

Article

Analysis of Barriers to Inclusive Schools in Germany: Why Special Education Is Necessary and Not Evil

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Abstract: Over the past decade, ever since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) in Germany, a morally charged debate has taken place about inclusive and special education. Special schools are under considerable attack and even special education is deemed responsible for the difficulties in implementing full inclusion in schools. The gravest accusation is that special education and special schools are even today a close connection to the Nazi era between 1933 and 1945, when children with disabilities were sterilized and murdered. Special education is seen as a symbol and guarantor of separation and exclusion and therefore incompatible with the idea of inclusion. This article will outline and analyze this claim and present other more compelling reasons why full inclusion has been difficult to implement in Germany. Following the analysis, we will describe a possible way forward for inclusion and special education.

Keywords: inclusion; history; Nazi Germany; special education; schools

1. Introduction

Inclusive education—meaning here the education of students with and without special needs in the same classroom—has been a controversial topic in special education in Germany and elsewhere for the past decades [1]. In 2019, 10 years after the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities [2] (CRPD) in Germany, advocates of inclusion criticized the slow progression of implementing fully inclusive schools in Germany. The monitoring body of the implementation of the CRPD in Germany, the Deutsche Institut für Menschenrechte (German Institute for Human Rights) (DIM), claims that inclusion is not working because Germany continues to operate a system that includes special education schools. The DIM advocates for the closure of all special schools because maintaining a dual system is too costly and thus undermines inclusion [3]. Recent data revealed that 550,000 students with special education needs (SEN) are educated in the German education system. Of these, 42% are educated in general education schools and 58% in special schools. From 2008 to 2018, the number of special needs students educated in general schools doubled [4] and the number of special schools decreased. In 2005 there were 3468 special schools, whereas there were 2865 special schools in 2017 [5]. However, since 2007 the percentage of students in special schools in relation to the total number of school-aged students has not changed and is at 4.2% [6]. This is because over the years more and more children have been declared as requiring special support. The increased inclusion figures are related to this increase. There is much to be said for the fact that the more severely impaired are accommodated in special schools and the less severely impaired in inclusive schools. However, the monitoring body (DIM) considers the 4.2% of students in special schools as evidence that not much has changed in the past 10 years in Germany in terms of fulfilling Article 24 of the CRPD. Very closely related to the argument that the continuous existence of special education schools is the reason for

failure to comply with the CRPD is the argument that special education in itself is a barrier to achieving inclusion for children and youth with special needs. One line of thought to support this latter claim is based upon the accusation that German special education is still, to this day, entrenched in ideas developed during the Nazi era in Germany [7].

In this article, we examine the claim that special education with its history, particularly the time between 1933–1945, is a significant reason for problems in educating children with and without special needs in the same classroom in Germany. We then present other possible reasons for Germany's supposed and continued failure to educate all children with special needs in general education classrooms. Finally, we describe a way forward to achieve quality education for children with special needs in the most inclusive settings.

2. Methods

The method to examine the above themes is a literature review. The focus of analysis is based primarily on written works by Dagmar Hänsel, a German historian of special education and professor emeritus of education at the University of Würzburg, Germany. Significant sources and statements by researchers and scientists in the area of special education, particularly as they refer to Hänsel and the debate surrounding her theses, were also explored.

All sources were originally written in German. Through the translation program dippl.com with subsequent English-language editing by native speakers working in the tertiary sector of special education, the authors hope to make the arguments and the language used accessible to the research community involved in inclusion and special education. The text contains perhaps more direct citations than usual, however, the language used is important, as it reveals the conflict and the dramatic nature of the arguments surrounding the discussion in the field of special education in Germany today.

