

## CHAPTER FIVE

# “I wanna be somebody”

### *Education and Upward Mobility in Germany and the United States*

In the fall of 2020, during the second wave of COVID-19, I relocated with my family to the small village in southern Germany I grew up in. My younger daughter was enrolled in first grade and her sister entered fourth grade—the year in which teachers have to make decisions about the kind of academic tracts students will be attending from fifth grade on. In comparison to the United States, southern German schools decide early on who will be going to a vocational school and who will finish twelve years of schooling with the goal of going to university.<sup>1</sup>

Having both my children go the same school I had attended thirty-four years ago was a surreal experience. A lot has changed since my own first day of school, but many fundamental aspects of schooling have also remained the same. The local elementary school has stayed rather homogenous. In both my children’s grades there were only a handful of students from immigrant families. Similar to the way things were in my own childhood, parents worked for the automobile industry. The Porsche

development center and factory are located two towns over. Bosch and Mercedes are headquartered within a forty-five-minute drive. With an average of 68,000 euros in savings per person, the area continues to be one of the wealthiest parts of an already wealthy state (Münzenmeier 2020, 32).

A small village in southern Germany may not indicate accurately how Germany has transformed over the past forty years. On the other hand, studies conducted at the national level confirm my local impression of stagnation: The educational system in Germany still fails to uplift children who are not ethnically German and who come from lower-class backgrounds. Children who have a migration background continue to be more likely to be selected into the vocational tract (Baumert, Maaz, and Trautwein 2010). The young men I interviewed at Adelsheim had mostly been attending the lowest level of the classic vocational schools—that of the so-called *Hauptschule*. While these schools used to offer viable pathways to employment, they are now reserved for a small minority of children who face an array of academic and social challenges (Bold 2020).<sup>2</sup> Similar to the American respondents I interviewed, the German participants I engaged with attended substandard schools. They were relegated to educational institutions serving primarily children who are not ethnically German and who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Focusing on the range of educational achievement in both samples, this chapter reveals the different ways educational institutions affirmed the respondents' outsider status. The young men's narratives also illustrate how education in and outside of prison reproduced stratification according to race and class in Germany and the United States.

### THE LEFTOVERS

In Germany young people can be tried as juveniles until they are twenty-one years old. As a result, many of the young men held at the juvenile prison in Adelsheim are eighteen and older. Being, on average, at the cusp of their twenties at the beginning of their sentence, many have had a long history of failing in school.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, 38 percent of those incarcerated at Adelsheim had finished school with the so-called *Hauptschulabschluss*. This degree has become so marginalized that is not even issued anymore outside special education settings. A majority, about 55 percent, had not even been able to achieve this remedial level of education (Stelly and Thomas 2021).

Among his low-achieving peers in prison, Eren was an exception. The twenty-one-year-old had been at Adelsheim for just over ten months when I interviewed him for the first time during the summer of 2017. On the outside, Eren had been on track to become the first member of his family to enter the Gymnasium. Eren's grandfather had immigrated to Germany from eastern Turkey to work. Eren's father followed him when he was old enough to find more lucrative employment as well. He returned to Turkey to get married and the family relocated to southern Germany permanently afterward. Like the majority of children who have a migration background, Eren was originally sent to vocational school. Defying the odds, he did comparatively well there. One of his teachers noticed Eren's academic ability and encouraged him to aim for continuing his education past the obligatory ten years of schooling.

The encouragement absurdly symbolized how children like Eren tend to be stigmatized in the German educational system. According to Eren, his teacher told him, "You need to work hard,

or you just gonna be another one of these ‘shitty Kanaken.’” The term “Kanake” refers to people of Arab or Turkish origin. Calling someone a “Kanake” implies that this person is lacking sophistication and intelligence. Unless it is used self-referentially, the term is an insult.

Eren did not care much about being labeled and was simply grateful that his teacher believed in him. He was very motivated initially, but his commitment faltered in part because his family was unsupportive of his educational goals. Eren’s father struggled with a gambling addiction and spent the family’s money on slot machines. His mother was helpless in the face of her husband’s self-destructive habit. Eren remembered that his father was withdrawn. Gambling encompassed his whole existence, and even when he was home, he barely noticed his son. Unsupervised and trying to get away from his family’s dysfunction, Eren was drawn to the streets. His attempt to become the first person in his family to graduate high school came to an end when he was arrested on his second day of school for armed robbery.

