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Assessing the effects of informal learning on occupational competences of disadvantaged young persons

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Wissenschaftliche Texte

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The Research Unit "Transitions to Work" ("Übergänge in Arbeit") was set up at the Deutsches Jugendinstitut (DJI) to investigate school-to-work transitions among disadvantaged young people and to evaluate training and other schemes established to improve the occupational and social integration of this group. In addition, we have revived the DJI's tradition of studying the problems and the educational, occupational and social integration of young people from immigrant families.

In order to assess the long-term effects of education and training we use both retrospective and panel approaches. Over the past three years we have been involved in devising and implementing large-scale quantitative longitudinal studies on school-to-work-transitions. We employ tried and tested scientific methods in order to acquire knowledge that will promote the development of solutions at a practical and a political level.

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Contents

1 Statement of the problem

Procedures for establishing occupational competence, such as the Assessment Centre (AC) procedure, are systematic and standardized tools for recording and measuring multidimensional competences and potentials (e.g., in specialist knowledge, behavioural achievements and deficits, and personality characteristics) in which the aim is to allow differentiated and optimized personnel planning. In accordance with these objectives, these procedures are traditionally applied by companies and organizations during the selection and posting of personnel.

Procedures of this type have also increasingly been used for some time in the area of the assistance provided for disadvantaged individuals during the transition between school and occupation, in order to allow more effective, more suitable, and better targeted individual vocational preparation and training. With suitable and appropriate test procedures, young people should be enabled to recognize their own competences and skills and use them in their future occupations. Teachers, trainers, and other specialists working with young people of this type should be able to recognize competences of the young people that have previously remained hidden and disregarded and use them for their individual education and training.

However, traditional personnel and aptitude diagnostic tests, such as the Assessment Centre (AC) procedure, neglect the individual (social) competences that young people acquire through informal learning outside the formal educational system. Instead, they often measure and certify the cognitive achievements or deficits (particularly in school performance) that are responsible for these young people having been stigmatized as 'disadvantaged young people'. The aim in competence assessment procedures in the field of assistance for the disadvantaged is to avoid this mistake and therefore attempt to conduct measurements at other levels and reach a differentiated and more comprehensive competence profile based on young people's strengths (the empowerment concept), which are often not taken into account in traditional personnel and aptitude diagnostic procedures of the type often used by companies when testing prospective employees.

2   Systematic ascertainment and establishment of competences

2.1   The concept of competence

The concept of *competence* lies at the centre of efforts to achieve a systematic method of ascertaining and establishing competences for the purpose of precisely matched assistance and job placement (in this case for disadvantaged young people).

In this context, it is important to distinguish between *competences* and *qualifications*, since the latter refer to 'clearly outlined complexes of knowledge, skills, and competences which people must have when carrying out occupational activities … They are *action-centred* and can usually be described so clearly that they can be tested in certification procedures outside of the working process' (Erpenbeck/von Rosenstiel 2004, p. xxix). It is precisely in these certification procedures, which mainly relate to qualifications obtained in the formal educational sector, that disadvantaged young people often fail.

The concept of competence, by contrast, is more comprehensive. It refers not only to the ability to solve problems using specialized methodological and instrumental knowledge, but also contains social and communicative aspects, as well as personal ones. In general, competences involve 'self-organizing dispositions in physical and mental action, with "dispositions" referring to inner prerequisites for regulating activity that have been acquired by the time of a certain action. Dispositions thus include not only individual talents but also the results of developments' (loc. cit.).

Competences can be divided into types, classes, and groups, although these attempts at classification inevitably have a certain element of arbitrariness. We will restrict ourselves here to a schematic depiction of various *classes* and *groups of competence* and their characteristics, in which the complexity and multidimensionality of the concept of competence is evident.

Classes and groups of competences *

	Groups of competences			
	Personality characteristics	Work and activity dispositions	Qualifications emphasizing special subjects	Social communication prerequisites
Classes of competence ('key competences')	Personal competences	Activity and implementation-related competences	Specialized methodological competences	Social and communicative competences
Competence characteristics	Self-organization and self-assessment. Attitudes, values, talent, creativity, motivation.	Active and self-organizing action. Implementation of intentions and plans for oneself and others. Integration of one's own competences into successful actions.	Creative, self-organized solution of problems with specialist/instrumental knowledge, competences, and skills. Competence to classify and evaluate knowledge in a meaning-oriented way.	Communicative and cooperative self-organized action. Creative interaction with other people. Group-related and relationship-related behaviour.

* Simplified scheme adapted from Erpenbeck/von Rosenstiel 2004, pp. xvi-xvii.

There are numerous more or less similar systems – e.g., the distinction between specialist competence, methodological competence, social competence, and self-competence (Kauffeld/Grote/Frieling 2003, pp. 261–2). Another competence class that is occasionally defined is *content-related basic knowledge*, i.e. 'natural-science, social-science, and ethical basic knowledge in the fields of history, literature, education, sociology, politics, philosophy, mathematics, biology, technology, etc.' (Edelmann/Tippelt 2004, p. 8).

