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## Policy and practice of inclusion in the German vocational educational system with the focus on VET teachers training

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### Abstract

Ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, is one of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 (UN 2015, 17). Inclusion has been a political commitment in Germany since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009. However, inclusive measures in the vocational school system have long been neglected and it is only since 2016 that the inclusion of persons with disabilities at vocational schools in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state, became compulsory (Wirth 2015). This article briefly presents the legal position for inclusion in VET both from the international perspective and from the German educational policy perspective. It considers a broad definition of inclusion which regards not only persons with disability but all individual characteristics and abilities, followed by specific information on the German VET system and its heterogeneity. A particular focus is drawn on recent measures for the inclusion of refugees and persons with disability. These changes present challenges for VET teachers. This article discusses recent research projects analysing the attitudes and thoughts towards inclusion of VET teachers (Jahn, Burda-Zoyke, Driebe, & Götzl 2019) and the skills required for VET teachers in inclusive work at vocational schools (Bylinski 2015a). To end, initiatives of German universities which aim for better preparation of future VET teachers in inclusive education will briefly be presented along with perspectives for future research.

*Keywords:* inclusion, German vocational education, teacher training

### 1 Inclusive education: legal and historical background

Inclusive education has become a global topic through the publications of UNESCO and the UN. These include World Declaration on Education for All (UNICEF 1990) in Jomtien, Thailand, which called for participation in basic education for all children, but without addressing the particular problems faced by children with disabilities. The thematization of these problems with focus on disabilities first occurred in the World Conference "Special Needs Education: Access and Quality" of UNESCO, in 1994 in Salamanca (Werning 2014). Most recently, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) has intensified the global debate on inclusive education. This follows a greater legal force of the declaration, which goes far beyond the previously mentioned statements (Werning 2014). The CRPD is the first United Nations human rights treaty to be adopted in the 21st century and presents the highest number of opening signatures recorded for any human rights treaty: eighty-one states plus the European Union (Kayess & French 2008). The Convention has been valid in Germany since March 2009. Moreover, in the year 2009 the UNESCO

published the Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (UNESCO 2009, 9), in which the plead for an inclusive education for all children is made explicit: “the requirement for inclusive schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and that therefore benefit all children”. In this statement, the focus is not drawn on the physical or cognitive disabilities, but on the individual characteristics and abilities of all children. Therefore, UNESCO uses the broader definition of inclusion in education, which will also be used throughout this article. In contrast to a narrow inclusion definition which focuses on disabilities, a broader inclusion definition implies that all young people and adults should be given learning opportunities and the same access to quality education and to develop their potentials, regardless of specific learning needs, gender, social and economic conditions (Bylinski 2016). However, it is still undisputable that students with physical, cognitive or learning disabilities should receive special attention during the process of achieving inclusive education for all. For over a century these students have been taught in separate institutions in Germany: first in "Hilfsschulen", intended to serve disabled or impaired students (Powell 2011) and then in “Sonderschulen”, nine different types of special needs schools which are each responsible for a specific disability, established by the Recommendation of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs on the Organization of Special Education of 1972 (KMK 1972). This same Standing Conference has passed a resolution on the inclusive education of children and adolescents in 2011. Unlike in their 1970s recommendation, special emphasis is now placed on the joint education of students with and without disabilities: "The basis of inclusive education is the joint learning and education of children and adolescents with and without disabilities" (KMK 2011, 7). The inclusive school is then described as a "vision to be achieved in a longer-term process". The federal states are now required to adapt the provincial school legislation to the CRPD and to enable inclusive school enrolment of pupils with and without disabilities (Kroworsch 2014, 28).

The vocational educational system in Germany also experiences this shift from segregation to inclusion now. In order to acquire a training qualification, students with disabilities would attend the so called “Förderberufskolleg”. In terms of school law, these are special education schools in secondary vocational education, which teach both in the area of learning and developmental disorders, as well as the sensory damage, physical and motor development (Fischer 2015). However, since 2016 the inclusion of persons with disabilities at vocational schools in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany’s most populous state, is compulsory (Wirth 2015) and therefore now reforms in the academical preparation of future VET teachers are necessary, so that they will be able to support all students according to their individual characteristics and learning background.

