

**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS
EDUCATION POLICY COMMITTEE**

Network on Early Childhood Education and Care

EDUCATION PROCESSES IN LIFE-COURSE-SPECIFIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS.

Supplementary document to EDU/EDPC/ECEC(2013)14

**10-11 December 2013
Amora Hotel
Wellington, New Zealand**

This document is only available as a PDF

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JT03350287

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6 Education processes in life-course-specific learning environments

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Abstract: Pillar 2 of the German National Educational Panel Study conceptualizes and operationalizes the learning opportunities individuals experience throughout their lives. These learning opportunities can take place in different formal, nonformal, informal, and familial learning environments. They are captured not only quantitatively but also concerning their quality. The quality of learning opportunities is framed within an opportunity-use model to bring together a social-environmental and an individual perspective. The information to be provided covers what learning opportunities an individual uses, their duration and intensity and—whenever possible—an estimation of their quality. Also, relations and transitions between different learning environments are covered at some critical intersections (e.g., school enrollment). Whereas the individual perspective stands at the focus of the National Educational Panel Study, different actors beside the target person contribute to the assessment of learning environments in specific cohorts and at specific stages. This leads to a comprehensive view of the cumulation of learning experiences and its effects on competence development, educational biographies, and educational decisions.

Keywords: Education · Panel study · Learning environments · Learning opportunities · Educational quality

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Bildungsprozesse in lebenslaufspezifischen Lernumwelten

Zusammenfassung: Säule 2 des Nationalen Bildungspanels konzeptualisiert und operationalisiert die Lerngelegenheiten, welche Individuen im Laufe ihres Lebens erfahren. Diese Lerngelegenheiten können in unterschiedlichen formalen, non-formalen, informellen und familialen Lernumwelten stattfinden. Sie werden nicht nur quantitativ sondern auch hinsichtlich ihrer Qualität erfasst. Die Qualität der Lerngelegenheiten wird innerhalb eines Angebot-Nutzen-Modells formuliert, welches eine sozial-umweltbezogene mit einer individuumsbezogenen Perspektive verbindet. Zur Verfügung gestellt werden Informationen darüber, welche Lerngelegenheiten von einer Person in welcher Intensität und Dauer genutzt werden und – soweit möglich – eine Einschätzung ihrer Qualität. An bedeutsamen Schnittstellen (etwa der Einschulung) werden zudem Beziehungen und Übergänge zwischen verschiedenen Lernumwelten betrachtet. Wenngleich die individuelle Perspektive im Fokus des Nationalen Bildungspanels steht, werden in verschiedenen Kohorten und Etappen neben der Zielperson auch weitere Akteure um eine Einschätzung der Lernumwelten gebeten. Dies führt zu einer umfassenden Sicht auf die Kumulation von Lernerfahrungen und deren Einflüsse auf Kompetenzentwicklung, Bildungsverläufe und Bildungsentscheidungen.

Schlüsselwörter: Bildung · Panelstudie · Lernumwelten · Lerngelegenheiten · Bildungsqualität

6.1 Introduction

During the life course, individuals experience a variety of (synchronic or diachronic) formal, nonformal, informal, and familial learning environments in which educational processes take place. In a chronological perspective, we can conceive a succession of different formal learning environments that structure and partly standardize the life course. This is especially true for the formal educational system in which individuals experience at least two compulsory learning environments (elementary school and secondary school). Different educational settings are experienced before and after formal schooling, and also transitions between these consecutive learning environments have to be taken into account. In Germany many children attend Kindergarten or day care. After general school, individuals may attend vocational education and training, colleges and universities, and they may also engage in courses of adult learning. During adulthood and the course of working life, additional learning environments are experienced that comprise or foster educational processes (e.g., training on the job, private studies, or mass media). In addition to the chronologically consecutive settings, synchronic, coexisting learning environments also have to be taken into account. Educational processes take place within a multitude of settings of a nonformal or informal nature such as non-formal provisions in the youth welfare system or informal learning in youth clubs, from peers, or from the (mass) media. During childhood and early adolescence, participation in out-of-school activities offered by, for example, music schools or schools of art are relevant. Also, the family has to be considered, not only as a rather general condition and context for educational decisions but also as a learning environment itself. Thus, the surroundings of an individual that need to be considered in the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) are composed of a complex interwoven network of different synchronic and chronological settings with different interconnections and transitions between them. In a life-course perspective, through the cumulation of experiences, this complex web of

learning environments leads to educational outcomes rather than experiences in a single setting. The main research questions the NEPS will address are: What kind of learning opportunities are experienced by an individual during the life course? What do experiences in different learning environments look like? How are different learning environments related to each other? What kind of cumulative experiences across different learning environments exist? How do specific learning environments and the cumulation of educational experiences across learning environments relate to individual development and educational decisions?