Important in the present context is the fact that the multidimensionality of the concept of competence, which goes beyond merely specialist and methodological formal qualifications and includes the field of informally acquired competences (see below) means that it is also of interest for our target group (disadvantaged young people), who might with slight exaggeration be described as the 'victims' of a one-dimensional and one-sided emphasis on cognitive achievements and formal qualifications in personnel selection. The introduction of a concept of competence that has been expanded to include *social* aspects, and the development of methods of qualitatively recording the processes of competence development (Arbeitsgemeinschaft QUEM 1999) in the non-company and non-school environment (family, peers, etc.), are therefore associated with hopes and expectations with regard to better occupational integration of disadvantaged young people and adequate consideration of their (social) competences and resources.

However, this approach presupposes that this procedure will actually be capable of compensating to some extent for the 'competitive disadvantages' that these young people have in the training-post market and job market. This desired effect also assumes that these previously disregarded, informally acquired social competences in the target group can be adequately proved and measured as well. In the present state of affairs, this is where the greatest need for research and action lies, since the traditional procedures for measuring competence – in relation to young people with special needs as well – are usually *results-oriented* (although not universally; see below); i.e., when measuring and establishing competence, they do not distinguish between competences acquired through *formal or informal* (or non-formal) learning. There is a broad consensus today that the development of competence depends on 'continuous interlocking of institutional and self-organized teaching and learning phases' (Edelmann/Tippelt 2004, p. 8). However, mainly for methodological reasons, there has so far been practically no success in precisely proving and determining the qualitative and quantitative contribution made by informal learning to the acquirement of occupationally relevant competence in the individual case. The complex interactions between formal and informal (or non-formal) learning are difficult to grasp methodologically. In Germany (and probably in other countries as well), 'there is above all a lack of long-term studies in which the effects of family contexts on acquiring competence, developing competence, and educational processes have been analysed' (Rauschenbach et al. 2004, p. 315). Similar research deficits also apply to other potential locations, forms, and methods of informal learning.

2.2   Measurement of competence

2.2.1   Aims and intentions

Efforts have been made for a relatively long time, based on results from psychological research, to develop procedures for measuring multidimensional (specialist, personal, social, etc.; see above) competences (e.g., in the form of aptitude tests, assessment centres) and to make the results usable for personnel selection and development. Social-psychological tests have a long tradition in the labour policies used in businesses. Tests of this type, which attempted to record and measure (quasi-mechanically) not only the physical and physiological characteristics needed for the immediate work programme, but also psychological aspects and social competences (based on observation and assessment procedures conducted by outsiders) were carried out on a large scale – i.e., outside of psychological laboratories – in the USA and the United Kingdom during the First World War in order to optimize the recruitment and deployment of soldiers. The more or less sophisticated methods used were later increasingly adopted as instruments for 'rational' personnel selection in the field of industrial and company psychology, leading in the 1920s to a veritable 'test mania' in the USA and in Great Britain. Interestingly, these methods always experienced a boom in popularity during periods of developing crisis – for example, during the world economic crisis at the end of the 1920s and in Germany during the 1970s during the debate over 'fairer' productivity-based pay systems.

2.2.2   Methods

From the methodological point of view, when measuring (more or less occupationally relevant) competences (independently of how they are defined and how they are to be measured), two alternatives are available, which can also be combined:

-    Observation and assessment by outsiders
-    Self-observation and self-assessment

Measurements are usually carried out on scales with four to five steps, which can be aggregated to levels, factors, aspects, classes, and groups, etc. of competences (e.g., specialists, methodological, social, and self-competence; see above) and can lead to more or less complex and meaningful *competence profiles*.

Observation and assessment by outsiders is carried out by several more or less trained observers, evaluators, assessors, etc. on the basis of 'controlled subjectivity'.

Self-observation and self-assessment are carried out orally by an interviewer (face-to-face or by phone), or (using self-completed questionnaires) in written form and more recently via the Internet (cf. INBAS 2003, pp. 231–2). The substantial demand for this type of procedure has led over the course of time to more and more numerous – and probably also better (i.e., more valid and more reliable) – methods and instruments being developed, including what is known as the Assessment Centre (AC) procedure. To minimize measurement errors, this procedure is based on a *methodological mixture*,

which is also characteristic of the ACs used for disadvantaged young people. Using as many methods as possible (questioning and assessment by oneself and by observers, participant and non-participant systematic observation, etc.), compensates for the errors of individual methods. For the same reasons, one test person is observed by various observers (assessors) and his or her performance and behaviour are evaluated. This is intended to neutralize subjective assessment errors (Ebbinghaus et al. 2003, p. 99).

The procedure used to establish competence in the AC (by trained observers, assessors, etc.) also presupposes that one can define and objectively measure competences (even social ones) as if they were quantities in the natural sciences. This applies in particular to target-oriented specialist and methodological competences emphasizing qualifications. However, precisely the informal social competences we are looking at here are often beyond the scope of this type of objective measurement by outside observation and assessment. More recent efforts have therefore been moving towards an 'extended view of competence measurement that includes qualitative aspects' (Arbeitsgemeinschaft QUEM 2004, p. 3). This approach also takes greater account of informal learning and informally acquired competences. By contrast, the traditional procedures for measuring and establishing competence are based on a quasi-mechanical, quantitatively measurable concept of competence. The same applies to most procedures for measuring and establishing competence in disadvantaged young people.

