

Special Education in Germany

AUTHORS

Ryan O. Kellems
Blake D. Hansen
Matthias Grünke
Shari J. Blodgett
Leah Tullis
Megan Sorensen

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ABSTRACT

Germany's education system is continually evolving and advancing, especially within special education. The country's history and the laws that have been implemented significantly shape special education as we know it today, yet unresolved issues persist in this field. One notable challenge is the divide between mainstream and special education, leading to limited inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools. This article provides information about Germany's demographics, the history of the country and its education system, and the laws and policies that affect people with disabilities in the country. Furthermore, it describes what the current systems look like, general and special education teacher preparation, and the issues found in the special education system today.

KEYWORDS

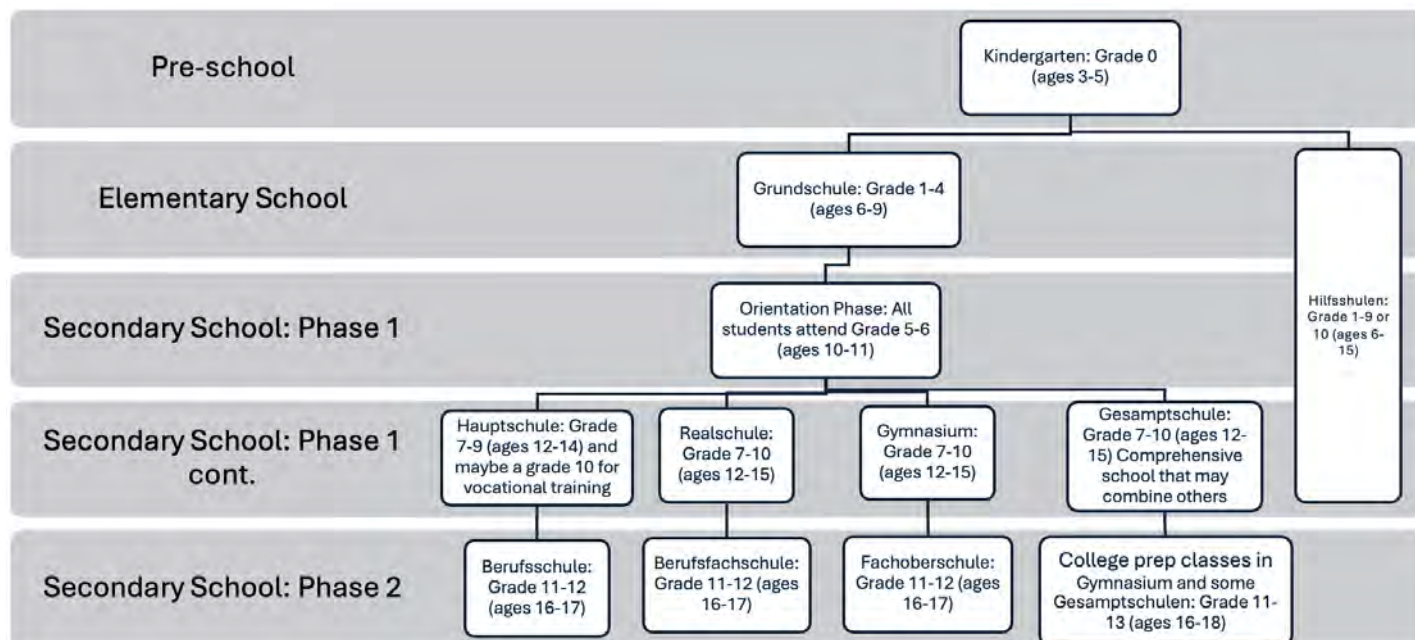
Educational change, higher education, inclusion, special education, vocational education