Pillar 2 tries to introduce two quite innovative aspects to the NEPS: First, we address all the learning opportunities a person experiences throughout her or his life. These learning opportunities take place in different formal, nonformal, and informal learning environments. Formal settings, in particular, also comprise educational stages that a person passes through during her or his education. Therefore, pillar 2 works in close cooperation with the stages of the NEPS. Due to the diversity and multiplicity of learning opportunities, our first task is to capture as much of these experiences as possible. Besides their mere occurrence, we are also surveying the duration and intensity of learning opportunities. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first time in education research that the analysis of learning opportunities tries to incorporate all learning environments and their interrelationships into one comprehensive approach. Our second task is to supplement, wherever possible, these quantitative aspects with an investigation of the quality of these learning opportunities. An innovative approach applies an overall framework model for all kinds of learning environments and learning opportunities.

6.2 Conceptual perspectives

When considering education processes, one has to account for the interplay of different actors: at least someone who educates and someone who is educated. Therefore, teaching or instruction and learning are just two sides of the same coin (e.g., Vermunt and Verloop 1999). Nevertheless, until recently teaching theories and learning theories were developed relatively unrelated to each other. Modern approaches to learning, such as social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986) or social constructivist approaches based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (e.g., Reusser 2006) point out that learning is a socially mediated process. The same is true for theories of teaching and instruction. Here a shift from teaching as the transmission of knowledge to teaching as the (co-)construction of knowledge has taken place (e.g., Wellenreuther 2004). Teaching thus takes the form of supplying learning opportunities to the student, who, in turn, has to make use of these experiences. The basic notion of the interplay between learning opportunities and their use has been proposed by Helmut Fend (2006) as a model that captures the interaction between the learning environment and the individual. The model is nondeterministic, and thus aligns with modern, constructivist views on learning. It is also consistent with recent theoretical developments in the psychology of motivation and interests that stress the role of the environment in offering support for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2000). Support, however, needs to be perceived and taken up by the learner. From a systems theory point of view, the interplay of opportunities and their use can

be understood as describing the exchange between the social-interactive and personal systems that constitute the basic operations of the educational system (Luhmann 2002). Thus, the concept of learning environments or, even more, that of learning opportunities points to the notion that education is always a relation between an actor and her or his (social) environment.

The terms formal, nonformal, and informal are often used to characterize learning, but unfortunately in a rather diffuse way (e.g., Overwien 2005). This is especially true in the case of formal learning, because the organizational issue of certifying an educational outcome is confounded with an individual process of achieving this outcome. It is not learning itself that is formal, nonformal, or informal, but the context in which it takes place. A more appropriate and well-established conceptualization of learning makes use of another distinction: that between intentional and incidental learning (e.g., Reber 1989; Sun et al. 2005). The term informal learning often connotes both forms of learning. Therefore, we propose to apply the terms formal, nonformal, and informal not to the learning process itself but to the contexts or environments in which learning takes place (e.g., Rauschenbach 2007). Both intentional and incidental learning can occur in all these different environments. In formal as well as nonformal learning environments, intentional learning is provided by instruction. But incidental learning also occurs in the so-called “hidden curriculum.” Here, incidental learning is mostly negatively connoted as being nonintended and often running counter to what should have been taught. In informal settings, on the other hand, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish what is learned intentionally from what is learned as a by-product of another activity. Therefore, and especially for statistical analysis, incidental learning is excluded explicitly from the definition of learning activities by Eurostat (2006), for example.

