

Learning to be precarious – The transition of young people from school into precarious work in Germany

Marcus Eckelt & Guido Schmidt, TU Berlin, Germany

Abstract

The integration of young adults into the labor market is a challenge for every society. Because Germany survived the current crisis quite well and youth unemployment rate is more or less stable, the German apprenticeship-system, Duale Ausbildung, became a kind of new role model in Europe. In this article Marcus Eckelt and Guido Schmidt analyze the downsides of the German system which are often disguised in the public discussion. Based on interview analysis and additional quantitative data it is argued that some young people on the non-academic pathway are structurally denied a straight educational career. They have to attend substitute courses, if they do not find an apprenticeship after leaving school at the age of 15/16. During the following difficult transition into work they give up expectations concerning job and life quality. In the end they gratefully accept unsecure positions in the growing low-pay sector to avoid unemployment and living on state welfare. The public discussion remains silent about their situation, which is explained as a result of neoliberal hegemony. In conclusion it is shown that pedagogics alone cannot change these serious problems of young adults, but that they have to be brought back into the political discussion.

Key Words: *Vocational training, precarity, transition, Germany*

Introduction

The educational system fulfills different social functions for society as a whole as well as for individuals in particular. Helmchen (2014) criticizes that neoliberalismⁱ transforms education – besides by commodification processes – mainly by subordinating the different and complex processes of educating under the one and only aim of employability. In this reduced perspective *Bildung* (education) – as a broader process of emancipation – cannot be achieved and is declared unnecessary or

useless. This kind of criticism is without doubts correct, but only focuses on the primary and secondary school as well as on the university.

The transition from school to work is therefore often forgotten in public discussions concerning the education system. However, this transition is crucial for young people in modern capitalist societies; their social status and individual welfare depend highly on a successful transition. In our working society even reaching adulthood is partly identified with the integration into the active workforce. Neoliberal ideology describes social interaction as market interaction; learning and education is reduced to an investment in one's employability. The quality of education is therefore easy to measure by the cash flow a certain credential generates. Especially higher education was previously seen as a warrant for a well-paid job.

The financial crisis since 2008 shows this correlation not to be justified. Higher education cannot guarantee young people a secured transition into work if there is a full-scale economic breakdown. In Spain or Greece more than half of the young adults are unemployed – many of them holding university diplomas. In contrast, Germany faced the crisis exceptionally well and its youth unemployment rate stayed below ten percent. In the political discussion the question emerged of how the European countries, which are affected stronger by the crisis, can reduce their youth unemployment rate. This changed the official education policy. Even the European Commission stopped repeating its dogma that more and higher education leads automatically to more and higher job security. Instead the German system of vocational education and training – apprenticeship consisting of company based practical learning with additional theoretical learning in school – is presented as the new solution for youth unemployment.ⁱⁱ

We do not want to analyze this change of arguments in this article in detail. It seems obvious that such education policies can only work out if accompanied by job creating labor market policies – furthermore: not any kind of jobs, but decent jobs. The equation "*Duale Ausbildung* = low unemployment" is a daffy simplification. Anyway many German politicians identify the VET-system as the outstanding reason for the

German miracle. The German government openly expresses its satisfaction of receiving this international recognition after long years of being criticized for underachieving the goal of increasing the rate of academics (Bundesregierung, 2013).

This conclusion nevertheless denies the many problems German young adults with low education credentials face in the transition from school to work. We will focus on this group in our article to show the hidden downside of the *Duale Ausbildung* – not to morally complain, but to bring attention to an often (also in critical discussions) forgotten aspect in the German system: The majority of people don't study in universities and nearly all of this majority will become employed workers. Especially for young people with low school degreesⁱⁱⁱ it is difficult to enter the labor market, because they are at the bottom of the German apprenticeship market hierarchy and so their possibilities to get a decent job later are low within a competitive labor market.

To analyze the difficulties to find an apprenticeship after school we combine statistical data about the dimensions and the structure of the German apprenticeship-market with qualitative data of interview analysis. The interviews were originally done in two research projects. In 2010 we interviewed ten teenagers at the age of 14-15 during an internship about their strategies to look for an apprenticeship-placement or further school based education (Lehmkuhl, Eckelt, Schöler 2011). In the other ongoing dissertation-project 27 interviews were done in 2013-2014 with young adults who had to take substitute courses after school before finding an apprenticeship-place. For this article we use passages of four interviews from both projects to illustrate our argumentation. Qualitative data can show the individual meaning of the transition process from school to work. Therefore we concentrate on a few cases to show in detail aspects of the actual social situation of young people. The combination of statistical data and interview analysis allows an understanding of the structural coercion as well as of the individual perspective of young working class subjects. Finally we refer to the existing segregation of the labor market to interpret the data and dismantle the hegemonic dimension of the German VET-system.