2.3 Measurement and establishment of competence in disadvantaged young people

2.3.1 Methods and procedures

On the basis of the special characteristics of the target group (including school deficits) and the aims (more suitable individual support and job placement), the methodological implementation of the procedure for establishing competence should be oriented towards the methodological breadth of the available survey instruments and should make use of various procedures and instruments. Action-oriented procedures such as the Assessment Centre have clear advantages in particular for the evaluation context and the target group, particularly if the individual and group tasks to be solved – depending on the objective – are oriented towards practical activities and the contexts of the young people's life-world. 'Both open and prestructured action-related procedures are regarded as particularly important in the young people included here, since these procedures can be used both in the specialist field and in open problem situations and decision situations. They provide an opportunity for self-organized action and thereby support the participants' motivation' (Hiba 2003, p. 6).

'Methods of this type have also been very popular for several years in working with people who have serious problems in gaining a foothold in the job market' (Druckrey 2001, p. 15). There are good reasons for this boom in ACs (and similar procedures for establishing competence): 'ACs … make it possible for young people to recognize their individual occupational abilities, skills, strengths, and preferences and to find out about their skills and competences both in dealing with everyday life and in the field of social

competence. ACs also allow young people to find out quickly about typical fields of action in various occupational fields. They give young people an opportunity to orient themselves occupationally and stabilize themselves, and provide staff with a multitude of important diagnostic and prognostic results, helping the staff and young people with planning qualification routes and goals, allow an initial individual support plan to be developed, contribute to designing support periods individually and effectively, allow effective entrance and aptitude diagnosis, increase staff members' diagnostic competence, and in the long term contribute to reducing drop-out rates in vocational training measures' (Druckrey 2002, p. 178).

The goals (and also the limitations) of using this procedure in the target group of disadvantaged young people are thus clearly outlined. The common element in the numerous procedures is the effort to modify the concept of competence and adapt it to the needs of the target group of disadvantaged young people by reducing the value of purely *specialist competence* in favour of *personal competence*.

In practice, this means above all that test components measuring acquired abilities (reading, writing, arithmetic, abstraction, etc.) mainly in the traditional framework of the formal educational system should be reduced in favour of action-oriented elements. The relevant procedures are therefore marked by a large number and variety of more or less original individual and group exercises, tasks, and games ('tasks').

The aspects measured (by specially trained observers), using an observation sheet on a scale with at most four or five points, are:

-   Competences in the area of traditional cultural techniques (reading, writing, speaking, arithmetic)
-   Cognitive characteristics (comprehension ability, problem-solving behaviour, etc.)
-   Desirable secondary qualities (punctuality, reliability, discipline, etc.), some of which can be described as 'integrative observation criteria'
-   Social characteristics/social behaviour (ability to work in a team, ability to communicate with others, ability to accept criticism, ability to deal with conflict, helpfulness)

The catalogue of criteria for measuring the various competences (e.g., teamwork: offers help, asks for help, coordinates suggestions, etc.) is often based on MELBA definitions.[1]

Some procedures distinguish between general occupational and specific occupational characteristics or observation criteria, and/or between interpersonal and intrapersonal competences (see below).

The various occupation-specific ACs are very action-oriented. The participants have to carry out certain practical tasks alone and in groups and are observed and assessed by trained assessors. In the occupation-oriented AC *Job Casting* (cf. Ebbinghaus et al. 2003, p. 14), for example, the following apply:

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[1] 'Merkmalsprofile zur Eingliederung Leistungsgewandelter und Behinderter in Arbeit,' an instrument for professional rehabilitation developed at the University of Siegen on behalf of the German government's Department of Employment. Cf. ISS 2004, p. 4.

- The tasks should be typical of the range of tasks carried out in the specific occupational field.
- Routine tasks should also be required in addition to 'interesting' tasks.
- The tasks should allow as comprehensive an insight as possible into the (positive and negative) requirements of an occupational field.
- The tasks should be related to the contents required in the relevant training regulations for the occupational field concerned.
- The level of standard should be appropriate for the target group.
- The tasks should evoke patterns of behaviour that are meaningful in relation to the observational criteria.

The observation and assessment are carried out using a four-step scale:

- General occupational competences (interpersonal competences such as individual behaviour in groups, social behaviour in groups, social behaviour in working contexts; intrapersonal competences such as problem-solving behaviour, performance behaviour)
- Specific occupational competences (work organization, working speed, skilfulness, tidiness, independence, behaviour towards subject teachers, behaviour towards those of the same age)
- Integrative competences (reliability, punctuality).

In each individual case, the observers compare their observations at an observers' meeting at which observations, impressions, and conclusions are exchanged. The principle of *consensus formation through discussion* generally applies, rather than through arithmetical calculations or majority decision-making.

Another very popular approach uses experiential teaching elements in the form of 'outward-bound' or 'city-bound' as a 'supplementary element in the competence establishment procedure' (Lehmann 2003). This also involves self-perception, perception of others, recognizing one's own strengths and weaknesses, promoting social competence, etc. (ibid., pp. 183–4).

The data collected more or less systematically during the exercises and games through observation and assessment by others may be compared with the data from a self-completed questionnaire and self-assessment, so that statements about self-perception, self-assessment and self-reflection are also possible.

The procedures usually lead to a *competence profile* and if applicable:

- To a *support recommendation*, for example in relation to occupational training, starting work
- And to the establishment of a *support requirement* (relative to specialist qualification, key qualifications, social stabilization, etc.)