6.2.1 Diversity of learning environments

Education is associated most prominently with formal learning environments, notably schools. As a result, it is not surprising that education research is, for the most part, school research. NEPS pillar 2 also draws from this research for its conceptualization—as will be seen later. *Formal learning environments* are always bound to a specific form of organization with characteristics such as hierarchical stratification, division of labor, goal directedness, and societal function. In addition, certification of educational outcomes is a major and distinguishing task of formal learning environments. Therefore, educational careers are governed to a great extent by this eligibility function. Personnel in formal learning environments act in an educationally intentional manner, and learning is also intentional but not self-directed (e.g., Fend 2001). In fact, at least in certain age groups (6 to 15 years, or nine school years), formal education is compulsory in Germany. Educational processes are highly structured in terms of content, timing, and order of subject matter. This strict analysis of formal learning environments holds especially for schools. However, in university, for example, at least the decision on what to study and, to some extent, the course of instruction as well is self-determined. In the interest of stringency, we also sacrifice certification as a constituting element and denominate learning environments occurring before or after school and university as formal as well—namely, Kindergarten

and firms or other enterprises in which vocational education and training and other forms of adult learning take place. This allows for a conceptualization of educational careers as trajectories through a more or less ordered educational system, starting in Kindergarten and going through elementary, lower, and upper secondary school or vocational education and training up to tertiary and further education. Not incidentally, this succession also comprises the sequence of the stages within the NEPS (see Chap. 1, this volume). In addition, comprehensive descriptions of the German educational system also take this broader view, accounting for Kindergartens at one end and employers and other providers of lifelong learning at the other (e.g., Cortina et al. 2008).

Nonformal and informal learning environments always accompany formal learning environments but show a marked difference in that they are not compulsory but self-imposed. Nonformal learning environments are similar to formal learning environments due to the other-directed organization of learning, whereas learning in informal learning environments is essentially self-directed. Nonformal learning environments are also designated as being for intentional learning, because their use is based on freedom of choice (Rauschenbach et al. 2004). As said before, it is not always easy to separate intentional and incidental learning processes in informal learning environments (e.g., Dohmen 2001). Nevertheless, to qualify as learning experiences, the individual has to perceive them, at least afterwards, as a learning opportunity. In contrast to formal and nonformal learning environments, the informal learning environment does not necessarily offer these learning opportunities intentionally. But, on the other hand, learning in informal learning environments is always self-directed (e.g., Boekaerts and Minnaert 1999). Also—again in contrast to formal and nonformal learning environments—the roles of teachers and students are not defined in a clear-cut way. Often, individuals learn all by themselves—as is the case for media use. But also in other informal learning environments such as peer groups, the roles of teachers and students are not defined at all or change constantly.

Another informal learning environment is of special interest in the NEPS: the family. We treat the *familial learning environment* as a special unit of research, because it has a profound significance for education at least for children and adolescents (e.g., Melhuish et al. 2008). It is also the first and a very long lasting learning environment that precedes, accompanies, and even outlasts most other learning environments. Certainly, families have long lasting effects not only on educational outcomes and success but in every realm of life (e.g., Schneewind 2008). NEPS pillar 2 pays special attention to the family of origin as a learning environment and looks at the efforts parents undertake to foster their children's advancement. Later in life, we also examine the individual's own family as a supportive environment for learning. However, pillar 3 is responsible for families as a more general context for development and as a decision-making unit for educational choices (see Chap. 7, this volume).

6.2.2 Cumulation of learning opportunities

Educational processes take place in many different settings. They are influenced by the conditions of specific learning environments and the cumulation of experiences across different learning environments in the life course. All the aforementioned learning

environments have to be considered, because education is more than learning and instruction in formal institutions. The family is usually the first environment in which learning opportunities are offered to the child. From birth onward, children interact with their parents, and there is strong evidence that the home learning environment exerts a profound influence on cognitive and social development (e.g., Bradley et al. 2001). Most children then experience a second learning environment: the Kindergarten. From age 3 to 6, they spend a great amount of their time in this setting. Even at this young age, children experience additional learning opportunities of a nonformal or informal kind. This continues through the course of formal schooling, which is certainly the main though not the sole source of learning opportunities in childhood and adolescence. Over the course of life, the individual is confronted with an increasing quantity of learning opportunities. From a biographical perspective, single learning environments then lose relevance for the individual. In our opinion, especially for schools and teachers, this should not be treated as a threat to their effectiveness but as a relief from liability. Formal, nonformal, informal, and familial learning environments thus form a complex web of synchronic as well as chronological learning opportunities. Little is known about their cumulative effects as well as their potential reciprocal, oppositional, or diminishing effects. As well as registering all the learning opportunities experienced, it is also necessary to account for the relations between different learning environments. Again, this holds for both a chronological and a synchronic perspective. In a chronological perspective, it is particularly necessary to consider the transitions between successive formal learning environments. NEPS pillar 2 is predominantly interested in what these transitions imply for the individual, and what measures the learning environments offer to facilitate the transition. In a synchronic perspective, the relations of formal learning environments to nonformal and informal learning environments (e.g., use of subsidiary offers) as well as the relation of the family to formal learning environments (e.g., parental involvement) have to be included.