Germany: Educational system and its abnormalities

Schooling is obligatory for children who have attained the age of six years. After primary school the children aged ten/eleven years are segregated between school forms which offer a direct university access after the 12th or 13th grade, and other school forms which end after the 9th or 10th grade at the age of 15/16 years. In 2012 around 57 percent of the population between 18 and 21 years held a certificate of education which gave them university access. Due to schooling reforms this number was exceptionally high that year. Prognoses say it will stabilize around 50 percent in the next years. This shows that non-academic education is pretty important in Germany compared with other developed capitalist countries: half of school graduates do not have a permission to study in universities and around 20 percent of those with permission to study do not enter university (KMK, 2005 & 2012). Even so there exists compulsory education up to the age of 18, those kids who do not follow the academic pathway have to apply in companies or for further schooling after finishing the 9th or 10th grade.

They have two possibilities: Firstly, there exists school based VET, which trains mainly for the health, education and service sectors. Secondly, there is the so called *Duale Ausbildung*. This means company based learning with additional schooling. Apprentices spend around 70 percent of their time in the company and 30 percent of their time in school during the three-year-apprenticeship. This apprenticeship-learning-opportunity is nationally and internationally considered as the typical German pathway to qualify for occupations. During the last years the German *Duale Ausbildung* was the mostly used argument for explaining the relatively low youth unemployment rate in Germany while the numbers in south Europe skyrocketed to more than 50 percent.

The devil's in the details: While public universities in Germany are free of fees and in practice everybody with permission has a right to study^{iv}, school graduates don't have a right to an apprenticeship spot. They have to compete with others in a market-based procedure. The neoliberal core-element of market as a social regulation hadn't to be implemented. It has a long tradition in Germany. In the late 19th and early 20th-century the medieval social forms of apprenticeship-based

learning of the guilds were reinvented as an answer to pressing social problems. Instead of liberating the education to the new industrial companies like it was done in Great Britain or building up a state school system like in France, the German state used education policies as a part of anti-socialist legislation to control the young working class subjects by integrating them into daily work and to strengthen the middle classes crafts (*Mittelstandspolitik*). This initial decision leads to an exceptional German pathway in educational politics until today. Paradoxically, this outdated system became the base for the highly qualified German industrial workforce, which during the Weimar Republic, fascism, East German socialism and West German capitalism changed the label "made in Germany" from a warning to a quality brand label (Greinert, 1994 & 2005).

Neoliberal politics weren't changing the formal constitutions of this system, but the context was completely changed. Since the 1980s there is a continuous lack of supply (meaning apprenticeship-positions) while the demand (meaning school graduates who do not study) has remained high. The so-called "Law of Supply and Demand" doesn't apply as there is no equilibrium. According to neoliberal dogmas the German state has not intervened in this non-working market. Instead of forcing the companies to offer more places or creating real qualifying possibilities – a possibility which was discussed in the late 1970s – state intervention is rejected as counterproductive. As a result around 30 percent of school leavers without A-levels do not find a qualifying educational opportunity today. For them the state provides substitute non-qualifying courses^v which aim to improve the young people's chances to find a "real" apprenticeship or further schooling. In 2003 for once even more school leavers entered substitute courses than apprenticeships. Since then the situation got better because the number of school graduates dropped.

These objective restrictions are socially denied. Since the 1980s the responsible institutions developed a highly sophisticated system of definitions and statistics to hide the constantly growing problem of fewer apprenticeship spots. Dobischat, Kühnlein & Schurgatz show in an expertise for the Hans-Böckler-Foundation that a whole discourse has been created by which school graduates are accused of being

themselves responsible for their situation. In case they do not find an apprenticeship they are accused of being lazy or not being able to work. It is made to look as if it were the pupil's fault if they don't fulfill the requirements of the companies – in theory at the age of 15 or 16 (Dobischat, Kühnlein, Schurgatz, 2012). While in fact the average age for starting an apprenticeship is now 20 years, since after substitute courses people apply again and again for years (BIBB, 2014, 135).

Transition: Giving up expectations

“Well, if I'm not chosen, then I have to go on looking for an internship/career choice, I mean searching for job opportunities and then I have to apply again. Indeed, it will last a while.” (Mohammed, 15 years, 9th grade pupil)^{vi}

Mohammed is a pupil who is just about to leave school. He is looking forward to start *any* apprenticeship, since he has an unusually realistic view of his low chances after leaving school. His wish to find any apprenticeship shows that he accepts the expectations of society to enter the labor force as soon as possible. Anyway he expects a difficult and long-lasting process to find somebody who is willing to give him a position as an apprentice, because he will leave school with a low school degree. His perspective on the labor market is influenced by his family history. His father (a migrant worker from Turkey) was unemployed and not finding a job for a long time during Mohammed's childhood. This phase of life was a serious situation for Mohammed and his family, which he still remembers very well.

The market-based transition from school to work puts high structural pressure on young people on a non-academic educational pathway. In the competition for getting an apprenticeship the companies select those with a higher education certificate or better school results (BIBB, 2014, 147). As the school results are determined by the family background pupils with less cultural and social capital are most likely to find themselves without an apprenticeship-placement. Other forms of discrimination like race and gender modify the chances of getting an apprenticeship: Immigrants with the same school diplomas and the same application-strategies have fewer chances of being invited to an

interview and being chosen in the end. While the underrepresentation of girls is based on job-related gender stereotypes: Girls are more likely to study or enter a school based vocational education. Those who begin an apprenticeship do so mainly in services and only in few cases in industrial, mechanical or craft jobs (Puhmann, 2005; BMFSFJ, 2008).