In the case of the *Job Casting* AC, the competence profile includes:

- A list and explanation of the aspects observed and tested
- A graphic representation of the observation results
- A written description of the results
- Data on biography and self-assessment
- Observation results regarding social behaviour
- Observation results on working behaviour
- An explanation of the test results
- An assessment by the instructor.

The participants thus receive nuanced feedback regarding their strengths and weaknesses, as well as information about their occupational competences and main aptitudes. In addition, recommendations are made for further personal and occupational support and development (ibid., pp. 15–16).

Other procedures such as the DIA-TRAIN (DIAgnosis and TRAINing unit), developed by the Institute for Occupational Training, Labour Market Policy and Social Policy (*Institut für berufliche Bildung, Arbeitsmarkt- und Sozialpolitik*, INBAS), for example, which can serve here as an example for numerous similar procedures,[2] aim to create a basis for targeted individual support. The young people are given opportunities to show their competences and experience them for themselves.[3] The overall results of the DIA-TRAIN procedures lead to a certificate for the young people and a support report for the institutions that are caring for or advising the young people concerned. In addition to an abilities profile (as the result of the Assessment Centre), the certificate and the support report include a description of the individual's competences, potential, and resources, as well as his or her prospects.

2.3.2   Practical problems

In the German-speaking countries, the market for procedures for measuring, establishing, characterizing, and certifying competence, particularly for young people with special support needs, is now quite confusing. There are mentions in the literature of a 'multitude of procedures' and 'procedure competition', and more colloquially of a 'test-procedure jungle' (Muckel 2004).

The disagreement regarding the goals and contents of competence ascertainment corresponds to variations in and meagreness of the methodological tools available, which often fail to meet the simplest requirements of empirical social research. Finally, there is often a lack of theoretical, technical, and practical expertise in evaluating tests of this type and above all how to implement them in practicable and realistic, but differentiated, recommendations and strategies for action.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between serious and non-serious products and procedures for establishing and ascertaining competence. Since neither the concepts nor the procedures used are protected – although using them promises publicity-effective 'competence' – a lively culture of 'do-it-yourself assessment' has developed. The often tautological word coinages and compound concepts used, such as potential assessment, profile assessment, development AC, potential ascertainment assessment centre, process centre for competence development, potential analysis, etc. (Druckrey 2001, p. 15) pretend to seriousness and complexity. But it is less a matter of the methodological and theoretical quality and meaningfulness of the competence establishment procedures themselves (in the sense of validity, objectivity, and reliability) than deficiencies at the implementation level. There are two dangers here: 'In our view, issues of quality are regrettably omitted, while the focus of interest is on feasibility and potential results' (Druckrey 2001, p. 16).

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[2] A detailed description of the various procedures is given in INBAS 2003.
[3] Source: INBAS Info Dienst no. 2, 2002.

Serious developers of ACs (e.g., the IMBSE) have their procedures tested for validity and reliability using the customary and recognized statistical test procedures. However, the results are only published in exceptional cases (e.g., Druckrey 2001) and are not always convincing (Arbeitsgemeinschaft QUEM 1999, pp. 58–9).

Procedures for establishing competence such as the AC are extremely expensive in terms of time, costs, and personnel, since they usually take several days and numerous observers have to be used (who also have to

receive time-consuming training beforehand). In action-oriented procedures such as the AC, one observer is needed for a maximum of two participants. Depending on the way the procedure is designed, a period of 5–10 days is required (Hiba 2003, p. 7). The 'full version' of the DIAgnosis and TRAI-Ning unit, for example, is designed for eight young people and takes a total of 10 working days. It includes seven different procedures: social training with 17 exercises, a biographical interview, a creativity training unit, 12 experiential teaching exercises, an Assessment Centre with nine tasks, a learning training unit, and a future workshop. Very few potential users (e.g., secondary modern schools and remedial schools) are either willing or able to afford the time and energy for this. Only a trimmed-down 'practicable' version is therefore likely to be used. Whether this procedure is then capable of measuring what it is intended to, however, is an open question.

Apart from these deficiencies and problems at the level of implementation, the most important thing in this context is that although the current procedures for establishing competence for young people with special support needs shift the focus towards social and communicative, personal and methodological competences and away from specialist and instrumental competences, they nevertheless neglect abilities and competences that young people have assimilated during the processes of informal learning outside of traditional educational institutions (family, peers, clubs, dealing with the media, computer and the Internet, sport, manual and creative activities, etc.). In what follows below, we will therefore take a closer look at informal learning and informally acquired competences.

3   Informal learning and informally acquired competences

3.1   Characteristics for differentiating between formal and informal learning

Informal learning includes all (conscious or unconscious) forms of learning practised outside formal educational institutions and classes or lectures. It differs from formal learning in particular in the respect that it is guided by individual interest.

