Moritz Emmelmann* and Florian Dinger

Comprehensive Schools as the Frontier of Religious Education: Current Developments and Emerging Principles in Germany

https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2025-0021

Abstract: The denominational model of religious education (RE) in German public schools faces pressure from demographic change, declining attendance, and concerns over dividing students by religion. Comprehensive schools, known for their diverse student bodies, have become key testing grounds for new RE models. This article highlights recent shifts in the German school landscape and the challenges RE teachers face in these settings. It suggests that the pedagogical approaches used in comprehensive schools may offer valuable insights for international exchange, as they align more closely with RE practices outside of Germany than previous models.

Keywords: Comprehensive schools, religious education, diversity, inclusion, interreligious learning

Zusammenfassung: Gesamtschulen, sind die *frontier* der deutschsprachigen Religionspädagogik. Der Aufsatz zeichnet aktuelle Veränderungen der schulischen und religiösen Bildungslandschaft nach und zeigt, wie an Gesamtschulen Modelle der didaktischen Einbindung von Heterogenität in den RU entstehen, die örtlichen Bedingungen und dem sozialdemografischen Wandel angemessen sind. Abschließend stellt er drei religionsdidaktische Essentials für den Lernort Gesamtschule – Inklusion, Heterogenitätssensibilität und Perspektivenwechsel heraus. Diese bieten die Anknüpfungsmöglichkeiten für ein internationales Gespräch über religiöses Lernen, da sie auch für Kontexte ohne konfessionellen Religionsunterricht an Schulen einschlägig sind.

Stichwörter: Gesamtschule, Religionsunterricht, Diversität, Inklusion, interreligiöses Lernen

***Corresponding author: Moritz Emmelmann,** Ph.D., Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Faculty of Theology, Department of Practical Theology and Religious Education, Platz der Göttinger Sieben 2, D-37073 Göttingen, Germany, E-Mail: moritz.emmelmann@theologie.uni-goettingen.de
Florian Dinger, Ph.D., Headmaster, Integrierte Gesamtschule Bovenden, E-Mail: florian.dinger@igsbovenden.de

1. The Shifting Ground of Religious Education in German Public Schools

Since its humble beginning in the 1970s and a period of accelerated growth in the past quarter-century, international research and collaboration have become a major element of religious education scholarship regarding both ecclesial settings and public schools. Certainly, it is not yet an "integrated international field of study"[1] akin to, for example, engineering or medicine – an understandable and perhaps necessary concession to the particular ecologies of education in any given country and region. However, several international associations, journals and book series provide venues for creating and discussing collaborative projects.[2] It is not a matter of course in these settings that RE scholarship is considered a part of practical theology. The level of independence between the two varies, both between national contexts and within them. The common (but not universal) German stance on this issue is moderate: RE is viewed as a theological discipline that incorporates a pedagogical perspective on teaching and learning, seeking mutual criticism between theology and educational studies as well as other social sciences. Because of this intermediary character, German RE scholarship is highly receptive to current practical theological research and should itself be seen as a part of international practical theological discourse.

In Europe, the largest international collaborations on RE of the past 15 years have pursued a comparative and integrative approach, using joint research designs and questionnaires across the participating countries.[3] Sometimes these research projects found that interests were more similar regarding church education, specifically confirmation work, than regarding RE in schools. In this push towards integration, the particularities of the German arrangement of public-school RE (or, indeed, its "peculiarities"[4]) naturally were not the focus of attention. But the conditions and organizational models of RE in German public schools are changing

1 Friedrich Schweitzer, Wolfgang Ilg, and Henrik Simojoki (eds.), *Confirmation Work in Europe. Empirical Results, Experiences and Challenges. A Comparative Study in Seven Countries* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2010), 24.

2 Most prominent among the associations that regularly publish their proceedings are the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV), the International Academy of Practical Theology (IAPT), and the European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education (EFTRE).

3 Cf. Martin Rothgangel et al. (eds.), *Religious Education at Schools in Europe*, 6 volumes (Göttingen: Vienna University Press 2013–2020) and Schweitzer/Ilg/Simojoki, *Confirmation Work in Europe* (n.1).

4 Dietrich Werner, "Religious Education and Ecumenical Formation in Post-confessional Settings – Essentials for the Theological Education of Pastors and Teachers of Religion," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 28.1 (2024): 135–157, 140.

rapidly in ways of which international observers should take note, we believe, because they may lead to new opportunities for international knowledge transfer on RE in schools and elsewhere. In other words: The ground is shifting, and new avenues of discourse seem to be opening up in the process.

Specifically, a large increase in religious and cultural diversity among students and a simultaneous, long-term increase of religiously non-affiliated students is stimulating new concepts and practices in RE, which had traditionally unfolded within a moderately flexible but normative denominational framework. Cooperative or integrative models for teaching RE, which had previously been exceptions, are now on the rise in the scholarly discussion and the practice of RE with diverse student groups in many regions in Germany. This development coincides with the growing popularity of *comprehensive schools* in Germany, i.e. secondary schools that enroll students of all performance levels. In most other places in the world, comprehensive public schools are not subject to rising or falling popularity – they are simply the only form of public schooling offered. But in Germany, they are an option next to other, specialized secondary schools that lead students to different levels of formal qualification. Because of their inclusive pedagogical approach, their administrative structure, the qualification of their teaching staff and their particularly diverse student bodies, comprehensive schools have a strong affinity for integrative RE and practical experimentation. The challenges associated with the broader developments in the schooling system and society include tensions between denominational RE, pedagogical aims, and students' needs and preferences. These are well-known to religious educators in other contexts and are heightened at comprehensive schools.[5]

These pressures give comprehensive schools a frontier-like quality regarding religious education. Comprehensive schools are also the school form most similar to public schools outside of Germany. Moreover, their pursuit of truly educational experiences for students of all religious upbringings resonates with youth work in interdenominational and interreligious settings. With this report, we invite readers to consider anew whether an engagement with German scholarship on religious education might further their own research interests and stimulate reflections on present-day pedagogical challenges across contexts.

