cultural and social capital in the sense of Bourdieu (1987), which substantially influences educational decisions. Families from educationally disadvantaged or socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds often lack access to precisely those resources that would be necessary to realistically assess academic requirements and transition decisions – which leads them to act in a risk-averse manner and choose educational paths that seem safer or more familiar, even when higher options would be available (El-Mafaalani, 2012, p. 25). For newly arrived families, this situation becomes even more challenging: they are confronted with an education system they largely do not know, have little institutional knowledge or informal networks, and therefore have even fewer opportunities to actively shape educational pathways or question assignment decisions (Korntheuer, 2016).

The influence of social origin on educational achievement is evident among students both with and without an international family history. The so-called migration background does not constitute an isolated explanatory factor, but operates in close entanglement with social origin (El-Mafaalani, 2023, pp. 69–70). Migrant households, on average, tend to have higher educational aspirations than non-

migrant households (El-Mafaalani, 2017; Relikowski et al., 2012) – and since high educational aspirations have been proven to be strongly positively correlated with academic success (Becker, 2010), students with a migration background would theoretically, according to El-Mafaalani (2017, p. 709), be more successful than students without a migration background under otherwise equal social conditions. However, the expected positive effect of high aspirations does not always materialize. The divergence between educational aspirations and the actually achieved educational paths – also described in research as the aspiration-achievement paradox – refers to the finding that young people with a migration background, despite having above-average educational ambitions, on average attain lower educational qualifications than they aspire to (Becker & Gresch, 2016; Salikutluk, 2016). The realization gap arises because structural disadvantages – including language barriers, fewer family support resources, and institutional assignment logic – generally weaken academic performance and thus make it more difficult to achieve high aspirations (Becker & Gresch, 2016; Gomolla & Radtke, 2009; Lokhande, 2016).

Although the influence of social origin is evident regardless of students' migration background, the so-called migration background thus carries independent relevance in the German education system – not least because migration-related axes of difference are addressed in institutionally specific ways. The following section examines how migration is institutionally negotiated in the German education system and which logics, routines, and inertias of the system are operative therein.

2.1.2 Migration and the Logic of Separation in the German Education System

In the German education system, migration is treated institutionally as an exceptional situation and a deviation from an imagined normality, rather than as an integral component of school reality (Massumi, 2019, p. 137). Historically grown structures and standardized processes are strongly oriented toward a homogeneous student body, which means that heterogeneous learning prerequisites – such as those found among newly arrived students – are only limitedly taken into account. The institutional response to this heterogeneity follows a characteristic logic: instead of adapting the existing structures, difference is managed through specific programs and separate classes (Karakayali et al., 2017). Heterogeneity is thus primarily understood as a problem of the students, which should be solved individually or through special measures – not as an occasion for structural change. This deficit-oriented view shapes the institutional image of migrant students: the system regards them primarily through the lens of what they lack – language skills, recognized qualifications, cultural familiarity with the German school system – rather than acknowledging the resources and competencies they bring with them (Massumi, 2019). A central mechanism of this deficit orientation is the *monolingual habitus* (monolinguale Habitus) of the German school. Gogolin (2008) uses this concept to describe the institutionally anchored self-evidence of treating German as the only legitimate language of instruction and communication – not as an explicit rule, but as an unquestioned assumption of normality deeply inscribed in pedagogical practices, curricula, and professional orientations. Multilingualism is not recognized as a resource in this context but is made structurally invisible. The question of whether instruction could also take place in other languages does not even arise institutionally. Following Gogolin et al. (2003, pp. 63–64, 89), language skills thus function not merely as one competency among many, but operate structurally as a central

criterion of selection that determines educational pathways, class placements, and opportunities for advancement. This implies, in reverse: those who do not sufficiently master German are institutionally considered as not (yet) trainable within the regular system – regardless of other skills, prior education, or learning potential. The *monolingual habitus* thus contributes to the persistence of the logic of separation: it provides the implicit legitimacy to segregate youth with other first languages into separate structures, as long as they do not meet the expectations of linguistic normality (Karakayali et al., 2017, pp. 226–227).

The persistence of the logic of separation cannot be attributed solely to a lack of political will but is deeply embedded in the institutional logic of the education system itself. Institutions such as the school function, according to El-Mafaalani (2023, pp. 167–175) as guardians of societal continuity – their inertia in the face of change is not a deficit but a system-immanent function aimed at preserving social orders. Structural changes therefore only ever occur within the system's own internal logic: migration is institutionally treated as an exceptional and emergency situation, rather than as a permanent societal reality to which the system would need to fundamentally respond to (Hummrich & Karakaşoğlu, 2022, p. 811; Massumi, 2019, p. 137). That the education system is structurally oriented not toward compensation but toward the reproduction of social inequality is already evident in access to education itself, which cannot be taken for granted for newly arrived and refugee young people. While compulsory schooling exists in Germany in principle, the specific regulations vary considerably depending on residence status and federal state (El-Mafaalani & Massumi, 2019a, pp. 12–13; Heidrich, 2024, pp. 33–34). Access to education is therefore structurally more insecure for refugees than for other young people. As an institutional response to this situation, various forms of support and preparatory classes have been established in general education schools across all federal states, bearing different designations depending on the state – such as preparatory classes (Vorbereitungsklassen, i.a. NRW, Saxony), intensive classes (Intensivklassen, Hesse), language learning classes (Sprachlernklassen, Lower Saxony), international preparatory classes (Internationale Vorbereitungsklassen, Hamburg), or introductory courses (Vorkurse, Bremen) (Massumi et al., 2015, p. 11).

Karakayali et al. (2017) demonstrate in their organizationally informed study that this practice of separated schooling is not a new invention but follows a long institutional continuity – from the "Ausländerregelklassen" (foreign national classes) of the 1960s to today's "Willkommensklassen" (welcome classes). Despite changed educational policy rhetoric and shifted societal attitudes toward migration, the same patterns repeat themselves: children are declared uneducable within the mainstream system on the grounds of insufficient German language skills and an assumed lack of cultural fit, and the design of separate schooling proceeds largely without concept and on a short-term basis (Karakayali et al., 2017, pp. 225–226, 231). This lack of conceptual grounding is reflected not least in the fact that preparatory classes are designed as temporary solutions (Heidrich, 2024, p. 82) – which paradoxically, furthers their structural solidification: precisely because they are seen as temporary, the pressure to change the general education system itself decreases. Rather than implementing structural changes, parallel structures are established – what Emmerich et al. (2016, p. 116) describe as a continuity of

adhocracy in educational policy responses to migration: educational policy repeatedly responds with administrative and organizational ad hoc solutions, rather than incorporating migration as a permanent societal reality into a comprehensive strategy of educational planning (Karakayali et al., 2017, p. 231). A further structural problem within the context of preparatory classes concerns the qualifications of teaching staff. Karakayali et al. (2017, p. 230) show that in their Berlin study, 13 of 18 interviewed teachers in preparatory classes were working as career changers – without experience in regular school operations and without a binding curriculum.

Empirical findings on the consequences of this separation practice are critical. Jording (2022, pp. 385–391) shows in her study on local school systems that separated forms of schooling restrict students' participation opportunities and generate differentiation practices that reinforce social inequalities. Höckel and Schilling (2022) demonstrate using Hamburg data that children in preparatory classes are less likely to successfully transition to a Gymnasium[2]. Winkler and Carwehl (2025) show that former students of welcome classes still have lower language skills years later than those who attended mainstream classes from the beginning. Research points to a structural ambivalence: preparatory classes are meant to facilitate integration, but can contribute to long-term segregation and reinforce educational disadvantages (SVR, 2018).

Overall, it becomes clear that migration in the German education system is addressed through institutional inertia, deficit orientation, and logics of separation – mechanisms that are not only effective in the general education system but, as the following section shows, continue into the vocational education sector and the transition system.

2.1.3 The Transition System in the Vocational Education Sector

Newly arrived young people aged 16 and older are generally no longer assigned to general education schools but to vocational training programs (El-Mafaalani & Massumi, 2019a, p. 14). Since many of them cannot (immediately) enter regular educational programs due to lack of German language skills, interrupted educational biographies, or unrecognized qualifications, specific educational pathways have been developed in all federal states within the vocational transition system (Baethge & Seeber, 2016; Braun & Lex, 2016). Despite state-specific differences in duration, entry requirements, and design, these offerings share a common programmatic core: they are intended to enable language education, provide vocational orientation, and prepare the transition into vocational training or further education (Reinke, 2022, pp. 36–37).

The so-called transition system refers to an institutional area within the German vocational education system that lies between general education schools and fully qualifying vocational training. It is aimed at young people who have left the general education school system without directly entering vocational training. The term was introduced by the National Education Report 2006 (Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung, 2006), which grouped partially qualifying educational programs – including

[2] The Gymnasium in Germany is the academically oriented secondary school that provides an advanced general education, preparing students for the university entrance qualification (Abitur).

pre-vocational training years (Berufsvorbereitungsjahre), preparatory measures of the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit), and vocational schools without a fully qualifying degree – as a third sector alongside the dual training system and the school-based vocational system (Baethge, 2012, pp. 327–328). These offerings share that they do not lead to a recognized professional qualification but are intended to prepare for later entry into fully qualifying training or employment (Konsortium Bildungsberichterstattung, 2006, p. 79). Thus, the transition sector serves as a work-related qualification bridge between general education and vocational training (BMFSFJ, 2017, p. 432).

At the same time, the transition sector is often described as an area where social inequalities are concentrated and reproduced. The participant structure has shown a high level of consistency over decades: primarily, young people with low or no school qualifications systematically enter this sector and remain there for an above-average length of time. The transition to measures within the transition system is not an exception for these people, but a structural pattern (Baethge, 2012, p. 331; Schroeder & Thielen, 2009, p. 7). Especially young people with a migration background are disproportionately represented in the transition area (Beicht & Walden, 2017, pp. 426–433; Seeber et al., 2019, p. 73), which applies in particular to young people without German citizenship (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2016, p. 177; Gruber, 2019, p. 5). This overrepresentation cannot be solely attributed to individual factors. Structural causes for difficulties in accessing vocational training include, in addition to the absence of school qualifications (Seeber et al., 2019, p. 76), language requirements in the vocational training market (Seeber et al., 2019, pp. 77–78), precarious residence situations (SVR, 2020, p. 11) and discriminatory selection practices toward applicants with a migration background (Scherr et al., 2015; Seeber et al., 2019, pp. 78–79). The transition sector thus functions not only as a bridge but also as a filter, where certain groups stay longer or are excluded from regular training pathways more than others. Baethge et al. (2007) and Münk (2010) argue in this context that the transition system does not function for many young people as a preparatory transit station, but marks the beginning of repeated measures without clear onward prospects. The danger of so-called "waiting loops" (Warteschleifen) is highlighted, in which young people repeatedly go through procedures without improving their vocational training prospects, potentially leading to a loss of motivation or stigmatization in the long run (Caponio & Borkert, 2010, p. 92; Richter & Baethge, 2017, p. 297).

The educational paths of young refugees are heavily influenced by individual and social resources. German language skills, knowledge of the education system, or social networks are crucial, while high educational aspirations alone are often not enough to successfully navigate transitions (Beicht & Walden, 2017, pp. 428–429; Maué et al., 2021, pp. 120–121; Rusert et al., 2022, p. 6). Transitions do not occur equally for all groups; instead, they are socially unevenly distributed and are significantly shaped by institutional conditions. On a strongly certificate-based labor market, formal qualifications are decisive for access to qualified employment (Georg & Sattel, 2006, p. 128; Konietzka, 2011, pp. 266, 270; Tippelt, 2006, p. 95). Those without vocational training are consequently often only able to access unstable and low-paid work (Georg & Sattel, 2006, pp. 133–134; Konietzka, 2011, pp. 269, 278). Refugees have frequently been forced to interrupt their educational biographies due to war and

displacement and therefore often lack completed formal qualifications (Brücker et al., 2018, pp. 31, 86; El-Mafaalani & Massumi, 2019b, p. 3). In addition, qualifications acquired abroad are often not recognized in Germany, which further complicates access to vocational training and the labor market (Brücker et al., 2018, pp. 64, 69–70).

But even when qualifications are present, access to the training market is influenced by further selection mechanisms. Studies show that young migrants and refugees often concentrate in particular, less attractive, or lower-paid vocational training occupations. In 2008, 44% of all foreign apprentices in the dual system were in just ten occupations – primarily in sales and retail, hairdressing, and the hospitality industry – while access to more qualified commercial, technical, or IT professions remained limited (BIBB, 2010, p. 186).[3] This concentration on a narrow occupational spectrum cannot be solely attributed to individual preferences. Wehking (2020) shows, using the example of refugee young people in vocational preparation classes, that occupational decisions are made primarily on the basis of practically available options offered by the education system and the migration and transition regime, rather than on individual interests, abilities, or long-term career aspirations. Career aspirations are often postponed, and the choice of a training place is made situationally, for example, following an internship (Wehking refers to this as an *adhesive effect* (Klebeeffekt)), rather than out of free preference. Wehking (2020, p. 375) further shows that the shaping of transitions is strongly influenced by social contexts and what she terms *knowledge-empowered guides* (wissensmächtige Wegweisende). While family support is frequently limited – particularly for unaccompanied young people – teachers, counseling institutions, and contacts with the majority society take on a central role in structuring possibilities and expectations (Wehking, 2020, pp. 276–277). These actors influence which educational and career paths are perceived as realistic, thereby contributing to the reproduction or expansion of scope for action. Drawing on Heinz et al. (1987), Wehking shows that the existing apprenticeship offerings and the institutional possibilities also determine career choices (Wehking, 2020, p. 392). Career decisions are often retrospectively reinterpreted: the vocational training appears in hindsight as the desired training, even though it originally resulted from structural adjustment processes (Wehking, 2020, p. 393).

A pragmatism is also evident in the fact that occupational decisions often have a functional orientation. Educational and training paths are chosen primarily to acquire basic resources such as language skills, legal residence security, or school qualifications (Wehking, 2020, pp. 372–374). Actual career aspirations are often postponed to the future, functioning more as a long-term frame of orientation rather than immediate actionable goals. Ideas of fulfilling or interest-driven work remain present as motivational ideals but can only be realized to a limited extent under conditions of restricted institutional permeability.

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[3] More recent BIBB (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung/Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training) data reports no longer present this specific breakdown by nationality and vocational occupation in a comparable form, which is why the 2010 data report is referenced here. However, the general tendency toward a concentration on a narrow occupational spectrum is confirmed in more recent studies as well (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2016, pp. 177–178; BIBB, 2021, pp. 97–98; BIBB, 2025, pp. 105–106; Gruber, 2019, p. 7).

2.2 Vocational Preparation Classes for Migrants (AvM-Dual) in Hamburg

Against the background of the structural context described in the previous section, the focus now turns to the educational program in which the interview participants of this thesis are situated: the Vocational Preparation Classes for Migrants (AvM-Dual) in Hamburg. As Hamburg's specific form of vocational preparatory classes for newly arrived young people, this program is outlined in the following with regard to its objectives, structural framework conditions, and curricular logics.

2.2.1 Objectives and Legal Framework

The Vocational Preparation Classes for Migrants (AvM-Dual) is an educational program of the Hamburg Institute for Vocational Education and Training (Hamburger Institut für Berufliche Bildung, HIBB), which has been offered at all vocational schools since 2016. It is directed at newly arrived school-age young people between the ages of 16 and 18, regardless of their residence status, and pursues the goal of enabling access to vocational education and opening onward pathways within the German education system (Sturm & Kruse, 2018, p. 1). The legal basis is the Training and Examination Regulations for Pre-Vocational Schools (Ausbildungs- und Prüfungsordnung der Berufsvorbereitungsschule, APO-BVS) and supplementary administrative regulations of the HIBB (2024, p. 2). The official documents articulate several interconnected objectives: AvM-Dual is intended to (1) promote the systematic acquisition of the German language, linking formal language education in school with informal language opportunities in the workplace, (2) support vocational orientation and gradually introduce young people to the dual vocational training system, (3) contribute to intercultural school education in full-day schooling by reflecting on experiences from the new social and professional environment and transforming them into learning processes, and (4) consider the heterogeneous learning prerequisites of young people and enable differentiated learning pathways. This includes the possibility of obtaining the first general school leaving certificate (Erster allgemeinbildender Schulabschluss, ESA) or, depending on performance level, an extended ESA (eESA) or the intermediate school certificate (Mittlerer Schulabschluss, MSA)[4] (HIBB, 2024; Sturm & Kruse, 2018, p. 7). The HIBB thereby positions AvM-Dual not only as a transitional format within the vocational education system, but also as a pedagogically framed integration offering intended to combine language education, competency development, vocational orientation, and personal development.

2.2.2 Organizational and Curricular Design

The program spans two years and is conceived as a full-time school offering with dualized elements (Figure A1). Overall, the AvM-Dual includes 36 hours per week, of which 30 are instructional hours, and six are supplementary offerings. A characteristic feature is the regular alternation between the vocational school and the workplace, coordinated across both school years (Kruse et al., 2017, pp. 126–

[4] The ESA, eESA, and MSA are successive qualification levels within the German secondary school system. The ESA corresponds to the certificate awarded after nine years of schooling, the eESA to an extended version of that, and the MSA to the certificate awarded after ten years of schooling. The latter is a prerequisite for access to higher secondary school types and a broader range of vocational training occupations.

129; Sturm & Kruse, 2018). The structure of the program is divided into an arrival phase, preparatory phases, several dualized phases (two or three days per week at the workplace), practical workplace blocks, and a concluding transition planning phase. In total, young people spend approximately 14 months at the vocational school and 10 months in the workplace. This close interlinking is intended both to serve vocational-practical orientation and to contextualize language requirements in a real working environment. Central to this is the principle of "extended duality", which provides that workplace experiences are systematically taken up in school-based learning processes The subject offerings in AvM classes are intended to encompass both cross-vocational and vocational-specific learning areas: "Language and Communication", "Mathematics", "Technical English", "Values and Life in Germany", and "Health and Movement", as well as learning fields such as "Learning and Acting in the Workplace", "Representing Work in the Workplace", "Reflecting on Workplace Experiences", and "Shaping One's Own Transition into Training and Employment" (HIBB, 2024). The curriculum is therefore oriented less toward the subject-specific requirement profiles of general secondary schools and more toward the competency requirements of pre-vocational measures.

A central structural feature of AvM-Dual is the institutional involvement of mentors, who are intended to accompany young people during the workplace phases (Kruse et al., 2017, pp. 127–128). These are intended to take on tasks such as mediating between young people and workplaces, supporting with operational requirements, identifying language-related needs, crisis intervention, and advising on social or organizational difficulties. Mentors can be both teachers and work assistants from external educational providers (Sturm & Kruse, 2018, p. 6). Their function is considered central to the quality and stability of the program, as they form an interface between school and workplace and accompany young people over extended periods of time. The design of transitions is likewise intended to constitute a central component of the program. The institutional objective of transition management is to develop "tailored onward pathways" (Sturm & Kruse, 2018, p. 8). The strong vocational-practical orientation of AvM-Dual suggests that the transition into vocational training constitutes a concept-immanent onward option. This is also indicated by initial quantitative evaluations of the pilot run of AvM-Dual. These show that in the first pilot cohort, 21% of young people entered vocational qualification measures (BQ), 6% entered employment (e.g., FSJ, Bufdi)[5], 14% entered further school-based educational programs, and 23% entered measures of the Federal Employment Agency. In the second pilot run, these proportions shifted: entry into BQ measures rose to 28.3%, transitions into employment to 7.6%, transitions into further school-based education fell to 6.5%, while 18.5% transferred into measures of the Federal Employment Agency (Sturm & Kruse, 2018, p. 8). Although onward pathways into general education programs are formally available, the available data suggest that these are realized in practice only for a minority of graduates – vocationally and labor market-oriented transitions clearly predominate. The labor market orientation is reflected not only in the curriculum but also in the HIBB's programmatic communication. The institute actively recruits businesses in its information brochures to provide

[5] FSJ: Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr (Voluntary Social Year); Bufdi: Bundesfreiwilligendienst (Federal Voluntary Service)

internship places for the workplace learning phases (HIBB, 2016). Participation is presented to companies as a "win-win situation", as they can "get to know your future apprentice early on" and receive support from school teachers and workplace integration guides (HIBB, 2016, p. 1).

2.2.3 Heterogeneous Learning Prerequisites and Superdiversity in AvM Classes

Worthy of particular note is the strongly heterogeneous student body in AvM classes, which is characteristic of preparatory classes in general. The students in these classes differ significantly in terms of their educational backgrounds, first languages, lengths of stay, and future prospects. Starting situations include widely varying durations of school attendance in the country of origin, interrupted or discontinuous educational biographies, missing or unrecognized qualifications, migration- and displacement-related burdens, diverging language competencies and literacy experiences, as well as differing vocational orientations and onward goals (Scheiermann, 2022, pp. 31–44). These multidimensional differences can be understood, in the sense of Vertovec (2007, 2023) as an expression of superdiverse learning prerequisites, since the students differ not only along one but across a multitude of overlapping characteristic dimensions. In addition to the characteristics just mentioned, this also includes family resources, legal frameworks, and different migration channels. All of these factors do not act in isolation but, in their combination, create highly individual starting points that lead to considerable variability within a class. Superdiversity thus refers to the increased complexity of pedagogical work, which must consider not only nationality- or language-related categories but also their intersections. Especially in AvM classes, this superdiversity is particularly concentrated, as all newly arrived school-age youth – regardless of residence status, educational background, language proficiency, or migration history – are enrolled in the same educational program. While certain differentiation mechanisms exist within AvM-Dual – such as literacy classes (Alphabetisierungsklassen) for young people without reading and writing skills (HIBB, 2024) – and didactic materials have been developed for three different language levels (Sturm & Kruse, 2018, p. 5), these are likely to have only limited reach given the heterogeneous learning prerequisites described.

3 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Discrimination is not a clearly defined or uniformly understood term across disciplines. Rather, it is used variably in different scientific fields as well as in legal and societal contexts and is theoretically interpreted in different ways. The starting point is a fundamental societal claim to equal treatment, which is anchored, for example, in human rights as well as in national and international equality and anti-discrimination norms (AGG, 2006; UDHR, 1948). However, whether distinctions are to be regarded as legitimate differentiations or as discrimination is theoretically controversial and depends on the respective analytical perspective, the underlying normative standards, and the social context considered (Heinemann & Mecheril, 2023, pp. 116–117).

The following chapter first presents a broad sociological conceptualization of discrimination (3.1), before elaborating its levels and forms (3.2), intersectional entanglements (3.3), and, with regard to the

research question, the subjective perception of discrimination (3.4). Disadvantages cannot be understood independently of individual interpretations, biographical experiences, and societal patterns of legitimation. Discrimination is thus conceptualized in this chapter as a multidimensional phenomenon that arises in the interplay of interactional processes, institutional conditions, intersectional axes of difference, and subjective processes of perception. The aim is to establish a theoretical foundation that allows experiences of discrimination to be analyzed not in isolation but within their social and structural context.

3.1 Sociological Conceptualization of Discrimination

While in everyday language, discrimination is often associated with derogatory attitudes, negative emotions, or stereotypical attributions, the sociological perspective on discrimination deliberately distances itself from a purely social psychological approach. Sociological discrimination research emphasizes that discrimination can only be understood when not only prejudices and their spread are considered as causes, but also broader societal, structural, and organizational contexts are taken into account. It thus understands discrimination not as isolated individual acts but rather as a social construction. Its analytical interest is directed less at individual propensity for prejudice and more at the societal conditions under which discriminatory practices emerge, spread, and become effective (Scherr, 2023, pp. 18–19).

Building on this perspective, discrimination can be conceptually and theoretically situated within the sociology of social inequality (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023; Scherr, 2010). Social inequality refers to the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within a society (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 202). In a socially unequal society, people have differential access to education, wealth, healthcare, the labor market, and political influence. This possession of resources and the associated social positions are systematically linked to advantageous or disadvantageous conditions of action and life (Solga et al., 2009, p. 15). Discrimination, by contrast, refers to the unequal treatment of people despite a legitimate claim to equal treatment (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 202). These two concepts are, however, not to be considered in isolation. As will become clear in the course of this chapter, they are closely intertwined. Discrimination can be both a cause and an amplifier of social inequality, for example by restricting access to resources and opportunities for certain groups, thereby further reinforcing and perpetuating existing inequalities (Scherr, 2023, pp. 18–19; Solga et al., 2009, pp. 14–15, 19).

