

## *Chapter 9*

### **From homogeneity to diversity in German education**

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*Germany is currently changing its self-perception as it shifts from a culturally homogenous nation to a more pluralistic society shaped by immigration. Education is thus evolving to be more inclusive although heterogeneity is still considered a challenge with which to cope rather than a potential strength. This approach can be compared with countries that have longer histories of immigration, such as Canada, having moved from merely “dealing with heterogeneity” to embracing diversity as a resource for education. Teacher education plays a key role in this transition, and there are many approaches it can use to facilitate this shift. These approaches range from increasing the intake of teacher trainees with diverse backgrounds, to applying didactic approaches that will encourage communication about their different identities, to exploring basic philosophical concepts such as diversity, identity and controversy.*

*From the OECD online consultation :  
resistance to change*

The perceived importance of diversity issues varied across countries and contexts. Although many practitioners acknowledged its significance, in some countries there was still resistance to addressing diversity in education systems.

### **Introduction: changing perceptions of German reality**

Understanding diversity in the German educational system calls for first taking a broader look at diversity and how it is regarded in German society. As is the case in most OECD member countries, Germany's perception of itself has been changing rapidly in recent years. Even if ethnic, linguistic and religious plurality have been a reality in Germany since the 1960s, the country has not come to terms with this fundamental change from its longstanding image of itself as a homogeneous society until a decade ago.

The “economic miracle” of the 1960s triggered an influx of foreign workers from Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey. Immigrants into Germany were called “Gastarbeiter”, guest workers, because of the assumption that they would eventually be returning to their home countries. In reality, most not only remained but brought their families from their home country to Germany. This influx of immigrant families has changed the demography of German classrooms. In the past 30 years, most classrooms in the urban areas of Germany (particularly in former West Germany) have become multicultural.

### **Germany: an immigrant society?**

The perception of “foreigners” living “temporarily” in Germany began to change when German politicians of all parties realised that the absence of an official policy to accommodate immigrants had created a parallel world of immigrant communities outside mainstream German society (with ensuing social problems). This delayed awareness is not without repercussions. With the beginning of the new millennium, the need to develop an understanding of Germany as a nation of “immigration” has found an increasingly stronger voice.

The successful integration of individuals with an immigrant background has become the declared aim of successive governments (Bommes and Krüger-Potratz, 2008). The current political discourse considers an immigrant to be successfully integrated if he or she speaks and writes German fluently and is able to participate fully in the education system and the labour market to earn a living. Whereas well-integrated immigrants were also expected to adopt German customs and cultural traits, the concept of diversity as an asset is slowly becoming tangible in the country's fabric. In recent years, several of the large private foundations have started programmes to support gifted migrant students on their way into higher education and positions of leadership. The Green Party is the first political party to have elected a chairman with an immigrant background, the son of Turkish workers born in Germany. The other political parties are opening their ranks to individuals with immigrant backgrounds, increasingly making them common-place rather than merely token figures. At the same time, Germany is still reluctant to ensure that minority groups are equally represented in the government and to grant immigrants without European citizenship full political rights at the local level.

### **Other diversity issues: gender equality and inclusion of individuals with special needs**

Seen from the outside, media reports of xenophobia in some parts of the country make it seem as if Germany has a problem with linguistic, cultural and religious diversity. But to grasp Germany's persistent discomfort with perceiving diversity as an asset rather than a problem, one must look beyond the cultural dimension of diversity. This discomfort also becomes apparent when examining gender and special needs.

For example, in spite of Angela Merkel being one of the few female heads of state in OECD member countries, women are significantly under-represented in the higher ranks of German companies and universities. The majority of leadership positions in business and academia are held by white men of German origin. A highly emotional public debate on the compatibility of raising children and having a professional career is indicative of the lingering uncertainty regarding gender roles. It has taken Germany longer than many other OECD countries to ensure public infrastructure for high-quality early childcare that enables both women and men to pursue careers and have children without remorse. It is only in the past four years that a coalition government, formed by the two big left-of-centre and right-of-centre parties, decided to make the necessary infrastructure investments while providing pecuniary incentives.