To map the complex web of learning opportunities, some additional points should be considered: Only some learning opportunities can be surveyed in retrospect. Schooling history is one example. But also in such cases, it is only the mere episodes that can be examined. If one wants to gain a comprehensive picture of other learning opportunities and of some other features of these as well, one can examine only a limited time period. In the NEPS, we decided to limit this time period to approximately one year back. Therefore, richer information on learning opportunities is only possible from one year before a single panel wave. This makes it necessary to take a longitudinal perspective and observe different cohorts. A second point is that the quantification of learning opportunities should not stop at their mere occurrence. Whenever possible we therefore also assess duration and intensity of the single learning opportunities. Last, as said before, formal learning environments correspond in most cases to the stages of the NEPS. Therefore, pillar 2 focuses on nonformal, informal, and familial learning environments and works on formal learning environments in close cooperation with the stages of the NEPS.

Whereas there are a lot of findings on the effects of the occurrence of learning opportunities, especially in economic research (e.g., Heckman et al. 2010), an additional feature has to be considered: Not only quantitative effects but also the influence of the quality of learning opportunities is of strong significance.

6.2.3 Quality of learning opportunities

Over the last few years, educational research has gained a basic understanding of the core factors of learning opportunities (e.g., Hugener et al. 2009; Klieme et al. 2009; Klieme and Rakoczy 2008; Meyer 2005; Scheerens 2008; Seidel and Shavelson 2007). There is even a lot of shared understanding of these factors across school-based research and research on nonformal and informal, for example, out-of-school activities (e.g., Mahoney et al. 2005; Miller 2003) as well as all-day offers at school (e.g., Radisch et al. 2008; Stecher et al. 2009). The core factors of learning opportunities apply first of all to the interaction between the teaching and the learning person. Therefore, they are often designated as process quality. Four basic factors (more precisely, three plus one, as will be shown below), which hold in a rather general sense, can be distinguished: *Structure*, as a basic factor of learning opportunities, relates to the arrangement of the educational processes taking place in the learning environment, thus providing, for example, safeness, stability, or clarity of rules to the learner. *Support* is reflected in positive emotional relations to peers and adults in the learning environment, understanding, feedback, support for autonomy and competence, and social embedding. *Challenge* relates to tasks that are not too demanding but also not too simple to be solved by the learner, thus leading her or him to a “zone of proximal development.” Such tasks will also be cognitively activating. *Orientation* can be seen in, for example, shared values and norms, coherence among members of the group/organization, and clear expectations. Whereas the first three factors describe the educational processes directly and can therefore be observed straightforwardly, orientation impacts more indirectly by influencing the behavior of the actors in the educational process. In the following, we refer to these four basic dimensions as “SSCO.” Although conceptualized originally in relation to (classroom) instruction, there have been several efforts to describe other learning environments with SSCO as well. Moreover, other conceptualizations have been proposed that we can easily link to the SSCO model. Table 1 recapitulates some of these concepts. Because orientation is not always present in other conceptualizations and can be seen as an overarching principle that is related to structure, support, and challenge, please note that it is not included in the table.

Beside these four basic factors that are proximal to the learning opportunity under consideration, it is also necessary to take the multilayered structure of learning environments into account, thus allowing for more distal factors in which the basic factors of process quality are embedded. For a formal learning environment, SSCO relates basically and especially to the instruction in specific subjects. However, it can also be differentiated on a school level, especially when orientation is considered (e.g., school regulations, social and cognitive climate, achievement expectations). We use Fend’s (2006) opportunity-use model of educational quality as refined by Helmke (2007) and Klieme (2006) as a kind of overarching theoretical framework. This depicts not only SSCO but also structural characteristics of the learning environment (e.g., in a classroom setting, the class size, class schedule, or class composition as well as school size or school composition on a broader level). This proximal learning environment itself is embedded within a broader context with, for example, specific socioeconomic compositions. The same conceptualization holds true for the family. The learning opportunities in the familial learning environments—like in a homework situation—can also be described in terms of the structure,