In prison Eren’s options for furthering his education were very limited. When I interviewed him, he was in the process of finishing vocational training as a metal worker. While this type of education could offer a path to a middle-class life, he still had a long way to go. Two years of training and schooling in prison would have to be followed by eighteen months of education and job training on the outside. Only then would he be allowed to call himself a certified metal worker. In the meantime, Eren had disengaged from the idea of ever enrolling at a university. While he likely could have achieved much more under different circumstances, he made good use of his time in prison. As one of the few young men that had finished ten years of schooling successfully, he was able to begin vocational training during his

incarceration. As an apprentice he made progress toward a tangible trade that could lead to well-paying employment on the outside. The approximately 55 percent of the incarcerated persons were at Adelsheim without any educational credentials had to take remedial classes before they could even think about starting an apprenticeship.

Armend was one of those young men who were not ready to meet the fairly high standards for enrolling in vocational training. At nineteen years old, he had finished the minimum level of nine years of schooling in prison. Armend spent the remainder of his sentence working in the storage facility of the prison—packing and labeling items. Having been diagnosed with ADHD, and struggling in school all his life, he was proud to have received a degree. He was aware of his limitations and did not aspire to be trained as an apprentice. Instead, the nineteen-year-old envisioned working as an untrained laborer in a storage facility on the outside as well. His greatest ambition was to become a forklift driver.

The reality he encountered on the outside undercut even his modest expectations. Against the advice of his probation officer, Armend went back to live with his family in a small, picturesque village in a tourist area known as the Swabian Alps. In contrast to the rest of the village, the government housing the family lived in was extremely run down and filthy. The family shared the shed-like dwelling with other welfare recipients. One of them openly displayed neo-Nazi tattoos, which intimidated Armend's family. His parents had come to Germany during the war in Kosovo at the end of the 1990s. His mother barely spoke German, and the whole family was marked as being "foreigners" (*Ausländer*) in the very homogenous, small town they lived in.

Armend was stuck at home for most of the day. The social workers in prison had been unable to set him up with a job before he left prison. The degree he had been so proud of was not good enough to secure full-time employment. He had only been able to get an internship at a nursing home, where he did not enjoy working at all. After showing up drunk one morning he never returned.

During the summer of 2018, one year after I had interviewed Armend in prison, he was waiting to be sent back there. Without going into any details, he stated that he had been caught stealing thirty euros. Struggling with depression and alcoholism, and being ashamed of where he lived, he admitted that he was actually looking forward to going back to Adelsheim. While he hoped that this would offer another opportunity for him to change, he was also fatalistic about his future. He seemed to believe that he was never going to be able to live a productive life. At nineteen years old, Armend was set up to become a life-long welfare recipient.

Achim had achieved the same educational credentials Armend had. Like Armend, he had also been diagnosed with ADHD. Growing up near Heidelberg—a city popular with international tourists—school had never been easy for him. Achim hated doing homework, and he admitted that he was distracted by girls and drugs as a teenager. In contrast to Armend, Achim had several advantages working in his favor after he was released from prison. His parents were embedded in the community they lived in. They owned a house and were gainfully employed. Achim remembered that his family struggled financially when he was growing up, but when I visited them, they seemed established. Owning property in this highly desirable part of Germany, they had achieved a significant level of financial

stability. Achim also had light skin and looked ethnically German. Only his father's family had a "migration background." His uncle already worked as a baker, and he helped Achim to secure an apprenticeship at the same bakery.

Becoming a baker has been one of the few options left for people who have only finished minimal schooling. The undesirable working hours and low pay have led to a shortage of apprentices willing to learn the trade. Having the support of his uncle, as well as choosing a trade in need of apprentices, allowed him to enter the labor market successfully after prison.

Achim still struggled with the demands put on him: He had to get up at 4:00 a.m. In addition to learning the craft of baking, he also had to attend school. His supervisor was unhappy with his school performance because he received a C for the practical tasks he was graded on. Nevertheless, Achim was hopeful that he could finish his education and become a baker specializing in making cakes.

During our final interview in the summer of 2019, Achim explained that he had switched to a different trade. In addition to the low pay—he had only received about 340 euros a month after taxes—he had run into personal problems with his supervisor. In the end, he felt it was best to avoid further escalating a conflict. His mother advised him to leave rather than being fired. She also helped him to find a new apprenticeship almost immediately after he quit the bakery. Within a week Achim had started an apprenticeship to become a construction worker. When we spoke, he had just finished his first year as a trainee. This time he had struggled with the theoretical part of his required schooling. He failed his first year, but since he was doing well in the practical aspects of his education, he was able to move forward to year two.