5 Lehmann et al., "Religiöse Bildung," in der Gesamtschule," in *Religionsdidaktik zwischen Schulformspezifik und Inklusion. Bestandsaufnahmen und Herausforderungen*, ed. Bernd Schröder and Michael Wermke, (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013), 115–145, 136.

1.1 The Legal Framework for Incremental Change

Religious education in German public schools is governed, at its most basic level, by a set of legal provisions in the German constitution.[6] Far from pursuing a strict separation of church and state, German Basic Law stipulates that RE be taught in state schools "as part of the regular curriculum" and "in accordance with the tenets of the religious community concerned."[7] In an arrangement known as *res mixta*, the religiously neutral state ensures that a religious element is included in the curriculum because it deems this to be essential for the moral education of its citizens. However, the state purposefully does not claim an exclusive right to decide on the form and contents of RE. Instead, it includes the regional churches (and equivalent religious bodies) in the process of designing RE and in the qualification of RE teachers, acknowledging the fact that it cannot define the tenets of any religious community. This arrangement came about not as a favor to the churches, but because of a wariness, born out of the experience of national socialism, of unchecked state control over the moral education of children and youth. The state's self-limitation has resulted in an intricate system of reciprocal checks and balances. While the federal states pay for all necessary resources (most notably the RE teachers' education and salary), the churches and other communities must authorize each individual teacher, entrusting them with the task of teaching in accordance with their respective tenets. Meanwhile, the states retain the right to supervise religious education, e.g., by chairing the committees that design state-wide RE curricula and requiring that RE is academically rigorous enough to be included in standardized final exams. The committees themselves are composed of RE teachers (paid by the state, tasked by the churches, and selected for this purpose by the Ministry of Education), as well as non-voting, advising representatives of the churches and teachers' unions.

Scholars of religious education commonly reject readings of these constitution provisions that derive from them a narrow, catechetical concept of RE. Going back as far as 1958, the Protestant churches in Germany pledged to "freely serve the free school,"[8] agreeing to hold the pedagogical needs of schools as highly as any sectar-

6 "Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany," The Federal Ministry of Justice (website), including amendments up to the Federal Law Gazette 2024 I, no. 439, accessed February 8, 2025, https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html. In the following, references to the Basic Law are given, as per convention, by naming the article and section followed by the German abbreviation "GG" for "Grundgesetz" [Basic Law].

7 Art. 7 Sec. 3 GG.

8 EKD Synod, "Wort der Synode der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland zur Schulfrage," in *Die Denkschriften der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*, vol. 4/1, ed. Kirchenamt der EKD (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1987), 37–39.

ian educational goals. With the end of the era of "Protestant instruction" (*Evangelische Unterweisung*) in the mid-1960s, RE in public schools has distanced itself conclusively from any form of indoctrination. Instead, teachers and scholars alike seek to foster among students a critical literacy of religious thought and praxis, including an elementary understanding of academic theology. For decades, then, the notion of "accordance with the tenets" has not been interpreted as a duty to organize RE around a confession of faith or a normative, dogmatic set of beliefs, but as a duty on the part of the religious communities to fend off arbitrariness in RE. They may elaborate much more general tenets than the twelve articles of the Apostolic Creed, for example. The Protestant Church in Germany (EKD) did just that in 1971 when it defined its tenets to include that "statements of faith and creeds need a continuous re-interpretation in the present that takes into account their situatedness in history" and that "from a Protestant perspective, the commitment to the biblical witness to Jesus Christ encompasses that teachers must interpret and communicate beliefs on the basis of academic scholarship (*Wissenschaft)* and through the exercise of their freedom of conscience.[9] For decades, then, Protestant researchers of religious education in Germany have studied and sought to assist forms of religious learning that are suitable to the academic setting of public schools and the needs of present-day students and that also maintain a "commitment to the biblical witness," all of this in a fashion befitting the Protestant ideal of an earnest, theologically informed and critical engagement with tradition.

Pursuant to the state's self-limitation regarding the assessment of religious tenets, the German Supreme Court has consistently ruled that this mode of RE fulfills the provisions of the Basic Law. Crucially, though, scholars of law commonly find that the constitution does impose some limitations on the format of RE. If it were to develop into a subject of purely informative, strictly non-sectarian engagement with "world religions" – so say the legal opinions –, then this form of RE would no longer comply with the demand of Article 7.3 cited above. RE in German public schools at all levels includes elements of comparative religious studies. But if this were its general approach, relinquishing an underlying interest in religious truth, then that would be seen as outside of what the churches and other religious communities may plausibly claim as their basic "tenets."[10] To be sure, it would not be illegal to

9 EKD Council, Stellungnahme zu verfassungsrechtlichen Fragen des Religionsunterrichts vom 7. Juli 1971, in *Die Denkschriften der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*, vol. 4/1, ed. Kirchenamt der EKD (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1987), 56–63. Translation M.E.

10 Cf. the most recent legal assessment produced by Ralf Poscher, *Gutachtliche Stellungnahme zur Verfassungsmäßigkeit des gemeinsam verantworteten christlichen Religionsunterrichts der evangelischen Kirchen und katholischen Bistümer in Niedersachsen*, accessed April 1, 2025, https://www.religionsunterricht-in-niedersachsen.de/christlicherRU/papiere.

include such RE in the school curriculum. But unlike the present model, schools would not be compelled to offer it, and there would be no legal basis for the churches to be included in its design or in the licensing of teachers. Last but not least: Foundational reforms of RE like this have the potential to throw into disarray the academic infrastructure that trains teachers of religious education, whose education currently takes place in theological faculties and institutes of theology. Given this legal framework, then, it is understandable that attempts at innovation in RE that cannot claim compliance with the stipulations of the German constitution are often viewed with skepticism in the scholarly community, even if they are pedagogically promising. The legal framework and the German system of cooperation between church and state in matters of RE discourages fundamental or large-scale reforms and incentivizes incremental, small-scale changes. Therefore, spaces within the school system that give individual schools the leeway to experiment, to adapt their concept of RE nimbly to local conditions and needs, and that advance pedagogical knowledge (through trial and occasional error), should be given as much attention by researchers in religious education as larger, regional or state-wide innovations in the model of RE. As we will argue below, comprehensive schools constitute such a space within the German system of public education, displaying a particularly high tolerance for and agility in deviating from the normative model of RE practiced in other schools in their surroundings. In the dynamic environment of RE, constitutional law is the most stable factor, but its flexibility is being tested, and some might say exhausted, by innovations in the practice of RE.