In the next section the current situation of heterogeneity in the German VET system will be examined, including measures applied in order to enable that newly arrived migrants without knowledge of the German language, disabled or disadvantaged adolescents access the labour market.

## 2 Students' heterogeneity in the German VET system

In the pedagogical discussion, the term heterogeneity is mostly used in relation to the diversity of students in classes or learning groups and refers to the learner's different learning prerequisites (Albrecht, Ernst, Westhoff, & Zauritz 2014). Unlike other upper secondary education system, the vocational school in Germany is characterized by a very pronounced heterogeneity in the academic education of its students. In many classes, for example, it is part of everyday school life that students without a secondary school diploma are taught together with high school graduates. For young people without a vocational qualification, the dual vocational training offers a great opportunity to acquire a vocational qualification and at the same time also a certificate of secondary education. Dealing with heterogeneity presents a great challenge for vocational teachers and an additional burden in the organization of a differentiated teaching. The vocational school also has an additional compensatory function in dealing with heterogeneity. The dual vocational training provides a new beginning for a professional career that even opens up access to higher education through the acquisition of the advanced technical college entrance qualification (Rauner & Piening 2010). Due to the length of stay in the transitional system before starting vocational education, young people often enter vocational education at an older age. Therefore companies, vocational schools and educational service providers have to be prepared for the fact that, older and mixed-age groups are always present in classes of vocational schools (Albrecht, Ernst, Westhoff, & Zauritz 2014). It is possible to conclude that the heterogeneity in class caused by the age gap between students, their different experiences, interests and previous knowledge acquired in the different school types which they previously attended is a very particular characteristic of the VET system and future teachers have to be specifically prepared on how to deal with these differences in class.

Furthermore, in the last decades, two additional diversity aspects became more present in vocational school classes: on the one hand the migration background of students and on the other hand, the disabilities of students. The overwhelming influx of refugees and asylum seekers has called for international, European and national policies' reforms, at least since spring 2015. In Germany, schooling concepts for this target group are currently being implemented in various federal states (Heinrichs et al. 2016). Almost 30% of the more than 850,000 asylum applicants in the period of January 2014 to April 2016 were aged 16-25 years (Baethge & Seeber 2016, 7). Even assuming that not all applications have been or will be accepted, and not all applicants will be seeking vocational training, estimations are that likely up to 88,000 additional places in the VET preparation system will be required. To clarify the scale of the challenge it should be stated that in 1995 a much smaller number of persons seeking protection and asylum came to Germany and by 2011 only 8% of them had achieved vocational qualification, 56% of them could not achieve any recognized qualification even after 16 years (Granato et al. 2016, 4). In order to change this prognosis and offer the newly arrived migrants better prospects in the labour market, the German VET system must be prepared to deal with the incoming great diversity of ethnical, religious and linguistic background. Teachers of all subjects must be prepared to develop language-sensitive lessons,

which promote simultaneously the subject-specific, the linguistic and the communicative competences of the learners (Leisen 2011).

A continuously higher number of students with cognitive, physical and sensorial disabilities is expected take part in classes in the vocational educational system. As previously mentioned, the tendency to teach them separately in special vocational schools is declining, whereas now vocational schools either open classes for students with special needs or opt for joint teaching amidst the inclusive educational reforms.

The group of students with impairments can be divided into two categories according to their access barriers to the VET system (Schroeder 2016):

- Students with learning, social-emotional and speaking disabilities: Here the causes of the impairments in school learning and the access problems for vocational training lie mainly in an insufficient adaptation of education concepts with the living conditions of these young adults. Therefore, the term "disadvantage" is usually chosen, which is based on the historically stable reproduction of social inequality and institutional discrimination through the general education and the VET system.
- Students with visual, hearing, physical, neurological and mental disabilities or severely disabled: The reasons for the impairment lie in the physical, neurological, cognitive and physiological situation of young adults. In this case therefore the term disability, which emphasizes the importance of health for access to education, social relations and the employment system, is used.

