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# A Grounded Theory Study on Motivational Development After Detours in Young Adulthood – How Extra-Vocational Training Affects Aspirations

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## Abstract

**Context:** In the present study, we explore what motivates young adults to re-engage with education or employment after a period of non-engagement. Insights into this process facilitate the implementation of tailored support measures for at-risk groups. It is well-known that young people who are not involved in any kind of education, employment, or training face further risks to their professional and psychological development.

**Methods:** Using a grounded theory approach, interviews with young adults from various educational tracks were analyzed, compared, and contrasted. The sample was focused mainly on apprentices in extra-vocational training and professionals working with young people to describe the process of re-engaging in detail (n = 30).

**Findings:** Our analyses suggested that frustrating prior experiences and offers to participate in government-funded vocational training prompted motivation to learn an occupational skillset. Undergoing an apprenticeship enabled young adults to develop the motivation to finish vocational training and to plan on further education.

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**Conclusion:** The implications of these results as they pertain to Germany's labor market policies, which foster a sense of individual responsibility to facilitate the achievement of professional success, are discussed. Furthermore, the implications for supporting further educational aspirations when working with young adults are discussed.

**Keywords:** Access to Education, At-Risk Youth, Apprentice, Career Pattern, Educationally Disadvantaged Youth, Vocational Education and Training, VET

## 1 Introduction

In times of uncertainty, the perceived risk of becoming unemployed increases, and some groups become more vulnerable to labor market changes than others. The groups at especially high risk of unemployment include young people and those with low levels of educational attainment (European Commission, 2020). Individualization and de-standardization pose risks for young people who have left school without any formal educational credentials. In the wake of globalization, and in line with trends that have been mounting since the 1980s, these individuals have difficulty finding any work, let alone well-paid, stable positions (Blossfeld et al., 2011). This overall risk is exacerbated by macroeconomic shifts, such as recessions. The last recession took place in 2008. It did not affect Germany as drastically as other countries due to the introduction of underemployment assistance, an instrument for workers who have been forced to reduce their monthly working hours that allows them to receive compensation from the Federal Employment Agency (Rinne & Zimmermann, 2012). However, young people with low levels of educational attainment are also at risk for becoming trapped in unstable careers in Germany, for example, due to their inability to secure training (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, 2013).

Nevertheless, many countries have a system to train apprentices in fields facing a shortage of workers and have attempted to deal with the situation by introducing alternative routes to vocational training (Aspøy & Nyen, 2017). However, these alternatives have advantages and disadvantages, such as reducing the motivation of employers to offer regular apprenticeship placements in the long run (Aspøy & Nyen, 2017). Hence, there continues to be a mismatch between young people wanting to begin an apprenticeship and the available positions (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2021). When no position can be secured, young people often end up entering the so-called "transition system" (e.g., Michaelis & Busse, 2021) to gain the necessary skills to obtain an apprenticeship. However, whether this system is helpful or only a "waiting loop" is a topic of debate (Busemeyer & Iversen, 2012; Solga et al., 2014; Walther et al., 2007).

The present study is focused on interviews with young people who participated in a special form of vocational training called "extra-vocational training" (BaE; "Berufsausbildung in

außerbetrieblichen Einrichtungen"). The BaE program is part of the transition system and is a government-funded program offering vocational training credentials to young people who, for various reasons, are unable to secure vocational training under normal conditions in a free-market economy.

The interviews took place in 2011, three years after the 2008 recession. Although the recession affected Germany only mildly overall (Möller, 2010), some subgroups, such as young, male, and poorly educated workers, were disproportionately negatively affected (Jenkins et al., 2013). Interviews with career counselors, teachers, and social pedagogues were integrated for theory-building according to the strategies suggested by grounded theory, the method used to analyze the data. Furthermore, a few interviews with Italian apprentices and teachers were included to add a perspective representing a more critical economic situation. The economic situation in 2011 was much worse in Italy than in Germany, especially for young people (Fiori et al., 2016; Schoon & Bynner, 2019). These interviews helped the researchers compare data with data, a key process within the applied grounded theory framework (Corbin, 2009). The present study is an attempt to understand the extent to which participation in BaE functioned as an educational detour versus an educational dead end. Special attention was paid to the factors motivating the young adults, as motivation is likely to be especially relevant for many people when dealing with such a detour, as well as the demands of the vocational training program. The results illustrate how disadvantaged groups within a society can be supported to enable them to engage with training and education during times of crisis.

## **2 The Importance of Work for Young Adults**

The domain of work was and is highly relevant for individual identity and for the development of a satisfying life perspective (Jahoda et al., 1975; Modini et al., 2016). Longitudinal research has shown that successful entry into employment is associated with better self-esteem and higher levels of life satisfaction (Winefield et al., 2017) and that well-being is positively influenced by successful work transitions (Schulenberg et al., 2004). Employment is associated with occupational self-efficacy (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2013), a minimal feeling of being stuck between adolescence and adulthood, and a lower need for identity exploration (Crocetti et al., 2015). Being given the chance to obtain more education throughout the often-volatile young adult years helps people learn to deal with the increased demands of the professional sphere and increases their chances of securing employment (Núñez & Ilias, 2010; Settersten & Ray, 2010).