1.2 The Normative Model of RE and Its Variations

The normative or primary model that emerged from the legal provisions and the churches' explanation of their tenets is commonly referred to as "mono-denominational religious education" (*monokonfessioneller Religionsunterricht*) in Germany. It bears repeating that despite this term, which can be somewhat disorienting in the international discussion, RE in German schools is not catechesis. It has its foundation in the Gospel, but it eschews biblicism or proselytizing for theological and pedagogical reasons[11] and it includes elements of learning about denominations and religions other than one's own. Parents or older students, respectively, also have the right to opt for an alternative, non-sectarian class in Ethics/Philosophy instead. And

11 EKD, *Koblenzer Konsent zur evangelischen und katholischen Religionsdidaktik. Theologische Positionalität im Kontext religiöser Bildung*, accessed April 1, 2025, https://www.ekd.de/koblenzer-konsent-88376.htm.

as many regions have a severe shortage of teachers of Muslim, Alevi, Jewish, Christian-Orthodox and other varieties of religious education, courses in Protestant and Roman Catholic RE are usually open to students of all faiths and none. Churches are aware of the complex and location-specific task of working with students of different religious socializations and starkly different degrees of familiarity with their respective faiths. Consequently, churches give religion teachers wide latitude to fulfill their task with theological and pedagogical competence and creativity, and in accordance with their conscience (Protestant wording) or in "critical loyalty" (Catholic wording).[12] There are the aforementioned core curricula but no strictly prescribed lesson plans. Teachers retain the ability to design their own lessons, to emphasize parts of the curriculum judiciously, and to discover or create suitable new material outside of schoolbooks – indeed, these competencies are central goals of teacher training and seen as necessary for good practice.

This model characterizes, with differing degrees of consistency, the mode of RE in twelve of the 16 federal states of Germany. However, as Dietrich Werner pointed out in a recent issue of this journal, several developments currently pose sharp challenges to mono-denominational RE: a dearth of teachers (and university students in theology), a continuous rise of religious non-affiliation,[13] a correspondingly growing number of pupils who opt out of RE in favor of ethics/philosophy, budget constraints in the school system that can put RE in competition with STEM subjects, and a growing pedagogical hesitancy to divide groups of students along the lines of their denomination or preference for the duration of RE.[14] We must add to this the increasing religious diversity of the German student population: While only about 5 % of the German population are members of non-Christian religions and an additional 4 % belong to non-mainline or post migrant Christian communities (e.g., orthodox churches in Germany that are growing rapidly from migration caused by the Ukraine war),[15] the percentages are much larger among school-age children and youth. School statistics do not capture students' religious affiliation; however, the

12 Sekretariat der deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.), *Musterordnung der katholischen (Erz-)Diözesen Deutschlands für die Erteilung der Missio canonica und der vorläufigen kirchlichen Bevollmächtigung an Lehrkräfte für den katholischen Religionsunterricht* (Bonn: DBK 2023), accessed April 1, 2025, https://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2023/2023-045a-Musterordnung-Missio-canonica.pdf, 3.

13 Church membership of any kind in Germany stood at 52 % in 2022 and is estimated to have already fallen below 50 %, mainly as the result of people exiting the Protestant and Catholic churches and because of the high median age of church members. EKD (ed.), *Wie hältst du's mit der Kirche. Zur Bedeutung der Kirche in der Gesellschaft. Erste Ergebnisse der 6. Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung*, accessed April 2, 2024, https://kmu.ekd.de, 8 f.

14 Cf. Werner, "Religious Education and Ecumenical Formation" (n. 4), 141.

15 Cf. EKD, *Wie hältst du's* (n. 13), 8 f.

majority of immigrants to Germany come from predominantly non-Christian, mostly Muslim countries, so it is possible to use migration history and nationality as imperfect stand-ins for religious diversity. According to government statistics, 42 % of people between the ages of 5 and 20 living in Germany had a migration background in 2023, meaning that either they or at least one of their parents were not born with German citizenship.[16] 14,2 % of all students enrolled in public and private schools in the schoolyear 2022/23 were of foreign nationality.[17] To fend off an all too common misconception: Having a migration background or a foreign nationality from a predominantly Muslim country or even identifying as Muslim does not necessarily correspond to a high degree of religious adherence.[18] But it nonetheless stands to reason that religious socialization in traditions other than Protestant or Catholic Christianity is substantially higher among school-age children and youth than the total of 9 % in membership among the entire population.

The pressure of these factors, which appear in different combinations from state to state, are reflected in a number of alternative arrangements of RE. "Cooperative RE" teaches Protestant and Catholic students (and others who might want to join) together, typically only for a part of their school career, but permanently in some places. "Integrative RE," the rarer option officially found only in the city states of Hamburg and Bremen, teaches all students regardless of religious affiliation along a curriculum that is developed and sanctioned by the participating religious groups. In each case, teachers are specifically trained for the inherent didactic challenges, and research in religious education has developed methods and guidelines for each variant.[19] The models stretch the framework and convention of RE insofar as they claim the same legal foundation as mono-denominational RE. The participating religious communities must therefore elaborate the multi-denominational or

16 Statistisches Bundesamt, *Mikrozensus 2023 – Bevölkerung nach Migrationshintergrund. Erstergebnisse 2023*, accessed April 2, 2025, https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publikationen/Downloads-Migration/statistischer-bericht-migrationshintergrund-erst-2010220237005.html, section 12211-03.

17 Statistisches Bundesamt, *Allgemeinbildende Schulen*, accessed April 2, 2025, https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bildung-Forschung-Kultur/Schulen/Publikationen/Downloads-Schulen/statistischer-bericht-allgemeinbildende-schulen-2110100237005.xlsx?__blob=publicationFile, section 21111-03.