In recent years, there has been an average of about 600,000 children, adolescents and young adults in Germany, to whom special educational needs are attributed in the education system. More than 400,000 pupils belong to the group of students with disabilities in the fields of learning, behaviour and language, and about half of them attend general and vocational special education and training. It is expected that the inclusion rate grows throughout the years, especially in the VET system. In North-Rhine Westfalia, Germany's most populous federal state, 113 out of the 377 vocational schools had students with a diagnosed disadvantage or disability in the school year of 2017/2018 (Ministerium für Schule und Bildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2018).

Next section examines current measures which are applied in the VET system in order to enable these group of students a better access to apprenticeships and to the labour market.

## **2.1 Inclusion of refugees**

The German VET system's challenge is to create at least 100,000 to 120,000 additional VET preparation places in vocational schools as well as apprenticeship places in the next few years. Qualitatively, preparation for training and apprenticeships should be arranged in a curricular combination of language teaching, general education and professional sequences. The federal states with their vocational schools are primarily responsible for the organization of the training preparation, whereas companies, vocational schools and non-company training

centres are responsible for the realization of apprenticeship training (Baethge & Seeber 2016). In the following, implemented measures in the field of the language learning and training preparation, which aims to impart competences before beginning an apprenticeship in the dual VET system, will be presented.

There are two types of relevant measures to allow newly arrived migrants a better access to VET and the labour market. They are aimed towards the integrated promotion of language acquisition and vocational orientation and towards training preparation and dual vocational training of the vocational schools (Baethge & Seeber 2016).

The integrated promotion of language acquisition and vocational orientation includes measures that focus on language learning, but also promotes job orientation and labour market knowledge. These include such German language courses, such as “Integrationskurs” and “Deutsch für den Beruf Kurs” that are open to participants of different age groups. According to the results of the project "Early Intervention" an A2 / B1 language level attained as a result of these language courses is enough to perform assistant tasks at the workplace. At least B2 level should be attained to take up vocational training and successfully attend a vocational school (Büschel et al. 2015, 15), therefore, to facilitate integration of migrants into the labour market comprehensive vocational qualification programs are necessary to prepare for work and study for further qualifications to achieve a stable integration with equal participation opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers (Baethge & Seeber 2016).

The measures taking place in vocational schools offer intensive language development coupled with job-oriented content, especially in the first months of admission to training preparation. They are aimed at young adults between the age of 16 and about 25 years of age. For the labour market integration of the 25- to under 35-year-olds has additional challenges as they might need to provide for one's own family, possibly also left-behind family members or might have strong individual preferences. For this age group, the recognition of work experience and possible participation in continuing education in the home country as well as acquiring extra-qualifications represent a better option for long-term occupational and labour market integration (Baethge & Seeber 2016). In the state of North-Rhine Westfalia this approach is called Internationale Förderklassen and can either be attended in full-time (under 18 years old) or in part-time (between 18 and 25 years old). In the part-time model the students attend the vocational school 2 days a week and 3 days a week they attend a specific vocational measure (for example, internship). Attendance is supposed to last for one year and enables the acquirement of a certificate of secondary education, allowing graduates to proceed with their vocational education (Baethge & Seeber 2016). VET teachers working in this context are faced with challenges such as having to prepare classes which are adequate to the levels of language knowledge of the students. The demands on teachers become more complex. The focus of VET schools on promoting vocational skills must be partly shifted in favour of language-teaching and social and occupational integration (Heinrichs et al. 2016).

## 2.2 Inclusion of disabled and disadvantaged students

Vocational training for disabled people is firmly ensured by the Vocational Training Act and is also recorded in Social Security Code III. The law stipulates that disabled people should be trained in recognized training occupations. At the same time there is the possibility of a so-called compensation for disadvantages, which, for example, refers to the temporal and factual structure of the training or to the use of aids and assistance (Bylinski 2015a). On the basis of this same law it is possible to adapt as well as the examination modalities of a dual apprenticeship to the needs of people with disabilities and thus to obtain a compensation for disadvantages (Bach, Schmidt, & Schaub 2016). However, an application for this compensation must first be made to the professional chamber in order for it to be implemented at the vocational school attended by the learner.