## 2.1 The Situation of German Young Adults

In Germany, the vocational education system, which pairs working for a company with attending vocational school ("dual system"), offers a clear path to employment outside the university that is respected by the community (Mortimer et al., 2005), although it is associated with relatively modest career aspirations (Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002). However, some young people are at an increased risk of being unable to secure vocational training placement. The risk factors include living in regions with few employment prospects or being socially disadvantaged because of learning disabilities or functional limitations (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, 2013). Oftentimes, the young people with the fewest formal educational credentials (the "Hauptschulabschluss", which is awarded after nine years) (or with no credentials at all) are at risk of marginalization and being unable to find an apprenticeship through the regular dual system (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2012; Öchsner, 2015). Such young people comprise a subgroup within the NEETs—those who are "Not in Education, Employment, or Training"—and they are oftentimes "forced" to engage (in education and training) under the threat of benefit withdrawal or have been discouraged from entering the labor market by a perceived lack of opportunity (Mascherini, 2019, p. 524f).

For disadvantaged youths, governmental training programs offer a way to obtain a vocational training degree. Such disadvantaged young adults are the focus of the present study. One such training program, BaE, offers disadvantaged young people a vocational training degree. Depending on their chosen occupation, these programs usually take two or three years to complete. Unfortunately, this program has become associated with negative stereotypes among prospective employers, who may assume that the participants are unqualified for real-life professional situations and who may be disinclined to offer the program's graduates a job (Braun et al., 1999). However, the quality of BaE training is generally high (Braun et al., 1999), and the graduates who meet specific criteria (e.g., grade point average, years of foreign language instruction) automatically obtain the next-highest educational credential, which is equivalent to ten years of schooling, as opposed to nine (Rahmenvereinbarung über die Berufsschule, 2015).

## 2.2 Macrostructural Influences on Youths Entering the Labor Market

During the period when the present study was conducted (the data collection took place from 2011-2012), Germany had, overall, been much less severely impacted than many other countries by the 2008 Great Recession (Möller, 2010). The youths who end up in a government training program tend to become especially frustrated in the context of an economy that is, overall, seen as improving, as they are likely to feel an increased sense of personal failure and may encounter less sympathy than their peers in their struggle to find employment (Heggebø & Elstad, 2018).

To account for the various macrostructural influences and economic situations that differ by country or region (Blöchle, 2010; Eurostat, 1995-2015), several Italian apprentices were included in the present study. Northern Italy has an apprenticeship system like the German dual system, while middle and southern Italy have distinct vocational training systems depending on the region. Hence, it is difficult to attain vocational qualifications outside the academic track (Blöchle, 2010). Compared to other European countries, youth unemployment, on average, is higher in Italy than in Germany (Eurostat, 1995-2015). Overall, depending on the characteristics of an area's social welfare system, entry into the labor market can be more difficult for young Italians, who must rely on family support more often than young Germans.

In Germany, the social welfare system supports young adults entering the labor market (Dommermuth, 2008). However, since the 1990s, activation approaches (i.e., those focusing more on individual responsibility) have been increasingly pursued for all age groups and sub-populations (Lessenich, 2003). Direct monetary support is kept to the minimum needed to survive to motivate people to search for work. The goal is to reintegrate unemployed people into the labor market as quickly as possible, with individual barriers, such as illness and debt, being addressed by counseling and support services (Broschinski, 2013).

One result of this focus on activation policies is that individuals are seen as being responsible for their own success or failure in the job market (Lessenich, 2003; Scherger, 2013). Young people who are not successful at securing vocational training positions may, therefore, struggle with feelings of frustration and demotivation as they grapple with their situation while being deemed to be responsible for their failure.

### **3 Detours During the Occupational Development of Young Adults**

Grounded theory uses what are known as "sensitizing concepts", especially in the context of the research questions that are asked (Tarozzi, 2012). In the present study, detours were considered a sensitizing concept. Coined by Blumer (1954, p. 7), the term "sensitizing concept" creates an awareness of which aspects should be examined more closely and focused on in the data (Blumer, 1954): "[Sensitizing concepts] are developed in the comparison of cases by finding similar or common elements among them all. They refer to the general rather than the unique and thus make cross-cultural understanding possible" (Diesing, 1971, p. 209; as cited in van den Hoonaard, 1997, p. 27). In the interview material, "detours" were defined as dropping out of school, having children, undergoing periods of unemployment, switching between training companies, and spending time in transitional programs to complete education or training.