Table 1: Concepts of educational quality

Learning environment	Structure	Support	Challenge	Reference
Formal: school	Classroom management, clarity and structure	Supportive climate	Cognitive activation and deep content	Klieme et al. (2009)
Formal: school	Classroom instruction and management	Student-teacher social interactions	Student-teacher academic interactions	Wang et al. (1993)
Formal: school	Efficient classroom management	Personal learning support	Cognitively activating elements	Kunter and Baumert (2006)
Formal: elementary school	Classroom organization	Emotional supports	Instructional supports	Pianta and Hamre (2009)
Nonformal/informal: after-school program	Structure/organization	Social climate	Focus on skill building and mastery	Mahoney et al. (2007)
General/formal: teaching	Regulation function of teaching	Affective function of teaching	Processing function of teaching	Vermunt and Verloop (1999)
General/formal: learning	Metacognitive regulation activities	Affective learning strategies	Cognitive processing activities	Vermunt and Verloop (1999)
General: environments	System maintenance	Relationship	Personal development	Insel and Moos (1974)

support, and challenge given by parents. These interactions are assumed to be influenced by the parent's educational orientations and further characteristics (e.g., their general educational level) and the home environment with its structural characteristics (like available books, family income). The family itself, again, is embedded in a regional-local environment and its social networks. The same is true for nonformal and informal learning environments. The interactions between the person who receives learning opportunities (target person) and the person(s) who offer learning opportunities (e.g., music teacher, sports trainer, peers) will take place under circumstances that can be described using more structural as well as more contextual features.

In relation to the design of the NEPS, we shall address these differentiated levels of learning opportunities within learning environments. Thus, for each educational setting of focal interest, we consider characteristics contained in the following three dimensions:

- *SSCO*: (a) Structure: safeness, stability, clarity of rules, monitoring, and scaffolding; (b) Support: positive emotional relations to peers and adults, understanding, feedback, support for autonomy, competence, and social embedding; (c) Challenge: demanding tasks, cognitive activation, and adequate pacing; and (d) Orientation: shared values and norms of the actors, coherence among actors, general attitudes and orientations related to educational processes, attitudes toward attributions of academic achievements. These characteristics are proposed to be valid in every educational setting, regardless of its formal versus nonformal or informal set up. Nevertheless, the specific features establishing the basic factors of structure, support, challenge, and orientation

will differ between various learning environments. It has to be kept in mind that SSCO is also valid on more aggregated levels such as the study program or the school as a whole.

- *Structural characteristics*: Comparatively persistent general conditions for educational processes in the different learning environments. For example, for the learning environment school class in the general education system: class size and class composition, number of lessons in different subjects according to the class schedule, equipment of the class, education and experience of teachers, and so forth; at the school level: size and structure of the whole school. This scheme can easily be related to nonformal and informal settings like sports groups. For familial learning environments, similar features can be proposed like family size, family composition, or time and material resources.
- *Contextual characteristics*: Framing conditions of the learning environment under consideration. For example, for the learning environment school: regional-local characteristics such as urban/rural, unemployment, migration structure, and so forth. For the family, contextual characteristics will be treated in more detail in NEPS pillar 3 (see Chap. 7, this volume).

As proposed in the opportunity-use model, the multilayered characteristics of the learning opportunities do not unfold their relevance by themselves, but have to be perceived and used by the individual (as the target person whose educational biography stands at the center of the NEPS). Especially for the *perception* of SSCO, we expect the frame of reference to become broader with age. In preschool age, for example, the Kindergarten group seems to be the appropriate learning environment to be explored, whereas in higher education, the study program should be analyzed. The *use* made of learning opportunities may be characterized by constructs such as learning activities or study time. Here, one should bear in mind that outcomes of earlier learning opportunities may also function in the use of later ones. This is to say that competencies and motivation will also influence the use of learning opportunities (see Chaps. 5 and 10, this volume). In addition, these characteristics will become more and more prominent with age. Therefore, the characteristics of the target person in the use of learning opportunities are not at the center of NEPS pillar 2, but will be treated in some stage-specific survey topics.