In addition, there is the possibility of vocational qualification according to special training regulations (Bylinski 2015a). The special training regulations stipulate a theory reduced apprenticeship course for certain professions. This type of apprenticeship is called “Fachpraktikerausbildung” and is predominantly attended by learners with learning disabilities. Most of these training courses are offered by the vocational training organizations and only a small proportion is carried out in companies. It is important to mention that, in order to apply for this type of apprenticeship, a diagnostic decision on the basis of a psychological report is necessary, which means the disability or disadvantage of the learner must be assessed by a professional (Bylinski 2015a). However, whereas these theory reduced professions offer an opportunity for integration of disabled and disadvantaged students into the VET system and in the labour market, learners might still face problems afterwards, since these professions do not have a good reputation and are not well known in the labour market (Fink 2006).

Including students with disabilities and disadvantages is still a challenge for the dual VET system, since they depend on the companies to accept them for an apprenticeship. Based on the guideline "Vocational training for all", an apprenticeship guarantee was introduced in some German federal states as a part of a redesign of the VET system. Those who have not been able to gain entry into an in-company training receive a publicly funded apprenticeship and thus have the chance to achieve a qualification instead of being stuck in the transitional system of the VET system while waiting for an apprenticeship approval (Bylinski 2016).

It is important to mention that Germany has a well-developed range of rehabilitation measures and workshops/factories for people with disabilities. In these cases, however, they only provide space for people with special needs (Schmidt 2015, 344).

It is possible to conclude that the German federal states try to enable the inclusion of people with disabilities and disadvantages in the VET system by offering them the possibility of requesting compensation for their disabilities at school (for example, writing exams in a separate room) and the possibility of completing theory reduced apprenticeships. Therefore, vocational schoolteachers must be prepared to deal with these students and their special needs

in class, since now they are not fated to be working in factories for disabled people anymore and are allowed to attend general vocational schools.

### **3 Teachers and inclusion in VET system**

The heterogeneity of the German VET system and the recent political and educational changes which bring along with them new challenges for the VET teaching personnel have been presented in the first half of this article. The second half of the article focuses on the way VET teachers perceive these changes and how they can be better prepared in order to deal with the growing diversity of their students. The results of two empirical studies which cover these topics will be briefly discussed to understand the perception of VET teachers on inclusion and which competences are regarded as necessary in order to work in an inclusive VET system.

#### **3.1 VET teachers' perception on inclusion**

Jahn, Burda-Zoyke, Driebe, & Götzl (2019) have conducted a quantitative study with 62 VET teachers from the German federal states of North-Rhine Westfalia and Saxony Anhalt, in order to analyse their perceptions on inclusion and possibly find out about factors which can influence teachers' views on this topic. For this, they have used a survey by Seifried (2015) covering three main dimensions:

- cognitive dimension consisting of the two scales "subject-specific support" (focus on the quality of lessons and the subject specific development of learners in inclusive classes) and "social inclusion" (focusing on the quality of inclusion of students and the atmosphere in class);
- behaviour dimension consisting of the scale "personal willingness" which refers to the willingness of teachers to implement inclusion in their classes;
- affective dimension which consists of one open-answer question about the expectations and fears of the teachers.

The results show that 58,6% of the respondents understand inclusion according to its broader definition, taking into account the whole heterogeneity of VET. 25.8% of them refer only to disabled persons when they think of inclusion.

When looking closely at the results of the three used scales, only the scale "social inclusion" presents a higher average (MD = 4.09), showing that teachers' perception on the subject-specific support to learners (MD = 2.77) and their personal willingness to implement inclusion (MD = 3.12) are rather low (Jahn, Burda-Zoyke, Driebe, & Götzl 2019).

The answers to the open-end question were categorised inductively and showed that the teachers fear overstraining due to implementation of inclusion in VET schools. Some of them fear that disadvantages for all students will happen with the inclusive teaching. They also

mention their fear of not having enough resources at their disposal to support learners (Jahn, Burda-Zoyke, Driebe, & Götzl 2019).

