



# The Assessment of Different Types of Student Work Experience for Vocational Orientation from the Perspective of Students with Learning Disabilities

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RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

In order to give all young people the same opportunity to engage with their future career at an early stage, vocational orientation programmes have been revised in all German states over the last ten years. For students with learning disabilities the transition from school to vocational education is however associated with special challenges. Due to their impairment in various developmental areas, the prerequisites for subsequent vocational training are often not in place.

Hence, revisions to vocational orientation programmes in North Rhine-Westphalia have included the development of additional programmes for students with learning disabilities to meet their individual needs and facilitate the transition process. These offerings include, among others, various work experience opportunities (three one-day insight days, two or three-week internships and longer-term work placements).

A quantitative-empirical study was undertaken. Students were surveyed at the end of Grade 10 ( $n_{11} = 201$ ) and one year after leaving school ( $n_{12} = 80$ ).

The results suggest that students value a variety of practical work experiences. Assuming that all practical offers are taken up, the results for the longer-term work placements and the student internships lead to significant differences between the genders. Furthermore, the results reveal who supported students in their search for work experience positions. In this respect, the results provide information about how best to accompany students with special needs in school-based vocational orientation.

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The professional and working world has developed rapidly in recent years. It is affected by globalisation, the influences of digitalisation and demographic change in society (Kim, 2019). The analysis of skilled worker shortage (Bundesagentur für Arbeit [BA], 2019) underlines for Germany that skilled workers are needed in many professions, especially in the health and care professions as well as in skilled trades. For these professions, a three-year vocational qualification must usually be completed.

For students with learning disabilities (LD) the transition from school to vocational training is associated with major challenges. The term LD refers to a comprehensive impairment of learning, which can be traced back to multivariate explanations. This often first becomes apparent in school learning contexts and spans across a variety of subjects. Students with LD need special educational support in education because they are impaired in their learning which does not allow them to reach their full potential and their academic performance in many subjects is often insufficient to achieve the goals of a grade (Gebhardt et al., 2011).

The status of the special educational need focus, the visit at a special needs school, an insufficient or missing school-leaving certificate as well as impairments in various developmental areas challenges the access to vocational qualifications for many. Findings in the German-speaking area show that the transitions of former students with LD from school to work are characterised by frictions and discontinuities in the long run. Thus, they have difficulties finding vocational training or permanent employment. In some cases, they also work in the low-wage sector and are on the edge of the poverty line (Basendowski & Werner, 2010; Gebhardt et al., 2011; Ginnold, 2008; Hübner, 2021a; Rosenberger, 2017).

The German ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the shortage of skilled workers, and demographic trends have contributed to the revision of school-based vocational orientation programmes throughout Germany over the past decade (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung [BMBF] & Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales, 2022; Ministerium für Arbeit, Gesundheit und Soziales [MAGS], 2020). In these programmes, the transition from school to vocational training has become the focus of the final school phase. Many established programmes across Germany's federal states aim to help students to make and orient themselves towards career choices at an early stage. There are also programmes for students with special educational needs (SEN). Thus, all adolescents should be provided with early and systematic work experience opportunities, which support their decision-making abilities with regard to a realistic future perspective, so that they can make a professional choice according to their competences and interests (MAGS, 2020).

In this context, various offers of work experience are made available. From the perspective of the students and schools, these are seen as an important first opportunity to try out and gain professional and practical experience in a company. From the perspective of the companies, they are seen as an opportunity to get to know future trainees better and to promote their own company. In this respect, they are regarded as an established and important stage in the school phase of vocational orientation (Allianz der Aus- und Weiterbildung, 2017; Beinke, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Depending on the federal state, a distinction is made between three one-day insight days, two- to three-week internships and longer-term work placements, taking place on individual days or anywhere from several school weeks up to a school year. The various work experience options are designed to meet the needs of students at different points in their vocational orientation and to satisfy the desire for more extensive insights into professional practice. Above all, the longer practical phases should be available to students whose transition to vocational training is at risk (Hofman-Lun, 2014; Hübner, 2019; Hübner, 2021b).

However, since the introduction of the various work experience opportunities, it remains unclear which of the three options are particularly useful from the students' perspective for their vocational orientation. Furthermore, the different options mean that students have to find a variety of work experience opportunities over different school years. In this regard, it is unclear whether they take advantage of supportive resources in their search for work experience positions or which persons advise them in their search.

The aim of the explorative study is to provide information for the first time about which offers of work experience opportunities are used by students at special schools in NRW; how they evaluate the offers at the end of their schooling; and to what extent they use support in their search.