The just-mentioned characteristics have mainly been conceptualized within school and teacher effectiveness research. Especially for secondary schooling in general and for math instruction in particular, some major research results are available (e.g., Kunter et al. 2005; Lipowsky et al. 2009) and also for German language instruction (e.g., Klieme et al. 2010). In sum, research results show that challenge is related mainly to competence development and achievement outcomes, whereas support is related to motivation and interest development. Finally, structure as well as orientation seems to serve as a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the quality of education. There is also evidence from research that proximal characteristics influence educational outcomes to a greater extent than more distal ones. Nevertheless, this does not mean that these features are not relevant, especially when taking educational, sociological, and economic perspectives into account. For example, the monitoring of returns to educational inputs and guiding policy

in the design of the educational system requires information on the more distal characteristics (see Chap. 9, this volume).

Going back to the succession of formal learning environments in the educational system, research on elementary schools is sparse compared with research on secondary schooling. But results show that the relevant features are much the same as the aforementioned (e.g., Helmke and Weinert 1997). Concerning Kindergarten, research conducted so far has relied mainly on global dimensions of educational quality. However, by differentiating structural, orientational, and process quality, the conception strongly resembles the framework of pillar 2 (e.g., Tietze et al. 2005).

This holds even more when we follow the educational career after compulsory schooling. Whereas there is some information on formal learning environments in higher education and vocational education and training, findings on further education are sparse—maybe due to the fact that occupational settings are seldom treated as formal learning environments. Nevertheless, we conceive these educational settings as offering structure, support, and challenge to the individual and shared educational orientations just like the other formal settings that have been conceptualized more frequently from this perspective.

As noted above, there are hints that our concept of educational quality also holds for nonformal and informal settings (e.g., Mahoney et al. 2007; Miller 2003). This is true for the family as well (e.g., Melhuish et al. 2008; Wild and Gerber 2007).

6.3 Perspectives of analysis

The basis perspectives of analysis within NEPS pillar 2 are twofold: Analyses can be conducted on an environmental or institutional level as well as on an individual level.

On the level of the learning environments, interest focuses on the quality of single learning opportunities. One can ask how many persons attend different learning environments (e.g., private lessons, music lessons, sport clubs) and how do they rate the quality of education within these learning environments. One can ask how learning environments of the same kind (e.g., secondary schools, Kindergartens) differ, and how do the differences relate to individual development. A wealth of information will be provided on level of learning environment. This includes structural and contextual characteristics and especially also features of the basic factor “orientation” on the level of the school or Kindergarten. Therefore, through its longitudinal design, the NEPS can also address questions concerning the long-term effectiveness of the learning environment and even changes and developments of effectiveness over time (e.g., Klieme and Steinert 2008).

On the level of the individual, we ask about the extent of use and the consequences of different learning opportunities and their cumulation over the life course. Questions are: What learning opportunities are used to what extent, permanence, and intensity? What is the role of the family as a special learning environment? Are there out-of-school educational biographies? Is the perception and evaluation of different learning environments related? Does the use of learning opportunities depend on experiences of their quality or the quality of antecedent learning opportunities? How do amount and quality of learning opportunities relate to competence development? One unique feature of the NEPS is that

we can take a look at all the relevant learning environments in the educational biography of the individual in a longitudinal perspective. We therefore expect to deliver a rich source of data to the scientific community interested in educational research.

6.4 Surveying learning environments

After depicting the conceptual frame of NEPS pillar 2, we now want to show some operationalizations of the aforementioned constructs that are already being implemented or planned. To sum up, Table 2 gives an overview of the constructs to be measured.

It should be noted that in relation to the living conditions of the actors in particular stages, the focus is on different learning opportunities such as homework or private lessons in the context of students' familial learning environments, work experiences as learning opportunities at the end of schooling or during university studies, or advanced training courses in further education in adulthood.

Depending on the specific cohort and stage under observation, information on learning opportunities is captured from different actors. Whereas in adult samples, we examine only the target persons' view, in samples of children and adolescents, data is provided by parents as well as educational and administrative staff. The latter give information mainly on contextual, structural, and compositional characteristics of the factual learning environment and also on their educational orientations. Information from parents relates especially to the home and out-of-home learning environments they offer to their children.