Having previous contact with disabled people shows a significant positive influence on teachers' perceptions on inclusion. This suggests that working in an inclusive class will also have a positive effect on their perceptions over time. Moreover, attending special training on inclusion has a significant positive impact on personal willingness. The reason for the increased willingness is probably the perceived better preparation, so teachers feel less overwhelmed by inclusive settings and have more confidence in their self-efficacy (Jahn, Burda-Zoyke, Driebe, & Götzl 2019).

### **3.2 Necessary competences to deal with inclusion in VET schools**

The German Federal Institute for Vocational Training (BIBB) conducted a qualitative study with different professionals working in the transitional system of vocational training in order to assess how professionalism of those working in this system has been changing in the last years, especially regarding to the new challenges faced due to inclusion. They interviewed 57 professionals: teachers of special needs schools, teachers of vocational schools, social workers and apprenticeship instructors (Bylinski 2015b). Findings confirm that a new professionalism has emerged with the new requirements for shaping the transition and the accompaniment of young people with special needs into vocational training and into the labour market. Summing up the interviews with all participants, researchers concluded that teachers working in inclusive VET settings must have competences in individual career guidance and must be able to design subject-oriented learning processes in the context of heterogeneous learning groups. Moreover, they should have competences in teamwork for the required interdisciplinary collaboration inside the institution (Bylinski 2015b).

The interviewed VET teachers mentioned observing a lower level of pupil achievement recently. They stated that their students have individual and social disadvantages, which allow little development opportunities. They mention trying to provide students with new, positive learning experiences by having a potential-oriented and empathic attitude as teachers. They see a change in professionalism as their job as teachers becomes more and more an educational task and less subject-specific. Therefore, they mention the importance of acquiring social and special education skills through further training (Bylinski 2015b).

The results of these interviews are clear evidence that inclusion in the VET system comes along with changed requirements on VET personnel that relate both to their original activities and to new tasks which emerge as a result of this complex process.

## **4 VET teacher education: preparing teaching students for work in inclusive settings**

In the previous sections, the current situation of inclusion in the German VET system has been presented along with measures implemented by the German federal states aiming to



enable a smoother inclusion of newly arrived migrants and persons with disabilities and disadvantages into the VET system and consequently into the labour market by completing dual apprenticeships. However, this is still a new situation and as the discussed study shows, VET teachers mostly feel unprepared to work in inclusive settings and have negative perceptions towards joint teaching (Jahn, Burda-Zoyke, Driebe, & Götzl 2019). To change this situation, universities which offer study programs directed towards students wishing to pursue a career as VET teachers are now implementing reforms in their curricula and developing new courses in order to specifically prepare the students to work in inclusive settings in vocational education. The projects conducted at two universities will be analysed below. They can serve as inspiration for other higher education institutions wishing to implement curricular changes focused on inclusion.

The University of Münster has developed a project entitled “Dealing with Diversity, kompetenter Umgang mit Heterogenität durch reflektierte Praxiserfahrung” [Competent Dealing with Heterogeneity through a Reflected Practical Experience], which aims to anchor the topics of how to deal with heterogeneity and inclusion in the curriculum of the VET teacher training course. They have developed university courses on the following topics: Disability as a social construct, diversity as a resource and profit, legal framework of inclusive education, inclusive didactics, individual career planning, basic diagnostic methods, chances of teamwork and cooperation, among others. A key point of this project is the use of filmed lessons in VET schools in order to prepare the students for their future work in inclusive settings. The emphasis of these videos lies on classroom management in classes. It is planned to test the success of this method in a quasi-experimental design with an intervention and a control group of students (Bylinski, Heinrichs, Niethammer, & Weyland 2018). Different studies have analysed the impact of the use of videos of filmed classes on teacher training and stated changes in the teachers’ and teaching students’ perspectives of classroom interactions (Sherin & Van Es 2005) and cognitive activation (Krammer & Schnetzler 2008). However, no studies have been published so far on the analysis of the impact of the use of videos in teaching students’ perceptions and knowledge about inclusion. It is estimated, that in the next few years the results will be published and the use of video sequences of classes will be a permanent part of the study programme for future VET teachers at the University of Münster (Bylinski, Heinrichs, Niethammer, & Weyland 2018).