## EDUCATION AND SCHOOL-LEAVING QUALIFICATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

In 2020, a total of approximately 582.400 students with SEN were supported in schools ([Sekretariat der Ständigen Konferenz der Kultusminister \[KMK\], 2022](#)), of which 228.093 students (39%) had LD. Regarding the gender distribution, 132.099 male students (58%) and 95.994 female students (42%) are classified as students with LD ([Statistische Bundesamt, 2022](#)). Students with LD are the largest group among students with a special educational need in Germany ([Statistische Bundesamt, 2022](#)).

In Germany, students with LD ([Gebhardt et al., 2011](#); [KMK, 2019](#)) can be taught at special needs schools or in all other general education schools (Grundschule, Hauptschule or Sekundarschule, etc.)

After the primary level, different systems become available ([KMK, 2022](#); [Sansour & Bernhard, 2018](#)). Although they can be educated in inclusive secondary school systems (Sekundarschule, Hauptschule, Gesamtschule, etc.) or at special needs schools ([Sansour & Bernhard, 2018](#)).

Since the UNCRPD in 2009, the inclusion rate in general schools has been increasing. Thus, in 2020, approximately 44% of the approximately 580.000 special needs students were educated in general education schools ([Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2022](#)). Students with and without disabilities are educated together and can obtain different school-leaving qualifications based on their individual competences.

Although a school-leaving qualification is not a requirement for a vocational training in Germany, from the company's point of view it serves as an indicator of the ability to pass the relevant content of vocational education ([Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020](#); [van Essen, 2015](#)). In this respect, the least demanding school leaving certificate, **Hauptschulabschluss**, is also the *lowest* qualified certificate recognised by companies. Companies usually prefer graduates with higher qualified school leaving certificates, known as Realschulabschluss or Abitur ([Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020](#); [van Essen, 2015](#)). The Hauptschulabschluss after the ninth grade is the first of all recognised certificates to be attained for students with and without SEN.

The criteria for the awarding of qualifications for students with LD are, in part, regulated differently concerning specific requirements issued by some federal states. Based on individual competencies, in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), students can obtain a school-leaving certificate in education for students with LD (Schulabschluss im Bildungsgang Lernen) or Hauptschulabschluss ([Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung NRW, 2022](#)).

In the statistics of the federal states, students with a school-leaving certificate in education for students with LD currently fall into the group of students who have *not attained* a Hauptschulabschluss. In the 2018/19 school year, 73% of all students with LD didn't achieve a Hauptschulabschluss, while only 27% did ([Statistische Bundesamt, 2020](#)).

In this respect, the transition process for these students is already more difficult at the first threshold to vocational education because they did not have a *recognised* school-leaving qualification or, in the case of Hauptschulabschluss, have too few qualifications. For this reason, they are usually accompanied in the initial measures of the vocational transition sector either in preparation for a vocational training or to achieve school-leaving qualifications ([Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2020](#); [Gebhardt et al., 2011](#); [Hübner, 2021a](#)). Therefore, the phase of vocational orientation at general education schools is important. The offers facilitate an early and reflective examination of the vocational choices of students with LD, so that existing resources, connections and vocational perspectives can be thought through and planned at an early stage ([KMK, 2019](#)).

In NRW, career guidance was reorganised for all school systems in 2011. It is divided into four fields of action. In field of action I, vocational orientation, all schools have been offering the services of the state-wide programme *Kein Abschluss ohne Anschluss* since the 2016/2017 school year (MAGS, 2020). Numerous offerings can be completed by students. These include, for example, a competence analysis in the eighth grade, career counselling by an employment agency, the processing of a portfolio instrument or different types of work experience (MAGS, 2020).

Beginning in the eighth grade, all students go through the initial offerings.

Table 1 outlines different work experience opportunities for which the student body in this study was surveyed.

**Table 1** Different work experience opportunities in NRW.

Note: (BMBF et al., 2016; MAGS, 2020).

WORK EXPERIENCE	GRADE	PERIOD	GOALS AND OBJECTIVES	NOTE
One-day insight days (Berufsfeld- erkundung)	Eighth grade	One-day insight days in three different occupational fields	Students testing their skills and interests in three different companies. This gives them the opportunity to get to know three different occupational fields in a very short time (e.g., crafts, kindergarten and administration).	As a rule, students at special needs schools go through the offers at external vocational training facilities. This is organised with the support of an employment agency. The personnel of the external vocational training facility give the students a one-day insight into a protected area for isolated training. A total of €50,00 per student per day is budgeted.
Internship (Schülerbetriebs- praktikum)	Ninth or tenth grade	Two to three weeks	The one-day insight days are followed by the internship. Students can deepen their practical work experience and test their own skills.	In NRW, students in secondary school must complete at least one student work experience assignment in a company.  As a rule, students must find their work experience places on their own.
Longer-term work placement (Langzeitpraktikum)	Ninth and tenth grade	One day a week for one school year	This offer is for students with support needs at the transition to vocational training. They gain intensive vocational experience in a company, so that the motivation for an apprenticeship increases and chances of finding an apprenticeship at the end of school are improved.	This offer can be made voluntarily by schools and used by students.  It is also important that the achievement of Hauptschulabschluss is ensured.