## 4 Motivation to Learn Throughout One's Lifetime

According to Ford (1992), motivation consists of the goals, emotions, and beliefs related to personal agency. Individuals set goals and decide for or against certain options (Faltermaier, 2008). However, this process happens within societal constraints (Faltermaier, 2008; Mayer, 2004). Agency can be defined as the perceived ability to act (Böhnisch et al., 2008, p. 31) and is influenced by factors such as resources, gender, and socioeconomic status (Settersten & Gannon, 2005). Agency can be considered present when goals are selected, and efforts are made to achieve them (Schoon, 2007). However, in economically depressed regions where the continued pursuit of goals may only result in frustration and distress, disengagement from occupational goals can better support well-being (Tomasik et al., 2009), making disengagement a manifestation of agency. The individual-level factors that influence learning throughout one's lifetime are gender, age, immigration status, and educational background (Offerhaus et al., 2016). For example, people without vocational qualifications are often not interested in pursuing further training. On a societal level, access to options and the availability of opportunities and financing also influence participation in lifelong learning activities (Boeren, 2017; Offerhaus et al., 2016). Besides these factors, the motivation to learn and the ability to transform such motivation in concrete learning activities are essential for the individual's achievement of learning goals (Spiel et al., 2019). Hence, one must be motivated to learn new things and be capable of creating a situation in which new knowledge can be accessed and acquired. It is also necessary to apply strategies to integrate such knowledge into one's existing frame of reference. Remaining motivated daily requires a strong will and the recognition of how remaining motivated serves one's goals (instrumentality) (Rheinberg, 2008). Instrumentality may also be referred to as an "action-result expectation", that is, one must be cognizant of, in this specific case, the link between devoting regular attention to training (action) and how it leads to the successful completion of the training (result) and, ultimately, to the implementation of one's pre-determined goals (consequence) (Rheinberg, 2008). Hence, motivation is a complex construct that has many individual prerequisites; however, a supportive environment is also an essential condition (Ford, 1992).

## 5 Aim of the Current Study

The successful completion of any training program and, more importantly, one's subsequent successful transition into the labor market, hinges on the motivation level of the participants and on how the goals, energy, and persistence they bring to the program are fostered and encouraged throughout the training. Hence, the aim of the present study was to investigate the participants' life paths prior to participation in the training program, the perceptions of

the participants, how the participants handled detours, what the participants thought about their futures, and the levels of participant motivation.

A qualitative approach was applied to gain in-depth insights into possible processes and to determine the relationships between them and the possible mechanisms driving the processes. Using a grounded theory approach allows researchers to examine "what is going on or what is happening (or has happened) within a setting or a particular event" (Morse, 2009, p. 14). Being in a training program and adapting to this reality represents both a social psychological and social structural process within a specific context (Stern, 2009). Whether young people either feel the outcome is worth the output of effort and are energized by taking personal responsibility for their learning, or whether, on the other hand, they are distressed by the implied deficit orientation and angered or frightened by the threat of decreased social welfare benefits if they do not comply with the program, might lead to different results. Hence, a process-oriented method, such as grounded theory, seemed most suitable for our objective (Dey, 1999).

In the present study, we gathered interview data to shed light on the possible mechanisms affecting why some young people have the ability to return to the pursuit of education as a prerequisite for a successful transition into the labor market. Hence, the research question was as follows: How can the process of developing motivation after undergoing occupational detours be described? Young adults in extra-vocational training (BaE)—who represent a particularly vulnerable group—were contrasted with young people entering the professional sphere under more linear and traditional circumstances, such as being university graduates or apprentices in the dual system. A few interviews with Italian apprentices and teachers were included to add a perspective regarding a more critical economic situation. Interviews with career counselors, university lecturers, and social pedagogues were also incorporated to facilitate theory-building. The aim was to compare and, hence, to identify the motivation development process for vulnerable young adults in the BaE program. This was done by contrasting the responses of diverse interviewees.

## **6 Data and Methodology**

### **6.1 Data**

Thirty interviews were included in the present study. In total, 12 of the respondents were male (40%), and 18 were female (60%). They were young adults involved in extra-vocational training (BaE;  $n = 11$ ) and members of their support systems, such as social workers ( $n = 6$ ). Grounded theory relies on the inclusion of contrasting voices, so interviews with a German university student ( $n = 1$ ), German apprentices in the dual system ( $n = 5$ ), and vocatio-



nal students from Italy ( $n = 4$ ) were also included. Furthermore, two women in a training program and one enrolled in a school-based apprenticeship from Germany were included. Including young Italian adults allowed the researchers to gain insights into how macrostructural conditions may result in similarities or differences within the target population. See Table 1 for the interview topic guide.

*Table 1: Topic Guide Used for Interviewing Young People in BaE*

General questions	For example:  And now your professional career: How did you get this training here?
Life situation	For example:  Current living situation
Education	For example:  Career aspirations during school time
(future) professional goals and values	For example:  What should the work be like you do every day?
Parents and peers	For example:  Who was important when thinking about work, decisions in school and training?
Work-life balance	For example:  How do you combine work/training and private life?
Adult status	For example:  Would you say you are grown up?
Wellbeing	For example:  Meaning "happy life"
Possible selves exercise	
Conclusion	For example:  How was it for you to be interviewed?