Forms of discrimination are diverse and heterogeneous. Distinctions can be made between, among others, ethnic, racist, gender-based, and ableism-related forms of discrimination, each of which has its own historical context of emergence, specific mechanisms, and differing impacts on the living conditions of those affected (Scherr, 2023, pp. 24, 37–38). At the same time, the various forms of discrimination share a common structuring core: they are grounded in processes of social constructions of difference: People are classified along certain socially significant categories, to which supposedly typical characteristics, abilities, or affiliations are attributed. Such distinctions become particularly problematic when they are essentialized, naturalized, or interpreted as insurmountable differences (Scherr, 2023, pp. 20–21). It should be noted that societal categories are frequently treated as

homogeneous "real groups" (Realgruppen) even though they are socially constructed collectives. Brubaker (2007, pp. 16–17) problematizes this equation as a form of "reification" that obscures the constructive nature of social categories and contributes to stabilizing hierarchies as well as asymmetric power relations. Discrimination is therefore less to be understood as a relationship between clearly defined groups than as an effect of social processes of group construction, which are also described in the concept of *Othering* (Ashcroft et al., 2000, pp. 156–158).

Against this background, discrimination can be understood as both an expression and a mechanism of power relations (Scherr, 2023, p. 21). Constructions of difference function not only as schemas of perception and ordering, but also structure access to resources, recognition, and participation. Discrimination thus fulfills a societal function in the production and maintenance of social order by marking boundaries of belonging and reproducing existing inequalities (Scherr, 2023, p. 21). Furthermore, discrimination operates in a legitimizing manner: by portraying disadvantages as natural, performance-based, or culturally justified, existing hierarchies are stabilized and their questioning is made more difficult (Scherr, 2023, pp. 35–36; Solga et al., 2009, pp. 24–25). The entanglement of discrimination with power relations is also evident in its normative character. From a critical or reflexive perspective, it is therefore important to recognize that the concept of discrimination itself constitutes a socially powerful category (Scherr, 2023, p. 34). Specific forms of unequal treatment are regarded as discrimination only insofar as they are evaluated as unjustified according to prevailing normative standards – standards that are historically variable and potentially controversial. The determination of what counts as legitimate differentiation and what counts as impermissible disadvantage is thus itself embedded in relations of power, discourse, and ideology. Certain forms of unequal treatment (such as racist attributions) are socially marked as illegitimate, while others (such as differentiations based on citizenship) are frequently regarded as legally permissible and politically necessary (Scherr, 2023, pp. 34, 38). Scherr (2023, p. 21) emphasizes that a sociological analysis must not unreflectively adopt these normative boundary-drawings, but must itself treat them as an object of inquiry.

In the context of the entanglement of various forms of discrimination with relations of power and inequality, the potentially self-sustaining character of discriminatory practices also comes into focus. In the sense of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 2010, pp. 94–96), prejudices toward a group can lead to actions that produce the prejudice-based disadvantage in the first place – for example, when low expectations of students negatively affect their actual performance development. The resulting disadvantages are subsequently not recognized as the product of discrimination but are interpreted as supposed evidence of group-specific deficits, thereby stabilizing existing stereotypes and legitimating further unequal treatment. Pettigrew and Taylor (1990, p. 501, quoted by Scherr, 2023, pp. 19–20) described this mechanism as "self-perpetuating": discrimination continues dynamically because its consequences appear as its cause, and those affected also lack the resources to oppose it.

Early sociological approaches already point out that discrimination can occur even when the actors involved do not hold discriminatory attitudes or when such attitudes are not guiding their actions. The typology developed by Merton (1976, pp. 192–199), for example, illustrates that discriminatory

behavior can equally result from contextual constraints, organizational routines, or strategic adaptations. This insight points to the fact that discrimination cannot be reduced to intentional acts, and constitutes, according to Scherr (2023, p. 30) a central starting point for later theories of structural and institutional discrimination, which will be elaborated in the following.

3.2 Levels and Forms of Discrimination

Discrimination does not manifest on a single level, but on three analytically distinguishable yet empirically complexly entangled levels: structural discrimination at the macro level (3.2.1), institutional discrimination at the meso level (3.2.2), and interactional discrimination at the micro level (3.2.3).

3.2.1 Structural Discrimination

Structural discrimination refers to those societal conditions under which discrimination emerges, becomes entrenched, and reproduces itself (Gomolla, 2023). The focus is not on individual discriminatory acts or decisions, but on historically grown economic, political, cultural, and social structures that stabilize inequalities and power relations. Structural discrimination thus describes disadvantages that are anchored in societal orders, bodies of knowledge, and conceptions of normality, and that frequently operate beyond clearly identifiable responsibilities (Gomolla, 2023, p. 173). Existing inequalities are therefore frequently not the result of current discriminatory acts, but the product of long-term structural disadvantages that reproduce themselves without active intervention. Examples of this include the disproportionate unemployment of migrants or a restrictive refugee and immigration policy that structurally makes access to education and the labor market more difficult (Heinemann & Mecheril, 2016, p. 46). Structural discrimination frequently operates in a subtle and invisible manner – not in the form of openly discriminatory acts, but embedded in societal bodies of knowledge, conceptions of normality, and organizational logics that make disadvantages appear natural. El-Mafaalani (2021) illustrates this with the example of racism: Even though societies are increasingly fighting against discriminatory structures, historically developed bodies of knowledge and interpretive patterns persist into the present. Institutional discrimination can be understood as a specific form of structural discrimination at the organizational level and will be discussed in more detail in the following section, as it is particularly relevant for analyzing experiences of disadvantage in schools.

3.2.2 Institutional Discrimination

Institutional discrimination refers to persistent disadvantages faced by social groups, which can be traced back to supra-individual factors such as norms, rules, routines, and collectively available justifications (Hasse & Schmidt, 2012, p. 883). Gomolla and Radtke (2009) argue that a considerable proportion of educational inequality between German and non-German students is not primarily attributable to individual characteristics of the children or migration-related starting disadvantages, but rather produced by structural processes within the school institution itself. Unlike individual and direct forms of discrimination, such as ethnicization by teachers, institutional discrimination does not refer to conscious or racially motivated intentions by teachers, but rather to institutional processes and structures

that favor the unequal treatment of students based on attributed characteristics and that maintain and amplify existing inequalities. Institutional discrimination can even occur through the actions of well-meaning actors (Gomolla, 2023, p. 173). Institutional discrimination is primarily located at the level of organizations – such as schools, companies, or public authorities – that perform central societal functions according to established rules (Gomolla, 2023, p. 173; Hormel, 2007, p. 116). Such organizations in particular have a heightened potential for discrimination, because unequal treatment can occur within them through formal regulations and everyday routines without requiring any substantive justification (Hasse & Schmidt, 2012, pp. 885–886).

The concept of institutional discrimination has its roots in the Anglo-American debate on institutional racism, which originated in the United States in the 1960s and gained renewed relevance particularly through the British Macpherson Report at the end of the 1990s (Gomolla, 2013, pp. 89–90; Gomolla & Radtke, 2009, pp. 35–38; Hormel, 2007, pp. 63–74). In the German context, Gomolla and Radtke deliberately generalized the concept to "institutional discrimination" – in order to make clear that not only racial axes of difference are operative, but that social origin, language, or residence status can also function as selection criteria (Gomolla, 2023, pp. 175–177). For the present thesis, this concept is analytically more suitable, since newly arrived and refugee youth in the education system may be disadvantaged not solely based on racial attributions, but also on account of factors such as precarious residence status, unrecognized qualifications, or limited German language skills.

3.2.2.1 Direct and Indirect Institutional Discrimination

Within institutional discrimination, a distinction is drawn between a *direct* and an *indirect* form (Feagin & Feagin, 1986; Gomolla & Radtke, 2009). Direct institutional discrimination arises from regularly occurring practices that are either legitimized by formal regulations– such as laws or administrative rules – or sustained through informal routines and unwritten rules within the organizational culture (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009, p. 49). Examples of this include directing students with a migration background to specific types of schools or segregating refugee youth into special classes (Gomolla, 2023, p. 184). It is important to note that intentionality cannot be fundamentally excluded in this form. Direct institutional discrimination can therefore indeed be conscious and deliberate (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009, p. 57).

Indirect institutional discrimination refers to institutional arrangements, practices, and regulations that are established and applied without explicit prejudices or negative intentions yet disproportionately disadvantage members of certain groups. Discrimination results from the fact that the chances of being able to meet supposedly neutral norms are fundamentally unevenly distributed among members of different social groups (Gomolla, 2023, pp. 184–185). Decisions that are primarily aimed at other goals – such as homogenizing learning groups or maintaining organizational routines – can inadvertently create systematic disadvantages for certain student groups as a side effect. Examples of indirect institutional discrimination include standardized tests, assessment criteria, or teaching methods that reflect the habitus of privileged groups and thereby systematically disadvantage students from educationally disadvantaged or migrant families. In this sense, the apparent equal treatment of all students can itself contain a discriminatory element when the individual prerequisites of students are left

out of consideration. This is evident not only in the selection of didactic models that are applied equally to all students, but also, for example, when in multilingual classes standard German functions as the benchmark for assessing performances, without adequately incorporating the potential linguistic resources of students (Gomolla, 2023, p. 185; Bommes & Radtke, 1993, p. 490; Gogolin, 2008).

3.2.2.2 Mechanisms of Institutional Discrimination at Transition Thresholds

Institutional discrimination becomes particularly visible at decision points at which students' further educational pathways are determined. Gomolla and Radtke (2009, pp. 262–263) demonstrate, using the example of the transition from primary to secondary school, that children with a migration background are systematically disadvantaged more frequently at these points – even when they demonstrate good academic performance. Their suitability for the Gymnasium is called into question based on criteria that have nothing to do with students' actual capabilities – such as "parents' lack of education", "absence of educational aspirations", or "unfamiliarity with the German school system". Students from educationally disadvantaged families or with a migration background must demonstrably achieve considerably higher performance than their peers in order to receive the same school recommendation[6] (El-Mafaalani, 2012, p. 26). These disadvantages can accumulate over the years of schooling and lead to long-term disadvantages (Heinemann & Mecheril, 2023, p. 125). While this does not apply equally to all groups of migrants, it can be shown that children with a migration background attend the lowest-tracked secondary school type (Hauptschule) considerably more frequently than those without (El-Mafaalani, 2012, p. 26). Against the background of educational expansion, this is of central importance insofar as higher educational qualifications are becoming increasingly important and constitute a necessary criterion for a professional career. Because more and more people in both absolute and relative terms attain higher qualifications, these qualifications lose their value (El-Mafaalani, 2012, p. 38).

Gomolla and Radtke (2009, pp. 265–270) describe in this context that schools as organizations pursue above all one central goal: to maintain their own functioning – preferably through homogeneous learning groups. To achieve this goal, children with certain characteristics – such as limited German language skills or unrecognized prior qualifications – are referred to other institutions or relocated to separate classes, regardless of whether this is pedagogically justified. What is decisive is therefore less the individual support of students than the organizational logic of the institution itself.

That discrimination processes are not only the result of informal practices but are also supported by official regulations can be illustrated by a recommendation of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (Kultusministerkonferenz):

> "For the decision on the admission of a child to a secondary school, the knowledge and skills indispensable for successful educational work are to be determined; but the child's aptitude, inclination, and willingness to engage in intellectual work as a whole are also to be assessed."[7] (KMK, 2006, p. 5)

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[6] In Germany, primary school teachers issue a school recommendation (Schulempfehlung) at the end of fourth grade, indicating which secondary school type is deemed appropriate for the student.

[7] (own translation; "Für die Entscheidung über die Aufnahme eines Kindes in eine weiterführende Schule sind die für eine erfolgreiche Bildungsarbeit unentbehrlichen Kenntnisse und Fertigkeiten festzustellen; es sind aber auch Eignung, Neigung und Wille des Kindes zu geistiger Arbeit insgesamt zu werten.")

This recommendation implies that habitual disposition and social origin are to be taken into account when assigning a child to a secondary school (El-Mafaalani, 2023, p. 165). According to El-Mafaalani (2012, p. 29), this invariably occurs at the expense of students from educationally disadvantaged and migrant families.

Once assigned, educational pathways are difficult to correct retrospectively. While the formal possibility of changing schools exists, almost all students in Germany remain in the school type to which they were assigned after primary school (Bellenberg et al., 2004). This points to what Bernhard (2017) describes as structurally limited institutional permeability – understood as the degree to which institutional barriers between different educational sectors have been dismantled and transitions facilitated. According to Dörffer and Bernhard (2025, p. 5), institutional permeability is a central condition for educational and social mobility, as it allows individuals to pursue educational pathways beyond predetermined tracks. Low permeability, by contrast, operates as a mechanism of social closure, by keeping certain educational pathways exclusive and making alternative routes more difficult to access. In order to concretely enable transitions, Bernhard and Powell (2017, pp. 341–342) identify four central support mechanisms: (1) targeted information and advice, (2) financial support, (3) organizational and pedagogical measures as well as (4) a school culture that recognizes and promotes diverse learning needs. From the perspective of institutional discrimination, it becomes clear that the lack of such mechanisms not only hinders educational mobility but also actively perpetuates social inequalities. Transitions are thus not only individual decision points but also become structurally shaped opportunity filters that disproportionately disadvantage certain groups.

The allocation of students into separate classes – such as preparatory classes for newly arrived young people – can itself be understood as a mechanism of institutional discrimination. Karakayali and zur Nieden (2019, pp. 888–891) show that school segregation is not only an effect of individual decisions but is rooted in organizational decision-making logics that reflect the desire for performance-homogeneous learning groups. The assignment to preparatory classes follows selection mechanisms comparable to those of the lowest-tracked secondary school type (Hauptschule): language skills, age, and residence status determine which educational program is accessible, not learning potential or educational aspirations.

These mechanisms are not confined to the general education school system. They continue in the pre-vocational and vocational education system – not only in the form of segregating assignments to transitional measures, but also in the allocation of vocational training places. There too, selection decisions follow similar logics: training places are allocated not solely on the basis of aptitude, but also according to criteria such as language accent or perceived integrability and the goal of minimizing imagined operational risks (Imdorf, 2023, pp. 265–266) – with the result that young people with a migration background are disproportionately concentrated in a few specific training occupations (BIBB, 2010, p. 186).

3.2.3 Individual and Interactional Discrimination

While structural and institutional discrimination operate at the societal and organizational level, discrimination also takes place in concrete social encounters. Interactional discrimination refers to direct, situational disadvantages in face-to-face interactions – such as through verbal devaluation, exclusion, or unequal treatment (Jennessen et al., 2013, p. 19). It includes both individual discrimination and discrimination as a group practice, and can be based on both discriminatory intentions and stereotypes or interpretive patterns, thus leading to discriminatory actions without conscious discriminatory intent (Hormel & Scherr, 2004, p. 28). It is more closely tied to individual actors and situations than institutional forms, without however being independent of them: discriminatory interactions too arise against the background of societal interpretive patterns and institutional expectations of normality.

Special importance is attached to the concept of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions refer to everyday, often incidental verbal or non-verbal messages that convey derogatory attributions toward marginalized groups – frequently without conscious discriminatory intent on the part of those acting (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). Precisely because they are subtle and ambiguous, they frequently elude clear attribution as discrimination by those affected, even though they are experienced as hurtful. In addition, individual interactional experiences may, when viewed in isolation, appear minor or trivial – yet, through their repetition over time, they generate cumulative burdens that can affect well-being, educational motivation, and the sense of belonging (Sue et al., 2007, pp. 275–279).

In the school context, interactional discrimination gains an additional dimension due to the structural power asymmetry between teachers and students. Discriminatory interactions by educational professionals are not only consequential because of their immediate impact but also because teachers play central gatekeeping roles in assessment, transition, and support processes (Behrmann, 2021; Lorenz, 2021; Blanchard & Muller, 2015). Derogatory attributions or unequal treatment by teachers can thus be experienced not only as situational injuries but also have tangible consequences for educational paths and transition opportunities, which clearly illustrates the intertwining of interactional and institutional levels described at the beginning. A particularly consequential form of such attributions is low expectations of performance. Studies show that teachers systematically underestimate the academic abilities of students with a migration background even when their objective performance is the same, frequently on the basis of culturalizing attributions in which (ascribed) origin or language is drawn upon as an explanation for supposed deficits (Lorenz, 2021; Lorenz et al., 2016). Such distorted expectations can affect actual performance development in everyday instruction – such as through different feedback or less frequent calling on students– and thus contribute to the reproduction of educational inequalities (Gentrup et al., 2020).

3.3 Intersectional Perspectives on Discrimination

Discrimination in social reality rarely unfolds along a single axis of difference. Rather, individual life situations are shaped by multiple social positionings that mutually influence and overlap with one another. Against this background, the concept of intersectionality has established itself as a theoretical perspective that aims to analytically capture the entanglements of various relations of inequality and discrimination.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is regarded as the central founder of the approach, having demonstrated through legal case analyses that the discrimination experiences of Black women can be adequately described neither through an isolated consideration of gender nor of race. Crenshaw thereby criticized a one-dimensional understanding of discrimination and made clear that different relations of inequality unfold not additively but in their mutual interaction (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). Intersectionality thus points to the simultaneity and mutual interpenetration of social categories of difference, as well as to the specific constellations of power and inequality arising from them. Marten and Walgenbach (2023, p. 132) emphasize that intersectionality directs attention not only to individual affiliations but also to structural conditions, institutional logics, and societal interpretive patterns through which social differences are produced and hierarchized. Discrimination thus arises from the interplay of social structures, organizational practices, and subjective positioning, leading to different subject positions and horizons of experience.

Hormel (2012) shows that Crenshaw's approach can be applied to educational research beyond its origins in legal science. Intersectional analyses not only ask which categories of discrimination interact but also how social distinctions are, in the first place, produced and legitimized in institutional contexts such as schools. Attributions relating to language, culture, and social origin, for example, operate so closely together in the school context that they can hardly be meaningfully separated from one another. It follows methodologically that categories such as "migration background" or "gender", for example, should not be fixed in advance but must be developed from the concrete case, guided by which distinctions actually have a disadvantageous effect (Hormel, 2012, pp. 502–503).

An intersectional perspective is particularly relevant for the present thesis because the discrimination experiences of students in vocational preparation classes are unlikely to unfold exclusively along a single axis of difference. Central are migration-related and ethnic attributions as well as linguistic normations. Beyond this, it can be assumed that these dimensions are entangled with further relations of inequality – such as social origin, residence status, or religious affiliation. As was shown in section 3.2.2, such dimensions mutually reinforce one another in the educational context and give rise to discrimination experiences that cannot be captured by any single category alone.

An intersectional perspective thus makes it possible to examine discrimination experiences in a differentiated manner and to avoid simplistic mono-causal explanations. It contributes to making visible the diversity of individual perceptions, interpretations, and coping strategies, and to understanding discrimination as a relational and context-bound phenomenon. In the present thesis, this perspective is

not applied as a rigid categorical grid, but used as a sensitizing lens that remains open to the entanglements that the young people themselves make visible in their narratives.

3.4 Subjective Experience of Discrimination

Discrimination should not only be understood as an objectively identifiable disadvantage but also always arises from the perspective of those who experience it (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 201), and is thus always an interpretive act. Empirical studies are therefore fundamentally dependent on subjective reports, as experiences of discrimination cannot be collected independently of the perceptions, interpretations, and attribution processes of those affected. It should be noted that subjectively perceived discrimination cannot be understood as an immediate reflection of actual discrimination occurring. Not every experienced disadvantage corresponds to legal or social psychological definitions of discrimination. Likewise, not every instance of discrimination is recognized or identified as such by those affected (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023). Indirect and structural forms of discrimination in particular frequently elude immediate perception, since they are less tied to individual actors and instead manifest, as elaborated in Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, in institutional routines, assumptions of normality, and organizational logics (Gomolla, 2023, pp. 173–174). The following section first theorizes how discrimination is perceived, interpreted, and evaluated in terms of its legitimacy (3.4.1), before turning to coping strategies and the scope for action available to those affected (3.4.2).

3.4.1 Perception and Interpretation of Discrimination

The perception of discrimination is socially unequally distributed. Research findings show that experiences of discrimination are perceived and articulated less frequently the lower the social status of those affected. People with lower levels of education or precarious socioeconomic situations more frequently report discrimination against their own group, while less frequently interpreting individual disadvantages as discrimination (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, pp. 206–207; Scherr & Breit, 2018, p. 4). These findings indicate that the capacity to recognize and name discrimination as such is itself socially mediated and may be tied to resources such as education, language proficiency, and societal positioning.

In addition, migration-biographical factors further influence the perception of discrimination. Studies show that reported discrimination frequently increases with greater length of residence in the receiving country (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, pp. 197–198). This phenomenon corresponds to what is referred to as the *integration paradox*: the counterintuitive finding that structurally better integrated migrants – that is, those with higher levels of education, longer residence, or better language skills – perceive not less but more discrimination (Schaeffer & Kas, 2024; El-Mafaalani, 2022; Steinmann, 2019). Three mechanisms are drawn upon in particular as explanations: First, advancing integration increases awareness of discriminatory situations – for example, through improved language competency and greater media use, which first make disadvantages recognizable. Second, with growing participation, migrants orient themselves more strongly toward the native population as a reference group, whereby unequal treatment comes to be perceived as unjustified disadvantage. Furthermore, as integration increases, so do the demands for participation and belonging – the more naturally one

experiences social participation, the more likely one is to evaluate unequal treatment as illegitimate (El-Mafaalani, 2020). Theoretically, this mechanism can be captured through the theory of relative deprivation (Runciman, 1980): What matters is not only the objective situation but also the discrepancy between the standard considered achievable and the actual experience. The perception of discrimination is accordingly context-dependent. Discriminatory experiences are not made or interpreted as such equally across all social spaces. Safe spaces, such as one's own community or familiar institutional contexts, can diminish the perception of discrimination because stigma-triggering features are less present in such environments, and one's group membership is not marked as deviant (Hansen, 2009, p. 164). By contrast, new, unfamiliar, or hierarchically structured environments, such as schools or workplaces, can promote the experience of exclusion because they increase the fear of rejection based on one's group membership. (Hansen, 2009, p. 163).

In addition to these factors, individual dispositions and characteristics of the interaction situation also play a moderating role. Studies indicate that optimistic individuals, or those who believe in equal opportunity and meritocracy, perceive discrimination less frequently (Major et al., 2003, pp. 95–97; 2002, pp. 272–273).[8] Also relevant in this context is the extent to which individuals believe they can influence their own life situation. Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) show that members of minority groups frequently minimize experienced disadvantages and attribute them to personal factors – such as insufficient performance or lack of effort – rather than interpreting them as discrimination. This tendency toward minimization is associated with the preservation of a sense of personal control: by attributing disadvantages to personal factors, the conviction that one can influence future outcomes in the performance and social domains is maintained. Acknowledging discrimination as a cause would undermine this sense of control (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997, pp. 375, 385). Disadvantageous acts are furthermore more likely to be interpreted as discriminatory when they originate from individuals positioned higher in organizational hierarchies (Barreto et al., 2010). Equally, the likelihood of a discriminatory interpretation increases when the group membership of the other person is known and differs from one's own: rejections by outgroup members are attributed to discrimination considerably more frequently than comparable rejections by ingroup members (Major et al., 2002, pp. 275–276). The perception of discrimination is thus not solely bound to self-attributions but arises relationally in interactions in which affiliations are marked and hierarchized.

It is important to emphasize that the subjective perception of discrimination is always bound to processes of legitimation. Different individuals affected by the same instance of unequal treatment can evaluate the same situation differently (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 202). Equally, those acting may view their behavior as legitimate, while those affected experience it as discriminatory (Hansen, 2009, p. 156). This difference in perspective again points to the fact that discrimination is to be analyzed not solely as an objective event but as a socially constructed phenomenon of meaning. The identification of

[8] Such findings are, however, ambivalent, since it remains open whether the corresponding attitudes reduce experiences of discrimination or whether, conversely, they result from fewer experiences of discrimination (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 200).

illegitimate unequal treatment is, however, frequently associated with uncertainty. Open and explicit discrimination has been largely delegitimized in society and therefore occurs less frequently, while subtle, ambivalent, or implicit forms are gaining in significance (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, pp. 202–203). In such situations, it frequently remains unclear to those affected whether a disadvantage is actually based on discriminatory motives or whether alternative explanations appear plausible. This explanatory uncertainty is further reinforced by the possible social costs of raising the issue –such as conflict, stigmatization, or doubt about one's own perception – and can lead to hesitancy or passivity (Kaiser & Miller, 2001a, 2001b). Those affected tend to interpret experienced disadvantages as isolated incidents or misunderstandings and avoid addressing them publicly (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 202; Hansen, 2009, p. 159). Furthermore, repeated experiences of discrimination can lead to the internalization of external attributions: distinction principles imposed from outside become action-guiding and lastingly influence feelings of belonging (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 199). This can lead those affected to perceive disadvantages as normal and no longer view them as illegitimate. Experiences of discrimination are thus closely intertwined with questions of legitimacy and legitimization.