These different forms of work experience are all intended for students with LD and can be offered at special needs schools according to the needs of the students. The aim is not only to provide practical work experience but also to encourage motivation and facilitate personal development (Allianz für Aus- und Weiterbildung, 2017; Hübner, 2021b).

## CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

There is currently little research on the vocational orientation process and the relevance of work experience opportunities for students with LD (Blanck, 2020; Hübner, 2021a). This may be due to the complex education and vocational education or training systems in German-speaking countries and the individual measures available. In this respect, the search initially covers the German-speaking area and using the available databases FIS Bildung, ERIC Database, and Psyn dex. In addition, regional research reports were retrieved from the websites of the labour and school ministries in NRW. These reports are not listed in the university databases. Only 19 empirical publications on the vocational orientation process of students with LD can be found since the year 2005 (research period May 2022). The following search terms were used: *students with learning disabilities in vocational orientation, work placements, work experience, school-based internship, learning difficulties, transition from school to work* or synonyms.

The survey phases of these publications, which focus more on the transition to vocational education, often referred to the period before the programmatic change in vocational orientation. In reviewing the papers, it can be stated that work experience opportunities in a company are of relevance to students with LD (Bindl & Thielen, 2013; Hofmann-Lun, 2014; Hübner, 2021b). Regarding individual offers, differences in the evaluation can be found if the

samples are differentiated according to socio-demographic variables. For example, female students seem to be more intensively concerned with their vocational orientation than male students (Boockmann et al., n.d.; Hübner, 2021b).

Due to the large number of different work experience opportunities available (individual insight days, two-three-week internships, and longer-term work placements), a quantitative-empirical study should, among other things, provide insights for the first time about how students at special needs schools in NRW evaluate these opportunities at the end of their schooling.

This study has the following research questions:

1. To what extent are the different work experience offers utilised?
2. What relevance do students attribute to work experience offers in relation to their vocational orientation if they have completed at least two or all three offers?
3. Are there differences in the evaluation of the importance of work experience between male and female students?
4. Who supports the students in their search for work experience positions?

The plan was to survey students in tenth grade, just before they left school. At that point, they had experienced all the available vocational opportunities and could therefore evaluate them.

In the planning phase of the study, there was not yet an ethics committee at the university that could be consulted. From there, an orientation towards the Declaration of Helsinki took place. Among other things, it was important that the school authorities, the school management, the parents and, above all, the students were first informed about the study and how the collected data would be handled, and that they gave their consent to participate in the survey. These steps were taken in the pre-tests and in the main study. Students were able to drop out of the survey at any time without giving a reason. Following a consultation with the university's data protection department, student data were pseudonymised after all surveys, transferred to an external hard drive, and stored in a locked location.

## METHODS

### MEASURES

Overall, the study was divided into a pilot phase and a main study with two quantitative surveys (Hübner, 2019). Independent of the commitment of an individual school, the quantitative approach made it possible to first gauge the relevance of the offers, identify their influence on the vocational orientation process and, for example, make group comparisons.

Questionnaires were developed in the pilot phase, as there was no existing instrument that would have captured the aspects of interest. Two pre-tests aided in the construction of the questionnaires. These tests were conducted at four secondary schools. A total of 231 students from grade 10 participated in both pre-test phases (Hübner, 2019).

After two pilot tests, the data set was subjected to an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to uncover correlative structures and identify factors relevant to the offers of vocational orientation. These factors led to the modification and adaptation of the instrument for both measurement time points. In addition, the EFA provided important information on the delimitability of the items and constructs – offering early indications as to the validity of the instrument.

In the main study, students with LD were surveyed at the end of tenth grade. After 12–14 months, a second survey was conducted after leaving school.

The questionnaire was developed as an online version for both surveys (Software Unipark ©). Regarding the work experience opportunities (individual insight days, two- to three-week internships and longer-term placements), three scales each on the *search for a position* and on *occupational experiences* were taken into account in the first questionnaire. This was followed by a scale concerning the *importance of the offer for the vocational orientation process*. A four-point response scale was provided for evaluating the offerings (1 = *does not apply at all*, 2 = *hardly applies*, 3 = *rather applies*, 4 = *fully applies*). An odd scale was not used to avoid distortions concerning the tendency of responses to the centre. This was kept constant across all scales.

