

Abstract for the Workshop on the Integration of Refugee Families in Host Countries: Research Advances, Policy Improvements, and Data Challenges

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Mastering the language of the destination country is key to immigrants' incorporation into the host society. Proficiency in the language of the host country – which is also the language of instruction in school in most countries – are also seen as a central prerequisite for the equal participation of immigrant children and adolescents in the educational system. This fact is well known from research on ethnic educational inequality (z. B. Alba et al., 2011; Azzolini et al., 2012; Kempert et al., 2016; Schnepf, 2007). First results on refugee children and young people show that proficiency in the language of instruction is also a key prerequisite for the educational success for this group (Edele et al., 2021).

Findings of the study “Refugees in the German Educational System (ReGES)”, however, indicate that despite a positive self-assessment, the language skills of the refugees lag far behind the skills of children and young people born in Germany (cf. Schild, 2021). In addition, only few refugee adolescents report to master specific language tasks that are required for school or vocational training, such as reading non-fiction books or writing demanding texts (Will et al. 2018). In light of this, measures to support refugee children in learning the instructional language could be all the more important, and they should also start as early as possible. ‘As early as possible’ is to be understood here shortly after immigration to Germany on the one hand, and on the other hand at an early stage of the educational career, i.e. ideally before starting school.

Our research project addresses this complex of topics and focuses on the language support of refugee children of preschool age. In a first step, we examine what contribution institutional language instruction in preschool can make to the acquisition of German language skills. In a second step, we investigate the conditions that promote and hinder the participation of refugee children in language training measures. For the first set of analysis, we use a general theoretical model of destination language acquisition (Chiswick and Miller, 1995, 2001; Esser, 2006a,b), which defines motivation, exposure, and efficiency as relevant factors. According to this model, taking language instruction increases the quantity and the quality of exposure to a given language, and, thus, fosters learning of that language. Our theoretical assumptions about the participation of refugees in language support measures are based on the notion that taking language instruction represents a special type of educational investment, and can be modeled accordingly (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). Educational decisions are the outcome of individual calculations about the benefits and costs associated with an investment that depend on motivations and opportunities.

For the analysis, we use the data from the ReGES study (see Will et al., 2021). We focus on data of Refugee Cohort 1 (doi:10.5157/ReGES:RC1:SUF:2.0.0), a panel of refugee children aged four or older who were first surveyed before entering primary school in Germany. The data contain information on the German language skills (based on psychometric tests) and support they receive in learning German. In addition, the data contain a wealth of information that is considered relevant for language acquisition (e.g. basic cognitive skills, various measures of contact with the German language, length of stay in Germany) and educational decisions (e.g. education of parents, intention to stay in Germany).

Results from a linear regressions analysis show a positive relationship between children's German language competency levels and both preschool attendance and formal language instruction (see Table 1, Model 1). The findings indicate that the benefits of attending preschool are largely related to additional language instruction that refugee children receive within this context (see Seuring and Will, 2022). Moreover, these benefits are particularly pronounced among refugee children who have only limited exposure to German at home and in their everyday lives (see Table 1, Models 2 and 3).

While 80 percent of the refugee children in the sample attended preschool, only about 26% of them received formal language instruction (Will et al. 2018). This discrepancy points to a possible imbalance between the demand for and provision of institutional language support in preschool. It is unclear, however, whether too few opportunities for language instruction are provided in institutions, or whether refugee children do not take full advantage of the support offered in preschool, for example, because their parents may not recognize their children's need for this support, or are not aware of the services on offer. However, the results also show that language support measures are primarily perceived when the children attend a preschool: In this group, it is almost a third of children compared to only 7 percent of the children who do not attend preschool (ibid). Preliminary results from linear probability models (see Figure 1) also show that attending preschool considerably increases the likelihood of participating in language instruction. In addition, with a longer duration of stay children are less likely to take language instruction, indicating that language supports takes place rather shortly after arriving in Germany. We also see a positive connection between participation in language support and the German skills of the parents. It is still an open question whether this is due to the fact that parents with increasing German skills know the educational opportunities better and are therefore better able to navigate their children through the educational system, or whether the parents are more likely to identify a need for language support in their children. With regard to motivational aspects, the parents' education were found to correlate positively with the children's participation in language instruction.