3. Hänsel's Theses about Special Education during the Nazi Era

In 2014, Dagmar Hänsel published a highly acclaimed book about special education training during National Socialism in Germany [8]. Hänsel claimed that Germany's special education community falsified its history to this day. The matter became a political issue when the Conference of Education Ministers (KMK) was informed of this at the beginning of 2015 and was called upon "to ensure the necessary historical and political reappraisal" [9] (p. 1). This initiative was based on the conviction that special education was not in a position to come to terms with its role under National Socialism. Or, to put it more sharply: without a powerful intervention from outside, without external pressure, this reappraisal would simply be impossible [10].

Following the accusations, the German Association for Special Education (VDS) set up a "Taskforce on Special Education under National Socialism" at the next federal congress in Weimar (2016) and gave Hänsel the opportunity to present her thoughts and findings. The situation was heated immediately before the conference by an article on special education and National Socialism published in the "Tageszeitung" (TAZ): "Disabled Enlightenment", subtitled: "Children from poor families have to go to special schools particularly often: Is this because the school form is a Nazi legacy?" [11]. Dagmar Hänsel is quoted in detail in the article as saying that "special education - especially education for the learning disabled - has been fundamentally developed in the post-war period on the back of its Nazi victims" [11] (p. 26). A more serious accusation can hardly be made. Schumann [12] also claims that even today there is no serious willingness to deal with the past in the special education community. Leading representatives of the association, according to the tenor of the TAZ article, put all their energy into opposing clarification. In the special education science sector, according to the accusation, Hänsel's works were deliberately ignored and attempts were made to silence other critical voices. In Hänsel's words: "this is not critical reappraisal, this is falsification of history" [11] (p. 27).

The German Association for Special Education (VDS) came under additional pressure as a result. At the congress it sought a clarifying discussion, ultimately from a defensive position. The question was whether academic and institutionalized special needs education has faced up to its history and

dealt with it within the framework of what is possible, or whether overpowering defensive movements dominated and defensive processes took place which are no longer justifiable. Hänsel's accusation of a lack of coming to terms with the past was accompanied by massive attacks on contemporary special education. First and foremost, she referred to (school) inclusion as a highly topical educational policy issue to which far-reaching historical links are being established. Hänsel is by far not alone in her assessment. Her deliberations also have special weight since Theresia Degener, Chairperson of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, also supports this view: "education is one of the most important human rights of our time, and that there is only a right to inclusive education, but not a right to apartheid in education, has been known at least since the UN Disability Rights Convention" [13] (p. 7). Brigitte Schumann, a former member of the German parliament, who often comments on education policy, agreed with these statements, and she uses Hänsel's works as a central reference point. German education policy maintains "one of the world's most segregating segregation systems bordering on apartheid" [12] (preface). In Degener's view the "main responsible actors" of the discriminated development are "especially the KMK" and the "Professional Association of Special Needs Educators" [13] (p. 8). The view that the existence of special schools is comparable to an apartheid system is shared by other influential protagonists as well [14–16]. Hans Wocken, a German special education professor and researcher spoke of the "Social Darwinian harshness of a divided school system" [17] (p. 47). He did not use the term apartheid but places the system in an inhumane context as well [10].

The main accusation by Hänsel and others is that the German Special Education Association is occupied by an unresolved past and is not only mistaken in numerous questions of detail, but even today it defends an overall concept which has proven to be historically outdated and ethically untenable. Its genuine self-image is misguided, the special education theory is questionable, and the practice is just as questionable as the adherence to special schools and the special education influence on inclusive schooling [12,18]. For Hänsel [19] (book cover), it is clear that the German special education system is "deeply marked" by the experience of the crimes of the Nazi era. In other words, it is about more than the historical events that have become known, it is not just about a stage which, even if its significance is fully recognized, stands next to later ones. "Deeply marked" refers to something very lasting, to the fact that everything else is influenced, if not determined, with great power.