## PARTICIPANTS

In the first measurement ( $t_1$ ), from March to June 2017, the total sample was reached via special needs schools. An important inclusion criterion was that the students from the special schools had to come from districts and municipalities that offer the various services of the new vocational orientation programme, so that the evaluation was possible in principle. The only students excluded from these schools were those who did not participate in the offerings or could not read.

After the school boards from three districts and three cities agreed to the survey, a total of 17 special needs schools in NRW agreed to participate. They forwarded the consent form to their tenth-grade students and their parents.

The first measurement was conducted with students in the computer labs of their schools. For the second measurement ( $t_2$ ), a sample of  $t_1$  was contacted. All students who scored on the measures at  $t_1$  were eligible to participate.

In the first measurement, a total of 201 students participated in the survey. Among them, 41% were female ( $n_{t1} = 83$ ) and 59% male ( $n_{t1} = 118$ ) adolescents. On average, the age of the subjects was 16 years old ( $SD = .65$ ). At  $t_2$ , the subsample ( $n_{t2} = 80$ ) could be split between 41% female ( $n_{t2} = 33$ ) and 59% ( $n_{t2} = 47$ ) male. Their mean age was 17 years ( $SD = .52$ ). This corresponds to a response rate of 40%.

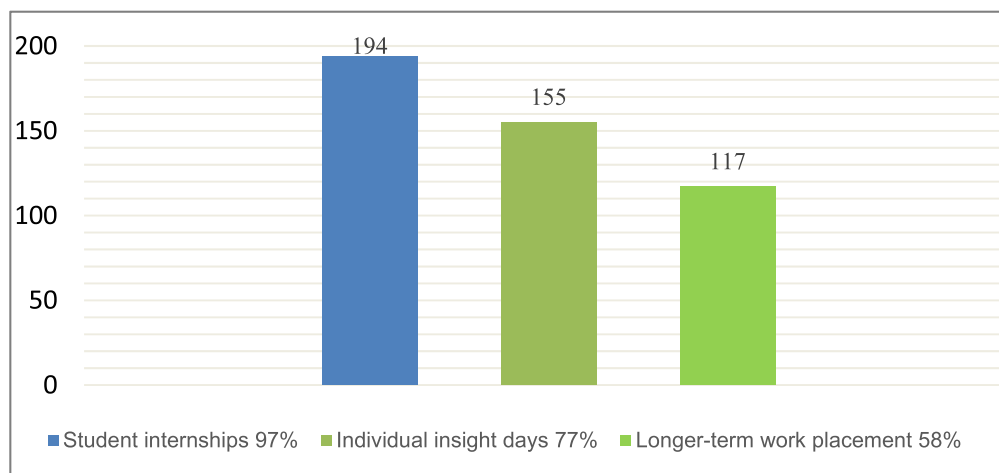
## RESULTS

In the following, in addition to the descriptive results, the findings of the statistical evaluation of the factors for the *importance of the three work experience offers* from  $t_1$  are presented. The scale and item evaluation of these factors led to the result that the data are not normally distributed and there is no sufficient variance homogeneity for all groups, so that nonparametric procedures were used for the calculation. In this respect, group comparisons were performed using the Mann-Whitney test.

Regarding the gender proportion, it can be stated that – according to the figures provided by the Statistische Bundesamt (2022) on the gender distribution of students with LD for the state of NRW and the federal government – the sample can be described as approximately representative at  $t_1$ .

### THE UTILISATION OF WORK EXPERIENCE OFFERS

Figure 1 shows the three offers that were evaluated. While the first two offerings (student internships and three days of individual insight days) are mandatory, the longer-term work placement is offered on a voluntary basis. In this regard, it must be considered that the longer-term placement was offered at just 15 of 17 schools. In addition, no school had the one-day insight days take place in businesses. All schools whose students participated in the survey had the one-day insight days carried out by external vocational training facilities.



**Figure 1** Students who evaluated the three work experience opportunities at  $t_1$ ,  $N_{t1} = 201$ .



Concerning utilisation, Figure 1 shows descriptively that a large proportion of the sample in the first survey can evaluate the mandatory work experience offers. Since the distribution of utilisation differs, Table 2 shows how many students combined and completed different offerings. Out of 201 students, a total of 99 students (49%) took advantage of all three work experience opportunities.