A note has to be made on the assessment of SSCO. The process quality of learning opportunities is not easy to grasp. Different perspectives have to be taken into account that all have advantages and disadvantages depending on the dimension under consideration. For process quality of classroom instruction, Clausen (2002) has argued that a

Table 2: Overview of the constructs in pillar 2 of the National Educational Panel Study

Learning opportunities in formal learning environments
Contextual characteristics (institutional, socioeconomic, regional context)
Structural characteristics (size, composition, facilities, etc.)
Basic characteristics (structure, support, challenge, orientation)
Learning opportunities in nonformal and informal learning environments
Type and extent of learning opportunities
Basic characteristics (structure, support, challenge, orientation)
Learning opportunities in familial learning environments
Structural characteristics (family size, family composition, time and physical resources)
Basic characteristics (structure, support, challenge, orientation)
Relations to formal learning environments (type and extent of contacts, participation)
Transitions between formal learning environments
Perceived barriers and problems in the process of transition
Measures of prior learning environment
Measures of subsequent learning environment
Use and evaluation of measures

comprehensive view necessitates the triangulation of the perspectives of teachers, students, and external observers. In the NEPS, an external observation is not applicable not only due to costs of assessment but also because of issues of data privacy in scientific use files. Moreover, in some cohorts and for some learning environments (e.g., nonformal and informal learning opportunities) in general, only target persons (i.e., students) are surveyed. On the one hand, students are reliable sources, because they have much more experience with a special setting than an external observer. But, on the other hand, their evaluations are prone to subjective bias. For example, it is hard to assess challenge independently from one's own competence level. Students also tend to evaluate instruction from a global perspective (e.g., Gruehn 2000). Nevertheless, student achievement shows higher correlations with student self-reports than reports from the teacher's or external observer's perspective. In Kindergarten, children are too young to be surveyed on process quality. Here we have to rely solely on the perspective of the educators.

Another issue is the limited amount of interview time or item numbers within the NEPS. We decided primarily to gain a comprehensive picture of the learning opportunities an individual perceives by quantifying their use and complement this picture whenever possible with some quality aspects. Overall, assessment of quality has to remain quite global. Nevertheless, we have succeeded in capturing quality features for most learning environments under consideration. We shall close with some examples of the corresponding efforts made so far.

A study was conducted to relate process quality in Kindergarten as assessed by trained observers to variables collected in the educator's questionnaire of the NEPS Kindergarten sample (see also Chap. 13, this volume). It can be shown that on a global level, Kindergarten quality can be reproduced by the use of questionnaire data quite well. But it has to be stressed that one should not expect a single indicator of Kindergarten quality, and any conclusions, especially causal ones, have to be drawn with caution.

In collaboration with NEPS stage 7 (Higher Education and the Transition to Work; see Chap. 17, this volume) an online survey was conducted targeting the process quality of study programs from the perspective of students. This results in a measurement model of the core factors as follows: Structure is represented by the factors "coordination of teaching" and "structuredness of teaching." Support comprises "support by lecturer," "relationships among students," and "choice options." Challenge is illustrated by "work load," "meaning orientation," and "activation/construction." Finally, orientation is captured with respect to "research," "practice," "interdisciplinarity," "society," and "internationality."

As a last example, we discuss assessment of the quality of nonformal learning opportunities, for example, practical courses for adolescents during their time at school and courses of further education in adulthood. Here, the battery of questions has to be very short, usually 9–10 single items to cover at least three dimensions (structure, support, challenge). Whereas an exploratory analysis resulting in one single principle component showed a tendency toward an overall evaluation, in confirmatory analyses a multidimensional solution in line with the core factors is usually superior to a single solution.

To conclude, despite the challenges associated with the assessment of the core factors of pillar 2, they can be surveyed quite successfully. Moreover, the structural and contextual characteristics of the learning environment as well as the capturing of the multitude

of learning opportunities itself provide a rich resource for different analyses by the different academic disciplines conducting education research.

6.5 Outlook

During her or his educational career, a person passes through a variety of formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments. It can be said that the succession of these settings as well as their synchronic structuring mold—at least in part—the individual's educational career. The major advantage, challenge, and innovative potential of the NEPS is that it brings together diverse and perhaps in some cases conflicting learning environments within a general framework. The framework we propose describes educational environments as offering learning opportunities that the individual can make use of, leading to a cumulation of learning experiences across time and settings. By focusing on the educational quality of the learning opportunities, it will become possible to examine the educational system and its effects on the individual's educational career as a whole, relating diverse findings and combining them to gain a deeper understanding of the educational processes taking place in our country.

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