While Achim's path was by no means an easy one, he could rely on his mother's support to help him navigate the complexities of the German apprenticeship system. As a native German, and herself being embedded in the labor market, Achim's mother had distinct advantages over Armend's family. Being able to draw on social connections allowed Achim to overcome the disadvantage of a substandard degree. Being knowledgeable about the kind of apprenticeships that were available further allowed him to adjust his expectations and to make choices that maximized his position in the labor market. Comparing Achim's position to Eren's and Armend's, the advantage of community embeddedness is obvious. Eren and Achim were on similar educational pathways. While Eren labored below his abilities, Achim was exceeding the limitations of his degree. Armend, on the other hand, lacked any social or cultural capital. Unlike Achim, he was not able to build on the educational degree he had achieved while he was incarcerated.

All three cases exemplify the credentialism of German labor market. While the apprenticeship system offers a viable path to a middle-class lifestyle outside a college degree, the requirements are too high for those who suffer from cognitive deficits and are not socially embedded in the community they live in (Haasler 2020).<sup>4</sup> As Eren's example shows, even high-performing students are stereotyped. Additionally, being in prison forced Eren to lower his educational aspirations significantly. Mirroring the quantitative data about schooling in Germany, the three cases demonstrate how the highly selective system affirms the current class structure rather than enabling upward mobility. In the case of Armend and Eren, their "migration background," coupled with their criminal record and challenging family history,

all but assured that they were unable to use the German educational system as a path to upward mobility.

“OPPORTUNITIES, THEY’RE NOT GIVEN.  
YOU GOTTA TAKE ’EM.”

Jesus grew up in grew up in Kensington, Philadelphia—a neighborhood the *New York Times Magazine* has dubbed the “largest open-air narcotics market” in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Jesus remembers being surrounded by heroin addicts and drug dealers growing up. Looking up to the dealers and their conspicuous consumption, he believed a lot of children in his neighborhood shared a similar mindset: “I’m not staying poor. I’m not walking to school. Like I want a car. I want a dirt bike. I want a four-wheeler. My mom need groceries. I don’t wanna see her crying no more; let me change something.”

Jesus was enrolled a segregated elementary school. Based on the latest data from the Philadelphia school district, 84 percent of the students at his former school are considered low-income. Almost 80 percent of the student body identify as Latino. The school is rated two out of ten, and students perform significantly below the state average in reading, math, and science.<sup>6</sup> Jesus went there in the early 2000s. He remembers being a good student and finishing his work more quickly than the others. He does not remember being offered any extra work. Instead, the teachers called his grandmother to pick him up early when there was nothing more to do for him. Even though he was bored and disruptive in school, Jesus always had high aspirations: “Probably like at nine years old . . . I wanted a job, but I wanted to be like one of the Fortune 500 company dudes.”

Becoming a drug dealer was the next logical step for him to make a lot of money quickly. School was an afterthought during these years. None of his teachers noticed that Jesus was a gifted student until he entered a juvenile placement center in his mid-teens. There he was able to finish his GED quickly at the facility and began studying for the SAT. Jesus scored high on the exam without much effort, and his counselor seemed to be amazed. He recalled: “They thought I was gonna be that one kid that came from nothing [and made it].” After his release, he received a scholarship to enroll at Temple University. He started the semester with high aspirations, wanting to become a counselor or psychiatrist, but his enthusiasm waned quickly. Believing he still had time to take college seriously, he became involved in street life again, was rearrested, and ended up dropping out of college. Gambling away the opportunity of a free college education is one of his biggest regrets. As he put it: “Now I’m like alright that shit wasn’t worth it.”

When I interviewed him in prison for the last time, he was worried about what his future might look like. “Opportunities,” he insisted, “they’re not given. You gotta take ‘em.” He knew that his felony conviction was going to make it a lot harder to find those “opportunities.” College was not out of the question for him. Like many young men I spoke to, Jesus held on to ideas of entrepreneurship. He envisioned himself as a successful mortician. Maybe, he thought, he could run his own funeral home. He had heard that few people were interested in this kind of morbid work but the need for funerals will always be there. He estimated that he would be able to make about three hundred thousand dollars a year, depending on where he lived and how popular his business would be.

Jesus was the only one in the American sample that had been able to attend a four-year college. Most respondents had not finished high school. If they attended school, they went there to meet friends and not to learn.

