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Abstract

Schools becoming more inclusive

Germany ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) in 2009, which has brought about a paradigm shift in the country's education system. Seven years into this process, full inclusion in Germany's schools has not yet been attained. Observers such as the UN CRPD's monitoring agency have criticized the slow implementation of the convention in several Länder. Others question fundamentally whether mainstream schools provide, in fact, the best learning environments for children with special needs. These criticisms from a variety of perspectives underscore the extent to which educational inclusion is now taken seriously. Indeed, much has been achieved in Germany in the last seven years: more and more special needs children are being mainstreamed into regular schools, special needs schools are closing down or being transformed into „Schools without pupils,“ special needs educators are increasingly present at mainstream schools and special needs training has been introduced for educators at mainstream schools. No longer a matter for integrative schools such as primary or comprehensive schools alone, cooperative learning has become a more broadly accepted objective for secondary schools (Gymnasien) as well.

Given the scope of the challenge, it is too early to draw definitive conclusions regarding the state of affairs in Germany for inclusive education. This volume, with its seven chapters, examines instead where we stand on the way to achieving this objective. Drawing on current education statistics and laws on education, this volume points to an overall slow pace of reform in Germany, with some Länder being particularly slow to pursue inclusive education and others demonstrating resolve in implementation. This discrepancy can be attributed in part to differences in school size, demographics and education policy in various Länder, but also to the fundamental skepticism expressed in some areas with regard to the effectiveness of mainstreaming special needs children. The prerequisites for consistency in implement-

ing cooperative learning nationally are clear: three of this volume's contributions draw on the findings of empirical education research, feedback from parents with exposure to inclusive education and the experience of educators working in inclusive environments to demonstrate that inclusive education can work – given the proper conditions. These findings could serve to positively influence education policy-makers in those Länder that have been slow to pursue inclusive education.

The pursuit of inclusive education needs the draw of success stories or schools where inclusion is already at work. There are a number of such examples in Germany. Since 2009, the Federal Commissioner for Matters relating to Disabled Persons, together with the German UNESCO Commission and the Bertelsmann Stiftung, has awarded the Jakob-Muth prize for inclusive schools. The prize and an overview of its recipients are presented in this volume. In June 2016, the following schools will be honored with the prize: Bavaria's primary and middle (Grund- und Mittelschule) Thalmässing, Saxony-Anhalt's Saaleschule Halle and – the first upper secondary school -- North Rhine-Westphalia's Geschwister-Scholl-Gymnasium in Pulheim. The annual prize for an inclusive school cluster goes this year to the Pestalozzi-Schule Husum and the Support Center for Education, Language and Emotional and Social Development in Schleswig-Holstein. A short portrait of each of the four prize recipients showcases their work.

On-site visits to each of the showcased schools proved exciting and insightful. In addition to questions regarding how specific schools approach inclusive education, the question arises as to how and what we can learn from these unique schools overall. Two contributions in this volume explore this question. One draws on interviews with school directors, educators, special needs educators and parents at the schools honored with the Jakob Muth prize to develop seven key features of good inclusive schools. A second contribution takes a close look at the educational practices implemented at these schools, highlighting concrete examples of methods and strategies. The volume includes a glossary that provides an overview of methods and a film that provides the schools' educators the opportunity to report on their experiences with inclusive education.

Seven years are clearly not sufficient to fully implement a reform of this scope and nature. Overall, however, the contributions and findings presented in this volume offer plenty of reasons to continue undauntingly the implementation of cooperative learning. These approaches benefit all students and parents and educators alike report positively on their experiences with inclusive education. In short, there are more than enough reasons to pursue inclusion and good examples of what's needed to ensure its success. In addition to the commitment of local schools, successful inclusion requires policymakers' clear commitment to creating a framework in which inclusive schools can be promoted.