In the present context, the important aspect is that the differences between formal and informal learning are mainly definable in terms of the premises on which they take place and the methods used, while the differences can hardly be defined in terms of content at all. This is also evident from the following overview schematically summing up the most important characteristics for differentiating between formal and informal learning (based on Dohmen 2001, pp. 18–19):

Formal and informal learning

	Informal learning	Formal learning
Location	Outside of formalized educational institutions. Entire environment.	Inside the public educational system. Educational and training institutions. Separated from the surrounding environment.
Methods	Unplanned, 'free' learning in integrated contexts of life and action. Semi-natural learning from experience in various environments. Processing of personal experience by thinking about it.	Organized, structured learning in and through institutions in the educational system. Educational planning, intentional control, consciously regulated learning arrangements. Guided learning (structured, organized, selected).
Characte-ristics	Related to problems and actions (cases, examples). Individual processing of experience, concrete. Authentic problems, tasks, actions. Immediate everyday situations. Unplanned, casual, unconscious. Unintentional side effect of other activities. Not organized, not formally recognized and certified. Immediate processing of stimulating structures, impressions, information, experiences, encounters.	Educationally prepared experiences. Communication of secondary experiences. Artificially arranged, divorced from experience, abstract. Processing of mediated knowledge. Learning through explanations/theories. Reception/assimilation of traditional knowledge mediated by teaching staff. Learning of specific contents. Organized, formally recognized and certified. Instructed processing of experiences by others. Mediated transmission of knowledge.

Above all, it is the locations and methods of formal and informal learning that differ. By contrast, the contents (and thus the acquired competences) can be identical. For example, one can learn Italian in schools or universities, or by marrying an Italian or having lots of Italian friends. Thus, one acquires the same competence (a command of the Italian language) in the one case via a formal route (inside and through institutions in the educational system) and in the other informally, through one's partner or friends

and outside of formalized educational institutions.

However, one can also approach the differences between formal and informal learning (and by analogy, between formally or informally acquired competences) via the goal. In the present context, the concept of learning in general is reduced to its instrumental meaning – i.e., it is the direct material *utility aspect* of learning that is in the foreground: learning for the purpose of assimilating competences that can be used on the job market, so that they can be made into money in the form of pay and salary and can thus serve as a long-term basis for one's livelihood.

By contrast, in informal learning the material utility aspect is initially at best secondary and in any case subordinate. Informal learning has other functions (the experience function, emotional functions, habitual functions, escape functions, social and interactive functions) and goals (fun, excitement, variety, diversion, self-realization, etc.) And this differentiating criterion between formal and informal learning applies similarly to formally or informally acquired competences.

In the present context, it is important that there are always connections – and usually positive ones – between formal and informal learning (and similarly between formally and informally acquired competences). However, this means that informally acquired competences closely correspond to formally acquired ones, both qualitatively and quantitatively (cf. Wahler et al. 2004, for example). Young people who are particularly active and successful in the formal field (e.g., school) are active and successful in the informal field as well (e.g. family, peers). This is because the social milieu (particularly the family) has a strongly positive or negative influence as an independent variable not only on learning processes in the formal field, but also in the informal field. In other words: young people from classes, families, milieus, etc., that have a poor educational background with regard to assimilating knowledge and competence will be handicapped not only in the formal field (e.g., at school), but also in the informal one.

This finding substantially relativizes the expectations and hopes that young people who have deficient formal qualifications and competences could improve their status if greater emphasis were to be given to informal learning and informal competences.

3.2 Validation and certification of informally acquired competences

3.2.1 Aims and intentions

Our focus of interest here is on informal competences, or rather: competences that are acquired informally – i.e., outside of the educational system – and the question of whether these informal competences can be better appreciated and used in the vocational development of disadvantaged young people than has previously been the case. The 'new learning culture' demanded in the course of the PISA study, in particular, gives greater importance to informal, self-organized learning. This new learning culture is oriented less towards qualifications and more towards competences. As experience shows, performance in informal learning is hardly recognized at all in formal educational institutions and is accordingly barely appreciated, let alone

given certification. The issue is therefore one of how the experiences and competences, as well as increased knowledge and forms of effectiveness, that young people acquire in informal areas (family, peers) can be identified and defined. What patterns of cognitive, emotional, and social learning are acquired in informal learning processes by young people, and what areas of knowledge and information do they assimilate in these situations? Which competences do young people gain 'for their own sake' and above all, what personal gains and social benefits do they achieve through the processes involved in informal learning; and how can these enrichments be used vocationally?

Greater attention to informal competences is intended to reduce the one-sided emphasis on technical knowledge and technical processes in favour of everyday abilities and everyday knowledge, ranging from social and communicative competences to a stronger emphasis on values such as cooperation, and a recognition of informally acquired individual abilities. The perspective used in the usual procedures for establishing competence and by those who apply them in companies, government offices, and institutions – a perspective that is more or less severely restricted to purely specialist and technical competences – is to be expanded to include informally acquired social and communicative competences as well. This is aimed at target groups whose potential for solving complex problems is often overlooked and who tend to be disadvantaged by the traditional procedures that are strongly oriented towards formal qualifications – such as women (with their cooperative and socially integrative family competences, for example), immigrants (with their intercultural competences, for example) and young people whose integration into the working world has previously failed due to their lack of formal qualifications (school marks and school-leaving qualifications).

3.2.2   Two examples: competence assessments and Qualipass

In view of the increasing exclusion of whole groups of the population from the educational and employment system, and as part of the 'new learning culture' demanded by PISA, there have been increasing efforts recently to counter these deficiencies in traditional procedures for establishing competence and to take greater account of informally acquired competences – particularly social competences, social-communicative competences, and self-competences – and to make use of them for vocational development. Examples of such efforts are what are known as 'competence assessments' and – particularly for young people and young adults – the 'Qualipass'. We can present these two procedures here briefly as examples of attempts to validate and provide certification for informally acquired competences.