COMPOSITION UTILISATION WORK EXPERIENCE $N_{t_1} = 201$	INSIGHT DAYS $N_{t_1} (%)$	STUDENT INTERNSHIP $N_{t_1} (%)$	LONGER-TERM PLACEMENT $N_{t_1} (%)$
Group 1	99 (49)	99 (49)	99 (49)
Group 2	55 (27)	55 (27)	
Group 3		17 (9)	17 (8)
Group 4	1 (1)		
Group 5		23 (12)	
Group 6		–	1 (1)
Total	155 (77)	194 (97)	117 (58)

**Table 2** Composition of the sample concerning the utilisation of work experience opportunities at  $t_1$ .

A further descriptive evaluation shows that the internships and the longer-term work placements were used several times.

Of the 194 students who evaluated the work experience, 125 students (64%) had already taken advantage of the offer in the eighth grade, a total of 161 students (83%) gained practical work experience in the ninth grade, and 128 students (66%) completed work experience in the tenth grade.

Of the 117 students who evaluated a longer-term work placement, seven students took advantage of the offer in the eighth grade (6%), 28 students in the ninth grade (24%), and in the tenth grade 104 students (89%) participated in the longer-term placement.

Thus, a total of 36 out of 201 students (18%) completed at least two work experience assignments and/ or a longer-term placement by the end of grade 10. Just under one-third of respondents ( $n_{t_1} = 64$ , 32%) completed all three practice phases. Four practice phases were completed by 49 students (24%). In this respect, the surveyed sample at  $t_1$  had completed a mean  $M = 3.31$  work experiences ( $SD = 1.44$ ).

## RELEVANCE OF WORK EXPERIENCE FOR VOCATIONAL ORIENTATION

The evaluation of the importance of the work experience is calculated based on the sample size and the possible comparison of at least two to three work experience offers, using the first and second group.

The results in Table 3 indicate that the student internship and longer-term work placement tend to be rated highly compared to the insight days. For the first group, the descriptive analysis of the item mean values shows that the insight days receive the lowest mean ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) and the longer-term work placement ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) the highest. In the second group, the student internship ( $M = 3.03$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) tends to be rated higher than the one-day insight days ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ). In none of the groups did statistical calculations with the Friedman test lead to a significant difference between the work experience offers.

GROUPS	INSIGHT DAYS $M (SD)$	STUDENT INTERNSHIP $M (SD)$	LONGER-TERM PLACEMENT $M (SD)$
Group 1, $n_{t_1} = 99$	2.96 (0.59)	3.07 (0.63)	3.13 (0.70)
Group 2, $n_{t_1} = 55$	2.94 (0.75)	3.03 (0.69)	

**Table 3** Evaluation of work experience of the first and second group at  $t_1$  in comparison.

The extent to which statistical differences in the evaluation of the work experience offers can be identified when the sample is divided according to the variable gender can be seen in Tables 4 and 5.

## DIFFERENCES IN THE EVALUATION DISTRIBUTED ACCORDING TO THE GENDER PROPORTION

Table 4 shows descriptively that the female students in the first group attribute a higher significance to all work experience offers than male students.

IMPORTANCE SUBSCALES GROUP 1, $N_{t1} = 99$	FEMALE STUDENTS ( $N_{t1} = 39$ ) $\tilde{X}$	$M (SD)$	MALE STUDENTS ( $N_{t1} = 60$ ) $\tilde{X}$	$M (SD)$	$P$
Longer-term placement	3.40	3.21 (.83)	3.00	3.07 (.61)	0.036*
Student internship	3.20	3.23 (.61)	3.00	2.96 (.61)	0.022*
Insight days	3.00	3.05 (.55)	2.90	2.90 (.62)	0.23

The results of the scale on the importance of the longer-term placement and the student internship led to significant differences. Thus, the evaluation of the longer-term placement is significantly higher among female students ( $\tilde{X} = 3.40$ ) than among male students ( $\tilde{X} = 3.00$ ) which, according to Cohen (1992), indicates a medium effect ( $U = 880$ ;  $z = -2.092$ ;  $p < .036$ ;  $r = 0.21$ ).

Furthermore, the female students ( $\tilde{X} = 3.20$ ) assign a higher relevance to the student internship than the male students ( $\tilde{X} = 3.00$ ). This difference also proves to be significant ( $U = 852$ ;  $z = -2.292$ ;  $p < .022$ ;  $r = 0.23$ ). According to Cohen (1992), this is also a medium effect size.

Descriptively, the median results in Table 5 indicate that the female students in the second group tend to rate the offerings higher than the male students. A significant difference between the two groups does not show up in the calculations.