Another challenging learning process with regard to diversity has been the debate about inclusive education for disabled students and students with learning disabilities or behavioural problems (Wansing, 2005). After the persecution of disabled individuals under the Nazi regime, post-war Germany felt a special obligation towards the disabled, which resulted in the creation of an intricate system of special schools for the various forms of special educational needs. Special schools were created for the deaf, the blind and for individuals with other forms of physical disability as well as for children and youth with learning disabilities or behavioural problems. The underlying assumption was that those with special needs would get the best possible developmental support if they were taken out of mainstream schooling and were taught and cared for by teachers with specialist training. The argument was that special needs required special investments in highly specialised institutions. Special schools were well-equipped and special needs teachers well-paid, highly qualified professionals, working outside the main school system.

In spite of recurrent debates about being more inclusive, the overall system of separating students with various special needs from students in mainstream education remained fundamentally unchanged for 50 years. Finally, parents – most of them with an academic background – of disabled children began to challenge the idea that their children had to be separated from mainstream education in order to get optimal support. They felt that special education in separate institutions failed to deliver the educational outcomes their children needed for graduating. For many years, a vocal but comparatively small group of parents legally challenged the system. Some of them were successful, achieving for their child (but not for disabled children in general) the right to be educated in a mainstream school.

In recent years, some of the German Länder\* have responded by creating more integrated schools, predominantly in primary education. Yet it was not until Germany ratified the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Disabled on 1 January 2009 that legal certainty for individuals with special needs was finally achieved. They can now demand to be fully integrated into mainstream schools and receive the individual support needed to succeed. This is an important milestone towards diversity in education.

### **Early selection and educational stratification as a barrier to diversity**

Mainstream education at the secondary level is highly stratified in several ways. As educational policy is the responsibility of the 16 individual German states, it is difficult to make universally valid statements about the

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\* *i.e.* “states”.

German school system. Compared with most other school systems across the OECD, the German system shows several specificities:

1. After four (in some states, six) years of elementary schooling for all, children's schooling continues in different types of schools based on an assessment of their competence level at ages nine to eleven.
2. Despite the common perception that Germany has a tripartite school system, the reality is more complex. In addition to different types of mainstream secondary schools, most German Länder still maintain a large number of special schools for children with physical and learning disabilities or behavioural challenges. Furthermore, several of the German Länder have created new highly selective special schools for gifted students. It would thus be more correct to speak of a four or five-partite school system.

For individuals socialised in comprehensive school systems, it is often difficult to understand the logic behind a system that sustains so many separate institutional tracks of schooling for students at such a young age. It is one of the core issues and should be more closely examined as Germany begins to move towards a culture of diversity.

The fundamental paradigm that has underlaid and shaped German education is the assumption that the homogeneity of learners in a group best facilitates their individual learning. Thinking along the lines of a “norm”, and deviations from it, has a long history in German educational thought (Tillmann, 2006). When asked about the most challenging task for teachers in classrooms, early German educational thinker Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) responded, “The difference in heads”. The first German professor of education, Ernst Christian Trapp (1745-1818) at Halle University wrote, “As it is impossible to take into account everyone's individual, special and momentary disposition in a heap of children who are educated and trained together, teachers should base their work on the approximate average” (Trapp, 1780). Trapp's advice to teachers was to cater to the needs of the *Mittelköpfe*, the “middle heads” or average students in a given class. This approach developed a long-standing consensus on certain norms that provided guidance for selecting and sorting children into the “right” type of school for them. This resulted in allegedly homogenous groupings in the various institutional tracks of the German system:

- *Förderschule*, a special-needs school for students with behavioural or developmental challenges;
- *Hauptschule*, a lower-track school traditionally geared towards educating future blue-collar workers;

- *Realschule*, traditionally geared towards future white-collar workers without a university education;
- *Gymnasium*, a cognitively more demanding type of school with an upper secondary level leading to higher education; and
- special schools for the gifted – a small number of schools with an enriched and accelerated curriculum.

This excessive tracking enabled the idea of homogeneity in German education to continue for so long.