How an experienced disadvantage is interpreted depends substantially on what it is attributed to. If a negative experience is interpreted as a consequence of individual deficits, this can lead to self-devaluation and internalized attributions. If, by contrast, it is interpreted as an expression of societal prejudice or structural inequality, this can have a relieving effect and function as a protective factor (Hansen, 2009, pp. 159–160). The attribution of experienced disadvantages thus substantially influences the psychological experience of those affected: those who are able to attribute disadvantages to societal structures are less exposed to the risk of internalizing them as personal failure. These attribution processes are closely related to social identification. Discrimination is especially interpreted as illegitimate when individuals strongly identify with a socially disadvantaged group. A strong group identification tends to lead people to attribute disadvantages to external causes, which can, in turn, have a protective effect (Hansen, 2009, p. 162). At the same time, the relationship can also operate in reverse: experienced discrimination can strengthen the sense of belonging to a marginalized group and consolidate one's own group identity in one's self-image – which can under certain circumstances lead those affected to accept experienced unequal treatment as legitimate (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 199). Experiences of discrimination thus have an identity-forming effect and can generate both solidarity-building and limiting effects when internalized external attributions become action-guiding.

In addition to the individual attribution and interpretation processes described, societal structures of legitimation are central to the evaluation of discrimination. Meritocracy represents the modern form of legitimizing inequality (Sandel, 2020, p. 190): inequality is regarded as legitimate in the self-understanding of modern societies when it can be attributed to performance, motivation, or competence, while unequal treatment on the basis of ascriptive characteristics appears illegitimate (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 206; Scherr, 2023, pp. 33–34). This normative order forms a central reference framework for subjective experiences of discrimination. For those affected, this often means that discrimination is uncovered through an exclusion process. When performance deficits, lack of motivation, or other

legitimate grounds for the disadvantage are not recognizable, the suspicion arises that ascriptive attributions play a role. At the same time, meritocratic interpretive patterns can lead those affected to first individualize or self-attribute unequal treatment before structural or discriminatory causes are considered (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 206). Precarity and disadvantage are thus not perceived as a structural problem, but subsumed under the legitimation of the performance principle and individualized (Mau et al., 2023, p. 86). This internalization of societal legitimacy patterns can explain why highly disadvantaged groups do not necessarily perceive discrimination more frequently. Empirical findings show that increasing distributional inequalities correlate with growing belief in meritocracy (Mijs, 2021) and that the meritocratic principle, as well as the belief in the justice of the system, paradoxically find their strongest support among the lower social classes (Bittlingmayer & Bauer, 2007; Mau et al., 2023, p. 86). If inequality is perceived as justified based on performance, disadvantage is more likely to be interpreted as individual failure.

Overall, it becomes apparent that the perception and interpretation of discrimination are not individual but profoundly social processes. The social environment, the institutional context, biographical experiences, and societal legitimation patterns substantially shape whether disadvantages are recognized and whether they are evaluated as discriminatory. This is a relational process in which concrete events and overarching interpretive patterns, social positionings, and societal norms are mutually entangled. Discrimination can thus be explained neither in purely subjective nor in exclusively structural terms but arises in the interplay of both levels. For the analysis of subjective experiences of discrimination, this perspective offers a nuanced view: it makes it possible to make ambivalences, uncertainties, and contradictory interpretations visible and helps understand discrimination not as a clearly identifiable event but as a process of social meaning-making. At the same time, it points to the fact that the evaluation of discrimination is closely linked to questions of recognition, belonging, and participation, and thereby touches on central aspects of social integration.

3.4.2 Coping Strategies and Agency of Those Affected

Those affected are by no means to be understood as passive victims of discriminatory structures and practices. While the previous section elaborated the interpretive preconditions of the perception of discrimination, the following section therefore focuses on how those affected process these experiences, what room for action they perceive, and what strategies they develop in dealing with discrimination. Coping strategies are not to be understood as purely individual or psychological reactions, but as socially situated practices that arise in the interplay of subjective interpretations, available resources, and structural conditions (Scherr & Breit, 2018, pp. 3–4). In the context of institutional discrimination in particular, it is to be assumed that possibilities for action are substantially shaped by organizational routines, power asymmetries, and selective transition logics. When considering coping strategies, it is therefore always also about agency. Agency is understood here as a situated, socially and psychologically conditioned capacity for action that always stands in interaction with present social structures and contributes to their reproduction or transformation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, pp. 962–963).

Scherr and Breit (2018, pp. 15–17) distinguish in ideal-typical terms between defensive, pragmatic, and offensive forms of coping. Defensive forms of coping are characterized by the interpretation of discrimination as an unchangeable reality. Patterns of action include withdrawal from contexts susceptible to discrimination, passive endurance, or the trivialization of one's own experience of being affected. At the same time, the de-thematization of discrimination can contribute to keeping structural discrimination invisible and limiting the possibilities for collective resistance. Pragmatic forms of coping describe the attempt to interpret discrimination as an individually manageable burden and to remain capable of action within existing structures. These include strategies of adaptation, the concealment of discrimination-relevant characteristics, or situational identity management – that is, the deliberate non-disclosure of one's minority membership in certain contexts (Scherr & Breit, 2018, pp. 18–19). The aim is to avoid discrimination and secure opportunities for participation – for example, through the adaptation of language, appearance, or behavior to institutional expectations of normality. Particularly in the school context, this coping strategy can appear rational, since educational decisions and transition opportunities depend heavily on positive evaluations by institutional actors. Pragmatic coping illustrates the ambivalence of agency under discriminatory conditions: adaptation can simultaneously open up room for action and stabilize structural inequalities. Offensive coping strategies include practices of actively addressing and criticizing discrimination. These include situational contradiction, confrontation of discriminatory practices, the use of legal means, or an open approach to stigmatized characteristics (Scherr & Breit, 2018, p. 21). Offensive coping, however, presupposes that discrimination can be recognized as illegitimate and made articulable. Elias and Scotson (2008, pp. 197–204) show that stigmatization directly affects the self-esteem of those affected, who then not infrequently respond with delinquent behavior – that is, the deliberate violation of social rules or norms, provocations, or rebellious behavior. The aim is to attract attention, compel respect, and protect one's own self-esteem. Such behavior frequently occurs in cliques or peer groups that provide protection and support, enabling those affected to collectively process experiences and devaluations. At the same time, a vicious cycle can emerge, since delinquent behavior leads to further stigmatization and the confirmation of negative attributions.

A study on possible responses to racist discrimination by the DeZIM Institute (German Center for Integration and Migration Research) (Rausch et al., 2021) shows that those affected by racist discrimination in Germany rarely take open action against the experienced disadvantage. This is less an expression of a lack of agency than the result of situational processes of deliberation, in which resources, the relationship to the discriminating person, the institutional embeddedness of the situation, and the behavior of third parties play a major role. Solidary intervention by third parties considerably increases the likelihood of situational counter-reactions (Rausch et al., 2021, p. 19,24), while anticipated costs – such as deteriorating interpersonal relationships or stigmatization as a "troublemaker" – and low expectations of success inhibit open resistance (Rausch et al., 2021, pp. 25–27). The study also shows that often only a small portion of those affected actually use institutional complaint channels because they lack knowledge, resources, or support, or they perceive the chances of success as low. Coping

strategies, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation as individual reactions. They always develop through the interplay of subjective interpretation, available resources, and structural conditions, and are thus themselves an expression of agency under conditions of structural inequality.

4 Research Design and Methodological Approach

The present thesis aims to capture the subjective perceptions of newly arrived students in Vocational Preparation Classes for Migrants in Hamburg (AvM-Dual) with regard to experienced disadvantages and discrimination. The primary research interest is exploratory, since vocational school transitional measures for newly arrived young people in Germany – and in particular the perspective of the students themselves – have so far been barely empirically explored. Qualitative research aims to reconstruct social reality from the perspective of those acting within it and to make subjective attributions of meaning visible (Flick, 2021, pp. 27–29; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021, p. 16). It is particularly suitable for questions where the focus is not on the frequency of phenomena but on their significance and nature. A qualitative, exploratory design was therefore chosen to reconstruct the subjective perspectives and interpretive patterns of students in AvM classes. The research questions examined in the course of this thesis are:

1) What disadvantages and structural challenges do young people in AvM classes in Hamburg perceive?
2) How do these young people interpret and evaluate these experiences – and to what extent do they identify them as discrimination?

Through these questions, the individual interpretations and experiences of young people are chosen as the starting point for analyzing disadvantages and institutional barriers in the vocational education system, to empirically explore and theoretically situate this underexamined perspective. Existing theoretical models of institutional discrimination in the German education system are drawn upon as an analytical framework and are expanded with empirical insights into the vocational school context.

The perspective of those affected is of decisive importance for discrimination research, pedagogical practice, and political and public debate on discrimination and anti-discrimination strategies – especially because the awareness of the problem and the initiative of those affected are crucial for the development of countermeasures (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 196). Analyzing subjective experiences of discrimination is thus not a methodological flaw but a necessary approach to reconstruct social inequalities from their perspective. In the present thesis, the narratives of the interviewed young people are understood as expressions of processes of interpretation, experience, and positioning – not as facts to be objectively verified, but as subjective modes of access to structural experiences. From these, recurring patterns can be reconstructed that are subsequently situated theoretically. This constitutes an analytical interface between individual experiences and the structural conditions under which they arise.

The present thesis and the qualitative research conducted for it are grounded in a constructivist understanding of knowledge, according to which knowledge is constructed by all actors involved in the research process. It is necessary to recognize and disclose this subjectivity as well as the situatedness of knowledge and consequently its limitations (Haraway, 1988; Flick, 2021, p. 29). Thus, this chapter first sets out the methods of data collection and analysis applied in accordance with the methodology of qualitative content analysis (4.1). This is followed by an introduction to field access and the sample (4.2). Finally, the entire research process, as well as my role as researcher, is reflected upon, and my situated knowledge is made explicit (4.3).

4.1 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

To capture the subjective perception of disadvantage and discrimination in the context of educational transitions, qualitative, semi-structured, interview-guide-based interviews were conducted (Flick, 2021, pp. 194–204; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021, pp. 164–171). Problem-centered interviews were chosen (Witzel, 2000) to capture subjective perceptions regarding disadvantage and discrimination in a theory-guided yet open manner. The interview guides were developed in accordance with the SPSS principle as outlined by Helfferich (2011). This German acronym refers to a four-step process: collecting (Sammeln), checking (Prüfen), sorting (Sortieren), and subsuming (Subsumieren) question elements. The guiding maxim followed was "as open and flexible – with the generation of monological passages – as possible, as structured as necessary given the research interest" (Helfferich, 2011, p. 181).

The interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed based on the state of research on school integration, discrimination in the education system, and institutional transitions, but explicitly left room for topics that the students themselves marked as relevant. This was intended to ensure that both theory-guided and new, spontaneous topics would become visible in the interviews. The interview guide thus served, in accordance with the recommendations of the methodological literature, as an orientation rather than a rigid questionnaire (Bogner et al., 2014, pp. 27–28; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021, p. 169). The order of the thematic blocks was handled flexibly and adapted to the natural flow of conversation – when interviewees raised an adjacent topic in the course of an answer, this was taken up before moving on to the next block. Participants were comprehensively informed in advance about the overarching research topic (experiences in AvM classes) as well as the general purpose of the study. At the same time, the interview guide followed a deliberate methodological strategy to maximize narrative openness. It was divided into thematic blocks following a funnel structure. The interviews began with general, less sensitive topics (school life, belonging) in order to establish a trusting conversational atmosphere. The questions on disadvantage and unequal treatment (Block 4) were deliberately placed later in the interview. The theoretically loaded term "discrimination" was initially avoided, with neutral formulations such as "treated differently" or "treated unfairly" chosen instead. This ensured that the subjective interpretations of the young people were not pre-structured by the theoretical language of research, and that they themselves could decide where to place their focus. Only in the concluding block were participants explicitly asked about their own definition of discrimination and for examples. This placement served a dual purpose: first, to capture everyday perceptions in the main part of the interview

without possible influence from a theoretical framing; second, the questions about definition and examples at the end yielded valuable data on the cognitive and linguistic framing of the topic by the young people themselves, which is of great relevance for the subsequent analysis of the participants' interpretations and meaning-making regarding their experiences in AvM classes. Biographical and sociodemographic data were additionally collected in a standardized manner via a separate data collection form (see Appendix B) at the end of the conversation, to protect the narrative character of the interview and not to disrupt the building of trust at the outset through excessive questioning.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 180 minutes. They were conducted predominantly in German. Where my language skills allowed, I offered participants the option of conducting the interview in their first language, in order to enable the most precise possible account of complex experiences and to reduce language barriers, but also to counteract reticence or embarrassment due to limited language skills and to create a safe atmosphere. Two interviews were thus conducted in French and Russian, respectively. The interviews took place in quiet, informal seating areas of the Hamburg Central Library. The aim was to create a non-institutional and trusting atmosphere – deliberately without a table arrangement or school context, to avoid associations with examination or assessment situations or asylum hearings. Given the vulnerability of the target group, particular emphasis was placed on sensitive communication, the possibility to terminate the interview, and a reflective follow-up process. During data collection, a clear thematic saturation became apparent: central patterns recurred across interviews, methodologically justifying the conclusion of data collection after 13 interviews.

All participating students were informed both verbally and in writing about the collection, use, and protection of their data, and provided *informed consent* (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021, p. 53) to participate in an interview and to audio recording (see Appendix C). Transcription was carried out using the data-protection-compliant software NoScribe and was subsequently manually reviewed and corrected. The transcripts were smoothed by omitting emphases, delays, and word repetitions, and rough speech errors were corrected for better readability. The guiding principle followed was to transcribe only as much and as precisely as required by the research question (Flick, 2021, p. 380). All interviewees were pseudonymized. Interview excerpts in this thesis are referenced with pseudonymized first names and the corresponding line numbers of the transcripts (e.g., Layla, 706–733). Interview quotations were translated from German into English; French-language quotations were retained in the original.[9] The pseudonyms reflect the interviewees' cultural background in general terms, making the sample's diversity recognizable without enabling inferences about their identity. Identifying information and contextual details (e.g., specific places of origin, schools, names of teachers, or companies where internships were completed) have been generalized or removed to ensure anonymity. The assignment of the pseudonyms was stored separately and password-protected. For data protection and relevance reasons, interview passages containing private, non-topic-related content (e.g., personal conflicts, leisure activities) were shortened in the transcript. These shortenings were transparently marked and concerned only sections without any substantive connection to the research question.

[9] The original transcripts are appended to the thesis (see Appendix E).

The analysis of the text material, that is the transcriptions, was conducted on the basis of qualitative content analysis. As noted by Schreier (2014, p. 2) qualitative content analysis does not exist as a unified method but rather as a field of diverse approaches. For this thesis, the content-structuring qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz and Rädiker (2024) was chosen. The decision for this approach is based on the necessity to find a balance between theory-driven structuring and data-supported openness. The research question is directed at individual experiences and processes of meaning-making, which is why the analysis of the interview data requires an approach that enables flexible, deductive-inductive category formation. In contrast to more strongly formalized variants of qualitative content analysis (such as that of Mayring, 2016), which prescribes a stronger compulsion for theory-driven (deductive) category development – the approach of Kuckartz and Rädiker allows for remaining open to new, unexpected topics and aspects that the young people themselves regard as relevant. Kuckartz and Rädiker's approach furthermore describes this analytical process in considerable detail and in a practice-oriented manner, which ensures the transparency and traceability of the analysis.

The analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA software. The analytical process was oriented toward the seven phases described by Kuckartz and Rädiker (2024, pp. 132–156) in order to ensure a systematic and rule-guided analysis. Given the familiarity with the data acquired through intensive transcription, the procedure in the coding phases was modified, resulting in a reduction to five core steps (see Figure 1).

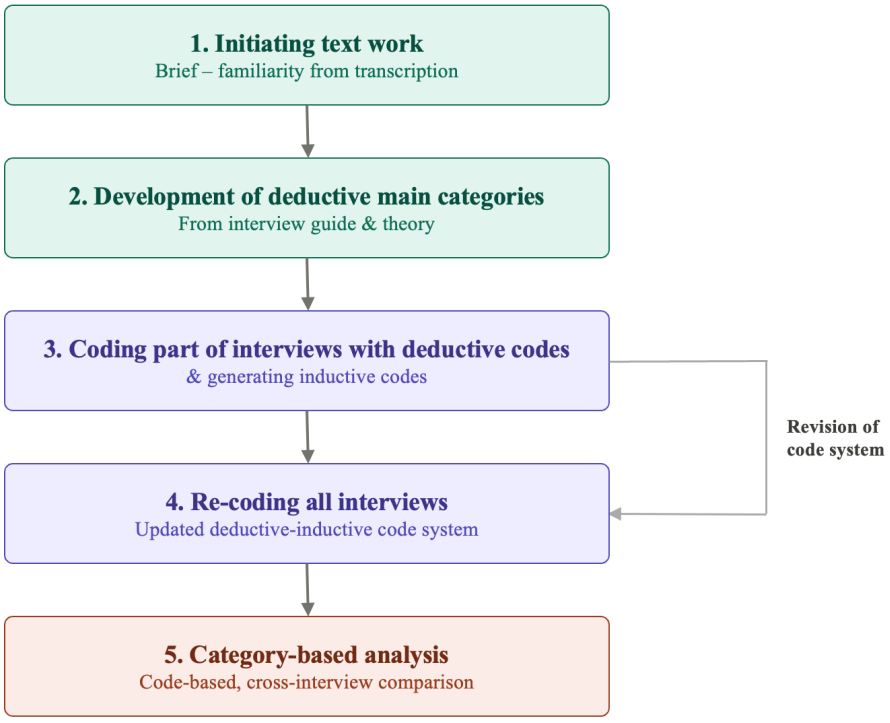

Figure 1. Process model – content-structuring qualitative content analysis (own illustration, adapted from Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2024)

Accordingly, the initiating textwork in Phase 1 was brief. In Phase 2, the deductive codes were first derived from the interview guide and the research questions. This led to the establishment of the first main category: "Described Disadvantage". A further differentiation of this main category was derived

from the theoretical framework of the thesis. In particular, the distinction between institutional discrimination and interactional/individual discrimination (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009) formed the theoretical lens through which the material was examined. The subcategories associated with the first main category – "Institutional Mechanisms" and "Individual/Interactional Experiences" – were thus deductively derived from the theoretical framework in order to systematically capture the complexity of discrimination experiences. The detailed elaboration of these subcategories was carried out inductively and iteratively in parallel with the deductive coding of the material in Phase 3. This differs from Kuckartz's and Rädiker's original approach insofar as they envisage the inductive development of subcategories as a separate step following the first coding pass. Here, by contrast, it was carried out already in parallel with the first pass, which was possible given the high degree of familiarity with the data material and the intensive transcription work. In the course of this first coding pass, it became apparent that the subcategories of the "Described Disadvantage" category displayed a high thematic density. To do justice to this density, further main categories – such as "Interpretation of Disadvantage" and "Reactions and Coping Strategies" – were inductively developed from the material, as the responses of the young people made these topics appear central and independently relevant. The second coding pass remained unchanged from Kuckartz and Rädiker's model and was conducted using the revised deductive-inductive code system (see Appendix D). The subcategories generated are thus a direct reflection of the empirical findings and represent the actual research contribution. After completing the second pass, the category-based analysis was conducted to address the research questions (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2024, pp. 148–149). The coded text segments were compared across all interviews on a code-by-code basis and thematically bundled. Recurring patterns, commonalities, and differences between the interviewees were identified and interpretively evaluated. In addition, relationships between the categories were examined in order to reveal overarching patterns in the experiences of the young people (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2024, p. 149).

4.2 Access to the Research Field and Presentation of the Sample

To conduct the interviews, contact was first established with the Hamburg school authority through a cooperating educational provider and later in person, in order to obtain a research permit for interviews in the school context. Since no response had been received by the time of data collection, the decision was made to conduct exclusively voluntary interviews outside the school setting. This decision also served to protect the participants: sensitive topics could be addressed more openly and with a reduced power asymmetry without the observational context of the school.

The recruitment of interview participants took place through several channels: initial contacts were established via social media with young people who were known from a previous position as a work assistant in an AvM class in Hamburg. This access facilitated the building of trust and willingness to participate. In order not to remain limited to this known circle of individuals and to ensure a broader diversity of perspectives, a snowball sampling procedure was additionally employed (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021, pp. 235–236). In addition, a further work assistant at another vocational school referred additional interview participants. The interviewees are thus distributed across two different

schools and a total of three classes within the Hamburg AvM system, ensuring that institutional experiences are not confined to a single school or class.

The sampling followed a deliberately theory-based selection procedure (purposive sampling, Misoch, 2019, p. 208): young people were interviewed who (1) are currently attending an AvM class or have recently completed one, (2) bring with them diverse prior educational experiences, language skills, and transition prospects, and (3) possess sufficient linguistic capacity to articulate complex experiences. Students who were still in the first months of attending AvM were deliberately not chosen to ensure that sufficiently developed school experiences were present.

The sample comprises 13 young people who are attending or have recently completed an AvM class in Hamburg. At the time of the interviews (September to October 2025), they were either already in vocational training, in the process of transitioning into vocational training, still attending a further AvM class with the aim of obtaining the intermediate school certificate (MSA), or enrolled at a mainstream secondary school (Stadtteilschule, Gymnasium[10]). The young people are between 18 and 21 years old and have been living in Germany for 2 to 6 years. They come from diverse regions of origin (Eastern Europe, the Middle East, East Africa, South Asia). Six of them identified as male and seven as female. Overall, the participants have diverse educational biographies: some completed several years of schooling in their country of origin, others were forced to interrupt their education early due to forced displacement, and yet others had not attended school prior to their arrival in Germany. Some of the interviewees are living with their families in Germany, while others arrived unaccompanied.[11] This deliberate inclusion of as heterogeneous a group as possible is justified on research-logical grounds: AvM classes are characterized by a superdiverse student body whose prior educational experiences, language skills, residence status, migration trajectories, and future prospects diverge considerably (Vertovec, 2007, 2023). To reflect the diversity of subjective experiences and perceptions in AvM classes, it was necessary to mirror this heterogeneity in the sample as well. It allows for making visible similarities and differences in the experiences of the young people and capturing as many diverse perspectives as possible.

4.3 Reflection on the Research Process and Researcher Positionality

Qualitative research is always shaped by the perspective of the researcher. One's own positionality, personal experiences, and theoretical-epistemological situatedness influence what is seen, asked, interpreted, and reported (Braun & Clarke, 2019, pp. 593–594; Holmes, 2020). The conscious engagement with this perspectivity and its effects on the research process – that is, reflexivity – concerns the entire research process: from planning through data collection and analysis to the presentation of

[10] Since a school structure reform in 2010, the general secondary education system in Hamburg has comprised two school types: the Stadtteilschule, which offers all qualifications from the lower secondary school certificate (ESA) to the university entrance qualification (Abitur), and the Gymnasium, which prepares students exclusively for the Abitur. Hamburg thereby replaced the historically widespread three-tier system in Germany, which distinguished between the Hauptschule (basic qualification), the Realschule (intermediate qualification), and the Gymnasium (academic qualification).

[11] A detailed overview of the sample that nonetheless preserves the anonymity of the participants can be found in the appendix (Table A1).

findings. The following section therefore reflects on how the data collection and analysis were designed and in what ways my own role and situated knowledge have influenced the research process.

My decision to pursue this research project was shaped not only by academic interests but also by personal experiences. My work as a work assistant in an AvM class in Hamburg – which amongst others led me to my studies – and my own educational biography, including the experience of not receiving a recommendation for the Gymnasium despite achieving the same academic results as my peers, sensitized me early on to educational inequalities. Experiences shortly after completing my Abitur – such as the pressure at the advisory office of the Jobcenter[12] to opt for vocational training rather than university study – further illustrated to me the structural barriers within the education system. My own educational biography influenced my perception of the fit between the educational aspirations of young people and the institutional structures observed during my time working as a work assistant in the field. When students I supervised expressed the wish to transfer to a "normal German school" or aspire to university study, I perceived these statements with particular sensitivity against the background of my own experiences with structural selection mechanisms, which gave rise to my academic interest in empirically reconstructing what forms of disadvantage and discrimination young people in AvM classes actually describe themselves.