Competence assessments
Competence assessments are a method of validating the *overall range* of qualifications and competences. This type of validation 'aims to make an individual person's knowledge and abilities recognizable and assessable over their whole range, independently of where or by what means they were acquired. The validation of non-formal and informal learning processes takes place both inside and outside of formal general vocational training, both in the workplace and in society. This type of validation is therefore a key instrument for transference and recognition of successful learning of all types in various learning environments; competence assessments are thus the most important instrument for validation' (Arbeitsgemeinschaft QUEM 2004, pp. 4–5). Competence assessments thus take into account 'formal, non-formal,

and informal acquisition of competences and thereby decisively enhance equality of opportunity for applicants on the labour market' (ibid., p. 3).

This claim makes the method of competence assessment an interesting one for our target group, since what we are concerned with is taking better account of informally acquired competences and making them usable for vocational development.

The competence assessment focuses on social-communicative competences, methodological competences, and self-competences that are acquired or further developed in the social sphere of the family and in which often overlooked potentials for solving complex tasks in modern working situations lie hidden. These potentials are related above all to 'abilities for appropriately self-organized action, adapted to changing working requirements' (Erler et al. 2003, p. 339).

The competence assessment aims to make forms of vocationally relevant competence for action in the 'family as a sphere of social action' visible and measurable. These forms of competence develop not only through individual assimilation of knowledge and cognitive training, but also – as a kind of 'side effect' – through social and cooperative action. However, the authors explicitly draw attention to the fact that the 'competence assessment … can also be used as an example of how to describe and evaluate competences obtained in other non-occupational places of learning (apart from working in the family) – e.g., through involvement in honorary/voluntary/civic activities, stays in foreign countries, etc. – or which derive from informal learning integrated into working activity. The competence assessment can be extended with further modules and components with this perspective' (ibid., p. 342).

The competences measured (using a list of 38 subcompetences) include 'social-communicative competences, methodological competences and self-competences that are connected biographically with informal learning spheres and in particular with work and responsibilities within one's own family' (ibid., p. 342). They are measured initially using self-completed questionnaires and self-assessments. The assessment is carried out using a scale with five steps (ranging from very good to not good). It is also recorded whether each subcompetence (e.g., achieving goals that have been set, estimating the consequences of one's own actions, holding to common agreements, etc.) have been *newly acquired*, *further developed*, or *not influenced* by activities within the family.

In a second step, assessment by an outside observer is recommended as an extra option for validation and objectification, although this lies, 'like the individual processing of the competence assessment itself, at the discretion of the individual observer' (ibid., p. 344). This is therefore a kind of 'controlled self-assessment' (ibid., p. 342) and a process of reflection and dialogue which 'should lead to further reflection and re-evaluation of the self-established competence profile in case of marked differences from the self-assessment' (ibid., p. 346).

However, the 'extent to which the candidates are capable of describing themselves realistically and appropriately must be inquired into' (Muckel 2004, p. 13). As things currently stand, it would in fact be excessive to expect our target group in particular (young people needing special support) to carry out a realistic self-assessment.

The important aspect in the present context is that the competence assessment represents a 'soft' procedure for validating and providing certification for informally acquired competences. It extends the usually narrow specialized and technically limited perspective of procedures for establishing competence, not only towards informally acquired competences but also and above all towards social-communicative competences, methodological competences, and self-competences.

Consequently, young people needing special support are also directly addressed as a (potential) target group for competence assessments. The Qualipass is aimed at this group in particular.

Qualipass

The Qualipass was specifically developed for disadvantaged young people and young adults. The Qualipass is 'not a scientifically developed measurement procedure in the narrower sense, but rather a widely applicable, simply designed way of documenting practical experience and competence gained by young people in connection with feedback relationships established with voluntary coaches' (Gerber 2003, p. 354).

As a 'soft' instrument serving in particular to demonstrate informally acquired competences in young people, the Qualipass dispenses with objectifiable measurement scales and is instead based on a subjective description of practical activities and competences.[4] However, this (not entirely voluntary) choice, which is by no means regarded by the initiators of the scheme as a deficiency, is also due to the fact that the scales used for self-assessment during the pilot phase (similar to the scales used for competence assessments; see above) proved to be impracticable, as the young people found them too difficult (ibid., p. 354).

Young people become involved in many fields, and this involvement is intended to be made visible in the Qualipass and thus usable for vocational development. The initiators assume that 'experience only becomes a communicable competence through reflection. For this process of reflection, young people need adult partners, self-selected coaches who are aware of the realities of working life and are able to listen and respond. This coaching is regarded as a personal dialogue between the young person and a feedback partner promoting awareness, who is able to trigger development processes by improving the young person's self-perception' (ibid., p. 360).

The Qualipass documents the variety of activities engaged in – for example, in the form of practical training, participation in a club, pupils' campaigns, stays in foreign countries, neighbourhood help, individual inventions, etc. In addition to the various stages of learning and strengths that young people have acquired in activities of this type, the accompanying process is recorded by personal advisers. This involves positive perception of the special individual contribution through the individual's biographically acquired characteristics and abilities, which in modern working societies are usually limited to the quality of an individual's own involvement in work (or in the case of young people, their school achievements). For young people, a well-presented Qualipass can provide them with an estimate of their value for a wide variety of activities and competences, and it does not reduce the perception of their competence to school marks.