Table 2 provides an overview of the entire sample. Most of the interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author. The participants in the interviews conducted by the first author were remunerated with vouchers or checks amounting to 10 euros. As shown in Table 2, some of the interviews were conducted by psychology students in the context of course assignments. The young adults who were interviewed ranged from 18 to 29 years of age (average = 21.46). The respondents in the support system ranged from 31 to 64 years of age (average age = 41.6; one missing response). The quotes were translated and modified by the first author to improve the expressions and to facilitate readers' ease of understanding (van

Nes et al., 2010). All the interviews were conducted in a professional setting. The process for the interviews conducted by the first author is described in detail below. The participants were approached via a provider of BaE training. Information about the interview was given to a group of apprentices or individuals. The interviewees clarified whether they wished to participate in the survey. The providers and individuals who were approached were open to and interested in the project.

Within the BaE facilities, convenience sampling was conducted, in which all those who were interested in participating or who were present on the survey days were interviewed (Merkens, 2010). However, care was taken to ensure that only trainees in the last year of their apprenticeship were interviewed to focus on their anticipation regarding the transition into the "real" world of work. Within the sample, there were only a few exceptions (see Table 2). In addition to the young adults in the BaE program, four trainees in the dual system were interviewed. These interviews took place either in the office of the first author or in a quiet room at the trainees' workplace.

Four interviews were conducted with vocational school students in Italy. Even though there were only a handful of interviews conducted, they offer the opportunity to pinpoint the extent to which various issues and processes found in the German context can also be found for Italian trainees. To examine the structural and cultural factors influencing the training situation of young adults, the following procedure was used. In addition to conducting interviews in Campania, interviews were also conducted in Trentino-South Tyrol. This enabled a comparison between the youths of Germany and two areas in Italy. Regarding the values and norms of workplace culture, Campania and the autonomous region of Trentino-South Tyrol are assumed to be more similar compared to Germany. If there are differences stemming from the training system, it is assumed that they will show up more in the comparison between the data from Germany and Campania than in the comparison with Trentino-South Tyrol, as the structure of training in Germany and the region of Campania differs greatly. The interviews in Italy were carried out from March to April 2012, and remuneration was provided to the trainees in the amount of 10 euros.

Two vocational students were interviewed in the Trentino-South Tyrol region and in Campania. Furthermore, the perspective of the support system was included in Trentino-South Tyrol, and a teacher and two integration teachers in South Tyrol were interviewed. In South Tyrol, all the interviews were conducted in German. Contact was made with a vocational school via the regional administration of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano South Tyrol, a German vocational training department. In Campania, the interviews were carried out with the help of an interpreter from the Goethe Institute in Naples, and the questions were adapted specifically to the respective narrative and translated into Italian in the interview context. The contents of the two interviews were summarized in German and, with the help of a native Italian speaker, the correctness of the content of the interview recording and

the summary was checked. In Italy, young adults were selected via vocational schools considering the criteria for determining disadvantage and the difficulty of living conditions (e.g., integration status of a student, changes in school/dropping out of school, etc.). In addition, it was necessary to confirm that the potential respondents were also interested in participating in an interview. When the interviews were conducted by students (see Table 2), the procedure was slightly different.

Table 2: Overview of Interviewees

	Interviewee (including gender and age)	Short description (including parental status, migration background/nationality if known)
1	Male, 20 Years, G	Final year in BaE, Turkish nationality
2	Female, 29 Years, G	Graduate of BaE
3	Female, 21 Years, G	From lowest school track to university, migration background, <i>interview conducted by students</i>
4	Male, 25 Years, G	In first year of BaE
5	Female, 41 Years, G	Social worker in BaE
6	Female, 46 Years, G	Career counselor
7	Female, 26 Years, G	Social worker in BaE
8	Female, 64 Years, G	Lecturer in BaE
9	Female, 31 Years, I	Teacher (focus on students with more support needs)
10	Female, 23 Years, G	Mother with one child, last year in BaE
11	Female, 29 Years, G	Graduate of BaE, has children
12	Male, 19 Years, G	Last year of BaE, Russian nationality
13	Female, 21 Years, G	Attends a special training program to prepare for a vocational training, <i>interview conducted by students</i>