“And then they didn’t choose me, this I got clear. OK, this is one thing. I can cope with that. It was bad for me. But they directly told me if I conduct the one year BQL [vocational qualification substitute course, authors note], means one year internship [at that company, authors note.] and schooling, they will choose me. This was the promise that motivated me: One year internship without payment, it doesn’t matter. The main thing is that I will have an apprenticeship afterwards. [...] But after six months they told me: No, we don’t choose you.” (Manuel, 21 years, apprentice in the first year in the field of logistics)^{vii}

After school Manuel was keen to find a job. He wanted to work and tried his best to get an apprenticeship-placement. With his low school diploma (Hauptschulabschluss) this wasn’t easy and several attempts failed. After Manuel had failed an aptitude test, one company offered him to attend a substitute-course instead. After one year he should get the apprenticeship the company promised him – at least in Manuel's eyes. Manuel was quite happy to get a chance and saw an outstanding possibility which would guarantee him an apprenticeship-placement. Highly motivated he started the substitute course, because his future seemed secure. Manuel worked half a year for the company without payment – he was a cheap labor force – and visited additional school classes. Manuel was highly frustrated after the company told him that he would not get the apprenticeship. The dismissal seemed unbelievable, because he had trusted the company and its representatives. Manuel had to learn that he can’t rely on promises in the world of labor, there trust occurs only through documentation or signed contracts.

Manuel's case is typical for many in similar situations. Having difficulties finding an apprenticeship after school brings young people (especially with low diploma) into a precarious situation. They consider their fate as

an individual failure – a view which is strengthened by official discourses about personal responsibility in the modern knowledge-based economy. As a matter of fact the main explanation named for the problem to find a job is a lack of self-discipline. There is the – always repeated – complaint of the youth not willing to work hard, not willing to get up in the morning, not willing to get dirty and so on (Dobischat, Kühnlein, Schurgatz, 2012). Young people are confronted with a huge variety of short-term substitute courses, which are offered by different companies.^{viii} Who enters which course depends mainly on social workers and state agencies. As all courses are preparatory and are not giving young attendees any certificates that are valuable for their future employers there are high fluctuations and many drop-outs. The changing classmates and instructors, different learning and working places and, sometimes, questionable pedagogical quality make it impossible for the attendees to develop a stabile occupational perspective. Albeit these programs officially have that aim. As these structural reasons are not discussed this uncertain situation can lead to a negative self-image of young working class subjects:

“No, during that time it was again a period when I went out a lot with my friends: It was like chaos and school and so was a minor matter.”
(Bastian, 19 years, apprentice in the first year in the field of logistics)^{ix}

After school Bastian followed his mother's advice and tried to upgrade his marks and visited, therefore, a substitute course with a focus on clerical work and services – he gave up after some months, because he lost interest. Instead he began a school-based training as an office management assistant – he broke off after one and a half years. Bastian was unsatisfied and indecisive about his personal future. To compensate his inner conflict he spent a lot of time with his friends, who were unemployed or without an apprenticeship-placement too. By doing so he lost contact with the school that offered substitute courses more and more. Paradoxically, it was the variety of possibilities that led him into a situation in which he lost orientation and a proper labor perspective.

The attendance of substitute courses can isolate young adults who have to cope with losing their school class (classmates, teachers, daily structure and social role) as a stable social context. They enter a new situation which lacks stability and perspective. For many pupils it is a shocking moment if they do not find an apprenticeship or if further schooling doesn't fulfill their hopes. This can lead to a period of social disintegration. Due to the isolation, young people react with demotivation and absenteeism often combined with focusing on their free-time activities like going out with friends.

Work: Accepting what is achievable

“And they told me that I hadn't got the apprenticeship-placement, because they already had two apprentices. [...] But one of them canceled his acceptance [...] because, I think, he had found something else. The funny thing is that this guy now is in my class.”
(Bastian)^x

After some breakoffs and reorientations Bastian found an apprenticeship thanks to a lucky coincident. Even after some time Bastian is assured that his success is only based on being lucky: Only because someone else steps back for a better apprenticeship he fills in. His perspective shows a fatalistic perception of the application process. With a low self-esteem he doesn't express anger about his situation, but a kind of happiness to cheat his fate. To find himself as a classmate of somebody who is officially better than him amuses him.

Manuel on the other hand refuses the idea of trusting in luck completely. He stresses the importance of strategic planning combined with postponing of his own interests to find an apprenticeship:

„Because of four temporary jobs over several months [...] because of that I got the job. Since in the application process/I have to admit I wasn't the best. And that is nearly impossible because you have applicants with 1,0 marks on their certificates or you have pupils with A-levels, everything.” (Manuel)^{xi}

Finally Manuel found an apprenticeship-placement in a company he already knew. He worked there several times as a temporary worker when he hadn't had a proper apprenticeship-placement or real alternative. He did so at other companies, too. For Manuel it is important to leave former employers in an amicable way, because he hopes for another employment opportunity in the future. In this respect it doesn't matter how he feels or if he thinks that the conduct of the companies is fair. Besides all disappointments and the frustration, his strategy worked out in the end and proved himself right. This self-affirmation of having a certain control over his own fate helps him to rearticulate disappointments as opportunities and necessary steps he tries to learn from.