The didactic focus on “the average” within these different types of schools has been paralysing the German education system. Calculating resources on the basis of the “average” legitimises uniform teaching for large groups: equal aims, equal content, equal learning steps, equal amount of time assigned for learning, and equal criteria for success. It is not surprising that in a culture of alleged homogeneity, assessment has predominately been norm-referenced, *i.e.* focusing on a given peer group. The paradigm of homogeneity required that learners were seen as similar in many ways and that differences were deliberately not acknowledged. Those in the same school and in the same classroom were treated the same, regardless of their interests and abilities.

Studies on teachers and the teaching profession have shown that an orientation along the lines of the “average students” in class has become almost impossible, given the cultural, socio-economic and linguistic differences in almost all of today’s classrooms (Gomolla, 2005; Gomolla and Radtke, 2009). Reliable data on the makeup of German classrooms along these lines is scant, however (Stanat and Segeritz, 2009). The lack of awareness of diversity issues meant that these data were not collected, and as a result, educational accountability with regard to diversity is still in its infancy. It was only in 2006 that the German government began to publish diversity-related data in its biannual report on the state of education in Germany, but compared to data available in North America, for example, they lack disaggregation (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2009).

Psychological and neuroscience research published at the end of the 20th century has finally encouraged German educators to start seeing every child as a unique human being with great individual potential to learn and develop. Ideas of reformist pedagogy are now making their way into mainstream schooling. Many primary schools are now applying didactic approaches developed by Maria Montessori, Celestin Freinet and other reformist pedagogies of a century ago. Mixed-age groupings as developed in the Jena-Plan pedagogy can now be found in more or less conventional state schools.

Primary school teachers have long known for a long time that homogeneity does not exist in education. But even for the secondary level, the OECD’s

PISA study, analysing the educational outcomes of students from the different types of schools in Germany, showed that there are learners at the *Realschule* who perform better than students at the *Gymnasium*, and some students at the *Hauptschule* sometimes surpass the results of those at the *Realschule*-level. No matter how much effort is invested in selecting wisely, the result is never a truly homogenous grouping of learners. The data collected in the context of the PISA study also revealed profound equity issues in the German education system (Baumert, Stanat and Watermann, 2006; Stanat and Christensen, 2006). Immigrant students and students with an immigrant background, *i.e.* those whose parents and even grandparents migrated to Germany, are severely over-represented in the lower tracks of the German secondary school system, even when allowing for differences in cognitive ability and grade average at primary school level. Children of parents with little formal education are also significantly disadvantaged. While this applies to German and immigrant children alike, immigrant children are especially affected since parents from certain immigrant communities often have little formal education. In other words, schools are currently unable to remediate differences in educational background.

### **From homogeneity to heterogeneity in German education**

While the school system has not yet changed significantly, several changes at the micro-level indicate a shift in thinking among those responsible for the education system. Individualised support, *Individuelle Förderung*; differentiation within the classroom, *Binnendifferenzierung*; and heterogeneity, *Heterogenität*; are the buzz words of the current educational debate. Not only do they shape the educational research agenda (chairs in education are now being redesignated to encompass these new concepts); regional and national policy programmes also aim to strengthen the system's capacity to deal productively with the heterogeneity of students and their needs.

One example of the change in what is perceived to be “best practice” is the German School Award, first offered in 2006 by a group of influential German foundations. It was established to single out and make widely known mainstream schools that have successfully responded to the educational and equity challenges that PISA and other studies have exposed. It is quite revealing that although diversity is one of the six criteria for the nomination of award-winning schools, this aspect is referred to as “Dealing with Diversity”, which sounds equally reserved in German (*Umgang mit Vielfalt*). The award is given to schools “that have found ways and means to deal productively with the different educational backgrounds, interests and abilities of their students, with their cultural and national origin, their family's educational history, and their gender; to schools that effectively compensate disadvantages and continuously and strategically support individualised learning.” In other words, diversity is not celebrated but something with which to cope.