14	Female, 20 Years, G	Attends a special training program to prepare for a vocational training, <i>interview conducted by students</i>
15	Female, 21 Years, G	In second vocational training (completed the first)
16	Female, 18 Years, G	Vocational training in dual system
17	Male, 20 Years, G	Vocational training in dual system
18	Male, 18 Years, I	Vocational student in Italy
19	Male, 20 Years, I	Vocational student in Italy
20	Male, 20 Years, I	Vocational student in Italy
21	Male, 20 Years, I	Vocational student in Italy
22	Female, 20 Years, G	Final year in BaE
23	Male, 21 Years, G	Final year in BaE
24	Male, 23 Years, G	In vocational training, <i>interview conducted by students</i>
25	Female, 24 Years, G	Graduate of dual system, first child before vocational training, second afterwards, <i>interview conducted by students</i>
26	Male, 19 Years, G	Vocational training in dual system
27	Female, 23 Years, G	Graduate of BaE, currently unemployed, <i>interview conducted by students</i>
28	Male, /, G	Head of a vocational training program, <i>interview conducted by students</i>
29	Female, 21 Years, G	Vocational training in BaE, <i>interview conducted by students</i>
30	Female, 20 Years, G	Young mother in BaE

*Note.* Place of the interview is indicated by G for Germany or I for Italy. The order of the interviewees is according to incorporation into the sample and analysis.

## 6.2 Application of Grounded Theory in the Present Study

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1974), and it can be described as a strategy for facilitating the data-driven development of theory. The goal is to map the process (Morse, 2009). The data are analyzed by comparing the material with other materials, as in the case of, for example, interview transcripts and codes, as well as memos (Corbin, 2009). In addition, this type of theory development uses so-called theoretical sampling, which means that subsequent interviews are included in the analytical process based on criteria that have emerged from previous analyses. In the present study, a constructivist grounded theory approach was applied (Charmaz, 2006) because, in this approach, the process of meaning-making is in the focus (Charmaz, 2006). This process acknowledges that the result of the analysis is an interpretation (Charmaz, 2006). The material is coded in four non-linear steps (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): Open, focused, axial, and theoretical coding. Open coding is focused on the data and descriptive, while focused coding is more analytical and abstract and aims to group and summarize open codes (Charmaz, 2006; see Table 3 for an example). Axial coding relates categories and subcategories and helps researchers to connect focus codes with abstract theoretical coding and bring a coherent structure to the data based on a set of systematic questions (e.g., when, where, why, how, and with what consequences) after the previous coding steps have been used to parse the material (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987; see Table 4). Finally, theoretical coding is conducted when the axial coding results have been integrated into the theoretical background, and the research questions are finally answered.

*Table 3: Some Focused Codes With Selected Open Codes*

<b>Focused Codes</b>	<b>Open Codes</b>
Difficult Life Circumstances	Problems within family
	Stepfather deceased
	Financial problems
Frustrating Experiences	Restricted career choice
	Practical skills should be given greater weight
	His school diploma is not enough for his career aspirations
BaE as an Intermediate Step	Goal is not higher school leaving certificate
	Intermediate step for more education
	Interested in studying
	Transition phase

Willingness to make an effort	High willingness to perform
	Intermediate exam taken seriously
	Wants to learn everything
Occupational Aspirations	Further plans
	Career planning
	Master craftsman as a goal
	Occupational advances
	Being self-employed as a goal

Table 4: Axial Coding

When?	After detours which are necessary for participation in BaE: preparation schemes as a prerequisite for the beginning of a BaE
Where?	Within the context of a strong and well-established vocational training system in Germany, special support for youth below the age of 25 years, System of unemployment benefits
Why?	Frustrating experiences and possibility to participate in a BaE
How?	Perception of the BaE as a chance, sheltered space, boost in motivation
With which consequences?	General motivation high, daily ups and downs in motivation, Further occupational aspirations → understanding of inflation of educational credentials, further goals vary in how concrete they are

## 7 Results

The results are focused on young people taking part in the BaE program, outlining their transition to the BaE program, and, from there, back to a more normative pathway into the labor market. To summarize the key findings, the frustration experienced by the participants while taking detours, combined with the offer of assistance through BaE, led to their willingness to see the BaE program as an opportunity. Various life circumstances, such as having had children at a young age, combined with the possibility that BaE would offer enhanced educational credentials, motivated the participants to complete the training. The lack of motivation that the participants sometimes experienced was partially compensated for by the special setting of BaE, in which the policies regarding being late were relaxed and they received tutoring to enable them to keep up with the demands of vocational school, for example (Landberg & Noack, 2017a). For an overview of the process, see Table 4.

The young people interviewed reported having had many frustrating experiences that could be attributed to their lack of educational credentials and low level of social capital before participating in BaE. They somewhat understood the importance of obtaining formal

qualifications, and they highlighted the importance of education and their plans to attain more education. Their experiences, therefore, appeared to reflect an understanding of the importance of lifelong learning in the neoliberal sense (von Felden, 2020).

## 7.1 Conditions of the Transitional System

Detours were characterized as something caused externally, and the interviewees emphasized that there was still time to compensate for such detours and that there was no reason to focus on feelings of regret. Unsuccessful prior efforts to enter the labor market, as well as periods of unemployment, led them to realize that education is important and beneficial. The young adults in the BaE program reported many *frustrating experiences*, which had made it clear to them that they had no chance with their existing education:

*"The writing applications are, of course, not difficult. [...] For [the position of a] salesperson 'Hauptschule' was required and then, [...] then you read 'secondary school or students preferred' or such things and then you think, 'Wow, okay, extreme.'" (female student in BaE, age 23 years)*

The interviewees accepted that they had to complete *"some" training* even if it was not in their desired occupation, as the BaE program only offers training in some selected occupations. Some of the respondents saw this as an individualization process: *"You always have to try everything on your own [...]"* (male student in BaE, age 25). Although many of the young adults were happy to obtain an apprenticeship, some further refined their career aspirations while completing the BaE training.