The access to the labor market is one-sidedly regulated or controlled by the companies and young people are aware of this. They develop their own explanation for how it could be possible for them to enter the labor market. Our cases illustrate two justifications: First you simply have to have luck. When it seems that you don't have any chance at a job interview or some tests then you can only get a foot in the door of the labor market if you are in the right place at the right time. Secondly, you develop some kind of long-term strategy to convince potential employers. Both explanations show how young adults cope in a situation of vocational uncertainty.

“I thought: I will earn later – after I finish my apprenticeship and start a regular job – I will take home two thousand Euros. [...] But that was much too high. They told me: 'No, you will earn one thousand to one thousand two hundred!' [...] Well today I think: Hey, nowadays it depends on every single cent, why not. Therefore, I can't say/I can't be fussy and say: No it is too little money or so. In any case: One has to be satisfied if you have an occupation at all, where you are a permanent worker and where you get your money.” (Bastian)^{xii}

The expectations on what he will earn after finishing an apprenticeship seem unrealistic in retrospective. 2.000 Euro after taxes would be a salary from which one (living single) can afford a lower middle class living standard in Germany. During a two year period of different steps

like substitute courses, unsuccessful applications, dropping out of school-based training programs etc. Bastian lowered his salary expectations, significantly. For him a decent job with a fair salary seems not to be acquirable. Instead he accepts (or just hopes for) a future position in society where "it depends on every single cent" – meaning as a working poor. A 1.000 Euro income is just a little more than state welfare in Germany, the poverty line for a single person was 980 Euro in 2013 (Baumann & Seils, 2014, 7). His rugged transition made him learn that one has to reduce his/her expectations to enhance his/her chance in the labor market. The right of complaining is given up for the hope to find at least a secured job with little, but regular, income. That's why Bastian is satisfied with his situation: The society gave him a chance to be part of its active workforce and saved him from the ever existing threat of being unemployed.

Young people are confronted with social expectations about what it means to reach adulthood. Especially in working class families to work in an apprenticeship or at least unskilled job is considered fundamental for reaching adulthood. As time goes by young people without direct transition into a stable apprenticeship feel a growing social pressure – for instance from their families, peers, boy-/girlfriends – to do something "real". They gradually reduce their expectations of work. In school they had been told that finding a job means to find an occupation matching ones interests and abilities. During school time the pupils had expected, furthermore, that a job would offer them social recognition, meaning they would be able to start a family and possess status symbols such as a car or going on vacation once a year. In general they are expecting a decent job which guarantees this. While this expectations are called conservative and white-bread in literature sometimes (Wellgraf, 2012, pp. 105) it is more likely to see it as a wish for a non-precarious life as they know very well from their families what it means to lack sufficient resources for a socially accepted lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1987, pp. 585). However, after a certain time of instability and growing doubts they begin to realize that the society – or more precisely the job market – will not offer them a lot of opportunities to choose from; they gradually lower their former expectations of work concerning the occupation sector, salary, security, gender stereotypes and prestige of the occupation and

work quality in general. Only some kind of precarious opportunities seems to be in reach. They start believing that they have no right to get a good job because of their personal failures. They describe themselves as being responsible because, they had been lazy during school and substitute courses. Finally, the young adults begin to force themselves to find and finish any qualifying apprenticeship: A stance that is strengthened by the perspective and the threat of living from state welfare in the future.

“Fun is always such a stupid word in the context of an apprenticeship. I mean: In the end nearly every apprenticeship or job makes you sick because, it is always the same work. [...] Because, of the colleagues it's fun hence, you like it to go there. [...] Yeah fun? Either you have to make fun with you colleagues. In between some foolishness, chatting a bit or so. But otherwise: Work is done, day is over and like this it goes on. Afterwards it is my motivation anyway to hold out the three years of apprenticeship – somehow or other.”
(Manuel)^{xiii}

During the transition to work Manuel developed a negative perspective of work. He is certain that now and also in future he will not have "fun" during his daily work itself. He expects that work will dominate his daily life. The idea of a lifelong job and his identity centered on it still exist. While the work itself is alienating, the relationship with his colleagues can make his work bearable. More and more the workplace becomes a social space where the interaction between colleagues gives him social recognition and stability. Still the situation of doing an apprenticeship will surely end and his hopes of staying in the company as a regular worker do not exist. That's why Manuel refers to endure the apprenticeship. The senselessness and difficulties there appear to be a price he has to pay for the certificate at the end of the apprenticeship, which gives him the possibility to enter the labor market.

