

# *Ausländerzentralregister* parents' experiences of SEN diagnosis and support in international and local schools in Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on more extensive work carried out for a Master's thesis (Holmes, 2022), this article will focus on the experience of non-German parents whose children have been diagnosed with Special and/or additional Educational Needs (SEN) whilst living in Bavaria, Germany. The rationale for this research is the lived experience within the researcher's own expatriate community, where children with SEN can be actively excluded from their local primary and secondary schools or international schools. The researcher wished to bring the front-line reality of these families into focus and give a voice to this minority group. Twenty-eight participants responded to a mixed methods online questionnaire, giving information pertaining to the experience of the SEN diagnostic process, the support offered to the child and their parents both in school and via other agencies, and the educational, social and emotional outcomes. Both quantitative and thematic analysis were employed to explore the data. The findings show that SEN diagnosis is not easy for *Ausländerzentralregister* (AZR; register of foreigners) families, they felt unsupported and found it challenging to understand the process. Intervention following diagnosis was reported to be somewhat successful, but was, often, not comprised of in-class support or differentiation. Suggestions for improvement include better staff and teacher training, having access to English-speaking professionals, a case manager, information in English, more positive communication and English-speaking parent support groups.

## KEYWORDS

SEN

IMMIGRATION

AZR

GERMANY

BAVARIA

INCLUSION

## INTRODUCTION

Educational inclusion is the topic of global education goals and international policies, where it is named as a right for every child (UN, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). The issue goes beyond that of education, with educational outcomes for all also having far-reaching social and economic ramifications (Ainscow *et al.*, 2019). On the 25th anniversary of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), a review (UNESCO, 2019) highlighted the complexity of transformation required to ensure inclusive education where diversity is valued and discrimination eliminated. Following this forum, the UNESCO (2020) paper emphasised that contextually sensitive systemic changes are required. Drawing on best practice from other countries can be helpful, but the local context must always be considered in the construct of inclusion and the complex issues surrounding its implementation (Mac Ruairc *et al.*, 2013). With the long-standing existence of such policies, it is, perhaps, surprising for immigrant parents to find that individual experiences in a wealthy and well-developed country like Germany do not reflect the ideals promoted by these policies.

The current educational policy that Germany is working towards is the Education, 2030 Incheon Declaration, which includes an increased focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups in education, encompassing children with disabilities and migrant children, to ensure that 'no child is left behind' (UNESCO, 2016). The Deutsches Institut für Menschenrecht (DIM) (The German Institute for Human Rights) acknowledges that inclusive education is far from being a reality in Germany (DIM, 2022). It is noted that none of the states has the necessary legal framework to create and guarantee inclusive education. Perhaps the most progressive, North Rhine-Westphalia, can be looked to as an example of how to move forward with inclusive education (Barow & Östlund, 2019). However, there are many issues lingering here regarding

the view that the child's deficiencies are at the centre of their SEN, rather than looking at barriers to education created by the environment.

In Germany, and specifically, Bavaria, the development of an inclusive school system is slow. Bavaria can be seen to be developing more slowly in this aspect than 11 of 16 other German states (DeStatis, 2018). As Germany is a federal country, each state governs its own education system and sets its own curriculum. This article focuses on the researcher's home state of Bavaria.

Germany is a wealthy member state of the European Union (EU), ranked as the 19th-richest country in the world by *Global Finance Magazine* (2021), and is a country where immigration is commonplace. A total of 21.9 million people (over a quarter of Germany's population) are on the *Ausländerzentralregister* (AZR: register of foreigners), including all residents with a non-German immigration background (DeStatis, 2022a). Residents enjoy a comprehensive, efficient and reliable healthcare system, funded through statutory insurance (Bundesministerium für Gesundheit, 2020). Unemployment levels are low, reported at 3.1% in January 2022 (DeStatis, 2022b), and schooling is free. However, Germany has an ageing population, with the old-age dependency ratio reported as 36.9 in 2020 (DeStatis, 2022c), and a declining birth rate (DeStatis, 2022d). As a result, the government wishes to encourage people to have children by providing an excellent benefit system to support parents not working whilst they bring up their children (Bundesministeriums für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend [For example,], 2022). Additionally, pre-school children are provided with publicly subsidised childcare, with 27.2% of children aged 0–3 years, and 91.8% of children aged 3–6 years, utilising this care in Bavaria (IFB, 2020). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD (2020) reported that out of 28 EU countries, Germany had the lowest

childcare costs.