The award-winning schools:

- Take in learners with different abilities and disabilities.
- Apply diagnostic assessment to find out what kind of support each child needs to be able to learn and develop successfully, taking into account prior learning and aiming to organise learning in each student's "zone of proximal development".
- Personalise learning, apply peer learning and provide individualised support for learning.
- Have changed their culture of assessment to move away from norm-referenced towards self-referenced and criterion-referenced formative feedback. Rather than comparing individual children with other children in the classroom, every child's development is considered separately. Children and parents receive feedback on the child's learning progress in relation to the child's previous development and in relation to a rubric of overall learning goals.

However, it is important to bear in mind that these schools are not yet representative of the German school system. More and more teachers are adopting these practices, but their work is not always part of a whole-school approach. Wherever there is a whole-school approach, it tends to stem from strong school leadership and local support for change.

### **From homogeneity to heterogeneity: the difficult process of changing deep-seated mental models**

As a teacher educator, I have often noticed that German teacher trainees' mental concept of schooling is deeply influenced by the school system in which they have been socialised. Many students in teacher education have understood the need to diversify pedagogical and didactic strategies applied in the classroom, yet at the same time they perceive the differences among learners as one of the most challenging tasks they will face. In a way, they are right. Given the fact that early selection of students into the various types of schooling has been the norm in German education, the equally separate institutional tracks for teacher education did not recognise the need to develop pedagogies and teaching strategies to productively deal with diverse student abilities, interests and needs. Teacher education is now beginning to focus on the different developmental stages (childhood, early adolescence, late adolescence), rather than on the different tracks.

This change is taking place alongside other shifts in the system. After PISA, the old way of early selection and alleged homogeneity has lost much of its credibility (Auernheim, 2006; Gogolin, 2008; Neumann 2008).



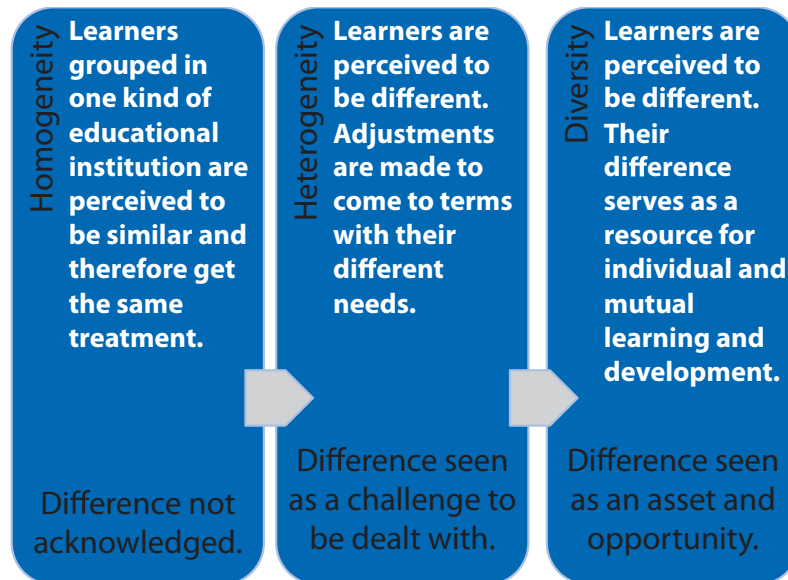
Empirical educational research is receiving massive funding. Many young researchers are examining the equity issues at stake. Additional issues are coming to the fore. Education for heterogeneity is not only about doing justice to each individual's learning needs, it is also about the development of the social and democratic skills that a pluralistic society needs to flourish, and it is about understanding the mutual benefits society as a whole (and smaller communities and groups within it) can gain from a wide range of abilities, perspectives, interests and skills.

This learning process in German education has allowed for a paradigm shift from homogeneity to heterogeneity, but can go even further.

### **Futures thinking: from heterogeneity to diversity**

Societies with longer histories of ongoing immigration seem to have responded with more thorough and sustainable school change to address the kind of challenges facing Germany today. I first noticed this during a research stay in Ontario/Canada in the late 1990s. I remember being very impressed at the time by the fact that teacher trainees in practice teaching not only had to have a curricular and didactic understanding of how they were going to teach but also needed to show an elaborate and well-developed plan about how they were going to work with a specific diverse class to enhance social cohesion in the classroom and to teach pro-social values and social skills.