Germany is an industrialized country in Western Europe with a rich and complex history that has shaped its education system, and specifically the special education system, over the years. Profoundly shaped by both World Wars, it is young compared to other global nations. Germany has a total population of approximately 83.2 million, with native Germans comprising about 72.3 million and immigrants accounting for the remaining 10.9 million. The highest rates of immigrants are from Turkey, Poland, Kazakhstan, and Syria (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). As of 2021, a notable 77.5% of the German population resided in urban areas and cities, indicating a high level of urbanization (O'Neill, 2023). In terms of household composition, one-person households are the most prevalent, accounting for 41.7% of all households, while a mere 3.5% of households consist of five or more individuals. This trend is paralleled by a low marriage rate. As of 2022, only 411 out of every 1,000 inhabitants were married. In 2021, each mother in Germany gave birth to an average of 1.58 children, marking a slight increase of 0.05 from the previous year (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). The notable demographic shifts in Germany, particularly the teacher shortage, may be attributed to factors such as rising student numbers driven by immigration and a modest increase in birth rates (Trines, 2021).

GERMAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

After the merging of German states into one nation in 1871, it became necessary to find a unifying element for all German people. Chancellor Otto von Bismarck introduced universal mandatory education, heavily shaped by Prussia, the most influential political force in the newly formed Germany. Developed in the 18th century, the Prussian system funded schools through taxes, allowing for free attendance and mandating compulsory education. This included 8 years of mandatory schooling, equipping students with basic educational concepts like mathematics, writing, and reading, as well as lessons in obedience, duty to country, and general ethics (Grindel, 2018).

The National Socialists rose to power in 1933 and sought to streamline the Weimar-era school system, leading to the standardization of higher secondary education

FIGURE 1: Germany School Structure

*Information from Boeck, T. (2014, July 14). *Demystifying the German Educational System*. Tori Boeck. Retrieved February 8, 2023, from <https://toriboeck.com/blog/2014/2/18/an-overview-of-the-german-educational-system>

types in 1938. It was designed to create citizens who were ideologically aligned with the regime, physically fit for military service, and steeped in nationalist and racist beliefs. Education was less about critical thinking or academic inquiry and more about shaping the youth into obedient and loyal followers of the Nazi ideology (Herrlitz, 2008; Oz-Salzman, 2016). These beliefs influenced how the education system shifted over the years.

The Federal Republic of Germany was then established in 1949, representing Western Germany and being allied to the Western democracies. It featured a multi-party system, representing a spectrum of political views. By this time, most German states had already mandated children's attendance at the country's schools. By the early 20th century, most states in imperial Germany had established a three-tiered school system: elementary school (*Volksschule*), middle school (*Mittelschule*), and secondary schools. At this time, the elementary school provided basic education for

children Ages 6–14. The middle school served as a bridge between elementary and secondary education, catering to students not proceeding to higher education but requiring more than what elementary school offered. Secondary schools included *Gymnasium*, focusing on classical education, including the study of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew and preparing students for university; *Realgymnasium*, with a focus on mathematics, natural sciences, and modern languages; and *Oberrealschule*, emphasizing mathematics, natural sciences, and modern languages without a classical language focus (von Ackeren, 2015).

Post-World War II, West Germany revisited Weimar Republic education concepts, establishing a three-tiered system for secondary education that we see today: *Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, and *Gymnasium* (see Figure 1; Boeck, 2014). Introduced in 1950, *Hauptschule* prepared students for vocational education and covered Grades 5–9. After earning a *Hauptschule* diploma, students could start an apprenticeship or trainee

program or pursue further education. *Realschule*, covering Grades 5–10, led to a diploma allowing for apprenticeships, trainee programs, or additional education. *Gymnasium*, covering Grades 5–13, prepared students for the *Abitur*, a comprehensive exam for university admission. These schools have shifted slightly in the grades that they currently cover, but their purposes remain the same. The 1960s introduced *Gesamtschule*, which merged various educational tracks for unified secondary education (see Figure 1; Boeck, 2014; Cortina & Thames, 2013).

East Germany adopted a similar but distinct approach after World War II. East Germany, under its socialist government, established a free education system that spanned from primary through the higher grades typically associated with high school. In contrast, West Germany continued a system where certain forms of secondary education were not free. Following the reunification of East and West Germany, the previously mentioned three-tier

model became the norm across Germany (see Figure 1). Although there are some private schools that usually charge tuition fees, public education in Germany has been free since the reunification (Trines, 2021). It is important to note, however, that the private school sector in Germany plays a relatively minor role (Trines, 2021).