Another project aiming to reform the curriculum of the study programme for future VET teachers with regards to inclusion is "Wegweisende Lehrerbildung" (WegE) [Pioneering Teacher Training] of the University of Bamberg. This project developed a course on the topics of diagnostic competences and the competences of dealing with socio-emotional problems of students on VET schools. First, the students learn about diagnostic methods and then they work on case studies on topics such as underachievement, bullying and violence, school absenteeism and text anxiety (Bylinski, Heinrichs, Niethammer, & Weyland 2018). These fictional written cases have been approved by teachers, who deemed them as realistic and authentic (Heinrichs, Reinke, & Ziegler 2018). In small groups they research on the case's phenomenon, formulate hypothesis on its causes and develop ways on how to deal with

them. First results of the evaluation of this course show that students worked on the cases motivated and with interest and felt cognitively activated by them (Bylinski, Heinrichs, Niethammer, & Weyland 2018). These results show that developing own fictional written cases on the work in inclusive settings might be a good alternative to the use of filmed lesson sequences in the academic formation of VET teachers. Using video sequences can often pose as a technological and legal challenge, considering the students' and teachers' rights on their own image.

## **5 Conclusion and perspectives**

This article provided an overview on how Germany is progressing in order to achieve the sustainable development goal of ensuring that all people have equal access to education of all levels, in this case with the focus on the vocational educational system. The barriers that persons with disability in Germany have faced to be included in the educational system have been presented along with the current reforms which ministries of education are implementing in order to ensure that people of all backgrounds, regardless of their abilities or nationality, are able to attend dual vocational training.

It is expected that due to these reforms and implemented measures the diversity in VET classes will increase and more and more VET teachers will be working in inclusive settings with learners with different abilities, previous knowledge, ages and linguistic background. Therefore, it is necessary that VET teachers are prepared to deal with this growing heterogeneity in class. Recent studies have showed that they feel unprepared for this challenge and have a rather negative perception on inclusion (Jahn, Burda-Zoyke, Driebe, & Götzl 2019) and that teachers need to develop competences for career guidance and individual-focused pedagogical interventions and also competences to work with different educational institutions and with people from different backgrounds (such as special education teachers or psychologists) at school (Bylinski 2015b).

In order to prepare future VET teachers for the work in inclusive settings, German universities are also reforming their study programmes' curricula and designing courses with special focus on inclusion in VET schools. The Universities of Münster and Bamberg have chosen to do so by working with filmed video sequences of inclusive VET classes and with validated written fictional cases on problems such as school absenteeism and bullying (Bylinski, Heinrichs, Niethammer, & Weyland 2018). As other universities follow the same path and make inclusive topics a compulsory part of their teaching study programmes, it is estimated that VET teachers will have higher levels of self-efficacy regarding the work in inclusive settings and will also have a more positive perception of inclusion, since they will acquire more experience with the topic.

The analysis presented in this article can facilitate discussion on changes required for effective inclusion of students with disabilities and refugees and the implications on TVET teacher training. Current developments demonstrates that adding special courses and

modules on the topic of inclusion in teacher training programs and creating measures which help to integrate persons with disabilities and migrants into the VET system are important steps each country might consider on the way to an inclusive VET system. However, in addition the following more specific research on the topic is required in order to find out what the biggest challenges faced by teachers working in inclusive VET settings are and what resources they use to solve the problems they face. Moreover, the perspective of the students is missing in the current research status: there is a lack of studies in which VET students have been inquired about their experiences in inclusive VET settings. Their insights could be useful in evaluating how successful inclusion in the VET system has been so far and which changes should be applied in order to improve learning conditions for all students. Thus, training of VET teachers can be adjusted accordingly.

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**TVET@asia** The Online Journal for Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Asia

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CITATION:

Matafora, B. (2019). Inclusion in the German vocational educational system with the focus on VET teachers and academical teacher training. In: TVET@Asia, issue 14, 1-14. Online: <http://www.tvet-online.asia/issue/issue-14/matafora> (retrieved 30.06.2019).

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