Growing up as an African American boy in Philadelphia, Bryan also attended under resourced, segregated schools. Asked about his elementary school years, Bryan bluntly stated: “It sucked. . . . I used to get teased, like they’d call me names, stuff like that.” Bryan also remembered being a difficult student. One of his earliest memories was kicking his elementary school teacher in the knee. He recalled that he “was always in detention, always getting suspended.” Reflecting on his upbringing, Bryan believed that he took his anger about his father’s abuse out on the teachers. Bryan didn’t remember any teachers reaching out to help him, and he believed that the teachers at his school in Philadelphia “didn’t really care.” His teachers would kick him out of class even though it was others who bullied him. When I asked him why the teachers did not stand up to his classmates, he replied: “What can they do? Teachers are scared.”

Bryan was even more upset that his teachers looked the other way when it came to his father’s domestic violence. His father regularly beat him, and Bryan was certain that the teachers must have known about this: “Teachers can see the scars. They see why I come to school angry every day.” Some days he did not want to go home and stayed in school longer voluntarily in order to do extra work. Like Jesus, Bryan was not challenged adequately academically. He remembered getting his work done quickly and then just sitting around being bored. As he got older, “girls, money, and drugs” became more interesting than school. He still wanted to be a good student to make his mother proud,

but being on the street gave him much more satisfaction. He remembered thinking: "I'm gonna do what makes me happy."

Miguel, who is s Latino, grew up in Allentown, a mid-sized town that used to be home to the headquarters of Bethlehem Steel. Miguel did not even want to attend school in order to socialize. He avoided going "at all costs" because he was ashamed of being poor and was worried about not fitting in. He had painful memories of other students teasing him: "I was kind of fat and, ugh, I never had clothes that fit me right. So they used to always make fun of me and stuff, and give me a hard time at school." He was certain that teachers and his classmates lived much better lives than he did and looked down on him. When I asked him how he knew that his classmates' lives were so much better than his, he replied: "They're always around wearing better clothes, smiling all the time, having fun, talking about stuff they did or, 'oh, my mom did this'; 'my dad did that.'"

Miguel's mother was an abusive alcoholic who struggled with bipolar disorder. His father was addicted to drugs and paid little attention to his son. Since his mother usually called his father when Miguel caused problems in school, Miguel figured that misbehaving in school would get his father's attention. Miguel also didn't receive a continuous education before his incarceration. His residential instability led him to switch schools so many times he could barely recall when he went where: "I think I went to like five different middle schools and . . . I think I went to about four different elementary schools from moving around too much," he explained.

By the time Miguel was supposed to attend high school, he was homeless and stayed with whomever offered him a couch to sleep on. Miguel lived by himself by the time he was fifteen. Nobody paid attention to whether or not he actually attended

school. As Miguel recalled, “Whenever I didn’t feel like going to school, I didn’t go to school . . . No one’s telling me I have to go; I ended up not going.” Miguel did sneak into school from time to time, though, to eat lunch and to see friends even after he stopped officially attending.

Miguel remembered several teachers, counselors, and even some principals trying to help him. In the end, individual attempts could not counterbalance the fundamental instability of his living conditions. He also believed that he was too young to understand the importance of schooling. Similar to other young men I interviewed, Miguel could not utilize schooling as a way out of poverty. His disruptive behavior alienated him from any support the social institution might have offered him. From an early age his interactions with school as an institution were shaped by shame and alienation. Moving from place to place disrupted his education even further (Desmond 2016). He never even attended a school long enough to receive a sustained education or to create lasting social ties to counselors or teachers that could have sustained him in the absence of his parents.

#### EDUCATION IN GERMANY AND THE UNITED STATES

In both countries, schools have become a battleground for social problems and cultural conflicts. In Germany, educational institutions are supposed to do the work of integration and assimilation. For over twenty years legal and cultural debates have been fought over whether or not female teachers who are Muslims are allowed to wear headscarves in schools.<sup>7</sup> Religious education continues to be part of the curriculum. At the elementary school my children attended during the fall of 2020, it was possible to opt out of the Protestant or Catholic religious instruction,

but students who chose not to attend religion classes were dismissed two hours earlier on Fridays. The dismissal time naturally encouraged parents to enroll their children in one form or another of religious education. In Baden-Württemberg schools are only required to offer alternative religious instruction if there are more than eight students at a school who identify with a specific religion.<sup>8</sup>

The German dual educational system has been lauded for offering viable pathways to employment that do not require a college diploma (Jacoby 2014). This praise overlooks the fact that the system's credentialism excludes low achievers like the children who were housed at JVA Adelsheim. Low-achieving students who are not ready to qualify for vocational training are enrolled in so-called prevocational programs. Nationwide, about a third of these prevocational students have refugee status or a migration background. Over the course of three years, only 70 percent of all participants across Germany were able reach the level required to begin an official apprenticeship (Haasler 2021).<sup>9</sup> This leaves 30 percent of those lowest achievers permanently unable to qualify for any work other than being an untrained laborer.