Today, education in Germany is primarily under the jurisdiction of the federal states rather than the federal government. Consequently, educational structures differ to some extent across the states, and secondary schools are not tied to specific districts. This allows students to attend any school that matches their educational level, provided there is availability, and they have the means of transportation. Some German states allow parents the autonomy to choose the type of school their children will attend for their higher grades, while in other states, this decision is guided by students' academic performance (Trines, 2021). Another difference between states is the current status of the *Hauptschule*. In most states, it still exists. However, since this institution has developed a reputation as a lower-quality school and is associated with stigmatization, *Haupt- and Realschulen* have been combined in some federal states (Niemeyer, 2014; von Ackeren, 2015). Despite the subpar performances in international comparative studies, a significant portion of the German populace supports the idea of reintroducing the *Hauptschule* nationwide (Focus Online, 2023).

SPECIAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

Special education schools, or *Hilfsschulen*, emerged parallel to the mainstream school system and were established in the 1920s. Their aim was to provide an effective education for students with disabilities that would facilitate their integration into low-wage vocational roles. Special education

teachers used modified curriculum and specified teaching methods, similar to current instructional practices within special schools for students with disabilities (Opp, 2001). While special schools in Germany have been modified, the *Hilfsschulen* became a model for future special needs schools and set a precedent for the organization of elementary and secondary education (Powell, 2015). The development of inclusive education exhibits political conflicts in education as there are conflicting views on inclusion, how people with disabilities are viewed and treated, and the current jobs that students with disabilities are prepared for after attending a public or specialized school.

In Germany, special and inclusive schools align with the regular education system, placing learners based on their abilities. In 1960, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Culture, or *Kultusministerkonferenz* (KMK), in collaboration with the German Committee for the Educational System, established various types of special schools for children and youth with disabilities, as well as their legal frameworks (Ellger-Rüttgardt, 1995). The KMK functions as a forum where ministers gather to develop and coordinate Germany's educational system, aiming for uniformity in interests and objectives nationwide. This body's goal is to tackle issues in education, research, and cultural policy to foster a unified approach and shared goals across the country. The specialized schools they established included those for blind, deaf, speech impaired, behaviorally challenged, and vocational education students (Powell, 2015). These schools aimed to offer tailored education for students with disabilities. However, there were many attempts made by parents and others to also have inclusive schools and integrated classrooms for students with disabilities.

Since the early 1990s, there has been

a push to integrate all general education classes within elementary schools, but this was not supported by all the states. One potential reason for this is that many general education teachers have mixed views about including students with disabilities in their classrooms because they feel they lack training or that it would impact their other students (Mónico et al., 2020). After 1990, there were continual efforts to push for inclusion; however, special and general education schools grew further apart (Powell, 2015). For example, special and general education schools became more exclusive, making more difficult for students with disabilities to attend public school. This separation caused discrepancies in academic performance and parent satisfaction. Powell (2015) described how students with disabilities who attended special schools performed worse than peers who attended inclusive schools – even if they had the same grades in elementary school.

Despite the push for inclusion, there are still many specialized schools, or *Sonderschule*, in Germany today (Niemeyer, 2014). Currently, around 577,000 students with disabilities are enrolled in one of Germany's seven special school categories, each focusing on a specific type of disability (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). These categories include schools for students with visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, or health impairments, as well as those with learning, speech, and behavioral challenges. There is also a school called *Förderzentren*, which focuses on multiple areas of development, such as academic, social, emotional, physical, vocational, and behavioral development. During the 2019–2020 academic year, there were roughly 2,800 special education schools staffed by approximately 68,500 educators (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). In the general education schools, approximately 93,000 students with disabilities were enrolled in elementary

TABLE 1: Elementary General Education Schools in Germany with Special Education Needs Students in 2021/22 School Year