IMPORTANCE SUBSCALES GROUP 2, $N_{t1} = 55$	FEMALE STUDENTS ( $N_{t1} = 26$ ) $\tilde{X}$	$M (SD)$	MALE STUDENTS ( $N_{t1} = 29$ ) $\tilde{X}$	$M (SD)$	$P$
Student internship	3.10	3.09 (.77)	3.00	2.97 (.62)	0.44
Insight days	3.00	3.00 (.74)	2.80	2.88 (.76)	0.55

## SUPPORT IN THE SEARCH FOR A WORK EXPERIENCE

Students ( $n_{t1} = 155$ ) who took part in the insight days, conducted it with an external vocational training facility and did not have to look for a position in a nearby company. The question is thus relevant for the first and second groups for the work experience and additionally for the first group for the longer-term placement.

Table 6 shows the results of the question as to who selected the place for the longer-term placement and the student internships. In both groups, students tended to have selected the work experience site on their own. Considering the large standard deviation, parents tended to be more involved in the search process for the longer-term placement in the first group ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ). In the second group, teachers tended to support the search process for the internship ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ).

GROUPS	MYSELF $M (SD)$	MY PARENTS $M (SD)$	MY TEACHERS $M (SD)$	OTHER PEOPLE SUPPORTED ME $M (SD)$
Group 1, $n_{t1} = 99$ longer-term placements	3.33 (1.13)	1.84 (1.20)	1.71 (1.11)	1.34 (0.84)
Group 1, $n_{t1} = 99$ student internship	3.47 (0.95)	1.80 (1.14)	1.82 (1.10)	1.46 (1.00)
Group 2, $n_{t1} = 55$ student internship	3.51 (0.94)	1.64 (0.97)	1.91 (1.16)	1.58 (1.10)

In addition, it was also recorded how the students found the internship place. Table 7 shows that most students in the first ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and second ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) groups knew the company and applied for the internship position. In both groups, moreover, the advice of parents and teachers tended to be less relevant. The first group ( $M = 1.69$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ )

**Table 4** Differences in the evaluation distributed according to the gender proportion for the first group ( $t_1$ ).

Note: Value range of the variables 1 (does not apply at all), 2 (hardly applies), 3 (rather applies), 4 (fully applies). Median ( $\tilde{X}$ ), mean ( $M$ ) and standard deviation ( $SD$ ), Calculation of differences with U-Test, two-sided; \*  $p < .05$ .

**Table 5** Differences in the evaluation distributed according to the gender proportion for the second group ( $t_1$ ).

Note: Value range of the variables 1 (does not apply at all), 2 (hardly applies), 3 (rather applies), 4 (fully applies). Median ( $\tilde{X}$ ), mean ( $M$ ) and standard deviation ( $SD$ ), Calculation of differences with U-Test, two-sided; \*  $p < .05$ .

**Table 6** People involved in the search for the work experience at  $t_1$ .

Note: Value range of the variables 1 (does not apply at all), 2 (hardly applies), 3 (rather applies), 4 (fully applies).



GROUPS	BECAUSE I KNEW THE COMPANY, I REPORTED THERE <i>M (SD)</i>	PARENTS ADVICE <i>M (SD)</i>	TEACHERS ADVICE <i>M (SD)</i>	SEARCH ON THE INTERNET <i>M (SD)</i>
Group 1, $n_{t1} = 99$ longer-term placements	2.79 (1.33)	1.87 (1.14)	1.77 (1.08)	1.48 (0.98)
Group 1, $n_{t1} = 99$ student internship	2.87 (1.31)	1.91 (1.10)	1.95 (1.17)	1.69 (1.13)
Group 2, $n_{t1} = 55$ student internship	2.98 (1.27)	1.95 (1.15)	2.09 (1.18)	1.47 (0.92)

and the second group ( $M = 1.47$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) hardly used the Internet to search for a company and a possible internship position compared to the other options.

## DISCUSSION

As a result of the change in vocational orientation programmes, all students should consider their vocational orientation as early as possible. Various offers in the school phase of vocational orientation are intended to support the process according to need, oriented to the competencies and interests of the students. Work experiences are one of the central offerings. In NRW, Germany's most populous state, three different types of work experience are currently offered during students' vocational orientation process.

In this respect, a quantitative-empirical approach was used to gain initial insights into which forms of work experience are completed, how important the offerings are for career orientation, and what support and advice is used in the search for a work experience position.

## UTILISATION AND RELEVANCE OF THE WORK EXPERIENCE OFFERS FOR VOCATIONAL ORIENTATION

Regarding utilisation, the results show that the two mandatory offerings were apparently used and thus evaluated by most of the students surveyed (Figure 1). Moreover, the results clearly indicate that all offers are important for the vocational orientation process because they all received very high ratings from the students' perspective (Tables 3, 4 and 5). This result is consistent with the findings of other studies (Brussig et al., n.d.; Hofman-Lun, 2014; Queisser, 2010). Nevertheless, differences in the evaluation of work experience offers can be identified. Of all three work experience offers, a lower significance is descriptively seen in the one-day insight days.