The young adults reportedly always had *contact with the job center system* during their job searches. The contact persisted through the acquisition of social welfare support and implementation of pre-employment measures. This type of contact was considered helpful because it eventually made training possible; in some cases, it resulted in the completion of a high school diploma. In comparison, while the young adults in the dual system reported having contact with a job support system as well (for example, with career counselors), they showed much more initiative in the career orientation and application process:

*"Ok. Yes, so after secondary school, I wanted to do something with foreign languages, especially with English. That was very interesting to me, then I was just at the employment office and asked what opportunities there were, and, among other things, just the school in [place name] just the [name of the school] was mentioned, recommended [...]" (female student in the dual system, age 21)*

Even though the young adults who enter the BaE program often come from underprivileged circumstances, securing a spot in a training program offers them the opportunity to build a *more traditional biography* after taking some detours. The desirability of this more straight-

forward, linear life path was clear to the interviewees, both among the apprentices in the BaE program and the participants in the conventional dual system. A young mother in the BaE program expressed this normative view when she said the following:

*"[...] first the education, then I wanted to first be together with my friend a little bit like that, and then we wanted a child, well, now I was just pregnant, then we moved in together and [laughs] and then I was just finishing the training, so I did not really want that, but in the end, it worked out better than we thought."* (female student in BaE, age 20)

Overall, among the participants, the time before entering the BaE program was characterized by frustrating experiences. The participants' educational attainment was mainly low, their general life situations were difficult, and detours were taken. The young people in BaE had career aspirations that they generally could not fulfill within the context of the BaE program. This phase ended in accepting a new vocational goal and starting the BaE program, which participants perceived as the major, final change leading them to a more normative path in life. Compared to the Italian apprentices, only a few differences were found. The detours made before entering their current vocational training were not as long, and their difficulties came more from personal circumstances and issues (e.g., learning difficulties). Plans for more education were also included in their aspirations.

## 7.2 Taking the BaE Offer

The offer to participate in the BaE training reached the young adults at what they considered the right moment, or the point when they were willing to go through the training. At this point, they had perceived that the costs of dropping out or not entering the program were greater than those of pursuing the training, even if it would not prepare them for their originally desired profession.

Previous behavioral strategies contributed to the participants' inability to find a professional path. This experience created a willingness to accept the BaE offer. Oftentimes, the participants framed the BaE offer an opportunity "happening" to them, instead of a choice they made, which they then took, seeing it as a chance to improve their lives:

*"Yes, I just, I had an appointment at the employment office and then said, I could go into this program now and then I will do a year of internship and so on and a bit of school on the side, and I went "Yes, good, better than sitting around at home," then I did that for a year and then after that I was unemployed for a few more weeks, and then I had another appointment and then they offered me the training here [BaE]."* (female student in BaE, age 20).



### 7.3 Differences in Motivation

The important role that the participants' children played in motivating them to pursue further education was especially evident in the responses of the young mothers interviewed (there were no fathers in the sample). This attitude was mainly echoed among the members of the mothers' support systems. The young mothers reported that they were motivated to complete the program and that they managed various demands and obligations, such as the apprenticeship and childcare. However, two social workers who worked directly with these young adults disagreed (at least to some extent) regarding the positive effect of children on motivation. The motivation created by being a mother would, accordingly, only be relevant to a small portion of the sample. However, for the whole sample, motivation involved several factors and was reflected at several levels. The BaE training presented new options that could lead to normal career biography, indicating the presence of normative expectations. The young adults interviewed increased their *occupational aspirations*, and the more they achieved, the more they sought to obtain further education. The opportunities that the BaE program offered the young adults created motivation. Within the *safety net of the BaE training*, the young people developed goals, experienced success, and developed a greater sense of self-efficacy. Thus, undergoing the training and developing other goals were positively associated. It seemed that, after having experienced many setbacks when jobs or vocational training positions could not be secured, the BaE program finally functioned as a facilitator of entry into the next level of higher education, which, of course, presented new (job) possibilities. Hence, almost all the interviewees planned to acquire more educational credentials after the completion of the BaE program. The willingness to engage in lifelong learning was present, with BaE graduates showing levels of willingness like those of the regular apprentices in the German dual system of vocational training and the Italian apprentices within the sample. Almost all the young adults in vocational training who were interviewed aimed to continue their education. One trainee in a dual education program, however, was unsure about continuing his educational trajectory, attributing his hesitation to his *"inner weaker self"* (male student in the dual system, age 19). One trainee in the BaE program reported wanting to graduate and gain employment, saying, *"I'm just trying to finish my training now, with a good average, so I then will have more opportunities"* (female student in BaE, age 20). However, not all the young adults interviewed, unfortunately, can pursue the dream of transitioning to higher education because, while the BaE program gives young people who would otherwise have no career opportunities a chance for qualification, it is by no means a guarantee of success.