Type of School	Type of special education needs	Male	Female	Total
Elementary School	Learning	21,763	18,162	39,925
	Vision	827	630	1457
	Hear	1800	1564	3364
	Language	10,392	5451	15,843
	Physical/Motor Development	3448	2294	5739
	Emotional/Social Development	15,211	3435	18,646
	Not Assigned a Focus	624	129	753
	Total	58,334	34,577	92,911

*Information from Germany Statistics Bureau: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Home/_inhalt.html

TABLE 2: Secondary General Education Schools in Germany with Special Education Needs Students in 2021/22 School Year

Type of School	Type of special education needs	Male	Female	Total
Secondary School	Learn	9014	6855	15,869
	See	102	72	174
	Hear	239	167	406
	Language	1006	537	1543
	Physical/Motor Development	307	176	483
	Emotional/Social Development	4293	1084	5382
	Not Assigned a Focus	23	5	28
	Total	15,559	9374	24,933

*Information from Germany Statistics Bureau: https://www.destatis.de/DE/Home/_inhalt.html

(see Table 1) and 25,000 in secondary (see Table 2) with varying needs during the 2021–2022 school year.

In Germany, only 33.6% of children with disabilities are included in elementary schools, and 14.9% are included in secondary schools (Niemeyer, 2014). Students with mild disabilities are more likely to be educated with their nondisabled peers during the elementary school years up through the fourth year unless they reside in Berlin or Brandenburg, where they would be educated with their peers until their sixth year (see Figure 1). Of the secondary school options (see Figure 1), about half of students with

disabilities who are in the inclusion setting will attend Hauptschule, which is considered the lowest of the schooling options and leaves little real job opportunities for these students (Niemeyer, 2014). Recently, inclusion schools have become more common in certain states, with a larger percentage of students with disabilities being included. Students with varying levels of disabilities can be included in elementary schools and Realschule (see Table 1). However, those with physical disabilities face unique limitations with the historical structures of some schools, which may not have typical accessibility features like ramps

or elevators. In the German education system, including the Gymnasium, there are special education services available to support students with diverse needs, but it is much more difficult to get into these schools because it is the highest and most advanced of the three-tier system hierarchy (Niemeyer, 2014). Students with disabilities who do not attend one of the main public inclusive schools will attend Sonderschule. For those with severe disabilities, they may attend Sonderschule earlier than those with a moderate disability.

The process for qualifying for special education services in Germany is similar to that used for developing an individualized education program in the United States. A student who may require additional support is referred by their general education teacher or a parent (European Agency, 2023). The ensuing procedure is designed to assess and identify any special educational needs. It involves a comprehensive evaluation to determine whether someone requires special education support and, if so, what type of support is most appropriate. For example, one of these inclusive practices for students with disabilities is access to mobile services, or *Mobiler Sonderpädagogischer Dienst*. The Mobile Special Education Services offers support to students in schools that may have other funding priorities by diagnosing and promoting individuals, advising teachers and guardians, and coordinating special education support for these individuals. The process includes collaboration among teachers, special education specialists, parents, and sometimes the students themselves, aiming to create an individualized education plan tailored to each student’s unique learning requirements. This process ensures that young individuals with disabilities receive tailored educational support to aid their learning and inclusion within the school system. This tailored learning could include a curriculum with thera-

peutic, technical, and disability-related measures integrated into the lessons. The process may vary slightly depending on the state in which the learner resides (European Agency, 2023).

Many public schools have transitioned to adopt an on-campus special education program so that learners can participate in classes with their same-age peers while still receiving specialized instruction. This is shown by the rising inclusion rate, with about 40% of individuals with disabilities in Germany attending public schools (German Education Server, n.d.; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d.). However, there is still room for improvement as this rate is considered moderate compared to other European countries. Inclusion can have many benefits for students with disabilities; however, there are also benefits to specialized schools, and the best fit depends on the student's needs. Paseka and Schwab (2020) found this when they researched the attitudes of parents on inclusive education. While many parents are supportive of integrating their children with physical or sensory disabilities, others are more skeptical when it comes to integrating their children with behavioral or severe cognitive disabilities into inclusion classrooms (Paseka & Schwab, 2020).