As a significant number of students are left behind, the most academically rigorous schools have become the most popular school choice for the middle and upper middle class. The year I graduated fourth grade in 1990, only 32 percent of fourth graders in Baden-Württemberg were sent to the Gymnasium. During the school year 2019–20, this number rose to approximately 43 percent. Receiving a Gymnasium education remained a middle-class privilege regardless. Children of parents who have a higher level of education are more likely to be sent to the most academically rigorous school, preparing

them for university attendance (Gil-Hernandez 2019). In 2012 and 2013, 68 percent of the parents who sent their children to the most academically rigorous school, had attended the Gymnasium themselves. Only 4.6 percent of the parents had stopped their education after the mandatory nine years (Kränzler and Cramer 2020). Class and immigrant status overlap significantly as well. According to Diehl and Granato (2018), the intergenerational upward mobility of immigrants in Germany has stagnated. Likely because of marriage migration, the number of Turkish immigrant women who do not hold any educational degree at all was 49 percent in 2012 as opposed to 33 percent in 2000. Being a naturalized citizen has also not significantly impacted educational achievement, especially for students coming from Turkish immigrant families. Finishing the most basic level of schooling (Hauptschule) still remained the most common educational outcome for these children. While those with Turkish roots fare worse than other immigrant groups, likely because of the comparatively low level of parental education, all children from immigrant backgrounds—irrespective of their citizenship status—lag behind their ethnically German peers. In 2018, only 21 percent of all eight graders who had a migration background were enrolled in the academically most challenging schools. The great majority (about 80 percent) of students who are not ethnically German attended school types that do not offer a pathway to higher education (Kränzler and Cramer 2020).

In comparison to Germany, the United States is much less focused on government-mandated credentials. It is not necessary to finish three years of training and schooling to work as a baker or car mechanic. On the other hand, having a high school diploma is an absolute necessity for securing gainful

employment. High school drop-outs in the United States are more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates. If they find work, they tend to get paid lower salaries than those who have a high school diploma in hand (McCaul et al. 1992; McFarland, Rathbun, and Holmes 2018). Given that there are only two viable credentials in the United States—a high school diploma or GED—a lot more people in the United States finish high school and become eligible for enrolling in college than in Germany. Of the 2018 cohort in Pennsylvania, 85.8, on average, graduated from high school. This seemingly high number obscures the fact that—similar to Germany—minorities in the United States are disadvantaged when it comes to accessing high-quality education. African American and Latino students are more likely to attend underfunded schools with low graduation rates in high crime neighborhoods (Shedd 2015). Violence in the surrounding neighborhood inevitably has a negative impact on grades and standardized test scores (Burdick-Will 2016; Pelletier and Manna 2017).

In Pennsylvania and most other states, schools are paid for by property tax revenue. Segregated wealthy white neighborhoods, where parents pay high property taxes, are therefore more likely to offer high-quality schooling. Those schools tend to be filled with students from well-to-do, highly educated families. While students of all achievement levels theoretically attend the same school, students from upper-middle-class families have a significantly different experience from students living in poor neighborhoods (Pattillo 1999; Reeves 2017; Owens 2020). Underfunded and underperforming schools are predominantly located in Latino or African American neighborhoods. These schools attend to students who struggle with food insecurity, trauma, and untreated mental health problems. Parents at

those schools are also more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (Haskins 2017; Poole et al. 2021).