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Appendix

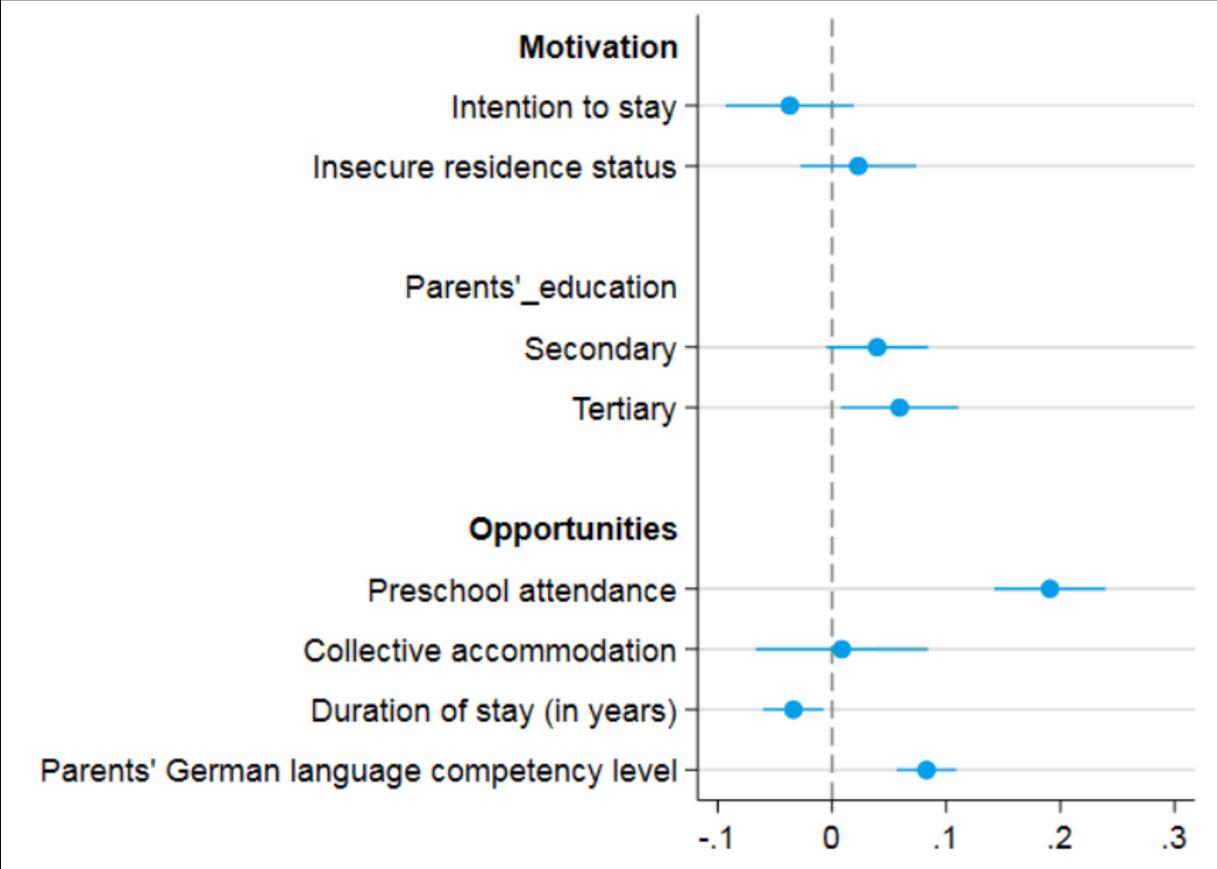
Table 1: Correlation between German vocabulary competences (PPVT-4) and preschool, languages instruction, and other conditions (linear regression models)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Motivation			
Intention to stay long-term	11.84*** (1.86)	12.01*** (1.86)	11.87*** (1.87)
Insecure residence status	-1.06 (1.89)	-0.94 (1.89)	-0.98 (1.90)
Efficiency			
General cognitive abilities	2.67*** (0.27)	2.62*** (0.27)	2.63*** (0.27)
Risk of post-traumatic stress disorder	0.70 (3.86)	0.37 (3.87)	0.66 (3.86)
Exposure			
Duration of stay (in months)	0.59*** (0.09)	0.59*** (0.09)	0.58*** (0.09)
German language support in family	1.16* (0.59)	5.10*** (1.30)	1.15* (0.59)
Parents' German language competency level	5.30*** (1.10)	5.29*** (1.09)	5.50*** (1.10)
German language contact (in hours/day)	0.51* (0.26)	0.52* (0.26)	1.92*** (0.52)
German language instruction	6.70*** (1.88)	6.68*** (1.88)	6.52*** (1.87)
Preschool attendance	4.39+ (2.24)	13.13*** (3.72)	11.30*** (3.23)
Collective accommodation	-1.44 (2.87)	-1.90 (2.85)	-1.83 (2.84)
Interactions			
Preschool attendance * German language support in family		-4.66*** (1.41)	
Preschool attendance * German language contact			-1.66** (0.58)
Constant	-90.35*** (22.10)	-96.71*** (22.13)	-91.41*** (22.02)
R ²	0.24	0.25	0.25

Notes: standard errors in parentheses; N=1,341 children; additionally controlled for age, gender, country of origin, highest education of parents, federal state, population size of municipality, and care rate in municipality. *Source:* Seuring & Will, 2022.

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Figure 1: Conditions that predict children’s participation in language instruction (linear probability models)



Notes: Coefficients with 95% confidence intervals; N=1,993 children; additionally controlled for age, gender, and, country of origin.