TEACHER PREPARATION IN GERMANY

The KMK guides policy-making and training for teachers. There are six kinds of teaching certificates that the KMK recognizes, a special education certificate being one of them. Teachers in Germany study at single-tier universities, with a combination of pedagogical courses and a teaching internship. Historically, only Gymnasium teachers obtained university education, but this changed in the 1970s to include all teachers (Cortina & Thames, 2013).

In Germany, only 33.6% of children with disabilities are included in elementary schools and 14.9% are included in secondary schools.

Teacher education in Germany includes three key features: the distinction between types of schools, a two-phase training model, and the status of teachers as civil servants, similar to the tenure track in the United States (Cortina & Thames, 2013). This status grants them strong job security, access to private health insurance, and relatively high pensions, making teaching an attractive career choice. However, there is little pressure for professional development after one becomes a teacher. While there has been debate regarding the continuation of this status for teachers, no changes have been implemented. Additionally, options for teachers to switch careers or change school types are extremely limited, posing a challenge for those desiring a different professional environment (Barabasch & Watt-Malcom, 2013; Cortina & Thames, 2013).

In Germany, there is a two-phase training model for teachers. The first phase focuses on academic training, with most German states utilizing university teacher training programs that award bachelor's and master's degrees (Cortina & Thames, 2013). The bachelor's program typically spans six semesters, followed by a four-semester master's program. Prospective secondary teachers start by choosing the level they wish to teach – Hauptschule, Realschule, or Gymnasium. University training focuses more on academic knowledge with less emphasis on pedagogy. Because of this, teaching practice accounts for only about 5–20% of their coursework. Conversely, elementary teacher trainees receive a larger portion

of pedagogy instruction (Hofmann & Bohl, 2023). The first phase then ends with the first state examination, which focuses on their academic training. Previously, this first state examination could have been taken in place of obtaining a degree, but that has changed in the last decade (Hofmann & Bohl, 2023).

Once teachers have completed their first state examination, they complete the second phase of training, where they are offered a full-pay student training position called *Referendariat* (Cortina & Thames, 2013). The *Referendariat* is a highly structured 2-year in-school induction program where teachers can learn classroom management skills along with pedagogical content knowledge. Each year of the *Referendariat* has different responsibilities. During their *Referendariat*, teacher candidates have full responsibility for their classes while also receiving feedback and professional guidance from a mentor teacher. They develop curricula and set class expectations akin to a fully licensed teacher. Upon completing a final state examination, teachers receive certificates from state governments as opposed to universities or colleges (Cortina & Thames, 2013).

SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER TRAINING

There are some similarities between the training of a general education teacher and a special educator in Germany. Both complete a similar preparatory phase and internship. However, those trained to become special educators will typically do their internships

in a special education school, although there are internships in general or inclusive settings as well (Liebner & Schmaltz, 2021). They are certified for elementary and secondary but typically specialize in only one of these groups. During their bachelor's studies, they specialize in two or three academic subjects, such as mathematics, German, English, social studies, or physical education, to better understand and teach complex concepts to students with disabilities. Even though these subjects are emphasized in their bachelor's program, trainees also need the capability to instruct students with disabilities across a broad spectrum of subjects. As a result, they receive instruction in various other disciplines to ensure a well-rounded educational skill set.

Special education teacher training is unique in that the coursework at universities contains significantly more instruction on pedagogy and behavior management compared to other subjects (Resch et al., 2023). Trainees are equipped to handle emotional and behavioral disabilities and learning challenges more effectively. They learn principles of behavior analysis to help with behavior management and strategies to break down complex tasks. This special emphasis on pedagogical training is due to the division of the German secondary education system. As discussed previously, secondary schools in Germany are divided into different types, depending on whether students are preparing for vocational or university-based careers. Special education teachers teach more often in *Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, or *Gesamtschule*. Given the higher academic rigor at *Gymnasium*, students with disabilities enroll there less often (Niemeyer, 2014). Therefore, it is quite uncommon for a special educator to be employed at a *Gymnasium*. These students' needs can be met with proper support.