Hänsel's massive criticism is not just aimed at special education settings but at special education itself. Her conclusions leave no doubt about this:

"The Nazi era is [...] seen as a gain for the special school teachers" [19] (p. 10). This gain also applies to the training of special education teachers. During the Nazi era, important foundations were laid for the establishment of special education teacher training, even if it was not yet enforceable at the time. Hänsel criticizes the development of independent special education training at the university level, which she argues led to a separation from general education—all on the back of what was developed in special education during the Nazi era [8]. She claims, that this seamless progression of special needs education, the development of its curricula and structures from 1933–1945 to the post war era had considerable consequences: special needs education has been able to consolidate itself further, and its educational and social weight has increased more and more. She states that this influence is currently becoming particularly clear: in times of inclusion, special needs education is striving to further expand its influence. It now wants to implement its problematic contents in the courses of study for general teachers. This is also seen as a historical continuity: "whereas before the Nazi era the reason given was to open up general teachers to special education in special schools, and under National Socialism the importance of special education for the racial recovery of the German people was also emphasized. Today the inclusion of disabled people is cited as a reason for abandoning special education, meaning their special educational support only in general schools" [8] (p. 264). Consequently, there should not be any special education teacher training anymore.

4. Critical Evaluation of Hänsel's Research

From a historical perspective, Hänsel describes a fact that is now undisputed. In the years between 1933 and 1945, the school for learning impaired was modernized and strengthened as an independent school form. The school type has been severely damaged by its implications in "racial hygiene" and euthanasia, and the special needs teachers involved in this process are heavily to blame. Hänsel explains the relevant facts in detail and analyzes which circumstances led to this. There is no dissent about this terrible event in recent special education history. It is also conceded and acknowledged that the generation directly involved in these events successfully tried to deny them for a long time after the war (in detail: [20–25]). Ellger-Rüttgardt [21] (p. 87) complained that those who worked in special education after the war "generally felt neither inclination nor need to critically question their own role in the past". There are, however, different views on the medium- and long-term consequences of the events at that time, and on the direct or indirect conclusions that can be drawn. It is true that after the war, there were indeed attempts to create an excessive distance from one's own history with the aim of avoiding a confrontation with the past. A "good" special education should be saved: with its commitment to people with disabilities, the will to support them, and the desire to improve their living situation, by identifying with a group of people for whom no one else was committed, and by holding on to an institution that was considered irreplaceable. The price for maintaining the illusion of an exclusively beneficial special education was a considerable degree of denial of reality. For this reason, it was also possible to pretend that a new beginning had become possible after 1945, leaving the past behind (largely) without consequences. The circumstances are nevertheless actually more complicated than they are presented [10,26]. A special education approach to evaluating the past has indeed taken place, starting with the second special education generation after the war [22,23,27–30]. There can therefore no longer be any talk of a split into "good" and "bad" special education, and certainly not of a split that continues to this day [20,21].

The fact that "special school teacher training was also based on race hygiene" [8] (p. 260) was particularly serious at a time when eugenic ideas were widespread and met with great acceptance, even in other European countries [31]. Thus, in the early 1930s, teaching staff at special schools were also caught up in the "eugenics movement"—like many other Germans [21] (p. 62). A willingness to resist was therefore hardly to be expected, at least not on a broad scale.

Nevertheless, no misunderstanding should arise. For all the exaggeration and short-sightedness that characterize Hänsel's conclusions, it should not be overlooked that her work is meritorious in several respects. That is beyond doubt. New sources have opened up, previously unknown facts have been brought to light, connections have been made that were previously unknown. In this respect the author deserves recognition [10]. However, it is surprising to see the intensity of the arguments, and the strength and the relentlessness of the accusations against special education which are to be found in all the writings. Hänsel unwaveringly maintains that the Nazi era was beneficial for special school teachers [19] (book title), and that special education carries its legacy deep within itself and continues to benefit considerably from the National Socialist era. Special education history is characterized by "repression", "silence" and "falsification" [32] (p. 7). Special education stubbornly and intransigently keeps "a myth alive" [18] (p. 55), and out of pure self-interest it draws on "mythic tales" [8] (p. 10).