“During the week I always get up at 4:30 a.m. I am only back at home at 6:30 p.m. [...] Yes, that's it: I don't have anything from my day. At 9:30 p.m. I have to go to bed, because I have to get up at 4 a.m. the next day. I have nothing from my day, as mentioned, I have no time

to meet my friends, too. When I see my friends, then maybe just once a day during the weekend. In any case, not as in the past: In the past we met after school directly with friends, we hung around.” (Bastian)^{xiv}

Bastian specifies what it means if work dominates one’s daily life. He is ready to do anything for his apprenticeship-placement: His company is located far away from his home and so he needs some time to get there. Leaving the house early in the morning and coming home late doesn't leave him nearly any time for other activities. After work he is tired and spends the remaining time with his girlfriend, while his other close relationships with friends suffer. The image he presents of himself recalls the working husband who sacrifices his time and health for his family – in this view Bastian's case is a very clear example of how young working class subjects rearticulate their precarious situation into an adult and mature attitude.

Time-consumption is one key aspect of work in the view of the interviewed young people. They have to get up early and have to work late hours. There remains less time to meet their friends like in school or maintain their social contacts. Closely related to the lowering of work expectations it became obvious that the interviewees also restructure their view on labor during the transition period from school to work. Their daily labor routine is boring and they cannot identify with their work. During school the pupils had had the vision that helping other people is the key aspect of work – the value in use (in Marxist terms) of their work was the only aspect they could think of. In contrast the aspect of earning money – the exchange value of work in capitalism – was rejected as a mere egoistic motivation.^{xv} After the transition process they face a very different reality. The young adults do not find themselves doing a meaningful work, but facing bad working conditions. Lacking other options they get to the point when they consider any bad job better than nothing. Because of this, they look for other sources of satisfaction that can be seen as resources to survive work routine. Colleagues play an important role in the coping process: The young people want to be seen as part of the team to feel recognition from their colleagues. But it seems to be much more than pure recognition by colleagues. Like Manuel

argues in the quotation below, young adults are not only seeking for acceptance during work they want to be treated as human beings not only as workforce. This can be seen as a critic of our current social structure where precarious work enforces the pressure on workers.

“That they treat you as a human being. I am a colleague, I am staff and I want to be treated accordingly.” (Manuel)^{xvi}

Segregation of the labor market: The explaining element

As mentioned, market based regulation of the transition from school to work in the non-academic pathway in Germany precedes neoliberalism. The neoliberal hegemony actually could integrate it and protect it from being questioned when the companies reduced the number of apprenticeship spots. The paradigm of individual responsibility proves itself strong enough to obviate other perceptions of the problems school leavers face when they have to find an apprenticeship. Of course there has existed critical analyses inside the academia since the 1970s up to now, but that couldn't challenge the neoliberal hegemony. Each year in October the German government publishes annual statistics about the apprenticeship-market and by statistical alchemy there are thousands of open apprenticeship spots.^{xvii} In the media the official version is widespread unquestioned even if the unions complain each year the biased presentation and publish their own data. In the last years the difficulties for companies to find apprentices in context of the demographical change dominate the official view. The permanent repetition of this mantra strengthened the neoliberal hegemony in the field of vocational politics. Demand forecasts warn that there will be (or is already) a lack of medium qualified workforce which might jeopardize the German national income, because the number of school leavers will decrease in the coming years, the proportion of school leavers that gain higher school diplomas rose up to 50 percent and the baby-boomers-generation will retire in the coming years (BMAS, 2013).

This official view and forecast contrast obviously with the actual situation of the young people described; and both views are in a way correct! The missing link to understand this coexistence of contradictory views is the segregation of the labor market – and, as a side effect, the

apprenticeship market. The ever more flexible laws concerning working conditions of the neoliberal governments of conservatives, liberals, social democrats and green party in the last 30 years destroyed the base of union power and therefore workers rights. The membership of German unions dropped from nearly 12.000.000 after the unification in 1991 to a little bit more than 6.000.000 in 2013 (DGB, 2014).^{xviii} As a consequence, the growing low-pay sector with insecure working conditions is relatively disconnected from the well-paid sector for qualified workers.

The imprecise language^{xix} mixes the situation of completely different groups of workers. By identifying "Fachkraft" (qualified worker) with having finished any apprenticeship or even holding a university degree, the reality of different labor markets for industries, science, state occupations, services, crafts and so on disappears. There might be an urgent need of IT-engineers, but will an unemployed carpenter be hired? There are different strata of apprenticeships. In the upper ones, mainly jobs in white-collar services like bank or insurance clerks are to be found. To achieve these apprenticeships applicants need A-levels that also permit university studies. School leavers with worse diplomas have no real chance to enter these fields. In the middle strata, one finds industrial and technical jobs and jobs in distribution – this is the kind of job which is associated with "Facharbeiter" and was the typical German figure of Fordism: white, male, industrial work, job security and a living standard near to middle class.