The schools at which the students were surveyed all offered insight days. They were conducted for all students by an external vocational training facility, so that the students were not required to look for the positions themselves. In this respect, this offer is associated with a personnel and cost-intensive commitment. Thus, costs of approximately €23,250.00 were incurred, measured against a number of 155 students (BMBF et al., 2016). It can be assumed that students have only a limited influence on the occupational field that they get to know. This is because the providers are only able to offer a selection of occupational fields. Brussig et al. (n.d.) were able to show that while career counsellors and teachers assume that students are certainly in favour of having a day off from school, the occupational field exploration at an external provider does not provide real world work experience or a real understanding of the relevant occupation. In this way, at best, skills could be acquired or curiosity about an occupation aroused. One goal of insight days is to stimulate interest in an occupation in a very short space of time or simply allow students to choose an occupational field for themselves and then get to know a company or occupation over a longer period through the student internship (MAGS, 2020). Therefore, students should be encouraged to actively participate in decisions concerning their insight days, developing their sense of autonomy and interest in the professional world. Ideally, they would be able to decide whether they would like to complete their occupational field exploration with an external provider or in a real company. This would require schools to allow time for implementation, so that the benefits and the expansion of the adolescent's skills can be increased.

**Table 7** Procedure for the selection of the longer-term placement or the internship at  $t_1$ .

Note: Value range of the variables 1 (does not apply at all), 2 (hardly applies), 3 (rather applies), 4 (fully applies).

However, a large proportion of the students surveyed did not participate in the mandatory one-day insight days. The reasons for non-utilisation cannot be verified at the current time based on the data. However, this finding is consistent with the results of Boockmann et al. (n.d.). In their study, 23% of SEN did not take advantage of this opportunity. It is conceivable that some of the students were unaware of the offer and its meaning in the transition phase of the new vocational orientation programme. In this respect, it would be important to inform the students and their parents sufficiently about all aspects concerning the organisation of the one-day insight days. Brüssig et al. (n.d.) were able to demonstrate that counsellors are of the opinion that insight days in an external vocational training facility can be advantageous especially for adolescents who refuse to attend school, or youth with school problems to raise interest and curiosity for the world of work. The importance of occupational exploration for the entire vocational orientation process clearly requires optimisation for this group of students, in particular, so that it can be used by all students.

In contrast, a large proportion of the students ( $n_{11}=194$ ) undertook internships. Especially for students with LD, it is emphasised how important company experiences are (Hofmann-Lun, 2014). It is assumed that participation in work experience programmes leads to intensified occupational experiences and supports the students in their ability to reflect on their career choice. The high ratings given by students to the relevance of internships in the vocational orientation process underline this statement.

It is interesting to note that almost half of the total sample took advantage of all three opportunities and can thus look back on a varied portfolio of work experience at the end of their schooling. This shows that different work experience offers, including the voluntary ones, are taken up by many students. Therefore, all schools should offer all three types of work experiences in order to give students sufficient exposure to the working world. Whether these have an actual effect on the vocational orientation process of the students must be further investigated. Kayser (2013) was able to show that work experience has an influence on the career aspirations of disadvantaged youth, among others, and increases their prospects of finding an apprenticeship.

## DIFFERENCES IN THE EVALUATION DISTRIBUTED ACCORDING TO THE GENDER PROPORTION

Regarding the results on gender proportion, the item mean values show that female students tend to rate the relevance of all work experience higher than male students. From the perspective of female students, internships and longer-term placements in the first group are significantly more important for the vocational orientation process than for the male students. The higher item mean values for female students compared to male students could be due to the fact that female students experience less support in their home environment when looking for an apprenticeship or lack corresponding role models who can advise them (Fasching, 2005; Kayser, 2013). In addition, it has been shown with reference to students with LD, that female students initially tend to have a more limited choice of training options than male students (Basendowski & Werner, 2010; Fasching, 2005). Therefore, female students could benefit more from various work experience options and would subsequently evaluate them as more important.

In their study, Boockmann et al. (n.d.) were able to show that female students, regardless of school status, tended to reconsider their career paths more than male students. Considering that for students with LD there is a risk of not achieving a qualifying school leaving certificate and there are limited career options available, it is understandable that female students attribute great importance to work experience. Thus, female students could perceive themselves to be dependent on the work experience and receive the offers and associated counselling. Offering gender-sensitive counselling and targeted reflection after an internship could increase the attractiveness and planning security for further work experiences of male students as well, so that the utilisation and importance for both genders increase. In isolated situations in everyday school life, for example, it would be conceivable to have gender-segregated, reflective discussions on the internships so that the focus could be on addressing specific needs.