My position in the field is thus shaped by both personal and professional experiences. Several interview participants were known to me from my work in an AvM class. This pre-existing relationship of trust facilitated access to the field and promoted an open conversational atmosphere. At the same time, there was a risk of making implicit assumptions about their lived realities or of "filling in" meanings without making them explicit. To counteract this, deliberate follow-up questions were asked, and my own prior knowledge was set aside. A relational closeness also emerged, supported by shared biographical references – such as a migration background or similar age. At the same time, unequal power and educational positions existed: while the interviewees struggle with structural barriers in the education system, I present myself as a university student with institutional privileges. The concept of the "insider-other" (Bukamal, 2022; Sereke, 2024) makes clear that researchers are simultaneously part of the social field and distanced observers. In my case, this position was complex: on the one hand, the young people and I share certain experiences of educational injustice or migration biographies; on the other hand, significant structural differences exist. I was born in Germany, have institutional privileges, and was able to pursue educational pathways that are only difficult to access for many of the young people interviewed. The perspectivity of "insider" experiences must therefore not be interpreted as equivalent to the experiences of the young people, but as a sensitive starting point for the research that must be continuously questioned. Despite this sensitization, the research situation remains shaped by unequal power and interpretive claims. The binary between researcher and researched cannot be fully dissolved, meaning that the risk of reproducing othering persists. I therefore attempted to make the

[12] The Jobcenter is a joint institution of the German Federal Employment Agency and the respective municipality, responsible for employment placement and basic income support, and also assumes advisory functions in the areas of vocational training and career guidance.

process transparent and to grant the young people a degree of co-determination – for example through the possibility of subsequently adding to or having removed interview passages. Nonetheless, the ultimate authority over interpretation and decision-making remains in my hands, which perpetuates my structural position of power.

At the beginning of the interviews, it was transparently explained that all statements would be anonymized, including the names of teachers and departmental heads, in order to prevent possible negative consequences – particularly for students still attending an AvM class. It cannot be ruled out that inhibitions nonetheless existed, as some participants may have continued to perceive me as part of the school staff and feared that information about my contact with a still-active work assistant (through whom some interview participants were referred to me) might reach the school. These different relational dynamics may have influenced which topics were addressed openly and in what depth.

Power asymmetries in the research process existed not only between the interviewed students and me as a researcher, but also at the institutional level. As described in the preceding section, access to the young people was shaped by institutional conditions. The necessity of obtaining permission from school authorities shows that research access in the education system is not neutral but is shaped by bureaucratic structures and power relations. In a manner analogous to Ekstedt's (2023) observations in the asylum context, it becomes apparent that institutional decision-making spaces also regulate access to research in educational administration, thereby co-determining the process of knowledge production itself. Language was a central dimension of negotiation in the research process. Three interviews were conducted partly or entirely in the participants' first language; other interviewees had to communicate in a language they had only recently acquired. Linguistic uncertainties, pauses, translation attempts, or the use of translation apps may have led to shifts in meaning and information loss. At the same time, the multilingual conduct of the interviews made it possible to reduce barriers and to give the interviewees greater expressive power. Given the language proficiency of the students, numerous follow-up questions and clarifications were necessary to ensure that the responses reflected the intended meaning of the questions. This meant that the interview guide had to be applied in a more structured manner than originally planned. Sub-questions intended as optional deep dives were frequently introduced early on to ensure understanding and maintain communication. This gave rise to a tension: ensuring comprehensibility could simultaneously cause the thematic development to be influenced more strongly by me as interviewer. It is therefore possible that certain aspects were foregrounded through follow-up questions to a greater degree than they would spontaneously have been raised by the young people themselves. To reduce the risk of unconscious topic generation, the narrative storytelling structure was maintained, and space was repeatedly created for independently chosen thematic emphases – for example, through open follow-up prompts such as "Is there anything else you would like to say about that?" It was consistently emphasized that the interviewees decide which topics they wish to (or not to) address. Reflecting methodologically, it also became apparent after the first interview that a concise and everyday definition of the term "discrimination" was needed for those participants unfamiliar with the concept. The explanation was deliberately kept general, so as not to direct the young people's own

interpretations through theoretical presuppositions and to leave them space to fill the term with their own meanings.

A further sensitive aspect concerns the setting and the recording situation. Interviews were conducted in the Hamburg Central Library in an informal seating arrangement – a seating corner without a table. Drinks and small snacks were intended to help reduce distance. Nevertheless, an interview situation – particularly with a recording device – can evoke memories of official questioning situations for newly arrived young people (Sylla et al., 2019, p. 94). One interviewee displayed nervousness at the beginning. The interview was therefore interrupted several times until they felt secure. Through empathetic interview conduct, the offer of follow-up conversations, and the explicit possibility to decline to answer questions, the emotional safety of the participants was prioritized.

A further reflexive aspect concerns my own stance toward discrimination. As a person who engages with questions of equality and justice both academically and politically, there was a risk of activist over-identification: presupposing discrimination too strongly or unconsciously positioning the young people in a "victim role". Research shows that while experiences of discrimination are important for understanding social inequality, the emphasis on agency is equally crucial in order not to reduce those affected to their vulnerability (Scharathow, 2017; Scherr & Breit, 2018). To counter this risk, the interviews deliberately asked not only about disadvantages but also about ways of dealing with them, strategies, and resources: "What did you do in that situation?", "How did you cope with it?", "Were there also positive experiences?" These questions make it possible to render visible active coping processes, resilience, and acts of resistance. This acknowledges that the young people interviewed are not objects of institutional structures, but competent actors who actively shape their educational and transition situations. The analysis therefore took care not to reproduce exclusively deficit narratives, but to represent ambivalences, resources, and room for action with equal weight. The young people are thus taken seriously not as "affected victims" but as knowledgeable experts of their own lifeworld. In line with this approach, the presentation of findings deliberately draws on direct quotes from the young people, in order to make their voices directly visible rather than only my interpretations of them.

Reflexivity means that I continuously remain aware of my own efficacy in the field. Nonetheless, the analysis of the interviews remains inseparably bound to my theoretical preconceptions. My own assumptions about what counts as disadvantage or discrimination structured my view of the material and influenced which aspects were foregrounded or translated into categories. The findings of the present thesis are therefore always also to be understood as a selective representation of the object of inquiry and as an expression of my situated knowledge.

5 Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the qualitative content analysis. The aim is to systematically elaborate and reconstruct the disadvantages perceived by the interviewed (former) students in the school context, as well as their subjective interpretations and ways of dealing with them.

First, the disadvantages and structural challenges described by the interviewees in their everyday school life are systematically presented (5.1). This is followed by a reconstruction of how the interviewees interpret and evaluate these experiences, particularly regarding whether and in what ways they are understood as discrimination (5.2). Finally, the students' reactions, coping strategies, and room for action in dealing with perceived disadvantages are examined (5.3). The analysis is illustrated by selected interview excerpts that exemplify typical experiences and interpretive patterns; a deepened theoretical contextualization of the findings is provided in the subsequent discussion chapter (6).

5.1 Perceived Disadvantages and Structural Challenges

The interviews reveal a wide range of experiences in which students describe structural challenges and disadvantages in the school context. The experiences recounted in the material can be located at different levels of the school system. They concern, at the macro level, structural aspects of educational pathways and transitions within the education system (5.1.1); at the meso level, the design of instruction and curricular conditions (5.1.2) as well as the organizational structures of everyday school life (5.1.3); and beyond this, at the micro level, concrete interactions with school actors – in particular teachers and fellow students – that are experienced by the interviewees as disadvantageous (5.1.4).[13] The presentation of the findings follows a thematic bundling of the interview statements and is oriented toward recurring patterns in the empirical material.

5.1.1 Transitions, School Assignment, and Limited Onward Pathways

This section presents the experiences described by the interviewees in connection with educational transitions, school assignments, and onward pathways. The focus is on narratives in which students identify restrictions, lack of clarity, or limitations regarding their educational and transition prospects.

5.1.1.1 School Assignment

Several students report in the interviews experiences connected to their assignment to vocational preparation classes, as well as limited possibilities to change school or class. From the interviewees' perspective, school assignment is strongly tied to formal criteria such as age, residence status, or possession of certain documents. Two distinct levels of experience can be identified in their accounts: on the one hand, some interviewees criticize the fundamental assignment to vocational school or AvM classes; on the other hand, several students report limited possibilities to change school or class within the existing AvM system.

Layla reports that after her arrival in Germany, she had wanted to attend a Stadtteilschule to work toward a higher school qualification. Instead, she was assigned to a vocational school due to her age and the absence of formal documentation, despite her stating that she had already obtained the relevant qualifications in her country of origin (Layla, 55–97). She describes this decision as difficult to understand and emotionally distressing: *"I cried. I said, I did well, why should I go to vocational*

[13] The distinction between different levels of school practice made here serves the analytical structuring of the findings. In practice, these levels partially overlap. For the purposes of presentation, they are nonetheless treated separately in order to render visible different forms of disadvantage in the school context.

school?" (Layla, 87–88). Particularly problematic in her view is that she was unable to choose the school type herself and experienced the decision as final. Shirin likewise reports that she had made several attempts to transfer from the vocational school to a Stadtteilschule, which was denied without any further explanation (Shirin, 363–364).

Age-related regulations are also addressed in the interviews as a central factor in school assignment. Hila states that the educational pathway depends strongly on the age of newly arrived students. While younger students can attend a general education school, older students are more frequently assigned to vocational schools or language courses (Hila, 522–537). Looking back, she describes this categorization as decisive for her subsequent educational pathway: *"If I had been 13 or 14, for example, then I could have gone to a normal school*[14] *too" (Hila, 527–528).* In her account, age thus appears as the central criterion determining which educational opportunities are available to newly arrived young people. Similarly, Daria reports that after a one-year period without school attendance in Germany – due to bureaucratic hurdles – she was told she could no longer be assigned to a Stadtteilschule (Daria, 328–338). Bilal also reports bureaucratic hurdles that delayed his access to schooling. He describes initially being unable to access a school because his residence permit had not yet been clarified (Bilal, 95–105). While attendance at a German language course had already been possible beforehand, access to the regular school system was initially not possible, which is notable insofar as AvM classes are by definition intended to be accessible regardless of residence status.

Against the background of these school assignments experienced as barely negotiable, several interviewees report having sought alternatives within the AvM system. Several interviewees describe their wish to change school or class in the hope of better learning conditions. Farid, for example, reports that over an extended period he had sought a school transfer – partly due to the long distance to the school and his assessment that little was being learned in class. Despite conversations with his supervisor and a teacher, the transfer did not materialize (Farid, 198–220). Farid, in retrospect, accepts this but simultaneously describes it as a restriction on his own decision-making possibilities (Farid, 245–266). Rojan reports that a school transfer was rejected with the comment that it was *"too late"*, without the decision being comprehensible to him (Rojan, 521–527). Mira describes that she would have liked to transfer to a different AvM class with different teachers, as she perceived better learning conditions there, but that this had not been possible (Mira, 716–722). Some interviewees also perceive differences in the transfer possibilities available to individual students. Oleh describes that a classmate was able to transfer relatively quickly from the ESA class to an MSA class (still within AvM-Dual, but a higher qualification track), while he himself, despite his own efforts and positive feedback from teachers, was not enabled to transfer, which he describes as unfair (Oleh, 556–583).

[14] The expression "normal class" or "normal school" is used by several interviewees (cf. also Layla; Mira; Shirin; Yasir) and refers in the interviews to classes outside the AvM structure, in particular classes in regular educational programs within the German general education system. The designation points to the fact that AvM classes are perceived by some students as deviating from the "normal" structure of schooling. The term is used in quotation marks throughout the rest of this thesis to reflect the interviewees' language use.

Overall, the interviews show that school assignments are frequently experienced by the interviewees as externally determined. Decisions about school type, class membership, or transfer possibilities appear to them only partially comprehensible and are frequently described as barely negotiable.

5.1.1.2 Mandatory Internships and Pressure to Enter Vocational Training

The internships structurally embedded in AvM classes are described in the interviews as a central and strongly structuring element of everyday school life. Many of the interviewed students experience the internships as an obligation that substantially influences their weekly rhythm, the volume of instruction, and individual educational and future decisions.

A recurring theme is the temporal extent of the internships and the associated reduction in instruction time. Students report regularly spending two or more days per week at their internship placement, or being almost entirely removed from instruction for certain periods. Rojan emphasizes that his class only had instruction three days per week, while the remaining days were spent at the internship: *"We were only in school three days. And we were supposed to improve our grades. (...) Three days a week was nothing for us. Because we are new in Germany. That's why we should have learned more German, math, English"* (Rojan, 89–105). The internship schedule is experienced here not as a relief but as an additional compression: while instruction time is reduced, performance requirements remain in place or are even described as high. Several interviewees express that, particularly in the first years, they would have preferred a stronger focus on academic learning, especially in German. Internships are partly acknowledged as potentially conducive to learning but simultaneously described as time-intensive and as a factor that restricts academic learning. Aisha describes how school requirements and internship obligations frequently overlapped: *"Thursday, Friday. We are on internship. (...) And on Sunday, we also have to write the Berichtsheft. We have to do our homework... We work, we don't have time"* (Aisha, 259–274). The internship is thus described as part of a near-seamless work and learning arrangement that leaves little room for rest or deeper learning.

In addition to the time burden, many interviewees address the pressure of having to find an internship placement at all. Several interviews make clear that finding an internship was not only expected but also tied to sanctions or consequences. Shirin describes a clear logic of responsibility-shifting: if no placement is found, disadvantages follow – even though, in her view, the failure to find one is not her own fault. She says: *"If someone has no place for internship... this person gets a bad grade... (...) That is not my problem. But I can't find a place"* (Shirin, 91–97). Similarly, Layla describes how the internship became a formal prerequisite for assessments and how teachers linked missing internship documentation to poor grades: *"He said: the main thing is the internship. (...) Otherwise you get... bad grades"* (Layla, 1316–1320). The internship obligation becomes an institutional expectation whose non-fulfillment is treated not primarily as a situational difficulty but as an individual failure. The associated pressure of sanctions, in the interviewees' accounts, leads to internship placements being accepted regardless of interest or fit, chosen instead for their quick or easy accessibility to avoid negative assessments. Additionally, she criticizes the limited degree of institutional support and points out that teachers have more contacts and resources available: *"Now it's your turn. Search with me. Call them.*

You have more contacts than me. I am completely new in Germany" (Layla, 1449–1451). Here, the internship obligation is described as an asymmetric arrangement: the obligation lies with the students, while resources (such as networks and knowledge of the system) are unequally distributed.

A central point of criticism for many students concerns the match between internship placements and their own educational or vocational goals. Several interviewees report having been repeatedly placed in sectors they would not have chosen or that they explicitly rejected. Frequently mentioned are internships in retail, bakeries, or kindergartens. Layla describes being repeatedly steered toward internships that did not interest her, despite having clearly articulated academic and professional aspirations. Particularly striking is that the question of fit appears to have been secondary in her experience: *"He said: the main thing is the internship"* (Layla, 1299–1317; cf. also Bilal, 224–250 and Oleh, 132–141). Rojan also describes how, instead of his goal of becoming an automotive mechatronics technician, he was steered toward *"easier"* training directions and corresponding internship placements: *"You should first do an easy training. (...) Retail. (...) Or kindergarten"* (Rojan, 392–397). In these accounts, the internship appears not as an individualized orientation but as a channeling into areas marked as more quickly available or less demanding. In a similar vein, Mira reports that teachers advised her to give up her original career aspiration because it was *"too difficult"* and instead recommended a training position at a dental practice – on the grounds that many apprentices were being sought there (Mira, 368–370). In her account, the recommendation appears less oriented toward her own interests than toward pragmatic labor market considerations.

In several cases, students also describe internships as not necessarily experienced as learning environments, but as places of simple auxiliary tasks – sometimes without guidance and without connection to the requirements of school examinations. Layla reports an internship at a bakery in which she was primarily deployed in the kitchen and *"cleaned the whole time"*, while for her practical ESA examination she was required to demonstrate tasks such as serving customers or preparing coffee (Layla, 1363–1383). She describes having had to acquire the necessary content independently, because it had not been conveyed during the internship*: "(...) watched videos at home. (...) I searched for everything myself"* (Layla, 1404–1410). A tension thus becomes visible: internships are relevant to examinations but do not automatically provide the learning opportunities needed for them. Jamila also addresses the link between the internship obligation and graduation requirements, explicitly describing internships as a prerequisite for the ESA: *"I have to do this internship, because of my internship exam. (...) Without internship, we have no ESA"* (Jamila, 206–208). The internship is thus described not only as part of everyday school life but as a condition of possibility for achieving a qualification at all. This coupling leads, in the interviewees' accounts, to internship placements being accepted even when conditions are unfavorable or when they do not correspond to the students' own interests.

Shirin likewise questions why she should carry out tasks *"that I don't even like and I don't get any money for it either"*, particularly since she feels she learns little in the process (Shirin, 261–271). Layla also criticizes the internship obligation in connection with the absence of remuneration and describes

internships – particularly when they are not oriented toward students' actual professional aspirations – as exploitative. She suspects that the intention is to have students *"work for free"* (Layla, 1263–1290).

Closely linked to the internship obligation is the pressure toward vocational training perceived by many interviewees. In numerous interviews, students report having been repeatedly advised to enter vocational training as quickly as possible – regardless of whether they were pursuing other educational pathways such as the MSA, Abitur, or university study. Rojan describes this pointedly:

> *"They just wanted to throw us out so that we do a training. Just throw us out, do a training. Whatever you do, it doesn't matter. No idea. They just wanted a training for you. And, oh, they clap for you. Oh, you have a training. (...) But that is maybe not your dream."* (Rojan, 377-381)

Layla similarly describes how both the Jobcenter and teachers relativized her intention to study and repeatedly suggested that she might change her mind: *"Maybe, one changes. (...) I have heard this word a hundred times"* (Layla, 1275–1276). Mira reports that teachers emphasized that vocational training was *"better than studying"* and led more quickly to a secure future (Mira, 908–916). Her wish to obtain the Abitur and pursue university study was repeatedly called into question, undermining her sense of self-efficacy: *"And they meant, it's difficult. (...) They thought that I wouldn't manage it. And I, because they kept saying it like that, I also thought like that. I thought, yes, I can't then. I'll look for something else"* (Mira, 364–367). Looking back, she describes the feeling of having no alternative – due to being denied access to the MSA: *"I felt... I'm now in a corner and there is no other way except training. Yes, and I have to do a training now that I didn't want and a profession that I don't want, for later"* (Mira, 920–922). Shirin likewise describes that at her school, the primary expectation was for students to pursue vocational training, while other educational pathways were barely considered options (Shirin, 102–111).

In some interviews, the internship also appears as a flexible organizational solution within everyday school life. Rojan, for example, reports situations in which his entire class was sent to their internship at short notice when teachers were needed for other school tasks. The head of department had decided that the AvM class would spend an entire week exclusively at the internship, for example, when teachers were deployed in other classes during examination periods (Rojan, 327–339). He describes this practice as difficult to comprehend and criticizes in particular the short-notice decisions and what he perceives as changing and inconsistently applied rules in everyday school life (*"different rules every week"*; *"that is no rules"*, Rojan, 324; 358). In his account, the impression arises that instruction for the AvM class can more easily be suspended under certain organizational conditions than for other classes.

Overall, the interviews show that the internship obligation and vocational training orientation are experienced in very different ways, with experiences of pressure, being overwhelmed, and restricted freedom of choice predominating in many accounts. Internships frequently appear less as a voluntary instrument of orientation and more as an institutional expectation whose non-fulfillment can be sanctioned, and which is coupled to graduation requirements. The associated pressure toward vocational training is described by several interviewees as a restriction on their own educational aspirations and shapes the perception of AvM classes as strongly oriented toward rapid labor market integration. Shirin

captures this conflict between one's own role as a student and institutional practice particularly clearly: *"I wanted to be a student, not an intern"* (Shirin, 338–339).

5.1.1.3 Transition Barriers in the Education System

Closely connected to these experiences, several interviewees also report limited onward educational pathways. They describe obstructed or blocked transitions between different educational programs and school types. This refers in particular to situations in which access to aspired qualifications or further educational programs – such as the ESA examination, an MSA class, or a general secondary school – is not experienced as a self-evident next step or as continuously and linearly plannable.

Layla describes transition barriers, particularly in connection with the recognition of her previously acquired school qualifications. She reports having obtained comparable qualifications in her country of origin and having seen herself as being at a level that would have enabled a direct transition into further educational programs. However, she identifies the absence of formal documentation as the central barrier: her school certificates had not been transmitted to Germany due to family and administrative circumstances, as a signature from a legal guardian – which was not obtained – had been required. The consequence was that she had to repeat school stages she had already completed. Looking back, she describes this as *"time lost"* (Layla, 22–36). The transition into further educational programs appears in her account to be contingent not on competencies but on bureaucratic requirements.[15]

While formal barriers initially shaped her educational pathway, Layla goes on to describe substantive barriers that arose as a result of this enforced educational route. She describes the feeling of an academic regression. Through the time spent in the AvM class, she had been unable to deepen much of the content she had previously learned and had since forgotten it. She describes an experience of being "set back": in the German school system, it was initially not possible to build on her existing knowledge, causing earlier learning progress to be partly lost (Layla, 706–733). She is convinced that this knowledge would have been retained had she been able to continue learning directly at a "normal school", since many subjects are similar regardless of language and are continuously reviewed and built upon there: *"(...) but I am 100% certain that if I go to a normal school and learn, it doesn't go away. Because I train it, but in a different language. I continue, but in a different language. And still, when you go to a normal school, you learn German better and faster"* (Layla, 730–733). The perceived loss of knowledge also affects her educational decisions. Layla describes having become increasingly uncertain about whether she can still manage the transition to a higher secondary school and the path to the Abitur: *"Now I have this fear. Maybe you won't manage it, Layla, because you have forgotten this information"* (Layla, 759–760). The transition to a further school appears to her considerably more uncertain than it did at the beginning of her schooling in Germany.

Rojan also reports transition barriers that emerged over the course of his schooling. He describes that a decision was made at short notice as to which students exactly would be admitted to the ESA

[15] This is also reflected in Shirin's educational path. Although her ESA grade would not have been sufficient for a direct transition into an MSA class, a previously obtained certificate was subsequently recognized, enabling her to transition directly to a business-oriented Gymnasium (Wirtschaftsgymnasium) (Shirin, 30–37).

examination and thus able to make the transition to an MSA class. This decision came as a surprise to him and his classmates, as they had assumed that all students would be entitled to sit the examination after several years at the vocational school (Rojan, 901–919). The announcement of the so-called "dismissals" is described by him as sudden and unforeseeable: *"All of a sudden they said, okay, next month we have dismissals"* (Rojan, 908–909). His account makes clear that access to the qualification was not experienced as secure, but as dependent on institutional decisions whose criteria were not transparently comprehensible to the students (cf. 5.1.1.4).

Mira addresses transition barriers in connection with the move to an MSA option, with the long-term goal of obtaining the Abitur. She reports having completed her ESA with good grades and having independently sought further educational options by contacting other vocational schools. Despite this, she repeatedly received the response that a transition to an MSA class was not possible because she had "extended" her ESA – on the recommendation of a teacher (Mira, 431–446). Instead, she was advised to first complete vocational training as a means of eventually reaching the MSA (Mira, 588–591*): "I wrote my ESA, eESA. With good grades. (...) And they said, yes, you extended. (...) And that's why I had to do training"* (Mira, 471–474). The transition into a further academic program appears here not as a regular continuation of the qualification achieved, but as contingent on additional conditions – namely, the completion of vocational training (cf. also Rojan, 740–747).

While other interviewees describe transitions as blocked or delayed, Oleh describes difficulties following a transition that had already taken place. He reports that the language level in the AvM class had been lower than in other school types and that certain subjects – such as chemistry, physics, or philosophy – had not been taught there, meaning that when he transferred to a different school type, he lacked subject-specific vocabulary. He describes how this content felt *"like a different language"* to him (Oleh, 258–270). In his account, the transition appears as made more difficult, since the linguistic and subject-specific requirements of the new school type encountered previously unacquired knowledge.

5.1.1.4 Lack of Transparency Regarding Educational and Transition Pathways

While the preceding section described structural barriers in the transition to other educational programs, the following section focuses on the informational dimension of these processes, which has already been touched upon at several points. Several interviewees report that they lacked key information about possible educational pathways, prerequisites, or deadlines.