Table 1: **Absolute und relative size of occupation segments of new apprentices in 2010** (Autorengruppe, 2012, p. 112)

		A-levels	Medium results	Lower results	Without diploma
		in percentage			
Total	559.032	21,0	42,9	32,9	3,1
Upper stratum	72.366	61,9	34,5	2,9	0,7
Upper middle	145.896	26,1	58,5	14,5	0,9

Lower middle	88.794	11,4	50,7	36,1	1,7
Lower stratum	153.318	4,5	30,0	59,9	5,6
Other occupations	98.658	17,8	39,3	37,4	5,5

In the lower stratum, craft jobs and assistance service jobs are offered – finishing an apprenticeship in this field doesn't offer access to jobs with employment security and fair wages. Apprentices in small craft trades are seen as cheap labor and often cannot continue to work in their profession. Even when one finds a fitting job these jobs are often paid like unskilled work and the salaries are near to the level of state welfare. Since, in Germany until now, there is no minimum wage it is possible to pay even salaries under the level of state welfare and force the workers to receive additional support from the state – a bizarre form of subvention for the companies which are part of the so called German miracle of the last ten years (Dempsey, 2011).

A similar imprecise use of language is the use of "precarious" which is more and more used as a catch-it-all-word. What we called precarious in this article is different from precarious transitions after university, because the group of young people with apprenticeships of the lower stratum cannot use the strategy of lowering their occupational level. They are those who suffer when higher qualified groups scale down into lower qualified occupation fields. For them scaling down means to become unemployed.

We mean this situation of social vulnerability when we use the term "precarious" like Pierre Bourdieu did (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 97). It is the same vulnerability, which Engels used when he defined the proletariat from its living conditions (Engels, 1845, p. 184) and, which sociology used to define proletarian consciousness until the 1970s (Schumann, 2013, p. 64).

Conclusion

Young people view their difficult and precarious situation as a part of becoming an adult: Giving up their personal expectations is considered

to be a transformation of losing childish stupid ideas. In the end of this process the young people think that they have entered the real, adult world. The interviewed young people are part of a social group which experienced precarity. Insecurity is part of their childhood and family history. Even so they are part of the working class they don't describe their situation as a result of the fate of a whole class, but rather as an individual fate. The interviewees don't hope for social ascension for themselves by getting more education. In the transition from school to work they struggle for a more or less secured existence. The result of this process is a certain form of precarious workers identity. They are prepared for the growing sector of working poor.^{xx} Instead of declaring the growing precarious living conditions since the 1990s as a fate of older workers who lack the necessary competences for the transition to the brave new world of lifelong learning, we want to stress that this phenomenon is not temporary, but a constant fact in our society nowadays. The experience of a huge part of teenagers and young adults unveil the ideological character of discourses about a knowledge based society and the disappearance of the working class.

First of all, Germany still has highly profitable industries, but there is a growing gap between those who still have a secured decent job as an industrial worker with conditions known from Fordism and the precarious and unemployed workers on the other hand. The composition of the working class has changed. We still do not understand enough of this change. Working class institutions often still act as if this change hadn't happened. Dropping union membership and co-management of unionists to defend the privileges of the industrial workers are some of the consequences. Even more threatening is the lack of class-consciousness. Individuals cannot resist the structural pressure of the educational system and the labor market. For this they need organizations such as unions. The talk about a meritocratic society where everyone forges his or her own destiny and where education as the most important resource is open to everybody has proven to be a falsity.

Surely, the answer to this problem cannot be found in pedagogics alone. We only name some possible political attempts which may be worth

discussing: As long as the neoliberal hegemony in media is not challenged, the individuals cannot fight back united. The financial crisis is destroying the future of a considerable part of the European youth. Even the commission of the EU had to admit this (EU Commission, 2014). In Greece and Spain the youth unemployment has reached more than 50 percent. This horror-news is stabilizing the German situation. In official statistics Germany has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates. Partly due to statistical tricks as everybody in a substitute course is not counted as unemployed, but every apprentice is counted as a full-working person. However, it is true: The German situation is far from being as bad as in Southern Europe – but should this be sufficient for not addressing urgent needs of young adults like the ones we presented? The political left is not articulating these problems. Instead nationalist propaganda can use the German success-story to create an imaginary entity of all Germans who are threatened by south-Europeans who are looking for jobs abroad.

We do not want to finish in a way of teleological pessimism; that's how Bourdieu calls the way social scientists tend to see the social world as always tending to the worse (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 23). There are tendencies which give some evidence that the hegemony is changing to integrate, at least, more social democratic ideas: After a longer campaign of the unions, the current Merkel government (conservatives in coalition with social democrats) will implement a minimum wage in Germany in the next years. Between 1st January 2015 to the end of 2016 a minimum wage of 8.50 Euro per hour will be introduced – which is still under the level of France for example. Bu there will be exceptions: E. g. workers under 18 years do not have the right to be paid the minimum wage. The justification is pretty interesting as the exception is based on the idea that school leavers shouldn't consider unskilled work a better paid alternative than an apprenticeship. Companies pay their apprentices between 300 and 1.000 Euro monthly depending on the sector. Keeping in mind that the average age of starting an apprenticeship is 20 years and they would earn according to minimum wage in unskilled labor this justification shows an irritating distance between the official discourse and the actual situation of young people. Anyway, the successful campaign for a minimum wage could open new

political space for emancipatory politics of vocational education and training.