As a prerequisite, these trainees needed to have substantial knowledge about the students with whom they were working: their ethnic, cultural, religious and socio-economic background, their level of language acquisition and their educational history. That requirement in itself significantly broadened the knowledge base of teacher training. I hardly ever heard the term “heterogeneity” in Canadian schools and universities. It seemed to me that the system had moved one step further. Whereas the paradigm of heterogeneity perceives difference as a challenge to be dealt with actively, diversity as a systemic paradigm perceives difference as an asset. The pedagogy that I came to know there was based on the idea that difference between individuals is one of the most important resources for mutual learning. A world without difference of interests, abilities and perspectives, on the one hand, and differences in cultural, religious and ethnic identities, on the other hand, would have been considered a barren learning environment. This educational philosophy was very different from what I had learned during my own education in Germany and proved to be a real eye-opener. As I will show later, there is much to be learned from this different mindset for teachers and teacher educators in Germany.

Figure 9.1. **Paradigm shifts: from homogeneity to heterogeneity to diversity**

I would like to argue that German education has taken some important steps in the right direction in recent years but would have to make more significant changes to reap the fruits of diversity in education. “Schools of diversity” would move beyond the schools of heterogeneity that we currently see emerging (see Figure 9.1). In addition to diagnostic and formative assessment as well as personalised learning and individual support for learning, the German education system would have to make full use of diversity, perceiving and communicating it as a core value and a key resource of education that needs to be cherished, safeguarded and fully explored. To do that, individuals would have to be perceived as having multiple, hybrid and changing identities. Their cultural knowledge and the individual perspective would be valued and used as a resource for learning, not just in socio-emotional but also in cognitive terms.

All of this would require not only changes in the structure of the German education system but also in the organisation of learning. This would require strengthening norms of mutual support and peer learning, a culture of formative assessment based on self-referencing and criterion-referencing, elements of choice and self-determination in learning, and finally a culture of public deliberation and citizenship. There is a long road ahead to make this vision come true, but Germans have already made strides in this direction, and they should go further.

### The potential role of teacher education as a change agent

As a teacher educator, I ask myself about the role of teacher education in the development of a culture of diversity. These are the steps that we ought to be taking in the coming years:

- Teacher education institutions need to increase the intake of students with diverse backgrounds, for example, by actively recruiting students from immigrant families and students with disabilities.
- Teaching and learning in initial teacher education need to make use of diversity to enhance student awareness of diversity as a resource for learning. This implies deliberately taking the perspectives of different students into account and applying didactic approaches that will draw students into communicating about their different identities and perspectives in a respectful manner.
- In teacher education courses, students should have opportunities to explore basic philosophical concepts such as diversity, identity, democracy, pluralism, controversy and deliberation. This will allow students to make connections and understand the bigger picture.
- Teacher education needs to significantly broaden its knowledge base to incorporate cultural and psychological knowledge on cultural, religious, ethnic and gender identities as well as intercultural communication. Any manager sent abroad is now required to undergo training in intercultural communication – why not do the same for teacher trainees?
- Training in foreign languages, internships and study abroad should become a requirement for teacher trainees as it will enable them to extend their frames of reference. Having experienced another culture firsthand, they will be more understanding of other cultures at home or even develop an understanding of culture itself as hybrid and changing.
- Students in teacher education programmes should take advantage of the learning opportunities that exemplary schools offer so that they may observe and apply “best practice” in diversity education. Internships in local schools with highly diverse populations would provide teacher trainees with essential classroom practice.

These are steps that German teacher education will have to make in the coming years. Many teacher trainees and teachers are eagerly looking for tools that will help them succeed in their diverse classrooms. On the other hand, there are others who simply feel that addressing diversity means extra work. Thus, changing the way the German educational systems views and embraces diversity also entails cultural change in the society at large, and that, as we all know, takes time.

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