#### 7.4 Perspectives on Further Education

All the young people in the sample, regardless of whether they were German or Italian, wanted to obtain more education after the training in which they were participating. One German apprentice in the regular dual vocational training system mentioned that he was unsure about further learning:

*"On the one hand, as a technician or master, whether I want to study there again and become a technician, well, I do not know [laughs], I do not think so. But I could definitely imagine it, let us see if I can get over my weaker self by the end of the fourth year of my apprenticeship."* (male student in dual training, 19 years)

### 8 Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, we shared stories of young people who were motivated and engaged in the BaE program. Having made detours was not only a prerequisite for receiving a BaE offer and an integral component of this vocational pathway, this type of experience seemed to contribute to the participants' understanding the necessity of lifelong learning and the need to build motivation. The specific setting of the BaE training is especially characterized by an understanding stance toward shortcomings, such as being late in the morning, which helped to compensate for the naturally varying levels of motivation that the participants regularly experienced. Together, the data support the assertion that the BaE is a helpful means through which to integrate young people into the world of work.

The participants' realization that their accumulated education was not sufficient, and hence their frustration about the situation, helped to increase their motivation to participate in the BaE program. Most of the young people perceived that they had few chances, and this "forced" them to participate in the BaE training (Mascherini, 2019, p. 524f). Indeed, the research shows that prior competence-related frustration strengthens motivation (Fang et al., 2018). Obviously, one could argue that, nevertheless, our treatment of fellow humans should be humane, and we should not aim to purposely frustrate people. Instead, the possibility of reconnecting people with the educational and vocational system throughout their lifetimes is more important, as this approach could allow people to reach new educational goals whenever they feel ready to tackle them.

Employment was also associated with agency in our sample (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2013). The sample used the program to improve their chances of accumulating more education, which increased their chances of securing employment in the long run (Núñez & Ilias, 2010; Settersten & Ray, 2010).

Some results require special emphasis. Despite the sometimes-difficult life situations from which the young adults in the program came, they managed to find their way into an apprenticeship, and most of them were likely to graduate because they were already in their final year of training. The agency that these young adults have has been proven. Since it is also likely that they will experience career changes throughout the course of their lives, the experiences that they already have can be built on, and a resource-oriented approach can be pursued.

One must question why taking various measures, undergoing phases of unemployment, and pursuing various jobs are necessary before the offer to participate in the BaE program is given to young people. The stigmatization that young adults experience in the system of career counseling and social security produces a very one-sided image of humans. As has already been shown in other studies, obtaining gainful employment is still a central goal for most people (Dörre et al., 2012). The question of whether motivation would have been created in the participants without the experience of frustration remains unanswered. A vocational preparation measure may be useful for developing their maturity and consolidating professional ideas. However, undergoing multiple phases of unemployment increases the risk of experiencing unemployment again in the course of one's life (Gregg, 2001; Schmillen & Umkehrer, 2014). To minimize this risk, an earlier placement is recommended to keep periods of unemployment as short and infrequent as possible. This would also be an expression of the belief that all people within a society should strive to lead meaningful and independent lives through employment and be integrated into a society's social structures (Blustein, 2011).

Even though the young people in the BaE were essentially forced to engage in the program (Mascherini, 2019), they did not view the experience as negatively as the literature suggests.

One could interpret these frustrating experiences as being essential for the development of motivation, as only successful young people were interviewed (most were already in their last year of the BaE training). Hence, it is likely that those who were less successful in coping with and reframing these challenges had already dropped out. The prevalence of high BaE drop-out rates supports this interpretation (Feldens & Bennett, 2019), and, in 2018, six months after leaving the BaE program, only 61% of the program's participants were employed in positions subject to social security contributions (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2019). However, this statistic does not clarify whether these young people had graduated successfully from the BaE training or dropped out and found employment anyway. For comparison, in a regional pilot program that offered even more support than the BaE, the dropout rate was 38.8% (Becker et al., 2011). In the dual system, one can look at the rate at which apprentices and companies cancel employment contracts to better understand the success rates. In 2017, 25.7% of the contracts in the dual system were canceled (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2019). However, this figure does not reflect the dropout rate because these cancellations could simply indicate a voluntary switch to another

company. It is reported that the dropout rate of young people in the BaE training is higher than that of those in regular training positions (Hecker, 2000).

As seen in other studies, the young adults in BaE preferred to delay starting a family because they had poor job-market prospects (Settersten & Ray, 2010). They showed a fundamental willingness to establish themselves professionally. For this reason, further experiences of frustration should be minimized, and the placement system should support young people even after completion of the training to aid them in entering employment and, for example, in finding a balance between needs-based training and consideration of the professional interests of young adults.