The German education system can be described as selective and highly stratified, with a long tradition of special needs education taking place in special schools and classes (Köpfer *et al.*, 2021). Children attend four years of primary education, where their results in mathematics, German and humanities/science in fourth grade determine their entry to various levels of secondary education (KM, 2022a). Throughout, there is an option, for those children who do not achieve the required grades, to attend separate special schools.

More recent calls for educational reform in Germany have been prompted by the fact that, in 2000 and 2003, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results showed that 15-year-olds in Germany were not performing as well as their counterparts globally (OECD, 2000, 2003). Therefore Germany made attempts to modernise the education system through policy development (Grimm, 2010). Subsequent results showed some improvement; however, the 2018 PISA report (OECD, 2018) identified Germany as having the sixth-highest between-school variation in scores, pointing to segregated education for lower performers. So, despite the policy changes, at ground level, the education system remains largely unchanged, with Walter Hirche, a member of the German Commission for UNESCO, reporting that the majority of children and young people with special educational needs still learn separately rather than attending lessons at ordinary schools. This is something we must change (Hirche, 2020).

The latest development in SEN provision is 'Inclusion Profile' schools, which are mainstream schools that have a focus on inclusion and may have up to seven SEN students per class (KM, 2022b). According to KM (2022c), Bavaria has a total of 4,505 schools, of which 162 (3.6%) are public special schools, and 273 (6%) are public schools with an 'inclusive profile'. In the

private sector are 12 international schools and 188 fee-paying special schools, meaning that parents are paying for the education of over half of the children who require special school placement.

Schöler *et al.* (2010) reviewed the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in European countries and made recommendations for practice in Bavaria. They noted that existing law on education and teaching in Bavaria has inadequate awareness of international developments in SEN education and is not receptive to taking on learnings from the literature. Admission to mainstream schools is aimed at performance-related homogenisation of classes, and the law states only that schools should make adaptations 'within the scope of their possibilities'. Consequently, there is no entitlement to local mainstream schooling, parents are not afforded the right to choose, and it is at the discretion of school management whether or not to admit a child with SEN (Schöler *et al.*, 2010). The authors had several recommendations for developing practice in Bavaria, mainly focused on mainstream teacher training and the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream settings. This research is 12 years old; however, these recommendations are yet to be seen in practice. The Bavarian Ministry for Education and Culture's website (KM, 2022d) currently points to a ten-year-old publication for best practice regarding inclusion in schools. Fischer *et al.* (2012), working from two prestigious universities in Bavaria, produced a profile of inclusive schools, with information pertaining to the educational and social inclusion of all marginalised groups. They stated that schools should provide diagnoses, accept all students and offer them the best individual support. It was also proposed that special education teachers should be employed by all schools in the future. Whether or not this points to a system where children would be withdrawn from mainstream classes for sessions with the

special education teacher was not made explicit. However, the authors noted that schools should not be judged on their inclusive practices, rather that the tools provided should allow schools to take self-initiated steps towards inclusion as a goal. It could be argued that without external evaluation, many schools would not seek to become more inclusive, and that large-scale progress towards inclusive education in Bavaria will not be achieved.

Immigrant students in Germany show poorer attainment than their non-immigrant peers, even after socio-economic status has been accounted for (OECD, 2018). Many authors have reported an over-representation of immigrant children in Germany's special schools (Wagner & Powell, 2003; Kemper & Weishaupt, 2011) and this does not appear to be changing. AZR children account for 16% of the children in Bavaria's special schools (KMK, 2021a) and 18% of the children with SEN in mainstream schools (KMK, 2021b), despite the fact that only 12.5% of the total school population are on the AZR (KM, 2022e).