In Austria exists a similar educational system with dual education as a central element of the non-academic educational pathway. Every Austrian school graduate who cannot find an apprenticeship-spot is offered a substitute by the state in schools and workshops. During this time it is possible to change to a company-based apprenticeship and continue there or to take an exam at the end of the substitute apprenticeship which is officially recognized as equal (Trinko, 2012). The federalism in Germany, where different education policies coexist, makes it difficult to describe national tendencies. Each Land (federal state) implements its own politics. Therefore, the situation is very different regionally and it is more critical in the states where there are fewer resources. In Hamburg the regional government tries to implement something like an apprenticeship-guarantee since 2009. It would be worth a try, if the unions would give more importance to this topic and struggle to replace the substitute course system by qualifying apprenticeships in state schools, where the missing workplace-practice inside a company could be compensated with workshops and internships.

In this article we described – illustrated with examples of case studies – the difficulties a considerable part of young people in Germany face during transition from school to work. We pointed out the inefficiencies of the German system of vocational education and training to integrate school leavers with lower grades. Due to neoliberal hegemony in the public debate the problem of the ever decreasing number of apprenticeship-places since the early 1990s was rearticulated as individual failures of the school leavers. Facing disappointing application-processes and attending substitute courses of doubtful pedagogic quality lower their self-esteem and work expectations.

We want to stress that this group of young people we were talking about in this article are not dropouts. They find a job in the end, but often badly paid, with high risks of future unemployment periods and with little prestige. This is why we argue that they are learning to be precarious

during this transition. Low paid work has widespread in Germany during the last ten years. With the coming minimum wage the political problem of the working poor is addressed. The guarantee of a qualifying apprenticeship for every school leaver could foster this politics.

We are aware that our article is based on the German debate and literature, but we hope it can give some information and arguments for European and international readers. First of all in respect of the European youth unemployment crises it is important to inform about the downsides of the German system which is presented as the solution to all problems lately. In a further step we see the need to situate this analysis in the international debates about youth research, working poor and reformation of the working class. Beside the specific national situation it must be examined what general changes of modern capitalist societies are causing this phenomena – and what possibilities for emancipatory politics arise from that.

ⁱ According to Karl Georg Zinn we define neoliberalism as a current mindset in the political economy and an orientation within political action. Neoliberalism tries to subordinate all areas of life under market forces and tries to commodify human, nature and ethics into boundless exchangeable goods (Zinn, 2006, p. 164).

ⁱⁱ Young people from all Europe are also told to go to Germany to find work or an apprenticeship-place there. This migration is officially supported by a German government program, but the funding is so little that the huge need cannot be met. The program was stopped, because all the year's budget was spent in three months due to more than 9.000 applicants (BA, 2014). On the other hand, the export of the German VET-system to other European countries is proclaimed, but until now there are no serious attempts to do so. It is doubtful if the German VET-system works under different circumstances. All in all it is not more than a knee-jerk reaction without deeper analysis.

ⁱⁱⁱ With low school degrees we basically mean degree from Hauptschule and degree from Realschule with bad marks.

^{iv} There exists no right to study what one wants as many degrees can only be entered with certain grades, but if one is flexible about the degree everyone gets a university-placement.

^v In fact it is not state agencies which offer this courses most of the time. There was established a market for companies that offer all kind of courses as a product paid by the state.

^{vi} German original: „Naja, wenn ich nich' angenommen werde, dann muss ich weiter ne Prak/Berufswahl suchen, also Stellen suchen und dann mich neu bewerben. Also

das dauert schon irgendwie 'ne Weile.“ (Mohammed, 15 Jahre, Schüler einer neunten Klasse)

vii „Dann hatten die mich nicht genommen, da wusst' ich das. OK, das ist eine Sache. Da kann ich noch mit umgehen. War zwar/war schon schlimm. Aber die ham' mir halt direkt angeboten, wenn ich ein Jahr BQL [Berufsqualifizierender Lehrgang; d.V.] mach' , sprich ein Jahr Praktikum mit äh Schule, dann äh übernehmen die mich. Und das war diese Zusage, wo ich dann 'ne Motivation hatte: Ein Jahr Praktikum unbezahlt, das ist mir eigentlich egal: Hauptsache ich hab danach 'ne Ausbildung. [...] Nach sechs Monaten hieß es dann: Nee, wir nehmen Sie nicht.“ (Manuel, 21 Jahre, Auszubildender erstes Ausbildungsjahr Fachkraft für Lagerlogistik)

viii It is not clear how many different offers exist nationwide – not even experts know this.