This massive criticism is difficult to understand today, after an intense struggle in special needs education, after long professional debates. In earlier times, this attitude would have been more understandable and appropriate, as reflections on coming to terms with the past. For many representatives of the first post-war generation, those who had worked during the Nazi era tried to evade historical responsibility. There is sufficient evidence for this, that is undisputed [10]. At that time, there was no will to enlighten, as Berner [33] and Ellger-Rüttgardt [23] state, and documents were kept secret or only made accessible in a limited way, as happened to Biesold [34], who wanted to gain insight into the history of deaf education [28]. Further examples could be added. However, these times are perceptibly long gone for everyone [10].

Today's special education has changed. There can be no doubt about that, too. In a large number of publications, a critical look was taken at one's own guild, in great clarity and with clear words. "The monstrosity of Nazi disability policy remains to this day a thorn and a wound in the collective memory" [23] (p. 15). In another place: "it must be emphasized again and again that the Nazi era did not represent a complete break with established special (curative) education traditions, but could build on existing ideological currents and willing individuals" [23] (p. 65). Should these statements be a tactical maneuver, an attempt to cover up again? That is hardly something that can be taken seriously. It cannot be deduced from the numerous writings of Ellger-Rüttgardt, an important scholar and researcher in special education, nor from those of many other prominent researchers, historians, and others in special education [10].

Special education has dealt intensively with its past. Topics were the extent of coercion and repression against special education, special education's identification with central goals of National Socialism, personal and institutional entanglements, the inner ambivalences of parts of the special education teaching staff, them being torn between willingness to harm and protective partisanship for the pupils as well as their resistance to the Nazi state. Furthermore, there was the evaluation of continuities and breaks in the work of associations, the importance of professionalization efforts, and preparatory work for teacher training in the years before 1945 [20,21,23,28,35–38].

In the overall picture, there are many consistent results in historical research of special education at that time, but also many results that are incompatible with Hänsel's research results, and that in some cases fundamentally contradict them. Hänsel also contradicts herself in some of her works [26]. The research situation is, with many gaps still existing, differentiated, tense, and contradictory. It cannot be pressed under the yoke of a simple equation. This should be taken note of and accepted, as can be expected from scientific discourse [10].

The immense distrust of special education continues with Hänsel and others who support her findings partially or more broadly or who come to similar insights on their own part. Hänsel uses a mode of expulsion: Evil is identified as not belonging to itself and is projectively shifted to an outside world that is completely alien to one's own. This is intended to preserve the good and save one's own innocence [10].

An entire profession is still accused of not being interested in historical clarification. Obviously, it does not matter that in the meantime the pedagogical responsibility has passed on to several generations with very different characteristics in a country that has undergone fundamental changes. Nevertheless, it is claimed that there can be no special education self-reflection. Without external intervention it is lost, helpless, and incapable of dealing with the past, unanimously, without cutbacks, without differentiation. The compass knows only two extremes: good or bad.

Hänsel's works are a disturbing example of how coping with the past can fail. The unyielding accusations and unwavering attacks create rifts that even with the best will in the world would be difficult to overcome. Divisions are created between the good and the bad, the enlightened and the unenlightened, the progressive and the regressive. They are opposed to a fruitful dialogue. This is a repetition of something that may have been inevitable after 1968 due to the circumstances of the time, particularly the reckoning with the Nazi regime, but which is no longer up-to-date today [10].

5. Special Education as a Barrier to Inclusion

From the historical accounts it has become clear how hostile, to put it almost cautiously, Hänsel is to special education. Her views are reflected in the work of Hinz [39], Schumann [40], and Ferri [41], among others, who also fear that special education is increasingly penetrating the inclusive field and causing damage there. They back up their claims with the increase in special education identification. In Germany, special education identification increased from 6.0% in 2009 to 7.4% in 2018. This increase is viewed as evidence of an encroachment on general education. However, on average, this puts Germany in the middle range of special education provision in Europe (for the school year 2015/16) [42].