18 Fahima Ulfat, "Die 'Entdeckung der Heterogenität' muslimischer Religiosität," in *Heterogenität. Eine Herausforderung für Religionspädagogik und Erziehungswissenschaft*, ed. Bernhard Grümme, Thomas Schlag, and Norbert Ricken (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2021), 165–177.

19 For cooperative RE, cf. the handbook by Bernd Schröder and Jan Woppowa, *Theologie für den konfessionell-kooperativen Religionsunterricht. Ein Handbuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2021). For integrative RE, cf. Jochen Bauer, *Religionsunterricht für alle. Eine multitheologische Fachdidaktik* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2019).

interreligious approach to RE as a valid means to and expression of their respective sectarian educational aims. Doing this requires a markedly ecumenical self-understanding or interreligious openness – and where it has been successful, it has been no small feat to unite various religious bodies and stakeholders to come to a consensus. The existing forms of cooperative and integrative RE, then, are no small-scale or incidental experiments, but innovations that have been tested through rigorous debates, are explicitly sanctioned by the state as well as by the participating religious groups, can draw on specialized didactic resources and training, and continuously receive attention from RE scholarship.

1.3 The (Dwindling) Tripartite Secondary Schooling System

Finally, RE in Germany exists in a schooling system that is differentiated at the secondary level, an arrangement that has great implications for the composition of student groups in any given RE classroom and for the scholarly reflection on RE. At the end of their four-year elementary education, German students traditionally attended one of three forms of secondary school that, if completed, issue diplomas granting different levels of access to jobs and continued education. On the first rung, the five-year "*Hauptschule*" qualifies for a wide variety of crafts and trades which graduates learn through subsequent on-the-job training accompanied by vocational school. The middle-rung, six-year "*Realschule*" is typically the prerequisite for apprenticeships in clerical positions that do not demand a college degree. The diploma issued by the higher-rung, eight- or nine-year "*Gymnasium*," may be used for the careers mentioned above, but its most important function is to qualify graduates for undergraduate university studies. The three strands of secondary schooling are not strictly insulated from each other: students with a degree from one of the first two rungs may enroll in a school of the next higher level. While this path can be an important corrective to the decision made after the fourth grade, the *de facto* permeability of the German school system is low, as shown most recently for the year 2022: In the critical phase between 7th and 9th grade, when a mismatch with the track assigned after elementary school could be corrected with relatively low disruption to students' social integration, only 4,2 % of students change between school forms.[20] It is more common for successful students to gain consecutive diplomas from different schools. Even so, in 2022, only 21 % of all students who gained the

20 Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, *Bildung in Deutschland 2024. Ein indikatorengestützter Bericht mit einer Analyse zu beruflicher Bildung* (Bielefeld: wbv Publikation 2024), 138.

university entrance certificate had previously studied at a *Realschule*.[21] Moreover, factors like the socio-economic status of the family, the highest level of schooling achieved by parents, and whether the family has a history of migration continue to be strong predictors of children's educational success, and in particular, the level of secondary schooling they attend. In 2022, no less than 78 % of fourth-grade students from families with a high socio-economic status received the (in some states: binding) recommendation to attend a school leading to the university entrance certificate, while only one-third of students from socio-economically disadvantaged families received one, with two-thirds being recommended or compelled to attend other school forms.[22] A disparity of 8 % between advantaged and disadvantaged children remains even when these numbers are adjusted to account for differences in their academic performance.[23] In short, the tripartite system must be suspected of posing a hindrance to educational justice and equity, not least because the nominally merit-based assignment of students to different educational tracks after elementary school coincides with student bodies at the secondary schools that are much less socially, culturally, and religiously diverse.

The socially uneven allocation to educational tracks is, however, counteracted by an increasing number of students enrolled in higher-rung and comprehensive schools – a decision that is made, in most states, by their parents on the basis of or in refutation of elementary teachers' recommendation. The national average of students per cohort who attend schools that potentially lead to the university entrance certificate currently stands at 64,4 %, an increase of 13,1 % since 2009.[24] This development is largely driven by the growth of comprehensive schools, which account for more than 10 % of the increase. The dynamic is partially rooted in the perception that the other schooling tracks, in particular the *Hauptschule*, no longer offer the high quality of (specialized) education it did in the past and that its diploma is valued less on the job market, leading parents and students to avoid it. The largest driver of the shift, however, is more fundamental: Most federal states in Germany have replaced the *Hauptschule* and *Realschule* with integrated schools that cover both tracks and offer students the chance to earn the first and middle-rung diplomas.[25] Taken together with comprehensive schools that cover all three tracks, there were almost 1.000 more schools of these types across Germany in 2022 than there were *Gymnasiums*.[26] In consequence, it is becoming less accurate to

21 Autor:innengruppe Bildungberichterstattung, *Bildung in Deutschland 2024* (n. 20), 211.
22 Ibid., 137.
23 Ibid., 138.
24 Statistisches Bundesamt, *Allgemeinbildende Schulen* (n. 17), section 21111-03.
25 Autor:innengruppe Bildungberichterstattung, *Bildung in Deutschland 2024* (n. 20), 130 f.
26 Statistisches Bundesamt, *Allgemeinbildende Schulen* (n. 17), section 21111-01.

speak of a tripartite secondary schooling system. The system is developing towards a two-fold system of integrated and comprehensive schools as one branch and the *Gymnasium* as the other.[27]

2. The Comprehensive School in the German Educational System

The traditionally tripartite German educational system was augmented in the late 1960s by an alternative that rejects the separation of students after the fourth grade: the comprehensive school (*Gesamtschule*). At the time, and throughout the 1970s, this addition was the subject of intense political controversy, both in state parliaments and between left-leaning and right-leaning teachers' unions. The question of whether the comprehensive school should replace other secondary schools altogether was debated.[28] The heatedness of the debate was the result of conflicting interests of social classes. The leading political advocate of the comprehensive school was the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which viewed it as an instrument to increase equality and to fulfill a historic mission of making higher secondary education more accessible to the working class.[29] On the other side of the debate stood "representatives of the upper and middle class," chiefly organized in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) as well as in unions for *Gymnasium* teachers.[30] These socially conservative stakeholders argued that a separated and thus competitive structure of the schooling system would motivate higher performance, provide adequate learning opportunities for the most adept students, and create well-educated elites.[31] The political efforts in West Germany to introduce comprehensive schools widely were hampered by the fact that communist East Germany employed a vaguely similar model and conservatives willingly derided it as an instrument of class

27 Cf. Birte Löw, *Perspektiven für religiöse Bildung an neuen Sekundarschulformen. Eine qualitative Interviewstudie an Oberschulen und Integrierten Gesamtschulen aus religionspädagogischer Sicht* (Göttingen: Göttinger Universitätsverlag 2020), 40–42.