Consequently, special education teacher training is predominantly pedagogical, preparing educators primarily for roles in elementary schools or vocational secondary schools (Resch et al., 2023).

GERMAN LAW AND POLICY ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

There have been multiple laws and policies that have impacted students with disabilities in the education system, which will prepare them to enter the workforce. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, public education was made free to all students, allowing more students with disabilities to enter the education system (Trines, 2021). A few years later, in 2006, Germany passed the General Equal Treatment Act, created to increase diversity and decrease disadvantages in the workplace (Yeh, 2015). A key focus of this legislation was facilitating the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workforce and ensuring that suitable accommodations are available for those who can no longer work. This act helped create awareness for individuals with disabilities in multiple settings, and soon after, many laws and policies were addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities.

To better serve persons with disabilities, the United Nations Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) was put into place worldwide in 2008 (Mannan et al., 2012). The UN CRPD was the first legally binding international group that focused on protecting and promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. Additionally, the UN CRPD examines the needs and circumstances of people with disabilities, allowing for a course of change in legal, moral, and political contexts. This convention allows persons with disabilities living in Germany more protection in the workplace, schools, universities, and communities. It can be

difficult for individuals with disabilities to feel as though they have a voice or that they are recognized by their peers. However, these programs can increase peer recognition and self-determination among students with disabilities (Mannan et al., 2012). Self-determination is an important skill for students with disabilities to develop so that they can succeed in future education, employment, and independent living situations.

Germany has a more vocational-focused education system that can prepare students to have more self-determination by providing practical skills and real-world experience. Not only do they have special schools built for specific types of disabilities, but students who attend *Hauptschule* or *Realschule* are given vocational training to prepare them for apprenticeships or jobs that do not require a university degree. However, they may offer limited job opportunities. In 2013, North Rhine-Westphalia, a German state, passed the 9th School Law Amendment Act to implement an inclusive education policy (Barow & Östland, 2019). Through this policy, many special schools in that state were merged or closed, passing the responsibility of educating students in special education to general education schools, like *Hauptschule* and *Realschule*. The categories used to previously segregate special school types are now used to identify students with disabilities and the services they need within the general school setting (Barow & Östland, 2019). This inclusive policy helped give students with disabilities the option to be educated with their non-disabled peers and made it more feasible in that state.

In terms of educational policy, each state has an especially high degree of autonomy, and schools are funded by the state. As a result, the education in each state varies in curricula and types of schools. However, the previously

mentioned KMK ensures a degree of harmony in the policies created throughout the country because of their efforts to unify and coordinate Germany's school system (Trines, 2021). This benefits all students attending schools in Germany, including those in special schools or special education settings. In March 2015, the KMK published a document consisting of recommendations for embracing diversity to show its support for inclusive education (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2015). It states how students with disabilities may receive financial help from social services, obtain vocational jobs, and/or work at specialized institutions at the end of their schooling.

CURRENT ISSUES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Germany's education system has evolved and advanced over the years for both general and special education. Its complex history has shaped the current system and inspired laws that have created the special education system we see today. However, there are still unresolved issues in the special education system. Some notable challenges are inclusion practices, funding, teacher perceptions, and the quality of schools for students with disabilities.

The first challenge is determining how to best support all students in general while still promoting inclusion at all levels. While numerous schools effectively merge special education with general education, others choose to maintain distinct systems. This separation can limit future educational opportunities for students with disabilities, potentially influencing their long-term academic and career paths. However, an inclusive environment may not be the best placement for all students with disabilities, and placement should instead be determined based on individuals' needs and

preferences. Inclusive education can lead students with disabilities to have positive cognitive outcomes (Krämer et al., 2021). However, some downfalls to inclusive education are unfavorable peer comparisons (Düll, 2023) and social isolation (Heyder et al., 2020). In fact, recent discussions in Germany have indeed pointed out that a 100% inclusion rate might not be suitable for everyone, as some may require specifically designed environments to meet their unique needs.