This very critical view of special education is not the position of outsiders. The pressure that is now being exerted on special education in the United States of America is also quite considerable. Some prominent authors therefore speak of a threat to the existence of special needs education [43]. In a highly complex field, the “agitation of special needs educators” [38] (p. 74) is hard to explain, especially since a similar development is taking place in countries with very different school systems and educational histories [38].

It is more likely that the concrete local difficulties in the implementation of inclusive education are similar in many countries [44–46]. Educational tasks have generally become more varied and more difficult. This increases the risk that individual children will not be reached through education. This fear is repeatedly expressed by teachers and parents in the case of inclusive schooling [47–49]. In this respect, the need for special educational support, which certain children require, is also increasing. As a result, particular attention is being paid to the child as a person, his or her learning and developmental situation at school, and his or her integration outside of school. Special educational diagnostics thus also react to conditions in the social field; they are not purely individual-related and deficit-oriented [50].

The skepticism Hänsel harbors towards special education, however, goes even further. Doubts are cast on whether special education is even capable of making a substantial contribution to the promotion of the group of people entrusted to it. What was previously regarded as reliable knowledge, corresponding to accumulated experience and empirical findings, is now suddenly put up for discussion. Once again, it will no longer be about facts that can be disputed in detail, but about subjective convictions of special education, which can be arbitrary, about nothing other than beliefs. Accordingly, Hänsel [18] (p. 63) states: “the belief of special needs education that special needs teachers are specialists and superior to general teachers in the promotion of these children lacks any foundation and cannot be empirically proven”. Hänsel claims that special needs teachers are not in a position to make any substantial contribution to the promotion of children beyond general education, that they have nothing valuable to pass on to children with disabilities. Surprisingly, the empirical findings she mentions are referred to with great determination. This is remarkable, inasmuch as there is an abundance of research results that prove exactly the opposite of what Hänsel puts forward. Overview presentations on the beneficial effects of special education interventions can be found in Ahrbeck [51], Felder and Schneiders [46], Ellinger and Stein [52], Stein and Müller [53], and Lelgemann, Singer, and Walter-Klose [54]. They document what special education helps children achieve, even if methodological problems arise in individual studies and there is a need for more empirical research in some disciplines. More recently, there has been an effort in this research to focus more on evidence-based research criteria [55–57].

Special needs education interventions are not only described as ineffective and useless by critics, but also as extremely harmful. The special nature of children’s experiences through special education is apparently responsible for this attitude: “a child who has been classified as ‘learning disabled’ is excluded from certain careers and educational pathways, even if he or she receives special educational support in general school, or access to these careers is made more difficult. In this respect, special needs education has immense consequences for children’s chances of learning and education” [18] (p. 61). In other words, special needs education is a handicap in all cases, whether in special or inclusive settings. Even if the disadvantages of special schools no longer apply, they retain a considerable residual destructive potential which has an immediate effect on practice and the future of children. Any support by special education is seen as damaging.

This also calls into question the advantages that inclusive schooling can offer to children with learning difficulties. It seems that as long as special education is present, the benefits of inclusive education such as shared social experiences, a feeling of belonging and acceptance by others and the opportunity to benefit from the higher average level of achievement are not even possible. The latter two aspects in particular can be major benefits of inclusive schooling, which open up far-reaching perspectives for children in post-school life. In Hänsel’s opinion, all this is threatened by the provision

of special education. It is unclear how this damaging process actually happens. The inconsistencies in Hänsel's arguments begin with the criticism of classification as learning impaired, language impaired, or in need of emotional and social support. In many German states however, this is no longer done in relation to the individual child; instead, the subsidies are allocated independently of the individual by means of a systemic allocation of resources. One explicit aim here is to avoid those labels which were associated with the old status diagnosis. Now, it is only a matter of informal attributions, which in one form or another are unavoidable if a child needs to receive special support. Thus, a central criterion of the desire for inclusion is fulfilled: professionals from general and special needs education turn their attention to the children, without categorizing them.