28 Katharina Sass, *Die Politik der Gesamtschulreform. Spaltungslinien, Akteure und Koalitionen in Deutschland und Norwegen* (Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa 2024), 107–215. Sass gives a detailed account of the highly polarized public fight over the comprehensive school in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia as well as of the more cooperative (and more successful) process in Norway in the same timeframe.

29 Cf. Sass, *Politik* (n. 28), 129.

30 Ibid., 131.

31 Cf. ibid., 131–133.

warfare and harbinger of communism in the West.[32] While it was seen as revolutionary at its inception, it is now a well-established school form and is found, if we include its variations without a *Gymnasium* track, in all federal states.

The comprehensive schools' overarching pedagogical concept aims to foster joint learning among students with a diverse set of abilities who would otherwise not attend the same school, providing them with equal opportunities in the process. In places where a comprehensive school is established, it usually does not replace other schools, but exists next to them, vying for applications from students with all levels of recommendation after elementary education and giving an additional option to parents. It defers until later the decision about which level of diploma students will receive, as it is able to issue all three of them depending on how long the students continue their education. Like all public schools, attendance at comprehensive schools is free of charge. As mentioned above, there are other school forms with integrative features, which typically combine only the first two rungs of the system into one school and leave the *Gymnasium* as a separate entity, commonly named "*Oberschule*" (high school) or "*Gemeinschaftsschule*" (community school). But the more comprehensive "*Gesamtschule*" is "the archetype of all integrated school forms at the lower secondary level in Germany."[33]

Within this school model, a conceptual distinction must be made between "*integrated*" comprehensive schools and "*cooperative*" or "*additive*" comprehensive schools. In this report, we focus on the former. The integrated comprehensive school *(Integrierte Gesamtschule – IGS*) does away with all performance-based administrative distinctions between the students. Students of all capabilities, including students with special needs and handicaps, learn together until the end of the 9th grade or 10th grade, respectively, when some of the students conclude their general education with a diploma at the level of the *Hauptschule* or *Realschule* levels. To facilitate these extended periods of joint learning, teachers of all subjects follow the didactic principle of internal differentiation. They present the students with tasks that can be fulfilled in different ways and degrees of complexity, in accordance with individual capabilities, and encourage cooperation among students of all academic performance levels. By contrast, the cooperative comprehensive school (*Kooperative Gesamtschule – KGS*) assembles students of all capabilities in the same institution but maintains an internal division into three tracks that reflect the tripartite system of the broader school system.[34]

32 Ibid., 181–191.

33 Christine Lehmann and Martin Schmidt-Kortenbusch, *Handbuch Dialogorientierter Religionsunterricht. Grundlagen, Materialien und Methoden für integrierte Schulsysteme* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), p. 59.

34 Lehmann et al., "Religiöse Bildung" (n. 5), 116 f.

Comprehensive schools are characterized by several pedagogical, didactical, and organizational features that distinguish them from traditional German school forms. First and foremost, they programmatically emphasize heterogeneity as a positive element to the total educational experience. While they recognize the influence of students' social background on their school performance as well as the ultimate necessity to award grades and specific diplomas, comprehensive schools strive to be schools for all children regardless of their academic merit, language facility, their families' socio-economic status, etc. The pedagogical expression of this ideal are need-based offers of individual support, not exclusively for students with learning challenges but also for particularly gifted ones.

Second, a main goal of comprehensive schools is to strengthen social cohesion among its students through joint learning at all stages of secondary education. This aspect is an important part of political considerations at the state level about whether to reorient the respective school system towards integrative models.

Third, teachers at comprehensive schools have more opportunities than those at other school forms to practice team teaching and to cooperate with special education teachers in order to ensure an inclusive educational setting. It must be said that, given the scarcity of teachers, principals have an incentive to assign the resources for team teaching to major subjects (like German or Mathematics) rather than to minor subjects like RE. However, RE teachers always teach at least one other subject and cooperation is not limited to in-class team teaching. It extends to various ad-hoc and institutionalized groups, such as subject-specific groups (*Fachteams*) and pedagogical teams that either supervise a whole cohort (*Jahrgangsteam*) or individual classes. Generally speaking, teamwork among teachers is the rule rather than an exception at German comprehensive schools.

Fourth, in contrast to other schools at the lower-secondary level, comprehensive schools are most often organized as all-day schools. This allows them to provide wider pedagogical support, including non-academic activities that foster holistic development and that might not be accessible to their students outside of the school. Through these activities, which are partially offered by teachers with whom the students work during regular classes as well, education extends far beyond academic instruction.

3. The Productivity of Comprehensive Schools for Religious Education

Because of the characteristics portrayed above, comprehensive schools magnify the key challenges that religious education presently faces in German schools. At the

same time, they are places of exceptional productivity in addressing these challenges. Specifically, they are predisposed to experiment with formats and practices of RE because of their foundational integrative concept, pedagogical principles, the composition of their student body and teaching staff, and a prevalent sense of distinction from the more conventional parts of the educational system. In a word, these unique characteristics make comprehensive schools the frontier of German religious education today.