Another issue is that the rationale for establishing specialized schools for students with disabilities lies in the provision of unique services and resources, often not accessible in general educational institutions. In Germany, these general settings grapple with limited and unstable financial funding. Consequently, it is challenging for schools that have traditionally not accommodated students with disabilities to secure funding for the necessary resources that facilitate their participation.

An important factor to consider is teachers' attitudes and perceptions and how those impact their students. Heyder et al. (2020) surveyed students with and without disabilities and found that physical inclusion does not automatically lead to social inclusion. However, they also found that the more positive attitude the teacher had about inclusive education, the more socially integrated students felt in that classroom. Teacher attitudes and perceptions directly impact the classroom environment and can thus lead to other factors of educational success.

Another significant factor that has impacted teacher perceptions is their experience with Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS; Blumenthal et al., 2022). In areas of Germany where inclusion has been developing, some have tried implementing MTSS combined with assessing response to

intervention (RTI). The execution of the process in the system was less than ideal, resulting in the MTSS/RTI model being perceived negatively by educators. This led to a further obstacle for students with disabilities, as this model is widely recognized as effective for accommodating these students and promoting inclusion practices (Blumenthal et al., 2022).

Lastly, of the secondary school options, about half of students with disabilities who are in the inclusion setting will attend *Hauptschule*, which is considered the lowest of the schooling options and leaves few real job opportunities for these students (Niemeyer, 2014). This is concerning because students with disabilities should have the option to attend any of the secondary schools of their choosing. Kleeberg-Niepage et al. (2022) stated that the German secondary school system presents a challenge to the implementation of inclusive education because of how ability-focused it is. This refers to the separation of vocational and university-prep schools. Specifically, the *Gymnasium* model, known for its lack of special services and rigid cultural ethos, makes the implementation of inclusive practices especially challenging (Kleeberg-Niepage et al., 2022; Niemeyer, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The German educational system has various school types that are stratified to accommodate the abilities of its students. Special education teachers are certified by the state after obtaining a university master's degree. Historically, students with disabilities have been excluded from public schools and instead attended specialized schools based on the type of disability. The educational system is currently experiencing a shift toward more inclusion of students with disabilities. This could redefine the role of special educators, from the main

teachers in special schools to interveners in general schools. Germany has come a long way in providing education to children with disabilities as educators continue to try to provide the best opportunities for all their students.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ryan O. Kellems, Ph.D.

Dr. Ryan Kellems is a professor and Fulbright Scholar in the Counseling Psychology and Special Education department at Brigham Young University. Prior to coming to BYU, Dr. Kellems was on the faculty at the University of Oregon, where he worked with the National Post-School Outcomes Center. His primary research interests are video modeling, transition for students with disabilities, post-school outcomes of students with disabilities, assistive technology, and working with young adults with autism in community-based vocational settings. Prior to completing his doctoral degree Dr. Kellems was a high school teacher in both rural and urban settings, teaching special education and social studies.

Blake D. Hansen, Ph.D.

Dr. Hansen received his PhD in behavioral psychology from the University of Kansas in 2010. Prior to that, he received his MS in special education and BA in history from the University of Utah. He is a Board-Certified Behavior Analyst. Dr. Hansen specializes in research regarding developmental disabilities, including autism spectrum disorders, inclusive education, and school psychology. He has also conducted research focusing on how to parent children with disabilities.

Matthias Grünke, Ph.D.

Matthias Grünke- Dr. Matthias Grünke is a professor in special education at the University of Cologne, with prior roles at the University of Oldenburg and as a visiting professor at the University of Sunderland. He holds advanced degrees in psychology and special education, and his research focuses on effective teaching methods for students with academic challenges. Dr. Grünke has authored over 200 publications and serves on several editorial boards, including as editor for multiple journals. He is a key figure in several international organizations related to learning disabilities and has received notable awards for his contributions to special education and leadership in academia.

Shari J. Blodgett

Shari is currently working as a special education teacher at Fairfax County Public Schools.

Leah Tullis

Leah recently graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in special education.

Megan Sorensen

Megan is currently studying special education at Brigham Young University.

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