Yet Hänsel claims "the central tenet of special education, on which the German special education system is based, is that children who cannot be accommodated by the general school system are disabled and require special educational support. This belief, in which the special school tradition is reflected, continues to apply without interruption in the context of inclusion" [18] (p. 61). Hänsel is correct in that the general school system does not succeed in adequately supporting all children but these children are by no means only those for whom a special educational need is possible or identified. One of the main problems of German schools is that a considerable proportion of pupils in the 7th grade have elementary problems in reading, writing, and arithmetic. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Study 2015, the proportion of those who have a particularly low level of mathematical competence (competence level I or below) is 17 percent, in the natural sciences it is also 17 percent, and in reading competence 16 percent [58] (p. 28, p. 45, p. 53). In contrast, the number of those classified as requiring special educational support is much lower. Special conditions must therefore already exist for a need of support to be identified. At the same time, Hänsel makes it sound as if there is an automatic, undifferentiated attribution of disability that is arbitrary. She uses a concept of disability which is borrowed from radical constructivism and questions whether disability exists at all outside of subjective constructions. In this sense, Feuser [59] already claimed years ago that "mentally disabled people do not exist". If disability is now only understood as a social construction that no longer has any fixed points of anchorage, the term remains vague. The door is wide open to any kind of disability with far-reaching consequences: "ultimately, it can only be determined in a circular way who is disabled and who needs auxiliary school or another school, and ultimately every child can be considered disabled by the 'usual' educational institutions or in need of special educational assistance" [32] (p. 319). "Every child" can be considered disabled—that is quite a remarkable statement. It completely underestimates and belittles the seriousness of the impact of some disabilities on learning and on quality of life in general. Hänsel fears that the special educational influence will expand if all children attend school together: "more special needs teachers, like the expansion of the special education support places, produce more disabled people, and the German special school tradition lives on unbroken in the context of inclusion as well" [18] (p. 64). Here, too, the choice of language is interesting: rising disability rates are being generated by special education, it is the responsibility of special education alone. That is what makes this very critical view of special education so dangerous, especially in times of inclusion. Hänsel can be sure of the support of others—such as governments worldwide who struggle economically and/or want to cut costs in educating children with disabilities. In her view, it is the general education teachers who should be solely responsible for the education of pupils with special needs. Funding should reflect this as well [8] (p. 62).

6. Inclusion and Special Education

Special education in inclusion now encompasses a wide range of activities with many professional collaborations. The individual support of a child is now only one area of activity among others. Special educational attention and support is regarded as a disruptive factor by Hänsel and others, possibly because specific support measures are generally underestimated. In schools it takes a long time, sometimes now to a frightening extent, before special educational attention is paid to children due to

fear of stigmatization. Children may have significant problems, but they are not recognized as such, making prevention impossible. Even without special needs education, their problems will continue to exist. From the point of view of radical constructivism, however, this may be difficult to understand. Empirically, it has to be asked whether children would develop better without the “disturbing” special educational care and would follow higher educational paths. As has already been explained, there is virtually no evidence for this, apart from a few exceptional cases. For pupils with learning disabilities, great hopes rest on inclusive schooling, because the basic assumption shared by Hänsel is that “the vast majority of them are prevented from obtaining a school leaving certificate in the socially impoverished learning milieu of special schools” [12] (p. 22). The subsequent question, which can only be answered empirically, is therefore what and how inclusive schooling contributes to the performance development of children with learning disabilities. A whole series of studies has indeed shown that inclusive schooling for this group of students can offer advantages over special institutions, especially due to a higher level of stimulation and higher performance requirements [60–62]. However, this is not the case consistently, and many questions remain unanswered [46]. Realistically however, it cannot be expected that all children with learning disabilities will be able to achieve the average level of performance in a general classroom. Their unfavorable starting position does not remain without consequences for further development, their performance is comparatively weaker [48,63–65]. Children may still need specialized instruction outside of the general education classroom to reach curriculum milestones. Even in inclusion, not all children can attain a high school diploma. Educational barriers cannot be removed at will. Special education is really not to blame for this. The possibilities of inclusion should be assessed soberly, and excessive expectations should be abandoned. The school is well advised to focus on what it is really capable of achieving [66,67].