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[4] The same applies to the 'Career Pass' (Berufswahlpass) that is more widely used in northern Germany. Cf. Kersten 2003.

The Qualipass is deliberately intended to be a 'soft' and versatile instrument for documenting areas of experience and competence developed by young people. However, considerable parts of the original (much more strictly defined) concept had to be deleted for various reasons. For example, in the pilot project, a qualitative scale was used for the young people to carry out self-assessment of their own increases in competence due to particular practical experiences. In addition, it was originally intended that there would a structural supplement to the pass provided by centres for competence assessment (see above), which would have led to formal recognition of sub-qualifications. Another aspect whose inclusion was discussed was 'operationalized competence fields with stated levels of reliable, transferable significance in the evaluation. It was found that consensus could not be reached on these options, or that they were not capable of being implemented. The decision was taken to have a widely effective, easily usable instrument accepting subjective assessments' (ibid., p. 360).

An approach that is similar to that of the Qualipass in its methodology and content is also taken by the Swiss 'CH-Q Qualification Book', which also gives considerable importance to biographical and informal learning (Autorengemeinschaft Schweizerisches Qualifikationsbuch 2003). This 'promotes the recognition of achievements in every area of life – in the family, in voluntary work, in leisure activities, and in civic activities' (ibid., p. 3). The aim of the Qualification Book is to render the often hidden personal and vocational potential that young people and adults have visible so that it can be recognized during training and work.

The Competence Assessment, Qualipass and Qualification Book instruments are examples of increased efforts to make informally acquired competences – particularly social competences, social-communicative competences, and self-competences – visible and usable for vocational development. However, these instruments pursue this goal with quite differing methods. The important aspect in the present context is that an instrument intended specifically to assess young people needing special support should obviously have certain restrictions with regard to its methodological repertoire. This is certainly what experience has shown in the development of the Qualipass. However, this raises the important question for 'soft' procedures of this type of whether the results are capable of being utilized in the reality of the working world.

Problems of transference and utilization: transferability and implementation of the results of competence establishment procedures in business reality

In conclusion, the question is whether and in what way competences – particularly informally acquired social competences – that are ascertained on the basis of an extended concept of competence can be made useful in the vocational development of disadvantaged young people in particular; in other words, whether they can be transferred to the system of training, work and employment. Because it is the effort to achieve occupational and therefore social integration of this target group that is the most important aspect. The various procedures should not become ends in themselves. In addition, there is a question of whether procedures of this type may not actually have the opposite effect (i.e., increasing the disadvantage) by putting in place additional processes of selection and labelling.

Selection and labelling processes resulting from competence establishment

Every measurement produces a range of values, and therefore leads – whether intentionally or not – to diversification, assuming that it is not only identical units that are being measured. The same also applies to the social world and the people living in it. In the case of procedures for establishing competence, diversity and colourfulness in the range of competences identified are even explicitly desirable – although initially only in the positive sense. However, since competence measurements (and therefore the subjects who are being tested as well) are evaluated and assessed with regard to each individual type, the sum effect produced as the result of the measurement procedure is necessarily a hierarchical structure. Every procedure – even if it 'only' measures qualitatively or is only a 'soft' one – thus has the ability to trigger additional processes of selection and labelling, by identifying and possibly stigmatizing school pupils as 'needing support' (cf. Edelmann/Tippelt 2004, p. 9, for example). The developers of the 'soft' procedures described above are certainly aware of this danger. The Qualipass, for example, regards itself explicitly as 'an instrument intended neither as a mark of distinction nor of stigmatization' (Gerber 2003, p. 359).

Transferability of the results to business reality

It is one thing to determine informally acquired competences (particularly social and integrative ones) using suitable procedures (see above) and give them greater weight; it is quite another, however, to adapt them and subordinate them to the utilitarian rationality of the business world and to the potentially antagonistic quality of the relationships between the agents involved in that social sphere. For example, past attempts to take the social component into account more in procedures for establishing competence, in order to improve the chances for school-leavers on the training-post and employment market, had to have their form and content oriented towards the ideas and guidelines of influential institutions (e.g., chambers of industry and commerce, employers' associations, companies) in order to be recognized. The 'social competence' proved and certified in their terms is related to subcompetences such as carefulness, reliability, ability to work in a team, manners, willingness to produce achievements, independence, and willingness to accept responsibility; and it culminates in a 'social mark' in a range of 1 to 6 (Autorengemeinschaft QUEM 1999, p. 65). This example of

a remodelling of qualitative characteristics into quantitatively measurable and provable attributes and corresponding certificates vividly illustrates the kinds of problem that can arise in transferring such concepts into business reality.

The problem of transference and utilization is also due to the fact that the relevant characteristics and goals at various organizational levels (e.g., the family, on the one hand, and the company or school on the other) differ too widely. Social competence in the family context means something different from what it does in the school or business context.

5   Summary

Efforts to use suitable procedures to identify the 'key competences' (personal competences, specialized and methodological competences, social-communicative competences, etc.) of disadvantaged young people in order to improve their chances in the training-post and employment market are not least determined by the need to make equal-opportunity procedures on the training-post and employment market more effective and more efficient. The main procedure used to achieve this nowadays, in the field of support for the disadvantaged as well, is the Assessment Centre procedure as 'the best-validated instrument for aptitude diagnosis' (Druckrey 2002, p. 177). Within only a few years, an almost overwhelming number of different procedures for establishing competence have been developed. The criticism has been noted that the developers, suppliers, and users of such procedures are often at the same time also the suppliers of the vocational education services in which the young people they are testing arrive. The 'neutrality' of the implementing authorities is therefore not ensured. In addition, it appears at present that the methodological standards for the procedures are not always implemented with the required care.