Farid describes his confusion, particularly with regard to formal requirements for vocational training places. He describes having had access to lists of entry requirements but finding these barely comprehensible: *"I don't understand. Someone who wants to go into training needs ESA. Or MSA. Or someone needs B1. Or someone doesn't need it"* (Farid, 460–468). It remains unclear to him why certain qualifications or language certificates are required for some occupations and not for others. Formal transparency (in the form of lists) does not, in this case, lead to actual understanding. The experience of lack of transparency is particularly evident in Layla's account. She describes having received contradictory statements from teachers – for example about whether she would be able to take the Abitur after the MSA or study later: *"Some say, you are allowed, for example, after your MSA, you are allowed*

to do the Abitur. Some say, you are not allowed. Some say, for example, if you find a good training, you are allowed to study further. Some say, you are not allowed" (Layla, 579–582). Questions about the distinction between the Fachabitur[16] and the general Abitur, and the university access associated with each, remained unanswered (Layla, 577–593). She emphasizes that she lacked a clear educational plan that would have given her orientation. Instead, she describes a situation of permanent uncertainty: *"Every time you ask different people, you get new information or a new answer"* (Layla, 620–623).

Rojan describes how he and his classmates were initially led to believe they could proceed directly from the ESA to the MSA, and made decisions accordingly, such as postponing the ESA examination. Later it was explained that this transition was no longer possible, even for high-achieving students (Rojan, 252–271). Similarly, Mira reports a lack of information about the consequences of decisions like this. She describes not having been sufficiently informed about the meaning of a so-called "extension". It was only after completing the ESA that she learned this extension meant exclusion from the MSA: *"She didn't tell me that if I extend, I can't do my MSA. And I didn't know that"* (Mira, 440–447). This belated information is described by her as shocking and is retrospectively assessed as having had serious consequences. Daria also describes not having been shown any clear prospects after the ESA. While it was mentioned in general terms that further educational pathways were possible, she did not receive concrete information about prerequisites, preparation, or alternatives (Daria, 421–432). Instead, after completing her qualification, she was simply told to seek vocational training, without being systematically informed about other options beforehand.

The students' accounts show that missing, contradictory, or belated information about educational qualifications, transition rules, and entry requirements constitutes a recurring experience. The lack of transparency concerns both formal regulations and their consequences for individual educational biographies, and is described by the students as burdensome and disorienting.

5.1.2 Linguistic, Curricular, and Didactic Design of Instruction

The following section addresses the requirements and conditions of instruction as perceived by the interviewees. Presented are statements relating to language requirements, curricular specifications, the design of instruction, and performance requirements described as challenging or disadvantageous.

5.1.2.1 German Language Instruction and Inadequate Language Development

In the interviews, German language instruction is described by many interviewees as an important component of AvM classes for their educational pathway, yet it is simultaneously frequently experienced as insufficient and failing to meet their needs. Students repeatedly address the fact that the volume, continuity, and orientation of German language instruction were inadequate for building the language competencies required for examinations, vocational training, or further education. Their accounts relate both to structural conditions and to concrete experiences in the classroom.

[16] The Fachabitur grants access to universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen), while the general Abitur provides unrestricted access to all university types.

Several interviewees describe how preparation for language-relevant examinations began relatively late. Farid reports that targeted preparation for the ESA only commenced in the last six months before the examination, while the preceding period was experienced as unstructured (Farid, 135–137). Instruction only intensified once examination dates had been set. Accordingly, he expresses in retrospect the wish for a stronger and earlier focus on German language instruction (Farid, 494–499).

In addition to the volume of instruction, several students also address the quality and structure of German language teaching. Navid describes having experienced the instruction of a German language teacher over an extended period as having little learning impact. When he says the teacher *"just played"*, he makes clear that he did not perceive the instruction as serious or purposeful (Navid, 76–77). He emphasizes that clear task-setting, regular homework, or binding requirements were absent (Navid, 135–144). Mira and Shirin also report phases in which German language instruction did not, in their view, take place in a systematic or continuous manner. Mira describes how, at the beginning, games were the main focus, and central grammatical foundations were only conveyed very late through the deployment of an additional external teacher: *"We didn't learn any German... Not accusative, dative and so on... We learned all of that only at the end"* (Mira, 89–96). Shirin describes a similar experience and additionally points to missed lessons due to illness: *"She was always sick, and we just played... We had no thorough German lesson"* (Shirin, 68–73). These accounts make clear that German language instruction was at times not perceived as a structured learning space but as lacking in commitment.

A further recurring aspect concerns the limited opportunities to actively speak German in the school context. Farid reports having performed worse in the oral section of the B1 test in particular and attributes this to a lack of opportunities to speak (Farid, 33–38). Rojan also describes instruction as strongly receptive and emphasizes that active speaking was barely encouraged: *"You were supposed to be quiet and just listen. And not talk. If you don't talk, then you also can't talk"* (Rojan, 677–678). Several interviewees report that they made central language progress primarily outside of school (cf. Farid, Navid, Layla, Rojan, Mira, Shirin). Layla expresses this very clearly: *"This German, I swear, I didn't learn it at school. Because at school, you always learn the things you only need to know for your job. At school, it's like that, at vocational school, it's always like that"* (Layla, 650–652). Her statement also points to the fact that, in her view, German language instruction at school is strongly oriented toward occupation-related content and vocabulary, while everyday language competencies receive less attention. With regard to the latter, she identifies work and contacts outside of school as the most important learning environments. Rojan describes having learned German primarily during his internship and through contact with colleagues (Rojan, 675–686). Shirin also reports having additionally drawn on private or online-based German courses, as she experienced school-based German instruction as insufficient: *"I learned everything from... my private lessons. Not at school"* (Shirin, 116–117).

5.1.2.2 Curricular Restrictions and Missing School Subjects

In addition to the weighting of German instruction, the interviewees repeatedly address curricular restrictions within AvM classes. The interviews make clear that instruction is strongly concentrated on a small number of core subjects, and that numerous subjects which some students regard as important

for their academic and biographical development are either not offered at all or only to a very limited extent. Several interviewees report that instruction in AvM classes was essentially reduced to German, mathematics, and English. Hila draws a comparison with her sister, who at a general education school has access not only to these subjects but also to physics, biology, further foreign languages, and music, while these are not provided at the vocational school. She connects this to the assessment that longer school hours and a broader range of subjects would offer better learning conditions for language acquisition and subject-specific learning (Hila, 500–519; cf. also Shirin, 348–352). Layla also describes the curricular reduction as problematic. She describes having repeatedly worked through content in the AvM class that she had already encountered in earlier school years, while more advanced or demanding content was absent. Basic mathematical content such as *"plus and minus"* was repeated over extended periods, even though she had already mastered it (Layla, 137–148). At the same time, she emphasizes that subjects important to her (such as biology, chemistry, or physics) were not offered, even though she regarded them as relevant to her educational goals (Layla, 869–877). In addition to Hila and Layla, Rojan also addresses the absence of certain school subjects. He reports that for his aspired professional pathway, foundational scientific knowledge had been particularly lacking: *"I never had physics. (...) And actually in, so this, so work, automotive, you need physics a lot"* (Rojan, 64–65; 597–601). Oleh describes a similar experience: *"I asked on the first day whether we would have physics or chemistry. (...) But unfortunately not"* (Oleh, 308–309). While retrospectively accepting the prioritization of core subjects, Oleh notes that the absence of subject-specific instruction later complicated his transition to a Stadtteilschule due to missing vocabulary and curricular continuity (cf. 5.1.1.3).

Overall, the interviews show that the curricular design of AvM classes is perceived by many interviewees as strongly narrowed. Missing school subjects, reduced options, and limited content differentiation are repeatedly described as restrictions – in particular with regard to onward pathways, individual interests, and long-term educational goals. Notably, the students draw both on comparisons with other school types and on their own prior educational experiences.

5.1.2.3 Written Performance Requirements and Insufficient Support

Several interviewees address written performance requirements and insufficient support as challenging aspects of their everyday school life. Their accounts relate less to the existence of examinations as such and more to the way written performance was prepared, demanded, and assessed. In particular, the interplay between language requirements, the absence of systematic preparation, and the high relevance of examinations is described by the students as burdensome.

Layla addresses the lack of preparation for written examination formats. She describes frequently having had to complete tasks at home without sufficient explanation regarding structure, language, or assessment criteria – requirements that appear in her account as implicitly presupposed rather than explicitly practiced in class (Layla, 521–532). Rojan also reports that tasks were frequently distributed in class to be completed independently, without central concepts or connections having been worked through together beforehand. Written performance requirements are thus experienced as temporally compressed and linguistically demanding, without sufficient support having been available (Rojan, 418–

423; 557–571). Mira also describes situations in which extensive worksheets were distributed for independent work without prior explanation. Despite asking questions herself, she sometimes felt left on her own in such situations. The completion of written tasks was thus experienced less as a learning process and more as a performance assessment (Mira, 55–70). In lessons without a teacher present, some classmates therefore resorted to digital tools: *"We always use our phones in class. With ChatGPT"* (Hila, 178–183). Some interviewees attempted to compensate for the lack of support independently – for example by seeking external tutoring, which however was not arranged institutionally (Aisha, 489–514).

5.1.2.4 Limited Translation Structures

Closely connected to the insufficient support in instruction described above are the limited or absent translation structures identified by the interviewees. Their accounts relate both to limited translation provision in the initial phase and to the absence of support during ongoing instruction.

Bilal describes that in his class only one interpreter was available – for Ukrainian – while other languages of origin were not taken into account. Since he himself initially had neither sufficient German language skills, he was initially reliant on explanations in English. He describes how teachers partly conveyed content in English, which he then translated for other students. Looking back, he points out that students without English language skills would have had considerably fewer possibilities for communication (Bilal, 894–911). Oleh also reports occasional translation provision that was largely confined to organizational and administrative aspects. While formal procedures at the beginning of his schooling were supported with the help of a Russian-speaking interpreter, regular instruction took place predominantly without translation. While Oleh was able to communicate partly in English and describes this phase overall as *"okay"*, his account nonetheless shows that translation structures were not systematically integrated into instruction but were employed primarily on a temporary and situational basis (Oleh, 13–33). The interviewees' accounts make it clear that language support structures in AvM classes were not consistently or reliably available, and that language barriers were not systematically mitigated. Support frequently appears dependent on individual resources – such as pre-existing English language skills – on individual persons, or on time-limited measures. Students were accordingly affected to varying degrees by the absence of translation structures (cf. Yasir, Oleh, Bilal).

5.1.3 Organizational Structures of Everyday School Life

In addition to the structural conditions of educational pathways and the design of instruction, the interviewees also address broader organizational conditions of everyday school life. These include organizational procedures, institutional regulations, and structural conditions within the school that shape students' everyday experience. These aspects are addressed in relation to frequent teacher changes, the management of psychological burdens, and spatial or social separation between groups of students.

5.1.3.1 Class Composition

The composition of AvM classes is described by many interviewees as a central factor that substantially influences their learning conditions and school experience. In the interviews, these perceptions relate in

particular to the linguistic composition of the learning groups, the heterogeneity of prior educational experiences, and the gender ratio within the classes.

A recurring theme in the accounts is the dominant use of shared languages of origin within the classes. In particular in classes with a high proportion of students from the same countries of origin, several interviewees report that their first language was predominantly spoken in everyday class life. Farid describes this situation retrospectively as problematic for his own learning progress: *"We were all the same, speaking Farsi. We always spoke so loudly in class"* (Farid, 22–25; cf. also Navid, 520–524). He describes having repeatedly attempted to encourage his classmates to speak more German, but without lasting success: *"I always said, please let's speak German. (...) But it doesn't work. Then I let it go"* (Farid, 148–150). Yasir also evaluates the shared language in the class with ambivalence, but overall, rather negatively. While it had provided a sense of security at the beginning, it had in the long term been an obstacle to learning German (Yasir, 210–231). Several interviewees draw comparisons in this context to other school types or class constellations. Yasir describes that in a so-called "normal class" he would have felt more compelled to speak German, as there would have been no shared language of origin: *"You have no other option. You have to speak German"* (Yasir, 218). Hila also draws a comparison with "normal classes" and describes the absence of sufficient German-language learning space and opportunities to use German in everyday life:

> *"Because I think if I had been at a normal school, I could have learned better. Because in our class, everyone speaks Farsi. But for example at the Gymnasium and so on, they always, they always speak German. Like my sister. She learned very well, because her friends are all, for example, born here or they are from Germany. Then they always speak German. Yes, she learned very well, but not me. Because in our class we always speak Farsi. And at home, I speak Farsi, at school, Farsi. Only the internship. Yes."* (Hila, 484-491)

A further central aspect is the strong heterogeneity of prior educational experiences within AvM classes. Several interviewees report that students with very different educational backgrounds were taught together – from young people with many years of schooling to those with little or no formal education. Aisha describes this constellation as burdensome and at times unjust: "*Une personne qui a déjà été à l'école pendant dix ans et une personne qui n'a jamais été à l'école, être dans la même classe, je trouve ça injuste*" (Aisha, 407-423). Oleh also reports that large parts of the instruction were already familiar to him, while other classmates required considerably more support (Oleh, 339–346; 366–373; cf. also Mira, 59–64). Despite these differences, all students received the same instruction, which was experienced by some as insufficiently challenging and by others as overwhelming.

Several female interviewees also address the gender composition of AvM classes, reporting having at times been the only girl in predominantly male classes. Mira describes this as uncomfortable and would have wished for a different class composition: *"There were 14 boys. I am the only girl (...) maybe that was also bad"* (Mira, 536–539). Daria similarly reports that having at least one further female classmate would have helped her feel less isolated (Daria, 10–21).

Overall, the interviewees' accounts show that the class composition of AvM classes is experienced by many as making the acquisition of the German language more difficult, as well as making adequate consideration of individual learning prerequisites more challenging.

5.1.3.2 Frequent Teacher Turnover

Several interviews address frequent teacher turnover as a defining feature of everyday school life. Farid describes the changes as so frequent (*"Always exchanged teachers, like a toy"*) that hardly any stable phases of learning could develop (Farid, 51–53). Shirin also reports an unstable staffing situation. She describes having had no permanent class teacher for an extended period, with teachers at times being present in the class for only a few months. As a result, there was no reliable point of contact in either German or mathematics instruction*: "One month someone was there and one month someone else"* (Shirin, 81–86; 162–167). She connects this lack of staffing continuity to dissatisfaction with instruction, particularly in core examination subjects. Yasir describes how the repeated turnover of teachers was problematic for him. He reports that in German instruction alone, several teachers were deployed in succession: *"We had our German teacher exchanged three, four times"* (Yasir, 64–65). Rojan (724-735) also addresses teacher turnover primarily in connection with lost time and a lack of content coordination. He describes how newly deployed teachers were frequently not informed about the progress of previous instruction. As a result, it repeatedly had to be explained which content had been covered previously, for which, in his view, there was barely any time. New teachers, at times, set their own priorities without building on previous content, which Rojan describes as frustrating and hindering the learning process.

The accounts show that interviewees who experienced frequent teacher turnover found it to be disruptive to their everyday school life. Recurring fresh starts, changing teaching styles, and a lack of continuity between phases of instruction shaped perceptions of learning and were described as particularly problematic in examination-relevant subjects.

5.1.3.3 Inadequate Consideration of Psychological Burdens

Several interviewees describe psychological burdens that substantially affected their everyday school life and capacity to learn. Notable is less the complete absence of support provisions than their limited availability, insufficient institutional anchoring, and lack of consideration in everyday school life.

Mira reports attempting to access school-based support when she felt overwhelmed by conflicts with classmates and by distressing situations in class. While a contact person had been available at the school who had explicitly invited students to seek conversation in the event of problems, this person was rarely present and in practice barely accessible. Mira saw the counselor only once; further conversation failed because she was not on site. She ultimately refrained from seeking further help, even though she had hoped for relief (Mira, 926–945). Psychological burdens thus remain unaddressed in her account and are not integrated into everyday school life. Bilal also addresses displacement-related psychological burdens as a central factor influencing his capacity to learn and his school attendance. He describes phases in which concerns about family situations in his country of origin had massively affected his concentration and motivation. On such days, it had barely been possible for him to follow instruction or attend school at all. While Bilal shows understanding for school attendance requirements, he simultaneously describes how absences – regardless of their causes – led to entries in his school report and to sanctions. Psychological burdens are not recognized in his account as a legitimate ground for excuse but are equated with rule violations. The school's response remains formal and performance-

oriented, while individual burdens are barely considered (Bilal, 466–481; 495–506; 589–618). For Bilal, this is particularly serious insofar as entries for missed lessons could, in his assessment, reduce his chances of obtaining vocational training and thereby also have long-term consequences for his residence status (Bilal, 745–774). Daria describes her situation retrospectively as a phase of severe inner overwhelm, shaped by her refugee experience and thoughts of returning home, and the feeling of not wanting to remain in Germany. This psychological burden manifested in a lack of motivation, frequent school absenteeism, and emotional exhaustion (Daria, 401–411). She reports that teachers had attempted to speak with her and describes this support as fundamentally positive but insufficient to stabilize her situation (Daria, 492–496).

The interviews show that support provisions frequently appear marginal, difficult to access, or time-limited. Absences and performance deficits are assessed primarily through formal regulations, while the underlying displacement-related burdens are only limitedly incorporated into school-based decisions.

5.1.3.4 Separation Structures

Several interviewees report a clear separation and differentiation between AvM classes and other educational programs within the school (e.g, AvDual[17]). This separation concerns both instruction and social contacts in everyday school life. Although the classes were located in the same building, many students describe only rare or purely situational encounters with other educational programs.

Farid reports that although there were *"German classes"* in the school building, there was hardly any contact. Encounters were mostly coincidental, such as in the cafeteria (Farid, 552–564). Navid also describes that joint lessons with other classes had occurred only on isolated occasions, for example, once in mathematics instruction. Even there, little exchange had developed. Regular instruction took place exclusively within the AvM class (Navid, 475–490). Several students express in retrospect the wish for greater contact with other classes. Hila describes having wished for German-speaking friends, but this having barely been possible (Hila, 664–669). Aisha emphasizes that exchange with other students would have been helpful, particularly regarding integration:

> *"Je trouve que parler aux autres aussi, ou bien connaître les autres aussi, ça serait bien, surtout quand on veut s'intégrer, puisqu'il n'y a pas seulement des étrangers dans l'école. […] C'est bien aussi d'être en contact avec eux, peut-être parfois qu'on a des questions qu'on voudrait poser mais qu'on ne peut pas poser, puisqu'ils sont des élèves comme nous, ou bien ils font des formations, peut-être qu'on a des questions sur ça, mais on ne peut pas poser, puisqu'on ne connaît pas… Du coup, chacun reste à son coin."* (Aisha, 385-393)

Her account makes clear that she describes the lack of contact not only as social distance but also as a missed opportunity for informal exchange. Questions about vocational training, school procedures, or everyday practices could, in her view, have been more easily clarified if regular encounters had been provided for. Instead, the groups largely remained among themselves in everyday school life. The significance of such contacts becomes particularly evident in Mira's description of a phase in which she

[17] AvDual classes (respectively AV classes) are generally designed for young people coming from the German general education system who have not yet found a vocational training place. They differ from AvM classes, which are specifically established for newly arrived young people with language support needs.

temporarily participated in the instruction of an AV class for organizational reasons, where she built up contact with German-speaking classmates for the first time. She describes this experience in detail:

> *"I was worried about that. (...) I don't dare because of my language. I said, if they say something and I don't understand, that is so bad. Embarrassing. I don't want that. (...) But afterwards, they talked so well. I felt that I am okay. I have no problem having contact with the others. (...) I wanted to have physical education with an AV class, because I think that would be better for us too. They were born here, they can do everything and we could also learn from them, if we have contact with a class that speaks German very well."* (Mira, 809-812; 835-837; 850-853)

The contact strengthened her confidence in dealing with the German language and made her feel equal. However, she emphasizes that such joint formats were not regularly provided for.

Separation structures are described by the interviewees not only regarding missing encounters between AvM classes and other educational programs. The interviews also reveal perceived differences in school conditions and differential treatment of students from different educational programs. Shirin describes clear differences between her time in the AvM class and her current class at a business-oriented Gymnasium. Looking back, she has the feeling that *"there is a difference between foreigners and German people"* (Shirin, 562–563). While she no longer perceives any difference in her new class today – "now I am equal" (Shirin, 569) – she describes the AvM period as a phase in which structural differences were clearly perceptible. As concrete differences, she identifies in particular the mandatory internships and the absence of school activities such as school trips: *"We had to do internships, so we didn't have school trips like normal students"* (Shirin, 574-575; cf. also Rojan, Hila, Aisha). She also describes differences in how criticism or complaints were handled. While students in her current class can, in her account, openly express dissatisfaction with a teacher, she experienced in the AvM class that corresponding feedback was ignored: *"When we said something, the teachers ignored us"* (Shirin, 575–579). The comparison with her current school situation at the business-oriented Gymnasium serves as her frame of reference. Only in retrospect and in direct contrast does she describe the AvM class as clearly differently structured and more limited in terms of room for action.

The students' accounts show that AvM classes were mostly organized separately within the school. Joint instructional formats, social encounters, or school activities with other classes took place only to a limited extent. Several interviewees express the wish for greater mixing and describe positive effects in cases where contact did come about.

5.1.4 Interactional Experiences of Disadvantage

The following section focuses on the interviewees' interactional experiences in everyday school life. Presented are situations and encounters with teachers and fellow students that are described by the students as burdensome, derogatory, or disadvantageous.

5.1.4.1 Experiences With Teachers

Statements concerning interactional experiences of disadvantage with teachers relate to the tone of communication, the nature of support in instruction, assessments, and situations in which students had the impression of not being taken seriously or of being discouraged in their educational goals.

A recurring motif is language perceived as aggressive or disrespectful. Yasir reports a mathematics teacher who *"screams"* and *"insults"* and was generally *"not good with us"* (Yasir, 280–295; 308–316). Mira also repeatedly describes conflicts with the same teacher. She describes how this teacher used expressions in class such as *"shut your mouth"*, *"shut your trap"*, or *"your math is shit"*. Mira reports having *"cried two, three times"* as a result and feeling ashamed in the situation (Mira, 449–452; 500–506). Similarly, Layla describes a situation in which a teacher spoke disparagingly about the class by commenting on the content with the remark: *"My children learned this"* – referring to his young children. Layla emphasizes that such remarks can be particularly burdensome for young people who had little or no schooling, and evaluates the comment as *"totally bad"* and *"rude"* (Layla, 1017–1042).

In addition to tone of communication, several interviewees address situations in which support was experienced as insufficient or selective. Shirin reports that her mathematics teacher repeatedly responded to questions with *"I have no time"* and was *"always loud"* (Shirin, 97–101; 170–174). She describes having developed anxiety about examinations as a result, since she had to catch up on content at home alone and ended up with "*bad grades"* (Shirin, 133–151). In a similar vein, Shirin describes the feeling that teachers paid more attention to students who *"speak German better"*, while others had to *"do everything themselves"* (Shirin, 534–551). Yasir similarly suspects differential treatment on the basis of his language skills. He reports that a teacher at times only responded once he had formulated something linguistically correctly; if he had not used articles or formulations correctly, she sometimes did not respond (Yasir, 438–450). Layla also observes differential treatment in connection with a school swimming course. She reports that a classmate repeatedly asked the instructor for help without receiving a response, while other students were actively supported. (Layla, 1168–1170). The classmate then said: *"Layla, do you think because I am Black, she didn't talk to me? (...) She told me, Layla, she, she just doesn't want to touch me because I am Black"* (Layla, 1146–1147; 1191–1192).

Several accounts also relate to assessments and the experience of a lack of comprehensibility (cf. Yasir, 280–295). Rojan describes an internship examination in which, from his perspective, *"strange questions"* were asked that had little to do with the actual activities; he also describes frustration about the grade, noting that his supervisor considered it unjustified from a professional standpoint (Rojan, 985–1013). Additionally, he discusses repeated statements from teachers, saying he can't do it or that certain pathways were too difficult. He describes this recurring message as demotivating:

> *"Every day, they say, you won't manage it, you won't manage it. These words in your head... Then you tell yourself too, oh, I won't manage it. Then I want to just stop..."* (Rojan, 438-441)

Mira describes a similar dynamic regarding her professional goals. She reports that teachers had repeatedly signaled to her that this path was *"difficult",* and she was *"not yet ready"* (Mira, 361–365). This assessment had increasingly unsettled her: *"When they say I can't manage it, then I can't manage it. Because I always believed the teachers"* (Mira, 380-382). She began to question her own plans and to orient herself more toward teachers' expectations than toward her own interests. Such statements do not appear in isolation but are partly connected to repeated teacher recommendations to pursue *"easier"* or understaffed training pathways or internships (Mira, 369–370; cf. also 5.1.1.2).