7. Problems in Implementing Inclusion

Given the very negative or, better, destructive view of special education it is no surprise to the authors that inclusive education in Germany is difficult to achieve. In the opinion of the authors, inclusive education is unthinkable without a robust special education. Unfortunately, the very negative view of special education does not seem to be exclusive to Germany but also permeates the UN-CRPD, which does not mention the term “special education” once [68]. Of course, Theresia Degener, who was instrumental in drafting the CRPD, is a jurist and professor in Germany and as we described above, she has a very negative view of special education.

In the following paragraph we will highlight two aspects that contribute to difficulties in the implementation of inclusive schools. These issues are the most salient in our opinion.

7.1. CRPD

The CRPD undoubtedly increased the numbers of children who were educated in general education classrooms. However, the wording of the CRPD, particularly Art. 24 is vague and is open for interpretation. Necessary processes to achieve its goal of high-level education in the general education system are not specified. In Germany, this resulted in increasingly teaching children with special needs in the general education classroom without providing adequate supports [69]. In Germany’s case it may have been better to establish a national system based on IDEA (Individuals with Disability Education Act) in the United States [70] than on the CRPD. IDEA offers predictability, transparency, accountability, and due process, and it was instrumental in placing a majority of children with special needs in the general education system in the United States, albeit with securing adequate support services for children. The individual child and the parents have enforceable rights, and there are timelines and deadlines. None of this can be said for Art. 24 of the CRPD, which is now the guideline for inclusion in many countries of this world. As Anastasiou et al. point out, a focus on “acceptance” and “anti-discrimination” and an open door policy to allow students with special needs into schools is meaningless if not supported by robust inclusion practices, anchored by special education and other support systems to reach social justice and educational excellence [71].

7.2. Systemic Allocation of Resources

The idea that school “systems” should receive funds and distribute them to their liking is highly problematic when it comes to children with disabilities. This is often, however, proposed by advocates for full inclusion [17]. Part of such system thinking is that allocation of resources to individuals stigmatizes them and thus the number of special education teachers should be based on the numbers of special needs students in a school or grade and not on the needs of particular students. The KMK views this practice as problematic because in the absence of diagnostics, there may be a very unclear picture of how many children actually have special needs [6]. Students with special needs have diverse needs, and one student alone may require the sole attention of a teacher allocated to 10 other students. On the other hand, there are cases where students with disabilities in a given school have relatively few special educational needs, yet they also receive a fixed amount of special education coverage. A system like that can be fundamentally unjust. In our opinion it is incompatible with the individual centered approach of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health [72]. Identification of and asset allocation to an individual student does not mean harming or stigmatizing the student if it is done in a professional and reflective manner. Teachers can do much to foster inclusive learning environments even with resources designated specifically to individuals.

In Germany, the resources necessary to provide meaningful education in the general education setting are not comparable to services the children used to receive in special schools. They are often much lower [69,71]. Systemic allocation of resources also always introduces the danger of misusing them, particularly in general education schools that struggle with a multitude of different interests. Who can truly guarantee that needs of children with disabilities are considered in complex systems such as large public schools if funds are not allocated specifically to them but to all children?

