Childhood as a resource and laboratory for the self-project

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Abstract
The biographies of individuals in today’s societies are characterized by the need to exert effort and make decisions in planning one’s life course. A ‘self-project’ has to be worked out both retrospectively and prospectively; childhood becomes important as a resource and a laboratory for the self-project. This empirical study analyses how the occupational choices of young people are connected with their occupational aspirations as a child. Children’s aspirations prove to be class-sensitive. Studying the importance of childhood in the self-project thus makes it possible to consider children’s agency in the interconnection of class and generational categories.

Keywords
children’s agency, occupational choices, self-project, social structure, structural reproduction

Introduction: Childhood as a resource for the self-project
Stefanie is a third year apprentice in a rather run-down hairdresser in a small town. Being asked why she chose this vocation, Stefanie answers:

I always wanted to work with hair somehow, I wanted to and I had to, because all my friends came to me while I was still at school . . . they came and wanted to have their hair done when they wanted to go out. My hair always looked great, just like that and then they got on my nerves and ‘can you please do my hair’ . . . and ‘you can do that so great’.

Mike, 19, a third year apprentice in a small car body workshop, says:

Well, I always wanted to do something with cars, with cars and with paint and then somehow this merged together . . . and my uncle [and] he is a car spray painter as well and I tried a little
bit to become clued up, I watched a bit, and then it seemed really cool to me, I helped my uncle and helped a little bit.

Both trainees, with a *Hauptschule*\(^1\) degree, and after a protracted search for an apprenticeship,\(^2\) define their occupational route as a personal choice, emphasizing their personal interests in terms of hair care and cars and paint, respectively. From Mike’s point of view, he doesn’t just follow a prestructured route prepared and given by his uncle, but pursues his own interests and plans. He speaks of an individualized decision and pathway – even though this decision operates within a familiar context and in the expected direction.\(^3\) Similarly, Stefanie substantiates her choice in her own biography when she says that she ‘always wanted to work with hair somehow’, and confirms her early talent with the praise she got from her friends.

These interviews were conducted in 2005 in a qualitative study which can be considered a pilot study for the study on which this article is based (Bühler-Niederberger and König, 2006). The interviewees comprised 31 young people, most of whom had considerable problems in the course of their apprenticeship, with several breaking off their training. Both of the trainees mentioned above have had problems in their workplace – Stefanie is described by her supervisor as rebellious, a trainee who does not accept the salon’s hierarchy, and Mike is repeatedly getting into trouble with his supervisor, who complains about his poor workmanship and his lack of respect. But neither has abandoned their apprenticeship.

In Stefanie’s and Mike’s narratives, it becomes apparent that the individualized substantiation of their choice for their apprenticeship acts as a resource against obstacles and difficulties within the apprenticeship. Both anchor their occupational ambition in the hopes and wishes they already had as a child, and link it to a biographical constancy which motivates them to overcome the problems in their apprenticeship. Such an anchorage of occupational ambition in personal biography was absent from the interviews with the young people who broke off their apprenticeship and switched to another occupation. In fact, it was uniquely characteristic of those who stuck with their choice.

Based on these results we conducted a survey study, the results of which are presented here. In this study we extended our perspective to highlight not only the trajectory of apprenticeship, but also a more encompassing view of what can be called the ‘self-project’ of adolescents. This is a theoretical term which links two different theoretical traditions: individualization theories and theories of social reproduction. For a broad and heterogeneous sample of young people, including not only vocational trainees (i.e. those pursuing a trade like Mike and Stefanie) but also teaching, engineering and art students, we analysed the resources, orientations and strategies which were important for their biographical decisions. Concretely, we focus on the biographical decisions upon leaving school. A major question here is the extent to which the occupational aspirations as a child and actual occupational decisions are congruent. We consider self-projects to be structured by social class and we also present our findings concerning the social structuration of children’s aspirations. Further questions concern the processes in which self-projects are worked out and how social class becomes influential and under what circumstances structured ways may be abandoned. We are dealing with these processual aspects in a qualitative follow-up study which is still ongoing and is not presented here.
Theoretical approach: Self-projects as prospective and retrospective work in an unequal society

The theoretical core of our study is the concept of a self-project. The efforts and requirements of planning and deciding life courses and life phases characterize the whole biography of individuals in today's societies. This insight is taken for granted by many sociologists: standards of 'normal biographies' (Beck, 1992) are becoming weaker, and elective, reflective and do-it-yourself biographies becoming more prevalent, allowing but also requiring the individual's attention and constant engagement (Hitzler and Honer, 1994; Kohli, 1985, 2003). Authenticity (Sennett, 1977) and personal uniqueness (Eberlein, 2000) become more significant, and the individual is confronted with the requirement to form and present a unique, recognizable identity and to identify with her/himself (De Singly, 2005; Kaufman, 2004). We call this constant individual accomplishment – which is at the same time socially permitted and socially imposed – the 'self-project'. The self-project is the more demanding as it cannot be worked out beyond social structure (see below), although some individualization theories suggest exactly this (Beck, 1992). Rather, it requires incorporating even structural limits as part of one's self. The notion of the self here has its roots in symbolic interactionism which – based on its view of the social world as a permanent interactive accomplishment – conceives of the self as a reflective, interpretative instance as well as a product of social interaction. In the tradition of Cooley (1922) and Mead (1934), symbolic interactionism assumes that one's self-perception is achieved in the mirror of 'significant' or 'generalized others', that is, orientated towards the expectations and demands of others. The world of work is an important element of forming and presenting one's self in today's societies, and this process of self-formation and presentation also becomes an important demand of the labour market (Baethge, 1991; Pongratz and Voß, 2003; Voß and Weiss, 2009) or the new capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Sennett, 2006).