Rojan also describes situations in which school rules were applied inconsistently or one-sidedly. He describes how even minor lateness led teachers to close the door and record the entire lesson as *"late"*: *"You are one minute late, directly the door closes... they write down for you the whole lesson... not one minute late... they write for you the whole lesson... You are late... That was really shit"* (Rojan, 822–826). At the same time, he reports that teachers themselves regularly arrived late: *"She was next to me on the train (...) and she writes my name, that I was late"* (Rojan, 829–842). In his account, the application of rules appears not as a neutral instrument of order but as an expression of an asymmetric power relation. The ability to document attendance and impose sanctions lies exclusively with the teachers, while their own rule violations go without consequence.

Some interviewees also describe situations in which they felt their concerns or perspectives were not taken seriously. Mira reports that complaints about the tone of individual teachers were relativized as *"a joke"*: *"They don't take seriously what I say"* (Mira, 512–515). Layla also describes a conflict with a classmate in which the teacher responsible for the class did not take her perspective seriously. After the classmate had insulted her, the teacher primarily attempted to end the situation quickly without addressing her demand for an apology (Layla, 221–231). Looking back, Layla raises the question of whether her gender or her headscarf might have played a role: *"I thought, why? Why? Because I am a girl? Because I wear a headscarf? Why am I not allowed to say my opinion?"* (Layla, 308–310).

5.1.4.2 Experiences with Fellow Students

In addition to conflicts with teachers, several interviewees also report burdensome experiences in their interactions with fellow students. These range from recurring "stress" and physical altercations to language-related devaluations, gender-related comments, and forms of mockery.

Navid describes his former school as permanently conflict-ridden and reports *"every week... stress"* as well as repeated police interventions. The altercations took place primarily among students; teachers had not been able to help (Navid, 172–188). Layla describes a conflict in which a classmate sought to restrict her use of her first language during the break, which escalated into verbal devaluation (Layla, 198–234). Daria also describes an uncomfortable situation with a classmate who repeatedly shouted political slogans (*"Putin, бах-бах"*[18]) and thereby provoked her. After speaking together with a teacher, the situation calmed down (Daria, 561–570). In a different context, Daria reports that her male classmates laughed when she used a translation app while working on tasks (Daria, 581–601). Mira also reports being laughed at by classmates after teachers make derogatory comments (Mira, 482–491). Hila describes everyday class life as at times disruptive, as *"the boys"* frequently used *"bad words"* (Hila, 332–343). Her account points less to individual escalations than to a continuous burden stemming from the overall tone in the class. In addition to their own experiences, some interviewees also report observed disadvantage directed at fellow students. Oleh describes, for example, the situation of a classmate with psychological burdens who broke into tears during presentations and was subsequently referred to as *"stupid"* by classmates (Oleh, 521–539). He also reports a classmate who was attracted to boys and was

[18] "бах-бах" (onomatopoeically approximately "bang-bang") is a Russian sound imitation for gunfire and can in this context be understood as a reference to Russia's war against Ukraine.

therefore mocked by other classmates – primarily through the deliberate use of wrong pronouns. Oleh describes having objected to this: *"You are in Germany (...) here in Germany it is completely okay. You are not allowed to say that"* (Oleh, 540–550).

The students' accounts reveal that AvM classes – despite their shared experience of migration – are not conflict-free spaces: linguistic, cultural, and political differences among students themselves can become sources of devaluation and exclusion, reflecting the complexity of social dynamics in highly heterogeneous class constellations.

5.1.5 Interim Summary: Connections Between the Described Disadvantages

The findings presented reveal various spheres of perceived disadvantage in the context of AvM classes. As indicated, these are rarely described in isolation in the interviews but are frequently placed in relation to one another. Figure 2 visualizes central connections between the problem dimensions most frequently highlighted by the young people. The representation does not constitute a causal model but serves to illustrate the themes that the young people themselves repeatedly linked to one another in the interviews.

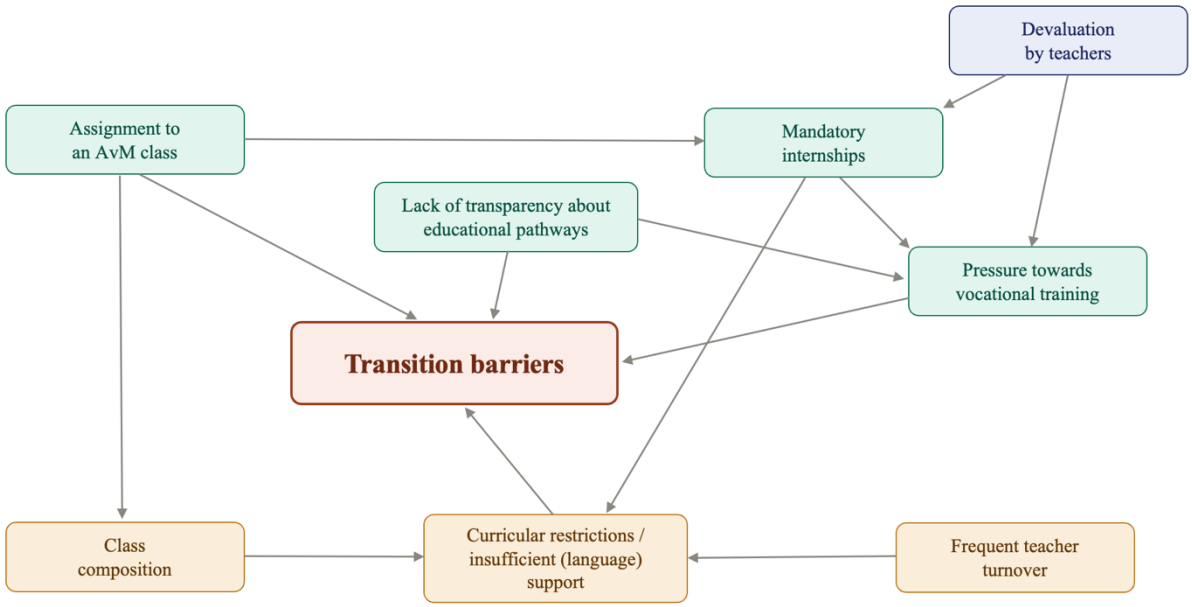

Figure 2. Connections between perceived disadvantages as constructed by the interviewees (own illustration based on interview analysis)

Particularly evident is the central role of perceived transition barriers[19], which many of the interviewees connect to institutional structures and conditions of the educational program (green), school organizational and curricular factors (yellow), and interactional experiences with teachers (blue).

5.2 Interpretation and Evaluation of Disadvantage

The following section focuses on how the interviewees interpret, situate, and evaluate the experiences of disadvantage encountered in their everyday school life. Central is the question of what explanations

[19] The term transition barriers includes here both barriers in transferring between school types and barriers in transitioning into vocational training.

students offer, what standards they draw upon for evaluation, and how certain or uncertain they appear in naming experiences as discrimination. Overall, it becomes clear that the interpretation does not follow a uniform pattern, but varies between explicit identification as discrimination, clear judgments of injustice without a clear attribution of discrimination, and forms of relativization. These interpretive modes are not to be understood as fixed positions of individual interviewees, but can vary depending on the situation, overlap, and also shift within a single interview.

5.2.1 Conceptual Understandings of Discrimination

Before examining the concrete evaluations of the situations described, it is relevant to consider what understanding of "discrimination" the interviewees themselves associate with the concept. In several interviews, students were asked to explain the term or give examples. Different frames of meaning emerge, which influence when a situation is categorized as discrimination.

A frequent interpretive frame associates discrimination primarily with **overt racism or explicit exclusion on the basis of origin**. Several interviewees cite as prototypical examples political or societal statements against migrants. Farid, for example, gives the following example: *"AfD... for example, all foreigners out"* (Farid, 530). Navid also draws an association with the AfD (Navid, 608) and gives as an example a blanket demand that *"all Afghans must leave Germany"* (Navid, 611). Yasir also explains discrimination in proximity to *"racist"* (Yasir, 582–582; cf. also Bilal, 868–878 and Oleh, 500–508). Rojan also responds to the question about a definition initially with a counter-question and spontaneously situates the term in proximity to racism: *"Do you mean something like racists?"* (Rojan, 800). Similarly, Daria describes discrimination as a situation in which the actions of one individual are transferred to an entire group, for example, when *"a Ukrainian did something, and everyone is judged by one opinion"* (Daria, 527–541). In these interpretations, discrimination appears primarily as explicit group-based devaluation. Other interviewees define discrimination more broadly as the **unequal treatment of persons on the basis of certain characteristics**. Aisha describes discrimination, for example, as a situation in which people are not treated *"de la même manière"* (Aisha, 322–328). Layla describes discrimination as a situation in which people are treated worse on the basis of origin, language, or skin color, and their weaknesses are exploited in order to devalue them (Layla, 1206–1229). She emphasizes that while discrimination can be distinguished from racism, both are closely connected (*"a little bit the same"*, Layla, 1220–1221). Shirin describes the concept in similar terms, drawing directly on an example from instruction in the AvM class in which teachers directed their attention primarily toward students who spoke better German, while others received less support (Shirin, 534–551). Discrimination is understood here above all as unequal attention or support (cf. also Navid, 643–646). Finally, in some accounts, **restrictions on rights or social opportunities** also appear as examples of discrimination. Hila refers to situations in which girls can be excluded from school attendance on the basis of their gender (Hila, 560–563), while Jamila refers to political debates about religious clothing (Jamila, 420–423). Discrimination is understood here as a structural limitation of room for action. Some interviews also show that personal experiences of discrimination in the country of origin influence the evaluative standards of the interviewees. In such cases, situations in the German school context are

implicitly compared with earlier experiences. Hila, for example, reports not having experienced discrimination at her school in Germany. For contextualizing purposes, she refers to experiences in Iran, where teachers had signaled to her on account of her Afghan origin that she was not permitted to pursue certain educational pathways: *"you come from Afghanistan, you are not allowed to, for example, learn further"* (Hila, 569–575). Against this background, she evaluates her current situation in Germany explicitly positively and emphasizes that teachers there did not ask about origin. Daria also draws a comparison between her experiences in Ukraine and at school in Germany. While she recalls situations in Ukraine in which teachers shouted at students or treated them physically roughly, she describes the behavior of teachers in Germany as respectful (Daria, 71-95). Such experiences serve as a frame of reference for her evaluation of the school situation in Germany. These comparisons make clear that evaluations of disadvantage do not only arise from current experiences but can also be shaped by earlier school experiences. Situations that might be perceived as problematic or unfair in the German context appear somewhat less severe compared to previous experiences. At the same time, it becomes evident that the interviewees apply different normative standards to interactions at school.

5.2.2 Uncertainty and Ambivalent Interpretations

With regard to the experiences of disadvantage in the AvM class, a portion of the accounts remains open or ambivalent in their evaluation. One example of this is found in Aisha's description of the heterogeneous composition of AvM classes (cf. 5.1.3.1), in which students with very different prior educational experiences are taught together. She describes this situation as *"unfair"* (Aisha, 210). However, when subsequently asked whether she would describe this as discrimination, she responds with uncertainty: *"Je ne sais pas, puisque je ne sais pas pourquoi c'est comme ça"* (Aisha, 426). She grounds her uncertainty in not knowing why the classes are composed in this way. A similar uncertainty is also evident with Jamila. She first asks whether discrimination can also concern religion: *"Does it also apply to religion or something?"* (Jamila, 474). She then cites the prohibition of praying at school as an example. When asked whether she would describe this situation as discrimination, she remains uncertain: *"Yes, no idea, how can I explain that? But I was a little sad"* (Jamila, 503–509). While Aisha's uncertainty results primarily from her inability to assess the causes of the situation, Jamila's uncertainty relates more to the question of which experiences fall under the concept of discrimination at all.

5.2.3 Identification as Discrimination and Suspicion of Discrimination

Other interviewees identify or confirm discrimination more explicitly – at times when directly asked, at times in the course of an argumentative sharpening. Layla, for example, describes derogatory remarks by a teacher directed at the class and discusses these in the course of the conversation in the context of a question about discrimination. As an example, she cites degrading statements such as *"my children learned this"* (Layla, 1021–1022) in reference to tasks that were difficult for the class. In the conversation, it becomes clear that Layla understands this remark not merely as unfriendly but as a symbolic devaluation: she interprets the statement as conveying the message that the students in her AvM class are *"stupid"* or do not belong in the class (Layla, 1044–1047). In addition to such derogatory

interactions, Layla also describes discrimination as a structure that limits or redirects educational aspirations. In the context of recurring messages from the school and the Jobcenter that she and her professional aspirations would change, and she should focus on training and internships, she describes how students from AvM classes are, in her view, systematically steered toward vocational training even though some pursue other goals: *"Why do you think they send us to a vocational school? Because at the end of the day they say (...) afterwards they have no other option, they do training. Go. Done. Because in training there are many places, you go directly into work"* (Layla, 1251–1254). Layla interprets this practice as an interference with her self-determination and formulates her criticism accordingly as a question of power: *"Why do you stand in my way and say, no, maybe, no, uh, it's better for you? Who gave you permission to decide what is better for us and what is not?"* (Layla, 1338–1341). Discrimination is understood here as the experience of institutional actors deciding over students' educational goals and relativizing their own future plans. A similar interpretation of this matter is found with Rojan. In his view, students in AvM classes are deliberately steered toward certain types of training. Teachers had repeatedly suggested doing *"an easy training first"* (Rojan, 329). He connects this to a suspicion of underlying racist motives:

> *"Sometimes... We said... Maybe they are racists. So... Look... Some... They don't want... that foreigners do well..."* (Rojan, 402-405).

In his interpretation, the repeated recommendation of simpler training pathways thus appears not as neutral guidance, but as an expression of a possible devaluation on the basis of origin. Rojan interprets this practice as an attempt to prevent students with migration backgrounds from pursuing more ambitious educational pathways and to direct them instead toward certain vocational options. After the term "discrimination" is explained in the interview, he explicitly confirms this categorization: *"Yes. They were that"* (Rojan, 808) and specifies: *"So that is for us discrimination. That they... simply wanted to send us... into training"* (Rojan, 871–827). Discrimination is understood here as the structural steering of students into certain educational pathways. Mira, in turn, approaches a discrimination interpretation through an observed contrast. She describes the same teacher in contact with a different AV class as *"completely normal"* and less derogatory, while experiencing her as insulting and disrespectful toward the AvM class (Mira, 610–623). From this, Mira derives a possible explanation:

> *"Maybe because of that, because we are not German. We are AvM class"* (Mira, 617).

Discrimination is understood here as differential treatment of comparable behavior: the fact that other students also talk during instruction without being sanctioned reinforces her impression of selective strictness or selective disrespect.

5.2.4 Denial of Discrimination

At the same time, there are interviews in which discrimination is explicitly denied – even when burdensome experiences are described. Yasir, for example, describes a teacher as loud, screaming, and insulting, but does not categorize this as discrimination. His central justification is that the teacher was

"like that with everyone" and had *"stress with everyone"* (Yasir, 570–572; cf. also Navid, 402–407). Discrimination is understood here as a specific form of unequal treatment that would need to be tied to characteristics such as origin, gender, or religion. When behavior is perceived as general (*"against everyone"*), it tends to be interpreted as a personal conflict, as a matter of *"character",* or as a general problem of conduct. Notably, the devaluation itself is not contested. What is contested is its anchoring in group-based distinction. Bilal denies discrimination with regard to the absence of linguistic support through translation structures. He describes how in the class, only Ukrainian was interpreted and how he himself had to translate via English. Although he describes this as *"a little unfair"*, he rejects the label of discrimination (*"No... that cannot be"*), explaining the limitation as a matter of resources: the assistant simply did not speak Farsi (Bilal, 894–918). Here, disadvantage is understood as a consequence of limited capacities, but not as discrimination.

5.2.5 Relativization

Several accounts show that evaluations shift over time and that disadvantage is at times relativized. Hila, for example, describes having initially experienced missed lessons as unfair (*"At first, I was angry, because I wanted to learn"*), but later: *"It didn't matter"* (Hila, 195; 368). This reinterpretation is justified pragmatically. When no instruction took place, they talked, *"like a break"* (Hila, 371). Shirin describes how repeated rejections (*"I have no time"*) initially made her sad, but after several repetitions became *"irrelevant"* (Shirin, 134–150). In these cases, the evaluation has not disappeared but shifts: from an expectation of institutional support toward a way of coping that limits disappointment and reduces burden. These relativizations can be read as an expression of adaptation to perceived unchangeability.

5.2.6 Self-Attribution of Blame

An additional interpretive approach involves assigning responsibility to oneself or to the class. Farid, for example, describes teachers as *"not so good"* but adds: *"We... were also not so good. As students"* (Farid, 64–67). He identifies loud talking, arriving late, and a lack of learning orientation as contributing factors for which he bears partial responsibility. Oleh similarly comments on situations in which internship places had to be sought during instruction time instead of having lessons – something that annoyed some of his classmates due to the resulting reduction in German instruction. He explains this by saying that many students had previously not made sufficient effort to find an internship; the problem was therefore *"not a mistake of the teachers"* but *"our mistake, because we had no desire for it"* (Oleh, 81–96; 101–116). Such self-attributions are not necessarily in contradiction with structural problem descriptions but show that students can draw on multiple levels of explanation simultaneously: individual behavior, class climate, school resources, and institutional rules. The interpretation thus appears as a negotiation of what is regarded as changeable and who is regarded as addressable.

5.2.7 Interim Summary

Overall, the interviews reveal different interpretive and evaluative patterns. Disadvantage is at times identified as discrimination – in particular when it is framed as devaluation, as selective unequal

treatment, or as a restriction of one's own educational aspirations (Layla, Rojan, Mira). In other cases, discrimination is explicitly denied, and reference is made instead to general conflicts, resource scarcity, or "character" (Yasir, Bilal, Oleh). Alongside these, ambivalent positions emerge in which injustice is clearly identified, but its cause remains unclear (Aisha, Jamila). Finally, it becomes visible that evaluations can shift over time, and that relativization (*"it doesn't matter"*) represents a form of interpretation that reduces expectations of the school and cushions disappointment (Hila, Shirin).

5.3 Reactions, Coping Strategies, and Agency

The way in which students interpret their experiences simultaneously influences how they respond to them – or, indeed, the interpretation of disadvantages can itself constitute a form of coping. The following section presents the reactions and ways of dealing with perceived disadvantages as described by the interviewees. The modes of reaction presented are not to be understood as fixed action types of individual persons. Rather, the interviews show that different strategies can be combined depending on the situation, context, or course of events, and that they can also change over time, which can cause overlaps in the systematization. The typology presented in the following, therefore, serves primarily as an analytical structuring of the ways experiences are handled that are visible in the material.

5.3.1 Complaints and Appeals to Formal Authorities

Several students report not simply accepting burdensome situations but actively seeking conversation or turning to formal authorities. These include conversations with class teachers, mentors, department heads, or school management. Yasir describes having turned to the school management regarding what he considered an unjustified grade. He had repeatedly asked why he had received a "four" even though his other results had been good. The school management's response he describes as evasive (*"I'll have a look"*), without anything changing about the assessment or him receiving an explanation (Yasir, 326–362). Navid also reports having gone together with a classmate to the school management to complain about a teacher's insufficiently supportive instructional design (Navid, 411–428). Shirin describes comparable experiences: she had turned to the department head, who, however, referred her to a direct conversation with the teacher, with whom she had already described a conflictual relationship (Shirin, 455–467). These examples show that students are indeed willing to make use of institutional channels. Appealing to formal authorities initially appears as a legitimate and obvious course of action.

5.3.2 Perceived Ineffectiveness and Resignation

At the same time, several interviewees report that these attempts had little effect. Complaints led, from their perspective, to no visible change. This experience has a clear influence on subsequent action. Yasir formulates this pointedly: *"In the end I said, okay. (...) I couldn't do anything about it. (...) Afterwards I said, forget it"* (Yasir, 347–417). After several conversations had brought no change, he had accepted the situation and not pursued the matter further. Navid similarly notes after his complaint to the school management: *"But nothing happened"* (Navid, 411–428). Shirin describes how her references to the lack of support had ultimately been *"irrelevant"* (Shirin, 133–151). Farid reports having also conducted

conversations regarding the class composition, but then having *"let it go"* (Farid, 147–153). A recurring pattern becomes visible here: a phase of active appeal is followed – when met with no response – by withdrawal. Resignation appears not as an original attitude but as a consequence of experienced ineffectiveness. The students adjust their action expectations: when change appears unlikely, further engagement is reduced. A similar distancing is also evident with Rojan. In response to what he perceives as the asymmetric application of school rules (cf. 5.1.4.1), he ultimately reacts with demonstrative indifference. When a teacher marked him as tardy despite their shared lateness, he responded: *"Write whatever you want. (...) Write that I'm shit. It doesn't matter anyway"* (Rojan, 836–837). His reaction points to a resignative distancing from the school's system of rules.

5.3.3 Support from Teachers or Fellow Students

In addition to formal complaint channels, the interviews also reveal forms of social support that can be important for dealing with burdensome situations and serve as a coping resource. Several interviewees report teachers who encouraged them or provided concrete support. Navid describes a teacher and his mentor who supported him in transferring to a different class (Navid, 197–220). Bilal also reports a mentor who actively approached him and asked about possible problems (Bilal, 507–514). In individual interviews, it further becomes clear that perceived support can also be connected to biographical proximity between teacher and student. Mira describes a teacher who herself had a migration experience and had only learned German in adolescence. This teacher had openly addressed her own educational biography and conveyed to the students that academic success was possible despite initial language difficulties. For Mira, this created a feeling of being understood: the teacher *"knows what we feel"* (Mira, 863–869). At the same time, she became an important point of orientation for Mira. Shirin, who had described experiences of disadvantage on the basis of language competencies (cf. 5.1.4.1), also expresses in retrospect the wish for more teachers with own migration experience. She justifies this by saying that such teachers could better understand the situation of newly arrived students: *"Yes, because this person was also one day in this situation, that they could not speak German so perfectly"* (Shirin, 518–519). Teachers with similar biographical experiences appear in her perspective to be more capable of showing understanding for language difficulties and school challenges. Support can, however, also come from fellow students. Mira reports that a classmate contradicted the teachers when they called her professional goals into question (*"Why do you believe them?"*, Mira, 373–374) and encouraged her to hold on to her aspirations. She also describes mutual support in learning, to compensate for the lack of instruction or the absence of teachers: classmates supported her in mathematics, while she helped them with learning German (Mira, 649–661). Such constellations show that room for action arises not exclusively through institutional channels but also within the students' social environment. Support from teachers or fellow students can open up alternative interpretations, provide encouragement, and help to cope with burdensome situations.

5.3.4 Resistance and Boundary-Setting

Some students respond with active resistance or explicit boundary-setting. Rojan describes having directly contradicted a teacher who attested to his lack of suitability for a training position (*"What is wrong with you?"*, Rojan, 131). Despite repeated discouragement, he holds firm to his professional aspiration (*"I won't let the company go"*, Rojan, 385). Layla also describes situations in which she raised her voice or made explicit demands – for example, when she insisted on an apology (Layla, 223–233). These forms of resistance are, however, frequently situational and emotionally charged. They arise from the feeling of not being heard or being misrepresented. At the same time, the interviews show that such strategies are not always sustainably successful and are at times themselves associated with negative feedback, such as reprimands for loudness (Layla, 237–246).

5.3.5 Adaptation and Pragmatic Acceptance

Alongside forms of active resistance or institutional complaints, the interviews reveal reactions that aim more at adapting to or accepting the situation: coping consists less in changing the situation and more in adjusting expectations, not pursuing conflicts further, or pragmatically accepting decisions. As already shown in Section 5.2.5, some interviewees describe burdensome situations as being evaluated less strongly over time or reinterpreted retrospectively. This relativization appears simultaneously as a way of dealing with recurring or difficult-to-change situations. By framing experiences as "irrelevant" or "normal", their emotional significance can be reduced. Particularly evident in this context is Mira's account: following repeated feedback from teachers, she began to internalize their assessments. Teachers repeatedly responded to her professional plans with the comment that this path was *"too difficult"* or that she was *"not yet ready"*. As a result, she began to question her own abilities: *"When they say I can't manage it, then I can't manage it"* (Mira, 380–381). Her initial reaction was to put aside her original plans and orient herself more strongly toward alternatives presented by teachers as more realistic. Adaptation appears here as an internal negotiation process in which external evaluations can be incorporated into one's own self-image. Further interviews reveal more pragmatic forms of acceptance. Jamila, for example, describes ultimately accepting the prohibition of praying at school, even though she initially felt sad: *"Then I said, okay, then I'll do what I can. And I'll just leave it all as it is"* (Jamila, 530–531, cf. also Yasir). When attempts to change situations remain unsuccessful or are associated with high emotional costs, it appears more reasonable to reduce expectations, accept decisions, or pursue alternative paths. Adaptation does not necessarily mean agreement but can be an expression of a realistic engagement with perceived limits within the school context.

