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Title

The Role of Work Values for Career Orientation in the School-to-VET Transition in Germany

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Abstract

Introduction

School-to-work transitions have become a globally significant research area, as young people in different countries face increasing uncertainty, more personalised transition pathways, and higher expectations to align their occupational choices with personal values. This has made guidance within this framework more complex due to changing labour markets, greater demand for flexibility, and more diverse life trajectories (de Boer & Bordoloi, 2022; Dokoupilová et al., 2024), while intrinsic values have a high importance for aspirations (Hegna, 2014; Kogler et al., 2024) and career stability (Sortheix, et al., 2015). As a result, work values are becoming more important for young people and their career orientation, with intrinsic and social values

gaining importance alongside longstanding extrinsic considerations (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Twenge, 2010). In this context, the German dual system represents a particularly relevant example, as its high level of specificity and institutional tracking force young people to make early and consequential educational and career decisions (Bol & Van de Werfhorst, 2013).

Objectives

This paper aims to examine how young people perceive, prioritise, and negotiate work values during their transition from school to vocational education and training (VET). It seeks to analyse how work values influence specific career decision-making situations, how intrinsic, social, and extrinsic value dimensions are weighted and interconnected, and how these processes shape expectations of training companies and workplace environments. By focusing on the transition process retrospectively, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of career orientation as a dynamic, context-dependent, and experience-based process rather than a singular rational choice.

Theoretical Basis

The paper is based on established models of work values (Brown, 2012; Ros et al., 1999; Schwartz, 1992, 2012) and utilises the person–environment fit framework (Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005, 2023). These approaches underpin the conceptualisation of career orientation as a dynamic negotiation process, in which individual value orientations serve as key benchmarks for evaluating the fit between personal expectations and organisational environments.

Methodology

Twenty-two problem-centred interviews with apprentices who recently made the transition from school to VET across various occupational fields in Germany have been conducted (Witzel, 2022). The interviews serve to retrospectively reconstruct participants' decision-making processes during the transition from school to VET and reflect on their current training experiences. The analysis of the interview material is a combination of structuring and explanatory qualitative content analysis. Here the aim is to reconstruct the micro-processes of value-based decision-making that are difficult to capture through standardized quantitative methods (Mayring & Fenzl, 2019).

Results

The findings reveal that work values are not fixed or isolated preferences but are actively negotiated internally based on context and experience. Intrinsic and social values, such as meaningful work, opportunities for learning, autonomy, recognition, and respectful social relationships, are central to decision-making. Extrinsic values, like security and income, remain important but are integrated through ongoing situational negotiations aligned with long-term development goals. Apprentices describe a sequential prioritisation where security underpins future growth and emphasise situational negotiation, balancing self-determination with social embeddedness. Additionally, workplace experience placements in training companies also function as sites where this internal negotiation is tested and reflected in relation to organisational value expectations, are crucial spaces for experiential validation, enabling young people to observe, interpret, and align organisational values with their own.

Conclusions

The study expands and integrates existing research by incorporating a processual, value-based perspective into the person–environment fit framework. It demonstrates that career orientation should not be viewed as a static matching process but as a dynamic, experience-based negotiation where work values are continuously interpreted and adjusted. This perspective provides a more detailed understanding of how young people navigate the transition into VET amidst uncertainty and institutional structures.

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