ix „Nee in der Zeit wars wieder so ne Zeit für mich, wo ich viel mit Freunden unterwegs war: Hab ich wieder ähm so Chaos so/ (.) Schule und so war für mich wieder nur Nebensache.“ (Bastian, 19 Jahre, Auszubildender erstes Ausbildungsjahr Fachkraft für Lagerlogistik)

x „Und die ham mir gesagt, ich hätte das gar nicht bekommen, weil die hatten schon zwei Auszubildende gehabt. [...] Und der eine hat abgesagt [...] weil er schon, glaub ich, was anderes gefunden hatte. Und das Lustige ist, dass derjenige der abgesagt hatte, jetzt in meiner Klasse is.“ (Bastian)

xi „Durch das viermal Aushilfe, das ging ja über Monate [...] dadurch habe ich dann auch den Job bekommen. Weil die Bewerbungen/Ich war, muss ich sagen, nicht der Beste. Kann man auch fast nicht sein, weil da gabs Bewerber nur mit Einsen auf dem Zeugnis, auch Abitur und alles.“ (Manuel)

xii „Ich dacht' mir so: Ich verdien' später schon so meine – wenn ich im Beruf ausgelernt habe und denn halt anfangen zu arbeiten – verdiene ich schon meine zweitausend Euro netto so. [...] Aber das war viel zu hoch. Die meinten: ‚Nee, du verdienst eins- bis einzwei!‘ [...] Also, wo ich mir denke heute: Hey, es kommt heut' auf jeden Cent an, warum nicht. Da kann ich jetzt nicht sagen/kann ich jetzt nicht rummeckern irgendwie: Ja, 'nee, ist zu wenig Geld oder so was. Also auf jeden Fall: Muss auf jeden Fall schon zufrieden sein, wenn man überhaupt ein' Beruf hat, wo man halt wirklich fest angestellt ist und sein Geld bekommt.“ (Bastian)

xiii „Spaß ist immer so ein doofes Wort jetzt Richtung Ausbildung. Ich sag mal: Auf Dauer kotzt fast jede Ausbildung oder fast jeder Job einen an, weil es immer dieselbe Arbeit ist meistens. [...] Durch die Mitarbeiter macht's schon Spaß, dadurch geht man doch nochmal gerne hin. [...] Ja Spaß? Man muss sich entweder Spaß machen auf Arbeit mit den Kollegen. Zwischendurch mal ein bisschen Albernheiten, ein bisschen quatschen oder so. Aber sonst: Arbeit wird getan, Tag ist zu Ende und dann geht's weiter. Im Nachhinein ist ja trotzdem meine Motivation, die drei Jahre durchzuhalten – so oder so.“ (Manuel)

xiv „Also in der Woche bin ich immer so von/vier Uhr dreißig steh ich auf. Und bin um achtzehn Uhr dreißig erst zu Hause. [...] Ja, das ist so: Ich hab nichts vom Tag. Also ich muss dann auch wieder um halb zehn schlafen gehen, damit ich früh um vier

direkt aufstehen kann. Und so vom Tag hab ich, wie gesagt, hab ich auch keine Zeit für meine Freunde. Wenn ich meine Freunde seh, dann vielleicht einen Tag am Wochenende nur noch. Also auf jeden Fall so nicht mehr wie damals. Damals haben wa so nach der Schule immer sofort mit Freunden treffen, abgehangen.“ (Bastian)

^{xv} It was an interesting result of our research project in 2010 to see that in school the commodification of work is not discussed, but left aside as an embarrassing/shamefaced aspect of our society.

^{xvi} „Dass man auch mal menschlich behandelt wird. Ich bin ein Kollege, ein Mitarbeiter und so will ich auch behandelt werden.“ (Manuel)

^{xvii} In 2013 the government pronounced that for the sixth year in succession there would be more open apprenticeship spots than unsuccessful applicants. While in fact the number of new apprenticeships lowered to around 561.000 in total and more than 257.000 young people began a substitute course (BMBF, 2013 & Destatis, 2013, 5).

^{xviii} It seems as if this trend could be stopped finally. Especially the unions in services sector tried new forms of mobilization successfully. The organizing concept from the US was copied to meet the needs of the growing number of precarious workers. As far as we know there still exists nothing comparable to organize the school leavers attending substitute courses. Organization only begins after one has found an apprenticeship.

^{xix} We do not want to argue in a postmodernist way that language is the only reality, but that language is an instrument of power and creating hegemony means to control the *sayable* in a way.

^{xx} Or as we could say in the German case: qualified working poor, since a considerable part of the German workforce doesn't work in their field, but in low income jobs as unskilled workers.

^{xx} It shows also the long lasting traditions and persistence of political pathways since there was a similar discussion 100 years ago after the First World War. When the war industries had massively recruited unskilled workforce, small craft trades had difficulties to find apprentices. The economic shock when changing to peacetime economy again in the Weimar Republic lead into a massive lack of apprenticeship spots which were substituted by state courses to keep youth unemployment low (Schütte, 1992, pp. 24). History is not repeating itself, but the similarities are striking.

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Authors' Details

Marcus Eckelt obtained his degree in Political Science at Philipps-University Marburg. He is a Phd-Student at TU Berlin and holds a Phd scholarship by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Foundation. He does research on

vocational and education pedagogy, social and class structures and Europeanization of vocational systems. marcus.eckelt@tu-berlin.de

Guido Schmidt obtained his degree in Science of Education at Philipps-University Marburg. He is a Phd-Student at TU Berlin and holds a Phd scholarship by the Hans-Böckler-Foundation. He does research on vocational and education pedagogy, social and class structures and the transition to work of young disadvantaged people, adult immigrants and refugees. guido.schmidt@tu-berlin.de