Minority groups such as SEN and AZR children are underperforming within the education system, and the teacher training is not in place to ensure their needs are met in the mainstream classroom. The training of primary and secondary school teachers covers neither differentiated teaching input nor meeting the needs of non-native German speakers, children with SEN, or a combination of both. There is an entirely separate training route for SEN teachers (KM, 2022f), who are then qualified to work in special schools, or to provide intervention for children attending mainstream schools. It is difficult to reconcile inclusive state policies with schools that lack appropriately trained teachers.

Despite some policy reform, the current system still relies heavily on diagnosis of SEN and out-of-school therapies. The education system purports to be differentiated (KM, 2022a) and in some

respects it is, as there are different schools available for each level of academic achievement. However, differentiation as it is known in the UK, and many other countries, refers to how teachers change their delivery of the curriculum to meet the individual needs of pupils (DfE, 2014). Differentiation as a concept is intrinsically linked to the inclusion of children with SEN within mainstream teaching and learning environments. This leads many immigrant parents to believe that this is what is meant by differentiation in German schools, yet this is not the case.

Whilst state policies have been updated to reflect a more diverse and inclusive culture, this has not yet been seen to be implemented in schools. The Bavarian state legislation (Bayerische Staatskanzlei, 2020) specifies that inclusive education is the task of all schools and that integration of migrants must be supported. But it would appear that these principles are not yet carried through into teacher training, nor practised within schools.

## METHOD

A mixed methods design (Creswell, 2012), with an 'intuitive' combination of quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017), within an interpretivist paradigm (Cohen *et al.*, 2018), was chosen to allow authentic research that is both accurate and nuanced. Mixed methods utilise the strengths of each data type whilst also compensating for any possible weaknesses of a single data type (Thomas, 2017) thus increasing the reliability and validity of the results (Cohen *et al.*, 2018).

A questionnaire was chosen as the method of data collection because it is quick and efficient, allowing for more data to be collected in a shorter space of time than interviews, and allowing the researcher to focus on particular issues across the range of participants (Townsend, 2013). The questionnaire was presented online to avoid any restrictions on in-person meeting related to Covid-19, via 14 English-language Facebook groups

for internationals and expatriates in Bavaria. Gliner *et al.* (2010) stated the internet is becoming the most widely used method for distribution of questionnaires and collection of responses, due to cost and time factors. There are numerous benefits of using an online questionnaire for research (Newby, 2014), including privacy, allowing a better response to sensitive questions. Google Forms was adopted to design the questionnaire and collect the results as it provides secure, protected data, compliant with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018) guidelines. An information and consent section was included, in line with British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) ethical recommendations, and care was taken with the wording of questions relating to sensitive topics. Closed questions, some using modified Likert scales, allowed the researcher to access data that can be reported and compared through quantitative numerical data analysis (Thomas, 2017), whereas open-ended questions provided an opportunity for participants to add more detail and depth to their answers. This type of less-constricted qualitative data collection gives participants a voice; their perspective can be captured, hopefully enabling a richer insight to be gained (Creswell, 2012; Punch & Oancea, 2014).

The online questionnaire yielded information relating to German-language proficiency, diagnostic assessments, school types, feelings surrounding the process, social, emotional and educational outcomes for the child, and suggestions for improvement. Participants were recruited via Facebook groups for international/immigrant/English-speaking people across the major cities in Bavaria. The questionnaire was presented in English, to allow it to be standardised across all participants, because the researcher speaks English and because this research is presented in English. This was designed to prevent any ambiguity that might arise from the use of different languages, with different interpretations of the questions. However, it is accepted

that this leads to an inherent bias in that it pre-selects participants who have a good knowledge of English.

Results have been combined and analysed according to mixed methods guidance (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2017). A convergent design meant that both types of data were collected and analysed simultaneously, which allows trends and insights to be identified. The researcher followed the six phases of thematic analysis offered by Braun & Clarke (2006) in order to capture important concepts relevant to the research questions and generate thematic maps of ideas.

## FINDINGS

The children in this study have 18 different diagnoses that cover a range of SEN issues, with the most common being ADHD, ASD and dyslexia. There was more than one professional involved in diagnosis in 16 (57%) cases, which is in line with best practice guidelines (Fischer *et al.*, 2012). A total of 12 different types of professionals were involved in their diagnoses, although the vast majority were medical, rather than the school psychologists or specialist teachers named as a vital part of the process in the state guidelines for diagnosis of SEN (KM, 2022g).

