

BWP 2/2011

EDITORIAL

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The recognition of diversity benefits us all!

Dear readers

“Tolerance should, strictly speaking, be only a passing mood; it ought to lead to acknowledgment and appreciation. To tolerate a person is to affront him.”

This quotation from JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE’s “Maxims and Reflections” dates from the beginning of the 19th century and perfectly encapsulates the meaning of inclusion: the conscious recognition of individual diversity and difference as a social and economic benefit.

INCLUSION AS A CORE PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL POLICY

Delivering benefit to oneself and others whilst exhibiting difference and being socially “integrated” at the same time admittedly also requires an individual ability to recognise the difference of others and a readiness to behave in a way suitable to the given situation and in a socially appropriate manner across a range of various social constellations. In other words, inclusion can only exist within a climate of reciprocal recognition of difference and if difference in any direction does not lead to social marginalisation or even exclusion. The enactment in the Federal Republic of Germany of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has reinforced inclusion as a societal norm. This norm is, however, also already clearly enshrined in the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany in Articles 1 (“Human dignity shall be inviolable”), 2 (Right to Free Development of Personality) and 3 (Equality before the Law, “No person shall be disfavoured because of disability”). To this extent, “inclusion” has been a core social policy principle in Germany since the foundation of the Federal Republic.

INCLUSION FOCUSES ATTENTION AT A SYSTEM LEVEL

“Equal educational opportunities for all” is one of the most important objectives and indeed prerequisites of inclusion. In Germany, educational opportunities continue to be more closely linked to family origins and to personal characteristics such as disabilities than is the case in most comparable OECD countries. A considerable gulf remains between societal reality and political postulate.

The present issue discusses the contribution made to inclusion by vocational education and training from a number of different perspectives. The debate makes it clear once again that this process can take place in a meaningful way only if a consideration of the educational system as a whole is undertaken. Educational systems which do significantly better than the German system in achieving equality of opportunity are characterised by long periods of joint learning, by whole-day provision and especially by robust and continuous individual support. Such educational systems facilitate better individual learning outcomes as well as being much more successful in dissolving the correlation between origin and educational success. Seen in these terms, the German tendency to consider (early) selection and the separation of different learner groups an effective form of support needs to be viewed as a rigidified “educational outlook” rather than a pedagogical strategy which is aligned according to facts.

Integrated educational systems in which the disabled and non-disabled, the less able and the gifted (initially) and migrants and the indigenous population all learn together whilst at the same time receiving robust individual and differentiated support are clearly superior to differentiated educational systems which offer such groups separate educational services each featuring specific standardised. The conclusion of all this is that inclusion is driven forwards via

differentiated individual support whereas it tends to be inhibited by a differentiated educational system.

RECOGNISING AND USING THE BENEFITS WHICH DIVERSITY BRINGS

There is good empirical evidence that such a finding applies to the general school system, and it is equally valid for the vocational training system. This means – and this is also the quintessence of the individual papers presented in the current issue – that special pathways for the disadvantaged, migrants, the disabled and those with learning difficulties should be the exception rather than the rule. Although such a recognition may be difficult to implement, it is absolutely essential to do so if we wish to tap into the benefits of diversity more effectively in future, something which I believe is necessary in both social policy and economic terms. The institutions and highly skilled workers currently embarking upon these separate pathways would be better and more effectively deployed in a comprehensive support system for company-based and vocational school based training within the dual system, training which has always delivered the most successful contributions towards inclusion – something else for which empirical evidence exists. This costs money, a lot of money, although there is no reason why it should cost more than the considerable investments in the many and expensive pathways contained within the vocational education and training system and in the so-called upstream transitional system. The significantly improved prospects of success save on the high follow-up costs of insufficient vocational training and integration.

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