To begin, there is an obvious tension between the norm of assigning students into different denominational, religious, or non-sectarian ethics groups for religious education and the core concept of teaching all students together all the time. Comprehensive schools do not adhere to this concept dogmatically: Students may, for example, choose different foreign languages to learn in addition to English and the class may then be split up for the duration of that lesson. But this decision comes later in their school career and is based on a preference instead of a personal characteristic, let alone a socially fraught one like religious affiliation. By pedagogical reasoning, therefore, teachers at comprehensive schools overwhelmingly reject the separation of students into denominational groups: "Many parents and teachers welcome or at least accept RE as a subject that aids integration. [But] they reject the separation into denominations as an impediment to inclusion...."[35] Rather than contradict their conceptual foundation, an unknown but significant number of comprehensive schools have instituted integrative models of religious education that broadly resemble the format used in Hamburg and Bremen, teaching RE to students of all religions and none.[36] The number is unknown because such alterations of RE cannot formally be authorized, even when neither parents nor churches nor school administrators explicitly object, and therefore exist in a legal gray area. In school statistics and on the students' grade sheets, the course simply appears as Protestant or Catholic RE, depending on the teacher's denomination. The number of schools experimenting in this way is most likely significant because some highly regarded schools publicly advertise their mode of RE as an innovation which, in turn, draws prospective students.[37]

There are other options or "micro-models"[38] of RE that are occasionally chosen by comprehensive schools. If the staff includes RE teachers of non-Christian reli-

35 Lehmann et al., "Religiöse Bildung" (n. 5), 120. Translation M.E.

36 Bernd Schröder, "Welche Formen von Religionsunterricht existieren neben dem konfessionellen Religionsunterricht – offiziell und im Graubereich?," in *Neuvermessung des Religionsunterrichts nach Art. 7 Abs. 3 GG*, ed. Andreas Kubik, Susanne Klinger und Coşkun Sağlam (Osnabrück: Universitätsverlag Osnabrück 2022), 149–177, 163.

37 Schröder, "Welche Formen" (n. 36), 163.

38 Ibid., 161.

gions, they may "rotate" so that the class, as a whole group, receives Protestant or Catholic RE one year and Muslim or Jewish RE the next year. Alternatively, teachers might offer denominational RE and ethics in separate groups but with similar topics, allowing the students to switch between groups from one semester to the next, so as not to cement the distinction. Finally, a school may also forgo any rotation or switching but bring the different denominational RE courses and/or the ethics course together for weeks at a time in cooperative sessions.[39] All of these further options, however, are dependent on the availability of ethics teachers and multiple RE teachers from different traditions. The pragmatic problem that teachers are scarce (or might be needed to teach other subjects) imperils these choices and is part of the reason that comprehensive schools more commonly offer RE without splitting up the students.

In practical terms, religion and ethics teachers at such schools adapt the official curricula based on their pedagogical aims and on the religious makeup of the student body. In contrast to teachers elsewhere, they do this difficult work without having been formally trained in cooperative or interreligious RE. On top of this, their didactic approaches must address with equal precision the other diversity factors that are prevalent in their student groups, including but not limited to academic performance and special educational needs in the areas of mental, physical, social, and language development. Consider, for example, that in all states but two (Hamburg and Bremen), immigrant and refugee children with lower skills in German are predominantly schooled at integrative or comprehensive schools.[40]

According to Bernd Schröder, the shape of this RE tends towards a religious studies approach of "learning about religion," a marked difference to the essentially denominational character that all officially sanctioned forms of RE ultimately seek to ensure.[41] It is very plausible that teachers, if they feel forced to decide between their pedagogical aims and the theological clarity of an RE course, prioritize the former. At the same time, a recent qualitative study on Christian RE teachers at inclusive schools found that their understanding of and dedication to inclusive teaching is rooted in biblical and theological images. In the interviews, the teachers presupposed the Christian love of neighbor, the image of the body of Christ, and the Lukan vision of solidarity among the strong and the weak as tacit knowledge, even though they rarely referenced them explicitly.[42] A notable exception was the case of a Protestant pastor assigned to teaching RE, who explained his concept of inclusion

39 Cf. ibid., 165–169.

40 Autor:innengruppe Bildungberichterstattung, *Bildung in Deutschland 2024* (n. 20), 132f.

41 Schröder, "Welche Formen" (n. 24), 164.

42 Cf. Rainer Möller et al., *Religion in inklusiven Schulen. Soziale Deutungsmuster von Religionslehrkräften* (Münster/New York: Waxmann 2018), 248f.

by referencing explicitly and simultaneously the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the theology of the *imago dei*.[43] More empirical research is needed to clarify the relationship of pedagogical and religious convictions within the professional knowledge of RE teachers in inclusive and comprehensive schools. However, one underlying tension is already evident: Basic elements of Christian theology and ethics can align, in the teachers' minds, with the pedagogical concept of an integrated classroom, counter-intuitively pushing their practices of RE towards models with a less denominational, interreligious or even secular, religious studies-based character. This tension is certainly most clearly on display in comprehensive schools. To the degree that the German student population as a whole becomes more diverse in terms of religious affiliation, the tension is relevant for all other school forms as well and deserves substantial attention in RE scholarship.[44] While an ostensibly neutral, religious studies approach of "teaching about religion" arguably releases teachers and scholars from some of these difficulties, it struggles (or does not even seek to) engage fruitfully with the perspectives that religious communities and practitioners have on their own faith and lived religion. Therefore, we do not view this approach as a desirable future model of RE. What is needed instead are didactical concepts and tools that aid teachers in creating productive encounters with lived religion in the RE classroom in ways appropriate to the students' growing diversity regarding their religious (non-)affiliation and worldview. In the final section of this report, we present the "didactics of alternating perspectives" as an approach particularly well-suited for teaching heterogeneous groups of students without reneging on the pedagogical and theological goal of giving students substantive and critical access to the internal perspective of religious praxis.