They were all diagnosed by age ten, presumably because of the selective secondary education in Germany, where the child's exam results in fourth grade determine which level of secondary school they have the option of attending (ISB, 2022). At the time of diagnosis, 54% of the children were attending a German-language educational setting, 29% a bilingual English–German setting and 11% an English-only setting (the two children diagnosed at birth are not reported here).

Participants came from 13 different countries, therefore, cultural differences in values, attitudes and expectations were thought to contribute directly to the feelings of parents managing their child's SEN journey (O'Hara, 2003; Nikolarazi

*et al.*, 2005). It was found that parents represented a range of nationalities (13) and spoke a range of languages (9), with 57% of children having zero parents who spoke fluent German. German language is important for navigating the complex system of assessment, diagnosis, support and educational provision. German-language proficiency amongst the diagnosed children is noteworthy, as assessments in a language other than a child's native language are to be interpreted carefully since they may indicate a language need rather than a learning need (Cline & Shamsi, 2000). Whilst 71% of the children spoke German as a first or second language, only 32% were felt by the parents to be fluent at the time of diagnosis.

Whilst 57% of parents felt positive, overall, about the entire SEN diagnostic procedure, less than half felt supported during assessment and less than half were offered support in their new role as a SEN parent. One parent stated that there was

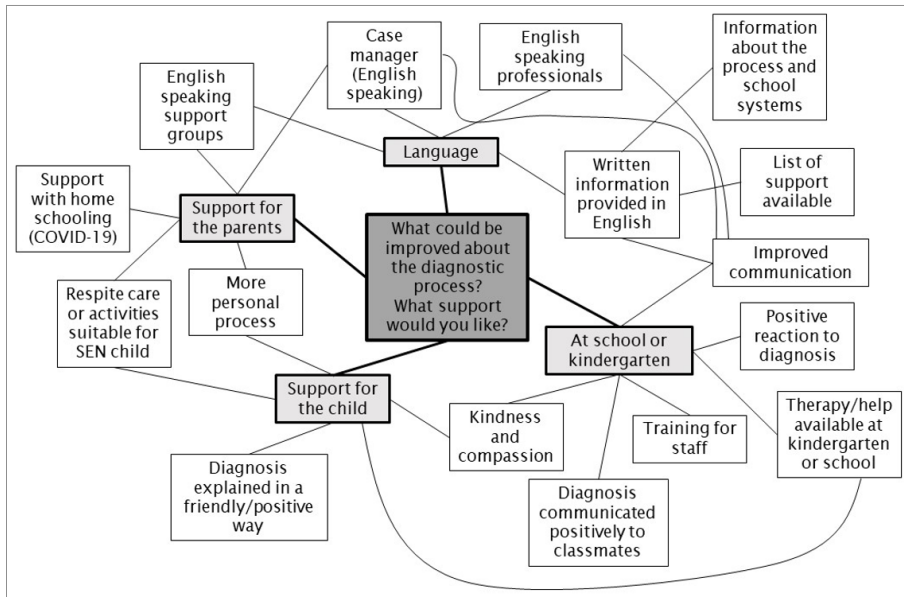
*'very little family support here. I felt I had to fight for the support for my child. It seems a bit taboo to talk about "special needs" here and I get cut off if I bring it up in parents' evenings.'*

It is interesting that those parents who were fluent in German did not feel more positive, overall, than those who found the language more challenging. Regarding the extent to which they were able to discuss their child's difficulties with the teacher/carer, one parent wrote:

*'Not at all, no interest was ever shown in helping my child. The information, and his diagnosis, was held against him and he was very often ridiculed in front of his classmates because of his diagnosis.'*

The impact of the SEN diagnosis was found to be underwhelming, with only 18% reporting a positive social impact, 25% a positive emotional impact, and 61% seeing some educational improvement. Further research could investigate how diagnoses are communicated with the

Figure 1. Thematic Analysis



children themselves, their educational settings and their peer groups to ascertain how more positive outcomes could be generated. One example of good practice was reported by a parent who stated that