Hänsel and others also want more general education teachers, not special education teachers, for inclusion to be successful. It is difficult to conceive how general education teachers in Germany can teach all children with disabilities effectively when they often do not achieve this goal even with children without disabilities, as we pointed out above. Even in the United States, where inclusion has been developed for more than 40 years, the reality is that general education teachers are often still taught during their training to teach the “middle of the road” children, not the child with special needs [73]. We doubt that this is very different in German teacher training. In addition, due to an increase in birth rates, retirement of teachers, and immigration to Germany, there is currently a significant shortage of general education teachers in Germany, particularly in the elementary school sector [74]. It thus seems incredibly unrealistic to think that there will be more general education teachers available for inclusive education in the foreseeable future. Reality and wishful thinking collide here. However, even with improved training and more general education teachers it may frankly be a too high an expectation for all teachers to be capable of educating the most difficult-to-teach students.

Irrespective of equipment and resources available, it is clear that children with unfavorable school forecasts have a statistical average difficulty in catching up with the general trend. They often remain in the lower performance range. Moreover, a “better” pedagogy does not lead to the same outcome in academic performance. On the contrary, if every child is taught optimally, the range of achievements is more diversified. The differences become greater and greater [10]. “The assumption of homogeneity is inevitably destroyed by successful pedagogy” [75] (Tenorth quoted, p. 122).

8. A Way Forward

Anastasiou, Sideridis, and Keller [76] found in their extensive study that special education coverage actually leads to higher reading ability in children (as evidenced by PISA studies). To claim that special education is inherently evil denies significant empirical evidence such as this. In our opinion, Germany needs more, not fewer, special education services in the general education system in a variety of roles and settings so that inclusion can be successful for more students. In Germany, special education teachers are highly trained professionals. A Master’s degree is a prerequisite for teaching students with special needs. The university education is followed by a 1–2 year long intensely

supervised apprenticeship in a school. Such intensive training is also evidence that children and youth with disabilities and their education are highly valued by society. Teachers have a range of responsibilities and intervene at different levels in special and inclusive schools. There is no doubt that teacher training and service delivery could be improved—in special and in inclusive settings. The acclaimed Finnish model of special education is often cited as an example to follow. It is based on broad special education support and coverage for all children and differentiations are provided when necessary, such as special instruction and special settings [77].

Hornby [78] proposes a system of “inclusive special education”, which builds upon elements of the Finnish model of special education delivery. It can be seen as a new theory which combines inclusive and special education. In the theory of inclusive special education, each child with special needs should receive the most appropriate intervention in the best possible setting “with the aim of achieving the highest possible level of inclusion in the community post-school” [78] (p. 247). Fostering acceptance and diversity is part of inclusive special education but so is evidence-based instruction and strategies such as response to intervention (RTI), positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS), universal design for learning (UDL), state-of-the-art assessment strategies, and other tested methods. Many but not all children will be able to be educated in general education classroom with such strategies in place. Thus, a continuum model of placement which includes options, such as general classes, special classes, special schools, and residential and hospital settings, must still be in place and is part of the inclusive special education theory [78] (p. 248).

9. Concluding Comments

Inclusion will fail if a totalitarian approach such as “full inclusion” or “all means all” is taken and special education is eliminated. It seems, though, that, at least in Germany’s case, both of these approaches are supported by prominent researchers, advocates, people with disabilities themselves, and politicians without sufficient empirical evidence. By omitting the term “special education” from the CRPD and by trying to link special education today to the Nazi era, calls not just for the abolition of special schools but also for dismantling special education have found their culmination and justification. In this article, we attempted to show that special education today is not as evil as it is portrayed by some. A solid and continuous line between special education in Nazi Germany and Germany today is highly questionable and debatable. In the not-so-distant past, the only schooling option available for all children was the public, general education classroom. This often meant exclusion from education for children with disabilities who were deemed too difficult to teach by general education teachers. We are not convinced that this history could not repeat itself in the absence of special education and special, dedicated settings for some children.

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