5.3.6 Interim Summary

The interviews reveal a multilayered spectrum of reactions. Students frequently turn first to formal authorities or seek conversation. When met with no response, withdrawal or a reduction of expectations often follows. At the same time, moments of resistance, solidarity, and perseverance exist. Coping thus appears as a dynamic process between agency and constraint. Room for action is present, but is substantially shaped by institutional structures, responses from teachers, and experienced efficacy.

6 Discussion

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the central findings of the present study in the context of existing research on educational inequality, institutional discrimination, and subjective perceptions of discrimination. The empirical findings are to be theoretically situated, and their significance for the understanding of AvM classes within the German vocational transition system is to be reflected upon.

The starting point of the study was two central research questions: first, it was examined what disadvantages and structural challenges young people in AvM classes perceive. Second, it was analyzed how the young people interpret these experiences and to what extent they are identified as discrimination. The discussion follows this twofold structure: Section 6.1 addresses the first research question and analyzes AvM classes as an institutionally structured transitional space. Section 6.2 focuses on the second research question and reconstructs the conditions under which disadvantage is perceived and named as discrimination. Section 6.3 synthesizes the findings of both preceding sections and relates them back to the research questions. Finally, Section 6.4 reflects on the limitations of the present study.

6.1 AvM Classes as an Institutionally Structured Transitional Space

AvM classes are perceived by the interviewed young people not exclusively as a supportive educational offering, but simultaneously as an institutional framework that channels and limits educational pathways in specific ways. Three dimensions are analyzed: experiences with school assignments and limited permeability (6.1.1), the strong vocational orientation of the program and its structural background (6.1.2), and the question of the extent to which the formal equal treatment of heterogeneous learning prerequisites itself constitutes a form of institutional disadvantage (6.1.3).

6.1.1 School Assignments and Limited Permeability as Institutional Closure

A central finding of the interviews concerns the perception of school assignments as externally determined, barely negotiable decisions. The assignment to the AvM class is experienced by several young people not as a pedagogically justified support measure, but as an institutional imposition tied to formal criteria – age, residence status, missing documentation – without individual competencies or educational aspirations being sufficiently taken into account. Layla (86–88) describes her assignment to the vocational school despite qualifications already obtained in her country of origin as difficult to comprehend and emotionally distressing: *"I cried. I said, I did well, why should I go to vocational school?"* Shirin (363–364) reports that a transfer to a Stadtteilschule was denied without explanation: *"She said no, just like that, you're not allowed to"*. Hila (527–528) describes retrospectively how age as a central assignment criterion pre-structured her entire subsequent educational pathway*: "If I had been 13 or 14, for example, then I could have gone to a normal school too"*. These experiences can be situated in the light of existing research on the institutional logic of the German education system. Gomolla and Radtke (2009, pp. 268–270) show, using the example of school enrollment and referral decisions, that such assignment decisions are frequently oriented less toward individual support than toward organizational goals, such as the maintenance of institutional routines. What is decisive is not the actual capability of the students, but their fit with the normative expectations of the institution. Karakayali and

zur Nieden (2019) emphasize in this context that school segregation cannot be understood as the result of individual decisions, but is rooted in organizational decision-making logics that reflect the desire for performance-homogeneous learning groups. The assignment to AvM classes follows comparable selection mechanisms to those in the general education system: language skills and age determine which educational program is accessible – not learning potential or educational aspirations. Competencies and qualifications brought from the country of origin are only recognized when they are available in the form of formally certified documentation – which for many young people is not possible due to their migration biography, as became evident, for example, in Layla's case. The assignment thus follows an institutional logic that structurally fails to capture the educational biographies young people bring with them – which can be read in terms of institutional discrimination: not individual intentions, but organizational routines and absent recognition structures determine which educational pathways are accessible (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009). The present findings show that the young people experience this separation structure not only as an institutional restriction of their educational pathways, but also as an exclusion from social contacts and informal learning opportunities that would be significant for language acquisition and societal participation (Jording, 2022; Karakayali et al., 2017).

These assignments appear particularly consequential in that they are barely correctable. Several young people report that attempts to change school or class failed – without comprehensible justification. Rojan (521-523) reports that a transfer was rejected with the comment that it was *"too late"*. Mira describes having wished to transfer to a different AvM class with different teachers, but this not having been possible. Oleh describes a classmate being enabled to transfer to an MSA class while he himself was not, without comprehensible justification. This suggests that the absence of transfer possibilities concerns not only the transition to other school types but is also experienced as arbitrary within the AvM system itself. These experiences point to what Bernhard (2017) describes as structurally limited institutional permeability: once assigned, educational pathways can barely be corrected retrospectively, which permanently excludes certain groups from higher-value educational options. The absence of institutional permeability operates, as Dörffer and Bernhard (2025) show, as a mechanism of social closure that structurally prevents educational mobility.

A further dimension shaping the experiences of the young people is the lack of transparency regarding educational pathways, entry requirements, and transition rules. Missing, contradictory, or belated information appears in the interviews as an independent dimension of disadvantage that substantially influences the young people's educational decisions. Layla (620–623) describes having received contradictory statements from teachers about possible educational pathways. Mira (440–447) only learned after completing the ESA that a school-based decision had permanently blocked access to the MSA: *"She didn't tell me that if I extend, I can't do my MSA. And I didn't know that"*. These information asymmetries can be understood as an independent mechanism of institutional disadvantage. Bernhard and Powell (2017, pp. 341–342) identify targeted information and guidance as a central prerequisite for the realization of educational transitions. Their absence not only impedes individual decisions but systematically reproduces inequalities, as young people without family or social networks

that could convey institutional knowledge to them are particularly strongly affected. The present findings show that these information asymmetries are particularly pronounced in the context of AvM classes, since newly arrived young people often possess neither family resources nor sufficient knowledge of the system to compensate for missing institutional information. These three mechanisms interlock: assignment decisions pre-structure educational pathways, the absence of transfer possibilities cements them, and information asymmetries prevent young people from knowing and being able to make use of their options. Together they constitute an institutional framework that systematically disadvantages newly arrived young people – not because individual actors intend to discriminate, but because regulations, routines, and structural conditions interact in a way that disproportionately affects this group (Gomolla, 2023, pp. 184–185). Assignment criteria such as age and recognized qualifications appear objective and factually justified, information asymmetries arise without the active involvement of any individual, and for this very reason, these mechanisms frequently remain invisible.

6.1.2 Vocational Training Orientation and the Aspiration Gap

As a vocational preparation class, AvM-Dual is conceptually oriented toward the transition into vocational training. The interviews show, however, that many young people experience this orientation not as support but as a restriction – in particular where other educational pathways are systematically treated as secondary and marginalized. Vocational training appears in many accounts as the most realistic or expected educational pathway – not primarily on the basis of their own preferences, but as the result of institutional conditions that make this pathway appear as the most obvious option. Rojan (377–381) captures this experience with particular force: *"They just wanted to throw us out so that we do a training. (...) But that is maybe not your dream"*. This orientation cannot be understood independently of labor market policy interests. In the context of the German skilled labor shortage, refugee young people are increasingly addressed by employers as "potential workers" and as "young people capable of training" with high motivation (Charta der Vielfalt e.V., 2015, pp. 3, 11). Foreign apprentices, whose numbers have increased mainly due to refugee inflows, are disproportionately concentrated in occupations with staffing problems (BIBB, 2021, pp. 26, 97–98; BIBB, 2025, pp. 105–106). This framing suggests that the labor market orientation of transitional measures is motivated not only pedagogically but also economically. Educational policy structures and economic interests interlock here, with the consequence that vocational training appears as the institutionally preferred onward pathway, while further academic educational pathways are structurally less supported. Korntheuer (2016) shows, based on expert interviews, that vocational training can be reconstructed as a structurally intended educational goal for young refugees in many institutional contexts – arising from the interplay of school prerequisites, institutional structures, and residence law conditions. This analysis, however, remains largely confined to the institutional perspective. The present study supplements this finding with the dimension of subjective experience: from the perspective of the young people, the vocational orientation appears not as neutral support but as a restriction of their own educational goals and self-determination. The fact that educational researchers fundamentally criticize that access to general education schools – and thus to university entrance qualifications – is barely provided for refugee young people aged 16 and above,

and that they are, as a rule, channeled into pre-vocational measures (El-Mafaalani & Massumi, 2019a; Korntheuer, 2016), is empirically supported by the present findings from a student perspective.

Within this framework, teachers, in particular, emerge from the interviews as key actors in structuring educational pathways. Wehking (2020) describes in this context *knowledge-empowered guides* (wissensmächtige Wegweisende) as persons who, through their institutional resources and interpretive authority, substantially influence which educational and vocational pathways are regarded as realistic or attainable, and shows that refugee young people frequently internalize their recommendations. The present findings confirm this observation but supplement it with a critical dimension: the young people interviewed here describe the same mechanism not as a helpful orientation but as a restriction of their own educational goals. Teachers who evaluate career aspirations as "too difficult" or recommend training directions as "easier" assume a gatekeeping function that substantially structures transition decisions and closes off educational pathways – without this being recognizable as discriminatory intent (Blanchard & Muller, 2015; Lorenz, 2021). Mira (380–382) describes exemplarily how repeated messages from teachers – that this pathway (university study) was "too difficult" – gradually undermined her own aspirations: *"When they say I can't manage it, then I can't manage it"*. These recurring messages from teachers can be read as an expression of low performance expectations (Gentrup et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2021) – and thus as a form of interactional discrimination (Hormel & Scherr, 2004; Jennessen et al., 2013). Mira's account exemplifies the interplay of two mechanisms: in the sense of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Gentrup et al., 2020; Merton, 2010), the repeated low expectations of teachers led her to limit her own perception of her abilities accordingly and initially not to pursue her original educational pathway further. This adaptation can, in turn, be read by institutional actors as confirmation of their original assessment – not as a consequence of low expectations, but as an expression of supposed performance deficits. Discrimination would thereby unfold its self-sustaining and self-perpetuating character: its consequences would appear as its causes (Pettigrew & Taylor, 1990, quoted by Scherr, 2023). At the same time, individual counter-examples from the interviews show that teachers can also actively open up transitions: Oleh was able to transfer to a Stadtteilschule with the support of a teacher, Navid was actively accompanied in changing class. The fact that such transitions appear to depend on the commitment of individual teachers rather than being institutionally guaranteed itself points to a structural deficit. These gatekeeping functions contribute overall to what Becker and Gresch (2016) describe as the aspiration-achievement paradox: despite high educational aspirations, actually realized educational pathways fall short – not because motivation is lacking, but because structural conditions and institutional expectations hinder their realization.

One consequence of this institutional channeling is evident in the fact that some of the interviewed young people accept training places that do not correspond to their own interests and career aspirations. Rojan reports having been repeatedly steered toward "easier" training directions such as retail or kindergarten instead of his goal of becoming an automotive mechatronics technician. Mira was dissuaded from her original career aspiration and steered toward a training position at a dental practice – on the grounds that many apprentices were being sought there. The match with one's own interests

appears for many of the interviewed young people to be a secondary consideration. This pattern can be described in terms of Wehking's (2020) observation of the so-called *adhesive effect* (Klebeeffekt): training places are accepted situationally – according to availability or following an internship – rather than on the basis of one's own interests or long-term career aspirations. This observation fits into the broader structural finding that foreign apprentices in the dual system are disproportionately concentrated in a small number of frequently less attractive occupations – including retail, hairdressing, and hospitality (BIBB, 2010, p. 186). Imdorf (2023, pp. 265-266,269) shows that this channeling comes not only from the school but also from the vocational training market itself, where selection decisions are made not solely on the basis of aptitude but also according to perceived social fit within the company community. The interviews also make clear that actual educational goals are not abandoned in this process, but deferred to the future, functioning more as motivational orientation than as immediately action-guiding aims (Wehking, 2020, pp. 372–374). Some young people describe a particular training, or certain more easily accessible training pathways, explicitly as an institutionally necessary detour, in the hope of later gaining access to their actual educational goals through an MSA qualification.[20] This, however, is less a freely chosen intermediate step than action under structural constraints (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998): vocational training becomes the most realistic available option because other pathways appear closed off. Mira (920–921) captures this pointedly: *"I felt... I'm now in a corner and there is no other way except training. Yes, and I have to do a training now that I didn't want and a profession that I don't want, for later"*. Rojan (383–386), by contrast, holds firm to his career aspiration despite everything and accepts the detour via an "easier" training to obtain an MSA. These different reactions point to agency under conditions of structural inequality – the young people act, but within an institutional framework that pre-structures their options. The present findings additionally show that postponing educational goals does not remain without consequences. Layla (755-760) describes how the time spent in the AvM class led to an academic deficit that makes her original aspirations appear increasingly unattainable: *"Now I have this fear. Maybe you won't manage it, Layla, because you have forgotten this information"*. Structural adaptation processes thus not only defer educational goals temporally but can over time undermine them – insofar as the enforced detour creates the conditions under which the original goal actually becomes unattainable. This can be understood as a consequential dimension of institutional disadvantage: not only are educational pathways blocked, but the resources necessary for their later opening can also erode in the process.

A further mechanism that reinforces this pressure toward adaptation concerns the relationship between residence status and vocational orientation. With the so-called Ausbildungsduldung (§ 60c AufenthG, 2019) – a toleration of residence during vocational training – an instrument was created that grants young people with precarious residence status temporary protection from deportation during vocational training, explicitly linking training with residence security. While AvM classes are formally

[20] In Hamburg, completion of a dual vocational training program of at least two years, combined with a vocational school certificate with a grade point average of at least 3.0, can be recognized as equivalent to the intermediate school certificate (MSA) (Behörde für Schule und Berufsbildung Hamburg, n.d.).

accessible regardless of residence status, the latter can nonetheless structure the young people's subsequent educational decisions: the prospect of residence security can thus operate as a structural incentive to pursue the vocational training pathway – regardless of one's own educational interests (SVR, 2020, pp. 21–23). Bilal (759-761) names this connection explicitly: *"If I don't go to school or don't work or don't do training, that means I have no residence permit, and I have to leave Germany anyway"*. The choice to enter vocational training thus functions less as a freely chosen educational pathway than as an instrument of residence security. Educational decisions thus become decisions about residence status.

6.1.3 Heterogeneous Learning Prerequisites and Insufficient Support

As the findings show, a further source of institutional disadvantage lies in the class composition of AvM classes itself. The program admits all newly arrived young people and instructs them largely according to the same curricular specifications. The separation of newly arrived young people into a dedicated educational program is supposed to create supposedly homogeneous learning groups (Karakayali & zur Nieden, 2019, p. 891; Massumi, 2019, p. 59). However, a highly heterogeneous learning group emerges, since newly arrived young people are grouped together regardless of their educational biographies and prior knowledge (Table A1). This extreme heterogeneity can be understood in the sense of Vertovec (2007, 2023) as an expression of superdiversity: the young people differ not only along one but across a multiplicity of overlapping dimensions – school experience, language level, migration trajectory, residence status, and family resources. Vertovec describes superdiversity as a societal phenomenon. The present findings show what it means when an institution is not prepared for this superdiversity and does not respond to it structurally. Formal equal treatment produces inequality, because the learning prerequisites of the young people vary so greatly. Aisha (419–421) captures this tension pointedly: *"Une personne qui a déjà été à l'école pendant dix ans et une personne qui n'a jamais été à l'école, être dans la même classe, je trouve ça injuste"*. Oleh describes how large parts of the instruction were already familiar to him while other classmates required considerably more support – with the same instruction for all. Layla describes having repeatedly covered basic mathematical content over extended periods, even though she had long since mastered it. This constellation can be interpreted in terms of indirect institutional discrimination. Gomolla and Radtke (2009) apply indirect institutional discrimination in their concrete analysis to the axis of difference of migration and ethnicity – that is, to the unequal treatment between students with and without a migration background. The present findings apply this logic to a different constellation: the relevant axis of difference runs here *within* the group of newly arrived young migrants themselves, along fundamentally different educational biographies within an already separated group. The underlying logic is the same: equal treatment under unequal conditions factually produces inequality. In the context of AvM classes, this means, concretely, that young people with little or no school experience are overwhelmed by a curriculum that implicitly presupposes certain foundational knowledge, while those with many years of educational experience can be held back in their development. A uniform curriculum thus fails to do justice to the very different learning prerequisites of the students. The fact that missed lessons and a reduced range of subjects are described

by the interviewees as further dimensions of insufficient support is consistent with existing findings on structural under-provision in preparatory classes (Massumi, 2019, pp. 287, 307).

Insufficient support manifests in the perception of the young people, particularly at the linguistic level. On the one hand, German functions as the only legitimate medium of instruction and assessment, what Gogolin (2008) describes as the *monolingual habitus* of the German school. The multilingualism of the interviewed young people remains institutionally invisible: the language competencies they bring with them are not recognized as a resource and find no point of connection in the school's offerings – neither in the form of heritage language instruction nor as recognized achievement (Massumi, 2019, pp. 278–280). On the other hand, the interviews show that German language instruction itself was experienced as insufficient. While some report having made language progress during their internship or through contact with colleagues – which corresponds to the conceptual claim of AvM-Dual as a dual site of language learning – many criticize that school-based German instruction itself was insufficiently structured, and that language progress was achieved primarily outside of school through private courses or in everyday life. This observation points to a weakness in the school-based component of the concept: the system relies on informal language learning contexts without ensuring sufficiently structured instruction. The young people are thus neither supported through the language resources they bring with them nor provided with adequate German language instruction, resulting in a twofold disadvantage.

6.2 Subjective Perception and (Non-)Identification of Discrimination

A central finding of the present study is that many of the described disadvantages are not explicitly identified as discrimination by the young people, even though they are experienced as unjust or burdensome. The following section first reconstructs which factors explain this non-identification (6.2.1), before analyzing the conditions under which discrimination is nonetheless named (6.2.2).

6.2.1 Why Disadvantage Is Often Not Identified as Discrimination

The findings of the present study are consistent with findings from discrimination research showing that discrimination is frequently not clearly recognized or named, in particular when it occurs in subtle or structural forms (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023; Scherr & Breit, 2018). Several complementary explanations for the absence of discrimination identification can be reconstructed from the interviews.

A first explanation concerns the young people's own conceptual understanding. In the interviews, many interviewees associate discrimination primarily with explicit racism or overt group-based devaluation – such as political demands like *"all foreigners out"* (Farid, 530) or blanket statements against certain groups of origin (Navid, Yasir). More subtle forms of unequal treatment – such as limited institutional support, the restrictive channeling of educational pathways, or structural assignment logics – fall outside this narrow framework of discrimination and are therefore not categorized as discrimination, even when they are experienced as unfair. This is not an individual problem of understanding but points to a societal finding. As El-Mafaalani et al. (2023, pp. 206–207) and Scherr and Breit (2018, p. 4) show, the perception and naming of discrimination is socially unequally distributed and tied to resources like education, language proficiency, and societal positioning. For the interviewed

young people – newly arrived, with limited German language skills, and without established social networks in Germany – precisely these resources are restricted. The fact that they experience disadvantages as unfair but do not categorize them as discrimination can against this background be read not as a lack of awareness, but as an expression of structurally unequal interpretive possibilities. A second explanation concerns the influence of meritocratic interpretive patterns. When inequality appears as performance-based, and thus as legitimate, those affected tend to individualize structural disadvantages – that is, to interpret them as personal failure rather than framing them as discrimination (El-Mafaalani et al., 2023, p. 206; Mau et al., 2023, p. 86). This pattern is evident in the interviews where young people locate responsibility partly with themselves: Farid (63–64) describes teachers as *"not so good"* toward them, but adds: *"We were also not such good students"*. Oleh (103–105) explains situations in which instruction time was used for internship searching by saying that many students had previously not made sufficient effort: *"That is not a mistake of the teachers (...), that was our mistake"*. Such self-attributions are not necessarily in contradiction with structural problem descriptions – they show, rather, how strongly internalized meritocratic performance norms shape the interpretation of one's own experiences. Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) show in this context that members of minority groups frequently minimize experienced disadvantages and attribute them to personal factors in order to maintain a sense of personal control. Self-attributions can, against this background, also be read as an expression of this protective mechanism. Acknowledging institutional structures as the cause would undermine this sense of control. A third explanation concerns relativization as a coping strategy. Several young people describe how burdensome experiences were over time framed as "irrelevant" or "normal." Hila (362–368) describes having initially experienced missed lessons as unfair, but later: *"It didn't matter"*. Shirin (149–150) describes how repeated rejections by teachers became *"irrelevant"* after several repetitions. This relativization should not be simply understood as indifference, but can represent an active form of coping: by reinterpreting experiences, emotional burden is reduced and the capacity to act in everyday school life is maintained (Scherr & Breit, 2018, pp. 15–17). At the same time, this strategy has a structural consequence: it keeps institutional discrimination invisible, because disadvantages are no longer articulated as such. In addition to these individual coping patterns, a further explanatory approach can be derived from the *integration paradox* (El-Mafaalani, 2020; Schaeffer & Kas, 2024). The *integration paradox* describes the finding that perceived discrimination increases with greater length of residence and societal participation, because frames of reference and comparative standards grow. Since the interviewed young people have been living in Germany for only a few years, many still have limited frames of reference for identifying unequal treatment as such. What appears as institutional normality could, in a different context or at a later point in time, be recognized as discrimination. That frames of reference do indeed play a role is shown by the cases in which discrimination is explicitly named – which is addressed in the following section.

6.2.2 When Discrimination Is Nevertheless Named

Despite the factors described above that make the naming of discrimination more difficult, the interviews also reveal situations in which young people explicitly categorize disadvantages as

discrimination or at least express a clear suspicion of discrimination. Three conditions under which this occurs can be reconstructed.

A first condition is the experience of restricted self-determination. Discrimination is named in particular when institutional actors decide over the young people's educational goals and systematically relativize their own future plans. Layla (1338–1341) describes the repeated message from school and the Jobcenter that she should give up her intention to study as an interference with her self-determination and formulates her criticism as a question of power: *"Why do you stand in my way and say, no, maybe, it's better for you? Who gave you permission to decide what is better for us?"* Rojan (402–405) interprets the recurring recommendation of simpler training pathways as a possible expression of racist motives: *"Sometimes... We said... Maybe they are racists. So... They don't want... that foreigners do well"*. After the term "discrimination" was explained in the interview, he explicitly confirms this categorization: *"Yes. They were that"* (Rojan, 808). In these cases, discrimination awareness arises where young people experience their own agency as curtailed – and where the institutional channeling is perceived so clearly that it no longer appears as neutral or factually justified. This is theoretically consistent with Hansen (2009, pp. 159–160): attribution to external causes protects the self and enables the naming of discrimination – those who can attribute disadvantages to societal structures are less exposed to the risk of internalizing them as personal failure. In the present findings, however, the external attribution goes beyond psychological self-defense. It can be read as a political consciousness that explicitly names power relations and racist structures. A second condition is the presence of a contrasting case. Discrimination is more readily named when a comparative situation exists that makes the unequal treatment visible. Mira (617–619) describes the same teacher in contact with a different AV class as *"completely normal"* and less derogatory, while experiencing her as insulting toward the AvM class. From this she derives a possible explanation: *"Maybe because of that, because we are not German. We are AvM class"*. Only the comparison makes the selective strictness visible and enables a discrimination interpretation. Shirin (562–569) similarly describes retrospectively perceiving the AvM period as structurally different and more limited – only in contrast to her current class at the business-oriented Gymnasium: *"Now I am equal"*. This finding is consistent with El-Mafaalani et al. (2023, pp. 202–203): discrimination is interpreted as illegitimate in particular when those affected have a frame of reference that makes unequal treatment appear as a deviation from a standard regarded as attainable. The present findings make clear that frames of reference can arise not only through simultaneous comparative experience but also retrospectively. A third condition is the emergence of collective interpretive frameworks. Discrimination is more readily articulated when it is not experienced alone but interpreted together with others. Rojan's (402–405) formulation *"We said, maybe they are racists"* points, for example, to the fact that the discrimination interpretation arose in a collective conversation among classmates, not as an individual conclusion but as a shared interpretation of a commonly experienced situation. This finding is consistent with Rausch et al. (2021, pp. 19, 24), who show that solidary intervention by third parties and collective processing increase the likelihood of naming discrimination and responding to it. Taken together, these findings show that discrimination awareness is not a stable

individual characteristic but arises situationally – in the interplay of personal experience, available comparative standards, and social processes of interpretation. Whether disadvantage is named as discrimination thus depends not solely on whether discrimination "objectively" exists, but on the conditions under which it becomes recognizable and articulable.

