

Task distribution between general and special education teachers in the transition from primary to secondary school of students with special educational needs

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For students with special educational needs (SEN) in Germany, the transition from primary to secondary school is of particular relevance, as it involves a far-reaching decision regarding the subsequent educational institution (e.g. § 20 SchulG NRW). At the end of an inclusive primary school education after grade four (or six) the choice between a regular or a special school has a substantial impact on future educational and career opportunities. Graduates of special schools are less likely to obtain a school-leaving certificate than students at inclusive mainstream schools (Klemm et al., 2023). In most federal states in Germany, parents are formally responsible for deciding on the further educational institution (Brand & Kuhn, 2025). However, there is evidence that parental decisions are strongly influenced by teachers' recommendations (Klicpera & Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2004). To develop a well-founded recommendation, general education teachers (GET) collaborate primarily with special education teachers (SET) (Dumbacher, 2024).

While previous research has extensively examined collaboration between GET and SET in inclusive classroom instruction, little is known how they cooperate in the context of transition. Although a too strict division of tasks is not conducive to this collaboration, GET and SET must clarify who is responsible for different tasks related to working with children with SEN (Lütje-Klose et al., 2024). In everyday school practice, a traditional division of labour often persists: GET tend to assume responsibility for the entire class, whereas SET focus primarily on

students with SEN (e. g., Quante & Urbanek, 2021). Initial evidence suggests that similar patterns may characterize collaboration during the transition from primary to secondary school (Schürer & Lintorf, 2021). At the same time, Schürer and Lintorf (2021) report that both GET and SET claim shared responsibility for generating secondary school recommendations for students with SEN.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine the division of tasks between GET and SET during the transition process. We conducted interviews with 16 pairs of GET and SET from inclusive primary schools in North Rhine-Westphalia as part of the DFG-funded project “Schulformempfehlungen nach dem Gemeinsamen Lernen (School type recommendations after inclusive education)”. Each teacher of a pair was interviewed separately about the same student with SEN in the areas of learning and/or social and emotional development. The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2024).

Preliminary findings show that both GET and SET are involved in developing the secondary school recommendation and in counselling parents to varying degrees. GET primarily report responsibility for tasks relevant to all students, such as conducting performance assessments. SET, in contrast, more frequently describe responsibilities specific to students with SEN, including organizational matters and individualized diagnostic procedures. Notably, SET report a broader range of responsibilities – such as non-standardized diagnostics – than is perceived by GET. The findings suggest that GET do not fully recognize all tasks performed by SET during the transition, which may lead to GET taking on more responsibility than necessary and not sufficiently considering SET’ diagnostic findings.

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