Another criticism that has been raised is that traditional procedures for measuring competence of this type are usually results-oriented – i.e., they examine the results of learning processes and not the (formal and informal) learning processes themselves. In the view of many experts, this consequently disregards precisely the social-communicative and socially integrative competences that are acquired in the informal sectors (family, peers, etc.). These informally acquired competences have recently been attracting increasing attention, as it is hoped that giving such competences greater importance will lead to increased competence and thus better opportunities on the training-post market and employment market for previously disadvantaged groups in the population.

There have in the meantime been various attempts (such as Competence Assessments, Qualipass) to prove and document the acquisition of informal competence, which is methodologically difficult to capture, for various target groups (those returning to work after extended maternity/paternity leave, young people needing support). For various reasons, however, the attempt to validate and provide certification for informally acquired competences using 'soft' qualitative procedures has to address the problem of the transferability and implementation of the results in business reality to a greater extent. In addition, there is a danger that such procedures will also trigger additional selection and labelling processes, as they will be identifying and possibly stigmatizing young people as requiring support.

The hope that what are known as disadvantaged young people will experience increased competence when their informally acquired competences are taken into account may in addition also be deceptive. Research on young people is providing evidence that these young people have deficiencies not only in the areas of formal learning (i.e., in organized learning in and through the institutions of the educational system), but also in relation to the various modes of informal learning.

6   **Conclusions and recommendations**

The occupational and social integration of young people needing special support is an important task for society as a whole. The Federal Government and States, as well as local authorities, are increasingly responding to this challenge with programmes based on the strengths, as well as on the weaknesses, of disadvantaged young people that are intended to use more or less complex procedures to establish and further develop their competences and allow better-targeted individual support. However, it should be borne in mind that failure to deliver the (young) participants to (regular) training and employment posts may not be primarily due to deficient qualifications on their part, or to (misconceived) concepts and methods for projects and measures, but rather first and foremost to the wretched situation on the training-post and employment market. These external economic conditions also mark out the boundaries for any prospect of success in the various efforts being made.

Nevertheless, there is no question that it is imperative, both from the humanitarian point of view and for economic reasons, to identify unused potential among young people and if possible to develop from these any competences capable of being realized on the employment market for them. Unused potentials of this type are thought to exist in particular in the area of informal learning and informally acquired competences. Procedures are therefore being sought that are capable of establishing and developing such previously neglected competences and of taking them into account to a greater extent.

The qualitative methods of establishing competence developed recently, such as competence assessments and the Qualipass, are increasingly attempting to take into account aspects of informal learning of this type (in the family, in the same age group, etc.). Central components of these 'soft' procedures for establishing competence therefore consist of self-observation and self-completed questionnaires – e.g., in the form of a biographical review. This method thus reveals competences acquired not only in the context of the formal educational system, but also those acquired informally.

Whether these methods of 'self-assessment' are capable of reflecting formal and informal competences in our target group is, however, questionable. It is often personality-related misjudgements in relation to individual capabilities, together with idealized and inadequately formed ideas of the content and demands involved in employment positions, that lead to unrealistic self-assessment and consequently to the wrong choice of career and to individuals dropping out of education and training (Ebbinghaus et al., p. 7). In addition, the problems of transference and utilization are particularly severe with this procedure for various reasons (see above). Young people are assisted little if competences are established for them that are not in demand on the job market. Occupation-related recognition for informally acquired competences (documented in the Qualipass, for example) as a kind of equivalent for a lack of, or for deficient, formal qualifications is likely to be difficult to implement widely.

Approaches methodologically based on the Assessment Centre procedure appear to us to be more promising, as they are closer to reality and more binding, so that the results can be transferred more easily to the training

and employment system. However, this recommendation does not apply to the numerous 'home-made' ACs that have in the meantime flooded the market, but only to procedures that have been professionally developed and evaluated and are applied and implemented in accordance with regulations. These conditions appear to us to be met in the AC START (*St*ärken *a*usprobieren – *R*essourcen *t*esten [Trying out strengths, testing resources]) produced by the Institute for Occupational Support Measures for Occupational and Social Integration (*Institut für Massnahmen zur beruflichen Förderung der beruflichen und sozialen Eingliederung*, IMBSE; cf. Druckrey 1999, 2001, 2002). START is being developed, maintained and evaluated, and systematically tested for validity and reliability (with acceptable results) by the Free University of Amsterdam (Druckrey 2001, pp. 12–13). Transference is ensured through the involvement of representatives of vocational schools and chambers of commerce, employment agencies and the Federal Institute for Occupational Training (*Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung*, BIBB) (ibid., p. 16). The procedure is also undergoing continuous improvement and is being further developed and subjected to continuing quality testing and quality assurance. The precondition for meaningful results based on this approach, however, is that the substance of the procedure should not be undermined by deficiencies on the implementation level. In addition, it should be pointed out once again that an adequate procedure for establishing competence must be followed by equally adequate support measures.

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Jugendliche an sozialen Brennpunkten und in strukturschwachen Regionen

Neu

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