Even if goals are relevant to creating and maintaining motivation (Ford, 1992; Rheinberg, 2008) and meaningful aspirations are predictive of professional success (Ashby & Schoon, 2012), overambitious goals also involve the risk of (renewed) experiences of frustration (Tynkkynen et al., 2012). Good advice and support are, therefore, important and helpful in the absence of clear ideas for one's professional future (Ashby & Schoon, 2012). It is also especially important that the training qualifications achieved are not devalued by unsuccessful transitions to work during the transition from training to gainful employment and that the work obtained is not precarious (Castel, 2008). For young parents, it is especially important that the costs of gainful employment, such as, for example, those stemming from the need for childcare, are not greater than the benefits, as they keep young people entrenched in social security systems (Edin & Lein, 1997).

Furthermore, young adults must learn strategies for continuing to learn independently and, thus, continuously acquire skills. The equal opportunities proclaimed by the educational expansion in the 1970s are recognized as illusions (Ecarius & Wahl, 2009; Schultheis, 2005). Social origin still determines the perception of educational opportunities and one's attitude toward lifelong learning as well as the development of the skills needed to acquire new knowledge independently and the qualifications needed for positions involving high income and prestige (Ecarius & Wahl, 2009; Schultheis, 2005). Regarding further professional development, the representatives of the support system emphasize that the young people in such programs are still too young to make decisive professional decisions. Therefore, the Italian integration teacher also welcomed the efforts to have students acquire the university entrance qualifications during a year more at a vocational school (made possible by law by the Ministry of Education in Rome at the beginning of 2013; Autonome Provinz Bozen-Südtirol, 2010). Hence, the opportunities and risks perceived in the pedagogical support system do not differ between Italian teachers, German teachers, and social workers regarding apprentices in the BaE program and integration students (Landberg & Noack, 2017b). Overall, it can be said that within this controversial discussion of whether a scheme such as the BaE program is helpful to young people (Busemeyer & Iversen, 2012; Solga et al., 2014, Walther et al., 2007), the present study offers evidence of its advantages.

## 8.1 Practical Recommendations

Remaining motivated daily requires a strong will, and the recognition of how to remain motivated serves one's goals (instrumentality) (Rheinberg, 2008). Instrumentality may also be referred to as an action-result expectation, that is, it reflects how closely, in this specific case, the link between regular attendance of the training (action) leads to the successful completion of the training (result) and, ultimately, to the implementation of one's pre-determined goals after the BaE program is completed (consequence) (Rheinberg, 2008). Absenteeism in the BaE program was identified by both the trainees and members of their support systems as a persistent problem and implementing learning strategies for enhancing self-motivation could be a means of reducing drop-out rates (Shane et al., 2012) and increasing motivation. Absenteeism can also be addressed by providing regular, individualized feedback that highlights and praises positive individual development (Rheinberg & Fries, 2010).

The findings of multiple studies indicate that all young adults have, to some extent, internalized the idea that pursuing additional education is important and even normative as a means of survival in today's knowledge-oriented society (e.g., Settersten & Ray, 2010). The same conclusion applies to the present study. However, young adults continue to formulate educational plans that are sometimes too diffuse, generalized, or disorganized, which, in turn, minimizes their likelihood of achieving them (Ford, 1992; Rheinberg, 2008). The goals of young people should be as specific as possible and, whenever appropriate, divided into intermediate, small goals so that there is also the possibility of receiving intermediate feedback and engaging in goal adaptation (Wild et al., 2006).

The young adults themselves must learn strategies to continue learning on their own and to continuously acquire skills (cp. Spiel et al., 2019). However, at the same time, equality of opportunity, as proclaimed by the educational expansion in the 1970s, seems to remain an illusion (Ecarius & Wahl, 2009; Schultheis, 2005). One's social background still plays a key role in determining the distribution of educational opportunities and attitudes toward lifelong learning, as well as one's likelihood of having the competencies needed to acquire new knowledge independently (Ecarius & Wahl, 2009; Schultheis, 2005). Since one's home environment plays a key role in whether and to what degree one acquires these vital skills, educationally disadvantaged young adults require special support (Ecarius & Wahl, 2009).

## 8.2 Limitations and Future Research

Further research should include BaE dropouts and compare their motivational trajectories to those of the successful trainees interviewed in the present study to better determine the factors for success. Future studies should also follow up on BaE graduates to examine their long-term integration into the labor market and lifelong learning patterns. The sample analyzed in this study had only a few Italian interviewees. Future studies should aim at including

a more balanced sample to systemically identify the effects of macrostructural influences and the specific features of the vocational training systems in various countries. Furthermore, depending on the availability of regular training positions and alternatives, the motivation to employ apprentices varies between employers (Aspøy & Nyen, 2017). Hence, it would be relevant to include this perspective in further studies.

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