*'The ergotherapist did a great job of explaining how my daughter had a superpower and she just had to learn how to use it.'*

Interestingly, 11 (39%) participants reported that the diagnosis had no educational impact or a negative impact on their child's education. This is unexpected, as the role of diagnosis should be to enable better understanding of a child's needs, thereby allowing them to be supported in school. The Bavarian State Institute for the Development of Education (ISB) (2016) asserted that a diagnosis provides information necessary for the 'Learning Plan' to be developed and support decided upon. It is possible that teachers' expectations of the child were reduced following a diagnosis (Blanck, 2014), and/or assumptions were made about the child according to their new diagnostic label (Katzenbach, 2015). Only 50% of parents felt that, overall, the diagnosis and resulting support was positive for their child, as it allowed access to therapies and specialist school settings.

It is worth noting here that seven of the children (25%) received no educational support following their diagnosis, six

of whom were attending a German educational setting and one, a bilingual setting. This may lead parents to question whether diagnosis has served its purpose, if it fails to bring about any support for their child at school. The tendency for medical therapies to take place out of school, disconnected from learning plans and without communication between professionals and teachers, indicates that the system is not cooperative and that opportunities for co-working and consolidation are being missed.

Data around the suggestions for improvement and what support parents would like were combined, as similar themes arose from both questions. Figure 1 details the thematic analysis carried out, and the four main themes that were identified.

In order to improve the SEN procedures for future AZR families, participants suggested that information should be available in different languages, including options for therapies, school support, school choices and parental support opportunities. They wanted to feel better supported through assessment and diagnosis by professionals who could speak English, including a case manager to guide them through the process. A need for English-speaking parent support groups in Bavaria was identified. It was felt that staff in kindergartens and schools

would benefit from training in meeting the needs of SEN children. They should also communicate more openly and meet families with kindness, empathy and understanding. It was suggested that the way in which diagnoses are communicated to the children, their families, their peers, setting staff and teachers should be improved, in order to reduce the stigma attached (Pfahl, 2004) and allow there to be more positive social and emotional outcomes for the diagnosed children.

## CONCLUSION

The findings show that SEN diagnosis is not an easy process for AZR families, who felt unsupported and found it challenging to understand the system. Intervention consisted, mainly, of medical therapies outside of the educational setting, and in-class support or differentiation was not consistently applied. Some progress was reported as a result of the interventions following diagnosis. Suggestions for improvement include having access to English-speaking professionals, a case manager, information in English, staff and teacher training, more positive communication, and English-speaking parent support groups.

This small-scale study, presented in English, has provided an initial insight into immigrant parents' experiences of the SEN system in Bavaria. An increased sample size would provide more scope for detailed analysis of the trends noted here. Further work should also move outside the English-speaking community, and focus on other immigrant populations to provide a better representation of AZR families in Bavaria. It would add value to this research area if the feelings of mainstream teachers in Bavaria were surveyed, focusing on their attitudes towards inclusion, their skills in this area, and their confidence in meeting the needs of a greater diversity of learners. Headteachers should be asked about their role in the developing inclusion agenda, and what challenges they perceive in moving forward. Materials from Booth & Ainscow's (2016) Index for

Inclusion could usefully be adapted and employed as a starting point here. There are examples of more inclusive practice and development from other areas of Germany (eg Barow & Östlund, 2019; Bengel, 2021) that should be considered by those in authority. The cultural context of Bavaria and its education system must be attended to when looking to move the inclusion agenda forward, because the changes cannot be applied directly from research in other contexts (Mac

Ruairc *et al.*, 2013; UNESCO, 2020). It is important to understand the reality of individual families' experiences and day-to-day practice in Bavaria's schools in order to manage change effectively. It is the researcher's belief that it will only be possible for the education system to make progress towards becoming truly inclusive and equitable when all members take responsibility for providing education for all children. Mainstream teacher training should be modernised to

include categories of SEN, differentiation, identifying barriers to inclusion and accommodation of individual needs. A fundamental shift in everyday teaching and school management in Bavaria is required to meet the goals set by Education, 2030 (UNESCO, 2016) and it is hoped this preliminary study will contribute to the research base and help to pave the way for improvements. ■

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