The willingness to experiment with formats of comprehensive RE appears to stem from teachers' pedagogical principles, their (mostly) tacit theological conviction, and their fulfillment of the challenges they face serving diverse student groups. These characteristics do not fully explain, however, why comprehensive school teachers are particularly likely to develop solutions locally and to engage in conceptual and didactic innovation themselves, instead of relying on outside expertise. This exploratory spirit on the part of the teaching staff, which Florian Dinger has observed at three different comprehensive schools as a teacher, pedagogical team leader, and headmaster, and which comes to bear in the process of curriculum development for comprehensive schools as well, appears to be connected to tea-

43 Möller et al., *Religion* (n. 42), 249 and 94–103.

44 Ulrich Kropač and Mirjam Schambeck (ed.), *Konfessionslosigkeit als Normalfall. Religions- und Ethikunterricht in sekularen Kontexten* (Freiburg: Herder 2022).

chers' deep sense of self-dependence and makes comprehensive schools such a worthwhile subject of RE research in our opinion. Because there is no specialized university education for comprehensive school teachers – they are trained and certified to teach either (1) elementary school, *Hauptschule* and *Realschule*, or (2) *Gymnasium* and all levels of comprehensive school – the faculties bring together teachers with various specializations and teaching experiences. Most comprehensive schools also seek to minimize teacher rotation from year to year, instead relying on teams of teachers who work with students continuously throughout the lower secondary level. As Lehmann et al. underscore: "Integration and cooperation [are] the foundational consensus of pedagogical action and curriculum development in comprehensive schools."[45] All this encourages critical discussion, the collaborative search for a consensus, and interdisciplinary collaboration among ethics and RE teachers.

4. Essentials for Comprehensive Religious Education

German scholarship in religious education is currently still mostly missing an extensive empirical look at the concrete practices developed by teachers of RE to address and profit from comprehensive schools' learning environments. Notable steps towards a detailed understanding shed light on teachers' and students' attitudes about integrative formats of RE and on some of their preferred teaching methods, for example in the states of Hessia and Lower Saxony.[46] Meanwhile, the broader theoretical debate has elaborated concepts and guidelines for teaching religion in diverse learning groups, which are already part of teacher education and should serve as key reference points for teachers' ongoing self-reflection, with the concepts likewise being tested and refined by praxis in the process.

45 Lehmann et al., "Religiöse Bildung" (n. 5), 136. Translation M.E.

46 Cf. Carsten Gennerich, David Käbisch, and Jan Woppowa, *Konfessionelle Kooperation und Multiperspektivität. Empirische Einblicke in den Religionsunterricht an Gesamtschulen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2021), esp. 143–163 and Monika Fuchs et al., *Religionsbezogene Bildung in Niedersächsischen Schulen (ReBiNiS). Eine repräsentative empirische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2023), esp. 73–94.

4.1 Inclusive Vantage Point

Firstly and most essentially, teaching RE in comprehensive schools requires an inclusive vantage point, i.e. a view of diversity among students and staff as a desirable and normal state. This is distinct from seeing diversity as merely a challenge to meet through the integration of some, viewed as the 'other,' into a supposed community. In Germany, the state's legal commitment to inclusivity through the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2009 was particularly consequential because it disputed the norm of separated educational tracks in the schooling system as a whole and lent further credence to a central pedagogical rational against a strictly denominational RE. From this vantage point, RE in schools must seek to contribute to reducing barriers and increasing equity in education. An extensive study by Ulrike Witten traces the journey that "inclusion" as a concept has taken from the (partially international) educational studies discourse into the German-speaking scholarship on religious education.[47] In the process, it has undergone manifold interpretations, which encompass theological appropriations, practical methodical innovations for teaching, and a fundamental critique of white male heteronormativity in RE. The wide-ranging debate on inclusion in RE thus holds opportunities for a reciprocal international conversation on religious education not only in schools, but in churches and in higher education as well.

4.2 Diversity-sensitive Teaching and Learning

Secondly, religious education in comprehensive schools requires the pedagogical skill to teach and interact with students with sensitivity for their diverse preconditions for learning and development. Such an attunement to heterogeneity (*Heterogenitätssensibilität*) is needed with regard to academic performance, religious affiliation and non-affiliation, cultural background, gender, socio-economic status, and the full spectrum of factors that are noticeably at play in a given group of students. Even for experienced teachers, it is a challenge to 'read' a student group diagnostically in this way and to finetune their teaching accordingly. However, if teacher rotation from year to year is kept to a minimum, as comprehensive schools usually aim to do, and if colleagues regularly share their observations and teaching experiences, it can be achieved. Importantly, a culture of diversity-sensitivity should also be engendered in the students, through both the example of the teach-

47 Ulrike Witten, *Inklusion und Religionspädagogik. Eine wechselseitige Erschließung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2021).

ing staff and explicit engagement with the differences students encounter amongst themselves. In recent years, German scholars of RE have found value in the terms "heterogeneity" or "enlightened heterogeneity,"[48] preferring these over the related concept of pluralism that previously dominated the RE discourse regarding religious diversity. From its roots in the social sciences and critical theory, heterogeneity in RE parlance carries with it a heightened attention to intersectionality and, ideally, a consciousness of power. Such power is exerted when practitioners and theorists construct the categories of heterogeneity that are "relevant" to RE in general, or to a specific student group, and bring these categories into play with the normative claims of the Christian faith (and perhaps other faiths). Practical questions of teaching in a diversity-sensitive manner, including the risk of over-burdening teachers, are addressed in an edited volume by Bernhard Grümme, Thomas Schlag and Norbert Ricken.[49] We would add to these that respectful and productive dialogue among students is the litmus test of diversity-sensitive teaching. This criterion corresponds with the observation that various forms of groupwork outshine all other modes of learning in comprehensive schools in Germany, extending even into the furnishing of classrooms to accommodate collaboration among students.

4.3 The Didactics of Alternating Perspectives

Thirdly, religious educators in comprehensive schools must seek ways to ensure opportunities for religious formation, not just religious information, within a diversity-sensitive approach that may, *de facto*, if not *de jure*, take the form of RE taught in multi-religious groups. To this end, the most promising tools are found within "performative religious education" (*Performative Religionspädagogik*)[50] and the subsequent "didactics of alternating perspectives" (*Didaktik des Perspektivenwechsels*)[51] that emerged in the 2000s in both Protestant and Catholic RE scholarship.