Given the complex social problems of the student body, schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods have to offer social services that are not part of their core educational mission. Schools buildings across the United States, for example, continue to be open for lunch during summer break to serve students who face food insecurity. To counter chronic absenteeism, some schools have also added washing machines on site to give students who are ashamed of going to school in dirty clothes places to do their laundry.<sup>10</sup>

The cases discussed in this chapter demonstrate the limitations of administering social services in a school setting. The support provided in schools may not even reach the students that need to be helped most urgently. In Miguel's case, for example, residential instability prevented him from going to school at all. Most importantly, while schools serving low-income students are more involved in offerings social services, they have also become more intimately connected with the juvenile justice system. Researchers have coined the term "school-to-prison pipeline" to describe disciplinary practices in schools mimicking the "zero-tolerance" approach of the criminal justice system. Akin to a classic understanding of deterrence, suspension and expulsion are supposed to prevent perceived disruptive behavior (Hirschfeld 2008). Studies have also consistently shown that Latino and African American students are subjected to harsher and exclusionary punishments in comparison to their white peers for comparable infractions (Skiba et al 2011; Morris 2016; Wegman and Smith 2019). Similar to Bryan and Jesus, many of the respondents I spoke to acted out in school and were eventually expelled. Expulsion solved a problem for the teachers

and other students in the classroom, but it removed other teenagers—those represented in this book, for example—even more fully from conventional pathways to success.

#### CONCLUSION

Jesus, Bryan, and Miguel fell through the cracks of a segregated educational system that was overwhelmed with the social problems of their student body. Like any kindergartners, Bryan, Jesus, and Miguel were probably eager to be in a classroom initially. Learning became secondary as they had to cope with neighborhood violence, drug addiction, domestic abuse, and residential instability.

Even schools in wealthy districts would have had difficulties providing the numerous social services their families needed. The schools most of the young men attended were not well-funded at all. Being located in areas of concentrated poverty, these institutions lacked the resources to address the multitude of social problems their student bodies coped with. In the end, the young men I interviewed were just several among many struggling with difficult home lives. Being disruptive and violent in school alienated Bryan, Jesus, and Miguel even more from the one institution that could have offered them a way out of the cycle of poverty that had engulfed their families for generations (Soyer 2018).

While a majority of the German respondents weren't academically ready to engage in vocational training, the American respondents did not even have the option to build skills useful for finding employment outside prison. For many, being held at SCI Pine Grove was merely a prelude to a longer sentence to be served at another state prison, where they might become eligible

for educational programs. In contrast to the German sample, the American respondents did have a path to getting a college education. Given the job market barriers the formerly incarcerated face, attending a community college may even have been a more reasonable goal than finding employment (Pager 2003). The German juvenile prison simply did not offer classes at the educational level needed for university attendance. In practice the possibility of receiving a college education was irrelevant for the young men I met in Pennsylvania as well. None of them considered a college education as a viable option.

The difference between both samples most clearly manifests itself in the young men's hopes and dreams for their future. In the absence of institutional pathways to success, several American participants subscribed to a vague idea of entrepreneurship. This allowed them to maintain the illusion of agency while they were in a holding pattern, waiting to be transferred to another institution (Soyer 2016). German participants who were unable to get an apprenticeship focused on a specific skill like forklift driving. The German young men had already leveled their expectations, while the young men at SCI Pine Grove seemed to hold out hope that the "American Dream" of upward mobility and the attainment of property could still become a reality for them (*ibid.*). In the end, optimism was difficult to sustain for both samples. Even as they expressed hopes for a better future, past experiences had shown them how difficult it would be to live a successful and engaged life. From an early age, they had experienced educational institutions as place of shame, failure, and punishment. Rejected by the quintessentially middle-class institution, they struggled to imagine a life course that could lead to financial security and emotional stability.

Despite remarkable differences between both educational systems, outcomes were astonishingly similar. In Germany schooling is based on an early selection process that concentrates disadvantaged children who are not ethnically German in schools that do not offer a viable pathway into the middle class. The US educational system seems to be less exclusive than the German one. Students of all achievement levels attend the same school. However, the American system is segregated and stratified by race and class as well. Students of color, like children who have a “migration background” in Germany, receive the short end of the stick. In both countries, education does not allow disadvantaged children to catch up to their middle- and upper-middle-class peers (Raudenbush and Eschmann 2015). On the contrary, their educational experience is alienating and pushes them further away from middle-class success. Even students like Jesus or Eren, who could have been high-achieving, experienced schooling as a string of failures

Turning away from school and focusing on what Bryan referred to as “having fun” was a coping mechanism that almost perfectly fits Albert Cohen’s (1955) assumptions about a deviant subculture as well as Paul Willis’s (1977) famous argument about working-class culture in the United Kingdom. Not fitting into, and eventually being completely excluded from, middle-class institutions encourages young men in both countries to find validation elsewhere—in a subculture that allows them to feel that they have self-worth even if they look and act differently from their middle-class peers.