It remains questionable what objectives female students, in contrast to male students, have associated with work experience and whether these objectives have been achieved.

The extent to which students with SEN take advantage of help and advice in finding a place has hardly been researched to date. As a rule, schools ask their students to look for a place for all types of work experiences themselves (Queisser, 2010). The findings show that students largely chose the place of their work experience themselves (Table 6). In this respect, the result is positive because the students are supported in their autonomy development and experience important phases of an application process for the first time. It also seems to be significant that the adolescents knew the company and subsequently applied for a longer-term placement or a student internship (Table 7). This is a finding already described by Beinke and Wascher (1993) and demonstrated by Queisser (2010) in the context of a survey with students of Hauptschule.

However, with the focus on future-oriented professions, it is considered critical whether aspects such as the proximity to the place of residence, or the personal degree of familiarity with a company are decisive for the choice of a work experience position, as this could neglect the regional economic structure or actual career aspirations (Beinke & Wascher, 1993; Queisser, 2010). However, students in the study cited here, completed an average of three work experience assignments, so they at least had the opportunity for reorientation. The evaluation of these assignments also shows that they were obviously very important for their further occupational development, so that it can be assumed that they chose the place consciously.

Followed by the independent search for work experience, parents and teachers can also be supportive. Although the average result suggests that little use was made of the support, the large standard deviation (Tables 6 and 7) indicates a wide spread of data. Thus, individual students certainly used the personnel support more intensively than other students.

Since students from all general education schools in NRW complete insight days or internships, companies might tend to prefer the better qualified students over the weaker applicants (Brussig et al., n.d.). In this respect, it is conceivable that students with LD are particularly dependent on support in the search process, which has already been demonstrated by Stöbe-Blossey et al. (n.d.), Queisser (2010) and Gebhardt (2009). The contacts of special needs schools to regional companies or parental support in the application process could contribute to these students acquiring work experience. Therefore, these students are dependent on the support and cooperation contacts of their teachers and parents to find a position.

Descriptively, the possibility of searching via the Internet seems to have been less important for the sample than using the advice of parents or teachers. In this regard, a similar result emerges in the study by Boockmann et al. (n.d.) with reference to career field exploration ( $n = 2715$ ). Only 23% of the youth stated that they found the internships with the help of the Internet. Overall, 72% used private contacts and 34% used school-based leads. In this respect, it is conceivable that adolescents, due to their developmental age, prefer to search via familiarity, proximity to home or personal support. For school-based practice, an *open forum* for finding an internship is suitable. Companies that have been cooperating with a school system for years could be listed in the vocational orientation office or linked via the school's website. In this way, students who have difficulty finding an internship for various reasons and whose parents are unable to support them would receive clear guidance and assistance in their search. A prerequisite would be regular adjustment of the companies and contact persons so that the students use the information in a targeted manner.

## LIMITATIONS

Despite the contributions to knowledge, the results have limitations. The questionnaire was constructed specifically for this study and the EFA provided only initial indications of validity. In future studies, the factorial construct validity of the instrument should be ensured using a confirmatory factor analysis to determine the internal consistency of the factor structure.

Furthermore, the survey showed how differently offers are implemented across school systems. For instance, the compulsory offers could not be evaluated by all students since they had not participated in all offers. Additionally, the actual behaviour and experiences of the students couldn't be objectively recorded in this survey. Future studies would have to consider complementary perspectives in career development, such as teachers, parents, and companies.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, a broad spectrum of work experience opportunities is available to students with LD. All offers are retrospectively important for their vocational orientation, especially the student internship and longer work placement. In this respect, the descriptive findings indicate that the students value a variety of occupational practical experiences that proved significant for their career orientation process. Provided that all practical offers are completed, the results regarding the longer-term placement and student internship lead to a significant difference in the comparison of genders. These results speak in favour of gender-sensitive, pedagogical guidance during vocational orientation.

With the revision of vocational orientation at schools, recent policies have developed a comprehensive programme. However, further qualitative studies should explore whether work experience has a long-term impact on career choice and what goals were associated with the utilisation of the various offerings from the students' perspective.

Regardless of this, it must be stated that the transition from school to vocational education poses a variety of challenges for the student body researched in the article. This also applies for students with LD who have attended inclusive schools (KMK, 2019). This is because students with LD depend on different types of work experience, comprehensive and targeted group-specific counselling, and guidance before and during the transition process in all school systems in which they are supported.

## DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENTS

Due to confidential and privacy agreements the data cannot be made available.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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