One of its main proponents was Bernhard Dressler, the late professor of religious education at Marburg University and himself a former teacher in a compre-

48 Bernhard Grümme, "Umdenken erforderlich? Zur Relevanz von Heterogenität für die Denkform der Religionspädagogik," in *Heterogenität. Eine Herausforderung für Religionspädagogik und Erziehungswissenschaft*, ed. Bernhard Grümme, Thomas Schlag, and Norbert Ricken (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2021), 17–27, 23.

49 Bernhard Grümme, Thomas Schlag, and Norbert Ricken (eds.), *Heterogenität. Eine Herausforderung für Religionspädagogik und Erziehungswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2021).

50 Silke Leonhard and Thomas Klie, *Schauplatz Religion. Grundzüge einer Performativen Religionspädagogik* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2003).

51 Bernhard Dressler, "Performanz und Kompetenz. Thesen zu einer Didaktik des Perspektivenwechsels," *TheoWeb* 6.2 (2007), 27–31.

hensive school. Dressler argued that modern RE should aim to enable students to experience firsthand the diverse ways in which religion is practiced and understood. A performative quality is inherent to religion, Dressler emphasized, and cannot be subtracted from it without inhibiting students' understanding of how members of religious communities themselves understand their beliefs and practices.[52] This reduction would interfere as much with an informed dialogue between students of different worldviews as with a well-founded critical engagement with religion. The task, then, is for teachers to invite students to witness and thoughtfully engage with religious practices and beliefs and to carefully arrange for periods in which they can distance themselves from the performative experience through reflection.

Adapted for the setting of comprehensive schools, this may take the shape of leading students into first encounters with lived religion of various traditions, e.g., through the interactions with religious artefacts, language, and places of worship, all of which make accessible the performative element. In addition, a well-tested method of German RE teachers is the careful *staging* of religious practices, a method adapted from theater education. In this mode, students deliberately enter into the role of a participant in religious practices, e.g., by taking different poses of prayer, and then consciously leaving this role again to reflect on their experiences from the position of an observer.[53] If religion courses collaborate (periodically or continuously) with ethics courses, i.e. their non-sectarian alternatives, or with other subjects such as history or politics, their disciplinary viewpoints will also interact with a religious or theological one, each becoming more clearly defined and visible to the students.

All these alternations of perspective – the inside and outside perspective of religious practice, the perspectives of lived and taught religion, the perspectives of religious and secular ethics – are intended to foster an experiential *and* cognitively accessible understanding of the shape and character of religion. If measures are not taken to make the *experimental* and *staged* character of such encounters transparent to the students throughout the teaching process, there is a risk of coercion or overwhelming of students associated with the didactics of alternating perspectives. This would be a severe break with RE teachers' fundamental pedagogical responsibility and theological sensibility. Careful instructions throughout the learning process serve to curb this risk, e.g., marking the role switches clearly and making it explicit that participating in staged religious practices does not mean engaging in

52 Dressler, "Performanz und Kompetenz," (n. 50), 28 f.

53 All of the approaches mentioned here can be seen as forms of "staging religion" (Religion inszenieren), cf. Florian Dinger, *Religion inszenieren. Ansätze und Perspektiven performativer Religionsdidaktik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2018).

them authentically but as an experiment that will later be evaluated for the purpose of learning. Clearly, the didactics of alternating perspectives is a demanding approach, for learners and teachers alike. While we value its potential highly, its risks are amplified when it is employed by teachers who are teaching out-of-field. Pragmatic reasons like staff shortages can cause comprehensive schools to assign faculty without training in theology to teach RE. In such situations, collegial support and supplemental training are of the essence to ensure a high quality of teaching, even more so if out-of-field teaching occurs persistently.

These measures are supported by and correspond with the artificial nature of school learning in general. Reading a short story in class and reading a short story as leisure are not the same thing either, after all. Recognizing distinctions (*Unterscheidungen*) like this, becoming able to draw distinctions outside of the school context as well, is what Dressler views as fundamental to reflective learning from and about religion, much more so than adopting any particular religious viewpoint.[54]

Learning to look at today's world from a religious perspective and to understand other people's viewpoints aligns with contemporary school's broader goal of fostering empathy and tolerance. It helps students to appreciate different religious expressions and worldviews, which may differ significantly from their own. The didactics of alternating perspectives encourages students to question their assumptions about religion and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role that religion plays in the lives of others.

By helping students to recognize distinctions in perspectives, this approach also sheds light on persisting differences, boundaries, and power relations. These tensions are purposely not swept under the rug, as if the staged religious practices were experienced by everyone equally. Rather, they are highlighted in the reflective process to discuss the sometimes painful reality of life in diverse societies. Ultimately, we regard this approach as particularly beneficial in heterogeneous classroom settings, where differences in religious beliefs as well as in academic performance and personal backgrounds are prevalent. It goes beyond merely teaching about religion to offering students the opportunity of experiencing religion as an often meaningful yet varied part in the lives of others – without overwhelming students or assuming to know the contours of any individual student's religiosity beforehand simply by virtue of their background and affiliation.

54 Bernhard Dressler, *Unterscheidungen. Religion und Bildung* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006).

5. Conclusion

Viewing comprehensive schools as the 'frontier' of religious education in Germany highlights three reasons why they deserve more scholarly attention – both to gain a more precise understanding of their practices and to draw insights from their attempts at innovation. First, comprehensive schools represent the part of the RE landscape that is undergoing the most pronounced change regarding students' diversity and the status of RE as a subject. Second, the teaching staff at comprehensive schools tackle practical challenges with creativity and a sense of self-reliance that is endemic to this particular school form going back to its inception in the 1960s. Third, because of this 'frontier spirit,' RE at comprehensive schools holds the potential for pedagogical discovery precisely where conventional models of RE may become untenable in the future. With the references to research literature given above for each of the three guiding concepts, we hope to aid international readers who may have recognized similarities between their own theoretical or practical interests and the developments described in this report to engage with the German debate. It would be a fortuitous side-effect of the recent developments in the German public-school landscape if they were to lower some of the contextual barriers that have traditionally hampered the transnational exchange of knowledge in religious education.