6.3 Synthesis and Revisiting the Research Questions

The present study proceeded from two research questions: (1) what disadvantages do young people in AvM classes perceive, and (2) to what extent are these identified as discrimination? The findings show that both questions cannot be answered independently of one another but are closely interrelated: the institutional structures that produce disadvantages simultaneously shape the conditions under which these can be recognized and named as discrimination.

With regard to the first research question, the interviews show that AvM classes are experienced by the young people as an institutional framework that pre-structures educational pathways in specific ways. School assignments, limited permeability, information asymmetries, a strong vocational training orientation, and the formal equal treatment of heterogeneous learning prerequisites operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms. These can be described consistently in terms of the concept of institutional discrimination: they are not based on individual intentions, but arise from institutional routines, decision-making logics, and structural conditions that systematically disadvantage certain groups (Gomolla & Radtke, 2009). Institutional and interactional discrimination do not operate in isolation from one another. As the findings on low teacher expectations show, interactional forms can reinforce and entrench institutional disadvantage – for example, when repeatedly low expectations gradually undermine the young people's educational aspirations and thereby contribute to confining them to the educational pathways that institutional structures have already made most accessible. The present findings connect to existing research on the experiences of refugees in the vocational education system. Rusert et al. (2022) show that in dual vocational training too, language requirements, institutional routines, and the absence of support are perceived as central barriers and are at times experienced as discriminatory. While these findings relate to the phase of vocational training, the results of the present study suggest that corresponding experiences begin already in the transition system and in AvM classes. Institutional discrimination thus appears not as a point-specific phenomenon at individual transition thresholds, but as a process that continues and intensifies along educational trajectories.

With regard to the second research question, the interviews show that disadvantage and discrimination are interpreted differently by the young people – and that these interpretations are themselves insightful. The non-naming of discrimination is not evidence that no discrimination is present, but points to the social conditions under which discrimination becomes recognizable and articulable. Narrow conceptual understandings of discrimination, internalized performance norms, relativization strategies, and the absence of comparative standards make naming more difficult, while experiences of restricted self-determination, contrasting cases, and collective interpretive processes facilitate it. The findings point to a structural connection between both research questions: the separation structure of AvM classes can be understood not only as a mechanism of institutional discrimination in

itself, but simultaneously makes it more difficult for this to be recognized and named, because the absence of contact with regular school operations leaves little room for comparative standards to develop. Institutional discrimination thus itself contributes to remaining invisible. These findings have methodological implications: they show that subjective perceptions of discrimination cannot be read as direct indicators of the presence or absence of discrimination, but as expressions of complex interpretive processes that are themselves socially and structurally conditioned.

At the same time, it would be analytically reductive to describe the young people exclusively as those affected by institutional structures. The interviews consistently show that the young people act within these structures: they contradict teachers, seek conversation with school managements, support one another, hold firm to their educational goals, or develop pragmatic strategies for dealing with institutional constraints. This agency unfolds under conditions of structural inequality and is thereby limited. It is, however, real and should remain visible in the analysis. Rojan, who holds firm to his career aspiration despite repeated discouragement; Mira, who organizes external support for herself; and Layla, who formulates her criticism as a question of power – these are not passive victims of institutional logics, but competent actors who actively interpret and shape their situation.

6.4 Limitations

The findings of the present study are subject to several limitations. A first concerns the context-boundedness of the study. The investigation focuses on AvM classes within the Hamburg vocational transition system, whose institutional conditions, curricular design, and school practices differ from those in other federal states. A direct transferability of the findings to other regional contexts is therefore only possible to a limited extent. The results of this study are primarily to be interpreted within the specific context of the Hamburg transition system. A second limitation concerns the one-sidedness of the perspective collected. The study is based exclusively on interviews with (former) students. Teachers, school managements, or representatives of authorities were not interviewed. The institutional side of the described mechanisms thus remains analytically underexplored. Statements about which decision-making logics are actually operative on the institutional side cannot be made on this basis. A third limitation concerns possible memory distortions. Several young people were interviewed at a time when they had already completed AvM-Dual. Retrospective accounts can be influenced by subsequent experiences, changed frames of interpretation, or temporal distance – both in the direction of dramatization and of relativization of original experiences. Fourth, the particularities of the sampling must be noted. Recruitment via personal contacts and snowball sampling may have led to an overrepresentation of young people who are already able to reflect more articulately on their situation or who were willing to speak about burdensome experiences. Young people who are more strongly marginalized or who have more limited language resources may be underrepresented. These are precisely the young people who may be most severely affected by institutional disadvantage. This limits the reach of the findings and suggests that the experiences described here may not capture the full range of disadvantage within AvM classes. Finally, it should be methodologically noted that the study captures subjective perceptions and interpretations of disadvantage, not objectively verifiable discrimination

events. As outlined in the theoretical section of the thesis, experiences of discrimination always arise in the interplay of individual interpretive processes and structural contexts. The findings are therefore to be understood as a reconstruction of subjective patterns of experience and interpretation – not as a comprehensive account of all discrimination mechanisms actually present. At the same time, it can be assumed that certain forms of structural or institutional disadvantage are not necessarily recognized or named as discrimination by those affected – which means that the actual scope of possible institutional discrimination in AvM classes may be underestimated rather than overestimated by the present findings.

7 Conclusion

At the center of the present thesis were newly arrived young migrants in the vocational transition system – an area of education that is structurally formative for this group in Germany and yet has barely been empirically explored from their own perspective. The study examined what disadvantages young people in Hamburg's AvM-Dual classes perceive and how they interpret these experiences – in particular with regard to a possible identification as discrimination. The findings show that AvM classes are experienced by the interviewed young people as an institutional framework that pre-structures educational pathways in specific ways: school assignments tied to formal criteria such as age and documentation requirements, without adequately considering individual competencies or educational aspirations; an institutionally preferred vocational training orientation that structurally marginalizes further academic educational pathways; a formal equal treatment that fails to do justice to heterogeneous learning prerequisites; and interactional experiences of low expectations that gradually undermine educational aspirations. These mechanisms follow the logic of institutional discrimination in the sense of Gomolla and Radtke (2009), according to which not individual intentions but organizational routines produce systematic disadvantage. At the same time, the findings show that the separation structure of AvM classes not only itself constitutes such a mechanism, but simultaneously creates the conditions under which institutional disadvantage remains difficult to recognize and articulate: absent comparative standards, internalized performance norms, and relativization strategies make the naming of discrimination more difficult, while experiences of restricted self-determination, contrasting cases, and collective interpretive processes facilitate it. Institutional discrimination thus itself contributes to its own invisibility.

The present study makes an empirical contribution in this regard that has been largely absent from existing research: it opens up the subjective perspective of newly arrived young people in the vocational transition system, thereby rendering visible a dimension of experience that remains structurally underexplored in institutionally analytical approaches. Theories of institutional discrimination according to Gomolla and Radtke (2009) have so far been developed primarily based on institutional decision-making logics. The present study supplements this framework with the perspective of those affected and shows that the subjective perception of disadvantage constitutes an independent analytical mode of access: it points to the social and structural conditions under which discrimination becomes recognizable and nameable — or does not. At the same time, the findings underline that institutional

discrimination is not a point-specific phenomenon at individual transition thresholds but intensifies and continues as a process along educational trajectories.

These findings give rise to perspectives for further research. First, a comparative extension to other federal states would be desirable, in order to examine whether and to what extent the patterns of disadvantage reconstructed here from the student perspective are shaped by Hamburg-specific conditions or prove to be overarching structural patterns of the German transition system. Second, future research should systematically incorporate the institutional side: the interpretive frameworks and decision-making logics of teachers and school managements remained methodologically excluded from the present study. A triangulation of these perspectives would make it possible to grasp the interaction between institutional routines and subjective experiences more precisely. Third, the findings on the *integration paradox* suggest that longitudinal designs could be insightful: how does the interpretation and naming of experienced disadvantages change among former AvM students with growing length of residence, language competency, and societal participation?

At the level of educational policy implications, the findings point to several structural starting points. The formal assignment criteria for AvM classes – age and formal qualifications – which dominate over individual competencies, should be critically reviewed. Furthermore, the described information asymmetries and limited permeability show that an improved advisory infrastructure would be necessary, one that informs young people early about their educational options – including the possibility of accessing university entrance qualifications. Finally, the findings suggest that measures to raise awareness of institutional discrimination mechanisms at the level of school decision-makers and pedagogical staff should be examined.

The interviewed young migrants have not been described in this thesis as passive subjects of institutional logics, but as competent actors who actively interpret their situation, develop strategies, and hold firm to their educational goals — even under conditions of structural inequality. The fact that this agency is real and should remain analytically visible does not, however, change the fact that the structural conditions within which it unfolds are systematically limited. The perspective of newly arrived young people on the structural conditions within which they move was at the center of this thesis. Without it, those affected remain objects of analyses rather than being taken seriously as experts of their own situation. The claim to be heard was expressed repeatedly in the interviews and can hardly be captured more aptly than in Mira's (899–905) own words, spoken through tears at the end of the conversation: *"I just wanted to tell this. It cannot be. The whole time it stays with me. Maybe this helps for next time, for other students"*.

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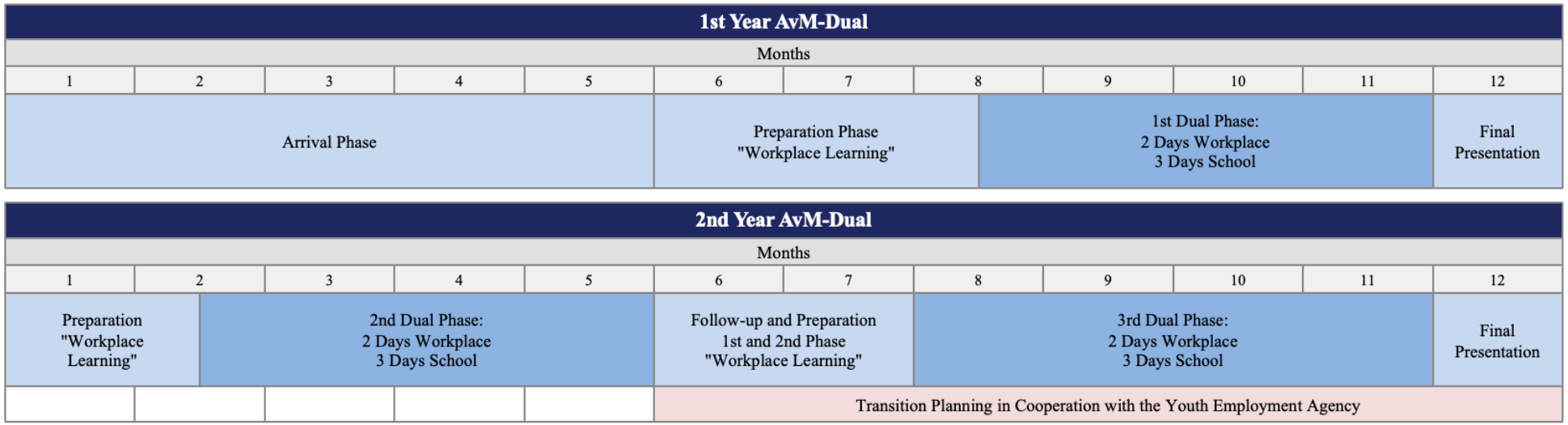
Appendix

Figure A1. Annual structure of the AvM-Dual program



(own translation, based on Sturm & Kruse, 2018, p. 6)

Table A1. Sample overview

Pseudonym	School, AvM class	Qualification & educational pathway	Gender	Country of origin	Length of stay in Germany	Accompanied/ unaccompanied	Years of schooling in country of origin	Educational qualification from country of origin
Farid	School A, Class 1	EESA → vocational training	M	Afghanistan	3 years	Unaccompanied	7 years	None
Yasir	School A, Class 2	EESA → vocational training	M	Afghanistan	2 years	Unaccompanied	5 years	None
Navid	School A, Class 1	ESA → MSA class	M	Afghanistan	3 years	Unaccompanied	3 years	None
Layla	School A, Class 2	ESA → MSA class	F	Lebanon	3 years	Unaccompanied	14 years	Yes: completed secondary education
Rojan	School A, Class 2	EESA	M	Iraq	3 years	Accompanied by family	9 years	None
Mira	School A, Class 1	EESA	F	Syria	4 years	Accompanied by family	4 years	None
Aisha	School A, Class 2	ESA → MSA class	F	West Africa	2 years	Unaccompanied	10 years	Yes: completed secondary education
Hila	School A, Class 1	ESA → MSA class	F	Afghanistan	3 years	Accompanied by family	9 years	None
Oleh	School B, Class 1	ESA → Stadtteilschule (recognition of MSA from country of origin)	M	Ukraine	2 years	Unaccompanied	12 years	Yes: completed lower secondary education
Bilal	School B, Class 1	ESA → MSA class	M	Afghanistan	2 years	Unaccompanied	7 years	None
Daria	School B, Class 1	ESA	F	Ukraine	4 years	Unaccompanied	6 years	Yes: completed lower secondary education
Jamila	School B, Class 2	ESA → MSA class	F	West Africa	2 years	Accompanied by family	10 years	None
Shirin	School A, Class 1	ESA → Wirtschaftsgymnasium (recognition of MSA from country of origin)	F	Iran	3 years	Accompanied by family	12 years	Yes: completed secondary education

(All information is based on self-reports by the interviewees and has not been independently verified.)

Appendix A: Interview Guide

(German original)

Warm-up:

- Wie geht's dir heute?
- Wie war dein Tag bisher?
- Von mir persönlich erzählen, meinem Studium/der MA und dass mich Erfahrungen von Jugendlichen im Bildungssystem interessieren
- Betonen der Anonymität und Vertraulichkeit

Block 1: Schulalltag

- Was war dein erster Eindruck, als du in die Klasse gekommen bist?
- Wie sieht ein normaler Schultag für dich aus?
- Wie findest du den Unterricht / die Fächer und die Art, wie sie unterrichtet werden?

Nachfragen:

  - Entspricht der Unterricht in der AvM deinen Bedürfnissen?

Block 2: Zugehörigkeit und soziales Umfeld

- Fühlst du dich in deiner Klasse wohl? Hast du das Gefühl, dass du dazugehörst? Warum (nicht)?
- Wie ist dein Verhältnis zu deinen Mitschüler*innen – sowohl innerhalb als auch außerhalb der AvM-Klasse?
- Hast du in der Schule Freundschaften geschlossen?

Nachfragen:

  - Hast du dich schon einmal ausgeschlossen gefühlt?

Block 3: Erfahrungen mit Diskriminierung oder ungleicher Behandlung

- Gab es in der AvM-Klasse Situationen, in denen du dich anders oder unfair behandelt gefühlt hast? (Hast du manchmal das Gefühl, wegen deiner Sprache, Herkunft oder Religion anders behandelt zu werden?)
- Kannst du ein Beispiel geben?

Nachfragen:

  - Wie hast du dich in dem Moment gefühlt?
  - Warum glaubst du, ist das passiert?
  - Hat jemand darauf reagiert (andere Schüler*innen, Lehrer*innen)?

Block 4: Verhältnis zu Lehrer*innen & Schule als Institution

- Wie ist dein Verhältnis zu deinen Lehrer*innen?
- Hast du das Gefühl, dass dich deine Lehrer*innen unterstützen?
- Hast du das Gefühl, in der Schule ernst genommen zu werden?

Nachfragen:

- Hast du schon mit Lehrer*innen über deine Zukunft oder deine Bildungsziele gesprochen?
- Findest du, dass dich die AvM gut auf deine nächsten Schritte vorbereitet?
- Wenn du es dir aussuchen könntest, wo würdest du deinen gewünschten Abschluss erwerben? Hast du den Eindruck die AvM-Klasse ist der beste Ort für dich, um Abschluss X zu erwerben?

Abschluss

- Wenn du eine Sache an deiner Schule ändern könntest – was wäre das?
- Weißt du, was Diskriminierung bedeutet?
- Wie würdest du das Wort erklären oder beschreiben?
- Ist dir das Wort schon mal begegnet – vielleicht in der Schule oder im Alltag?
- Was von dem, worüber wir gesprochen haben, empfindest du als Diskriminierung?
- Gibt es noch etwas, das du gerne sagen möchtest, worüber wir noch nicht gesprochen haben?

(English translation)

Warm-up:

- How are you doing today?
- How has your day been so far?
- Brief introduction about myself, my studies/the thesis, and my interest in young people's experiences in the education system
- Emphasise anonymity and confidentiality

Block 1: School Everyday Life

- What was your first impression when you joined the class?
- What does a typical school day look like for you?
- What do you think of the lessons / subjects and the way they are taught?

Follow-up questions:

- Does the instruction in the AvM class meet your needs?

Block 2: Belonging and Social Environment

- Do you feel comfortable in your class? Do you feel like you belong? Why (not)?
- How is your relationship with your classmates – both inside and outside the AvM class?
- Have you made any friendships at school?

Follow-up questions:

- Have you ever felt excluded?

Block 3: Experiences of Discrimination or Unequal Treatment

- Were there situations in the AvM class where you felt treated differently or unfairly? (Do you sometimes feel treated differently because of your language, background, or religion?)
- Can you give an example?

Follow-up questions:

  - How did you feel in that moment?
  - Why do you think that happened?
  - Did anyone react to it (other students, teachers)?

Block 4: Relationship with Teachers & School as an Institution

- How is your relationship with your teachers?
- Do you feel that your teachers support you?
- Do you feel taken seriously at school?

Follow-up questions:

  - Have you ever spoken with teachers about your future or your educational goals?
  - Do you think the AvM prepares you well for your next steps?
  - If you could choose, where would you like to obtain your desired qualification? Do you feel the AvM class is the best place for you to achieve that?

Closing

- If you could change one thing about your school – what would it be?
- Do you know what 'discrimination' means?
- How would you explain or describe the word?
- Have you ever come across this word – perhaps at school or in everyday life?
- Of everything we have talked about, what do you consider to be discrimination?
- Is there anything else you would like to say that we have not talked about yet?

Appendix B: Biographical Survey

(German original)

Datum:
TN:

Erhebungsbogen – Biografische Angaben

1. **Wie alt bist du?** _____ Jahre
2. **Bist du …?**
   ☐ weiblich ☐ männlich ☐ divers/etwas anderes
3. **In welchem Land bist du geboren?** _____
4. **Welche Staatsangehörigkeit(en) hast du?** _____
5. **Seit wann lebst du in Deutschland?** _____ Jahre / _____ Monate
6. **In welchem Land bist du zur Schule gegangen?** _____
7. **Welche Schule(n) hast du dort besucht?** (z. B. Grundschule, weiterführende Schule)

   _____
8. **Hast du dort einen Abschluss gemacht?**

   ☐ Ja, welchen? _____ ☐ Nein
9. **Wie viele Jahre bist du in deinem Herkunftsland zur Schule gegangen?**

   _____ Jahre / _____ Monate
10. **Warst oder bist du in einer AVM-Klasse?**
    ☐ Ja, ich bin **noch drin**
    ☐ Ja, aber **nicht mehr**
    ☐ Nein

    Falls **Ja**:
11. Wie lange insgesamt? ____ Jahre / ____ Monate
12. Wann ungefähr? _____
13. **Welche Sprachen sprichst du?**

    _____
14. **Mit wem bist du nach Deutschland gekommen?**

    ☐ Familie ☐ Freunde ☐ Alleine ☐ Andere: _____

Deine Angaben bleiben anonym. Du musst nichts beantworten, wenn du nicht möchtest. Die Infos helfen nur, die Antworten später besser zu verstehen.

(English translation)

1. **How old are you?** _____ years
2. **What is your gender?**
   ☐ female ☐ male ☐ diverse/other
3. **In which country were you born?** _____
4. **What is/are your nationality/nationalities?** _____
5. **How long have you been living in Germany?** _____ years / _____ months
6. **In which country did you go to school?** _____
7. **Which school(s) did you attend there?** (e.g. primary school, secondary school)

   _____
8. **Did you obtain a school leaving certificate there?**

   ☐ Yes, which one? _____ ☐ No
9. **How many years did you attend school in your country of origin?**
   _____ years / _____ months
10. **Were you or are you currently in an AvM class?**
    ☐ Yes, I am **still in it**
    ☐ Yes, but **no longer**
    ☐ No

    If yes:
11. **How long in total?** ____ years / ____ months
12. **Approximately when?** _____
13. **Which languages do you speak?**

    _____
14. **Who did you come to Germany with?**
    ☐ Family ☐ Friends ☐ Alone ☐ Other: _____

Your answers will remain anonymous. You do not have to answer anything you do not wish to. The information only helps to better understand the answers later.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Einwilligungserklärung zur Datenerhebung und -verarbeitung

Hiermit willige ich einer Interviewteilnahme im Rahmen der Masterarbeit von Karina Vartanjan an der Universität Lüttich ein. Ich erkläre mich damit einverstanden, dass im Rahmen dieser Masterarbeit mich betreffende personenbezogene Daten und Angaben durch die Versuchsleiterin erhoben, anonymisiert auf elektronischen Datenträgern aufgezeichnet, transkribiert und verarbeitet werden dürfen. Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass die gewonnenen Daten vertraulich und anonym auf einem passwortgeschützten Datenträger gespeichert werden dürfen. Ich bestätige, dass ich von der Versuchsleiterin über die Erhebung, Verarbeitung und Verwendung der Daten aufgeklärt wurde.

Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass die Studienergebnisse in anonymer Form, die keinen Rückschluss auf meine Person zulassen, in wissenschaftlichen Publikationen veröffentlicht und auf wissenschaftlichen und öffentlichen Veranstaltungen präsentiert und ausgestellt werden. Mir ist bekannt, dass ich jederzeit mein Einverständnis ohne Angabe von Gründen und ohne nachteilige Folgen für mich zurückziehen und eine Löschung der von mir erhobenen Daten verlangen kann. Mir ist jedoch klar, dass eine solche Löschung nicht mehr möglich sein wird, nachdem diese anonymisiert worden sind. Mir ist bekannt, dass meine Angaben in Übereinstimmung mit §4 BDSG behandelt werden.

Die Verantwortliche für diese Forschungsarbeit und die Datenerhebung und -verarbeitung ist Karina Vartanjan, Université de Liège, karina.vartanjan@student.uliege.be.

Mir ist zudem bekannt, dass ich ein Recht auf Auskunft über meine verarbeiteten personenbezogenen Daten habe, einschließlich einer unentgeltlichen Kopie dieser Daten. Dieses Auskunftsrecht besteht gegenüber der genannten Verantwortlichen. Weiterhin ist mir bekannt, dass ich ein Recht auf Berichtigung sowie auf Löschung meiner verarbeiteten personenbezogenen Daten habe. Ich willige ein, dass meine Angaben in Übereinstimmung mit Art.6 DSGVO behandelt werden.

Name (in Druckbuchstaben):

_____ _____

Ort, Datum Unterschrift

Appendix D: Code System

List of Codes
Code system
Described disadvantage
Institutional / structural mechanisms
School assignment
Mandatory internships; Pressure towards vocational training
Transition barriers
Lack of transparency about educational pathways
Curricular restrictions; lack of support/teaching
Translation structures
Frequent teacher turnover
Class composition
Separation structures
Non-consideration of psychological problems
Restriction of religious practice
Individual / interactional experiences
With teachers / mentors
With fellow students
Observed disadvantage of others
Experienced discrimination/disadvantage in the country of origin
Interpretation of disadvantage
Uncertain whether discrimination
Identified as discrimination
Explicitly denied as discrimination
Self-attribution of blame
Normalizing / relativizing
Examples of discrimination given by the students
Reactions and coping strategies
Direct resistance
Complaint to teachers / school administration
Passive coping
Coping through external support

Appendix E: Interview Transcripts

The full interview transcripts are available as a digital appendix (see the enclosed ZIP file: Digital_Appendix_Transcripts.zip). All transcripts are provided in their original interview language.