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Self-rated health and wellbeing among school-aged children with and without special educational needs: Differences between mainstream and special schools



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ABSTRACT

Background: Studies among students with special educational needs (SEN) in separate special schools (SSS) and mainstream schools (MS) are particularly applicable to educational attainment and social participation. However, indicators of health and wellbeing have rarely been considered.

Aims: This study investigates two related topics: first, health and wellbeing differences between students with SEN in special schools (SSS) and students without SEN in regular schools, and second, the rarely considered question whether health and wellbeing among students with SEN differ between school settings (i.e. MS vs. SSS).

Methods and procedures: Bivariate and multilevel analyses are applied with data from the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) with 5267 students (grade 7).

Outcomes and results: After having controlled for background characteristics, students in SSS report higher likelihoods of poor self-rated health compared to students in higher track schools. Self-rated health of students with SEN does not significantly differ between MS vs. SSS. For life satisfaction, students with SEN show higher likelihoods of low life satisfaction when attending MS.

Conclusions and implications: Teachers in inclusive settings are encouraged to establish class work and teaching that support a real change from class placement to inclusive culture in order to suitably support students with SEN.

What this paper adds?

Comparative studies on health and wellbeing among school-aged children with and without special educational needs (SEN) attending different school types are scarce, particularly with focus on separate special schools or mainstream regular schools. Using representative data, this study emphasizes differences in health and wellbeing between school-aged children with and without SEN as well as between mainstream and separate school settings. Results highlight that prevalence rates and likelihoods of poor health

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among students in separate special schools are higher compared to students in school types of higher tracks. Opposite results are found for students' life satisfaction, indicating lower prevalence rates and likelihoods of low life satisfaction for students in separate special schools compared to other school types and students with SEN in mainstream schools. In inclusive settings a real change from class placement to inclusive culture is necessary, to get suitable support for students with SEN and that supports overall student wellbeing.

1. Introduction

Since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, UN-BRK, 2008)¹ in Germany in 2008, inclusion rates of school-aged children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream school have slightly increased (KMK, 2016).² About 30% of school-aged children with SEN attend mainstream regular schools in Germany (KMK, 2016); other school-aged children with SEN attend a separate school type for students with SEN (i.e. Förderschule). Meanwhile, the prevalence rate of diagnosed SEN among young people is on a constant level since a couple of years, with an increasing tendency (Klemm, 2015; KMK, 2016). For students with SEN, the German educational system provides two (publicly provided) education choices: either an integrative education in regular mainstream schools (MS) or a separate education in special educational needs schools (SSS).

One research focus related to the 'inclusion debate'³ in Germany is to identify differences between students with and without diagnosed SEN or who are educated in different settings (inclusive school settings vs. segregated settings in special schools). Another focus is on the characteristics and performances of students with and without SEN (Gebhardt, Sälzer, Mang, Müller, & Prenzel, 2015; Pijl, Koster, Hannink, & Stratingh, 2011). In the area of school performance and scholastic development of students with SEN, there are many international studies available; however, the findings have been inconsistent (see review by Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009).

Researchers examining non-cognitive factors have also found notable differences between school environments. In particular, students with SEN in inclusive school settings had more positive social and emotional functioning and showed fewer problem behaviors than students in special schools (Wiener & Tardif, 2004). This topic has been extended in international research on SEN to interaction and class participation of school-aged children with SEN (Bos, Müller, & Stubbe, 2010; Frostad, Mjaavatn, & Pijl, 2011; Pijl et al., 2011), social exclusion of students with SEN in mainstream school settings (Frostad et al., 2011; Huber & Wilbert, 2012; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009; Schwab, Gebhardt, & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2013; Venetz, 2015), and academic wellbeing among students with and without SEN in mainstream schools (Kullmann, Geist, & Lütje-Klose, 2015; McCoy & Banks, 2012; Schwab et al., 2015; Venetz, 2015). Recent research revealed that students with SEN attending mainstream schools have less interaction with classmates (e.g. Pijl et al., 2011), have less friends than peers without SEN (Frostad et al., 2011), are less accepted by their peers (Schwab, 2015) and feel more often lonely (Schwab et al., 2015).

In related research, satisfaction with school has been used as an indicator of emotional wellbeing (Diener & Diener, 2009) among students with SEN in regular school vs. separate school settings. However, findings were inconsistent (McCoy & Banks, 2012; Schwab et al., 2015; Venetz, Tarnutzer, Zurbriggen, & Sempert, 2010). Specifically, McCoy and Banks (2012) found that students with SEN reported lower satisfaction with school compared to students without SEN, whereas other studies did not find differences in school satisfaction between students with and without SEN (Schwab, 2015) or between mainstream and separate school settings of students with SEN (Schwab et al., 2015).

There is much research on the scholastic and psychosocial development of students with SEN, but a rarely considered research question is how students with SEN in the German education system fare in terms of their overall wellbeing in mainstream schools compared to separate schools. So far, German surveys on school-aged children's health and wellbeing often survey only children attending regular school types as the German educational system is highly differentiated in different school types, such as in high track schools (i.e. Gymnasium), medium or comprehensive school tracks (i.e. Real- or Gesamtschule) or low track schools (i.e. Hauptschule). Despite increasing rates of integrating SEN students in mainstream education in Germany, students with SEN are still educated mainly in special schools. Only 7% of students with SEN attend a regular mainstream school (KMK, 2016). However, students with SEN have not been part in those surveys on school health and wellbeing. One exception is the German sample of the "Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC)"-Survey 2013/2014 (N = 5961 school-aged children), which also surveyed school-aged children attending special educational needs schools (n = 143). One critical finding from the German HBSC-Survey 2013/2014 is that students in special schools report worse health outcomes and lower wellbeing compared to students without SEN attending mainstream school types (Bilz et al., 2016; Rathmann, Herke, Moor, & Richter, 2016). This is very likely linked to differential intakes by school type of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and the differential learning environments in special schools compared to higher track schools (Baumert, Stanat, & Watermann, 2006). Since 2010, the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) has been surveying students with SEN in both mainstream and separate schools, as well as students without SEN in mainstream school types (Blossfeld, Roßbach, & Maurice, 2011), which for the first time allows for the examination of differences in health and wellbeing among students with SEN between mainstream vs. separate school settings.

Using these data of seventh grade students, this study will examine

¹ UN-BRK(UN-Behindertenrechtskonvention): UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

² KMK (Kultusministerkonferenz): conference of minister of education and cultural affairs.

³ School inclusion is intended to give all school-aged children, including those with (learning) disabilities, the opportunity of participation in the highest possible quality educational services in the community. However, schooling in Germany is still highly segregated, even in regular schools which attempt to include students with special educational needs.

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