We understand such a self-project as being worked out both retrospectively and prospectively – which is what our pilot study showed:

- **Prospectively**, children trace out a biographical project, to get an idea what they will become later, to place themselves in society; to some degree they are also expected to do so, and they all know the adult question ‘what are you going to be when you grow up?’ (Delalande, 2006).
- **Retrospectively**, the actor is requested to trace back his/her actual self to early events, to link up with this foundation, to anchor decisions within his/her unique life history. By doing so these references can act as a form of capital, a source of certainty – which is just what the examples in the introduction illustrate.

Self-projects are neither worked out nor realized beyond social structure. Many studies show a strong association between educational success and social class – and educational success is a key variable defining the scope of self-projects. The PISA results, for example, show that there is a high correlation between educational success and social class in Germany – in fact one of the highest among the OECD countries (Baumert et al., 2001; Prenzel et al., 2003). These findings have been more or less constant for decades,
and while the extent of such social inequality varies among different countries, it remains considerable in all of them (Blossfeld and Shavit, 1993; Geißler, 2004; Vester, 2004).

Theoretical explanations concerning the mechanisms of structural reproduction can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Best known is his concept of differing forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). We can assume that cultural capital – especially embodied cultural capital which constitutes an integral part of the person – becomes even more significant as the requirements concerning the self-project increase. The skills needed to present the self – accentuated and inherited in ways that are specific to class location⁴ – turn out to be important forms of capital in themselves. But it is not only the availability of different forms of capital that is decisive for structural reproduction, Bourdieu also points to the structured nature of perception and evaluation concerning the possibilities that may be available and suitable. In this respect, he speaks of a form of self-elimination among the lower classes which operates when it comes to the competitive struggle for higher social positions. They themselves judge these positions to be out of reach and unsuitable for them as well as for the others in the same social position (Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964).

With the concept of the self-project as continuous and socially patterned, as a form of structured and restructuring work, we link theories of individualization with theories of structural reproduction. A self-project – however limited its scope may be by social class position – has to be worked out in a way that makes identification possible, and this means ascription to a unique self. This is a social requirement that even very young people have to meet. As this work has to be done in a prospective–retrospective way, the concept also opens up a new perspective on childhood. Childhood can be understood as a resource for the self-project in later life. This does not happen in the usual sense of referring to experiences one was exposed to during childhood (in the sense of a ‘happy childhood as a solid basis to start from’) but as a reference to the prospective work one has done at that time. This makes the child an important actor in his/her self-project. And as the self-project is structured by unequally distributed chances, the child’s acting has in some way to be conscious of those structures.

It is, of course, not at all new to think of childhood as an important phase in the reproduction of social inequality. Socialization research made this one of its main topics of research (recent and important studies in this research area include Hart and Risley, 1995; Lareau, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2007). But the important actors in the work of reproduction in such an approach were adults such as parents and teachers, while children were conceived mainly as the objects of adult investment and cultivation. With the concept of the self-project, children can be approached as actors in structural reproduction, and, at least to some degree, as informed actors concerning its logic. The scope of the self-project is structurally limited and reproduction is what it is: an unequal distribution of resources. Therefore, children are not seen naively as actors without any limits to their agency, but as actors with limited and unequal access to action. To analyse the working out of the self-project allows us accordingly to study children’s action, its limitations and its competences (King, 2007; Prout, 2000). To be theoretically more precise: it makes it possible to consider agency in the interconnection of class and generational categories (Alaanen, 2009: 170).
Study design

Our results are based on data from a survey of young people at the so-called ‘first threshold’, the start of an apprenticeship or university studies upon leaving school, which is one of the important institutionalized transitions in young life. The first threshold is a biographically condensed phase between school and qualification for an occupation. In this phase, decisions are required on a number of issues, including accommodation, lifestyle and quite frequently continuing or stopping the training that has been chosen. In this study we also asked about childhood experiences, and especially about the aspirations concerning future career possibilities which our interviewees had when they were children.

Such a retrospective design – our informants are normally around 18 years old and talk about their childhood – has the advantage of allowing analysis of the relevance of children’s biographical work for further decisions as well as the actual situation of young people by measuring the correspondence between actual decisions and former aspirations. The downside of this design is that the reports concerning childhood may be distorted and congruence established between the actual situation and the earlier plans as they are remembered. Therefore, we validate our results by referring to studies by other authors which asked children about their plans concerning their future. Such studies in turn have the advantage that they may gain more authentic insights into children’s working out of their plans and visions, but the disadvantage of not throwing light on the relevance that such plans have later on in life. Some of the results of our study give further validity to the retrospective design; this is discussed together with the respective results.

The survey consisted of standardized interviews with 1107 young people. The total sample is composed of three subsamples: (1) 450 vocational trainees (243 hairdressers and 207 painter/lacquerers); (2) 463 teaching (258) and engineering (205) students; and (3) 194 art students. It is a cluster sample recruiting whole classes in schools for vocational trainees and universities in different medium and large towns in western Germany. We wanted this sample composition to represent different patterns of self-projects. The differences we looked at were:

1. The scope of opportunities at the first threshold operationalized by the school qualification achieved. While all engineering and teaching students in our sample have passed a university entrance exam and almost all of the art students (93 percent) have done so as well, the painters/lacquerers and the hairdressers have lower school qualifications, 57 percent achieved a Hauptschule degree, 8 percent left Hauptschule without a final certificate and only 6.6 percent have an university entrance exam.

2. The kind of orientation concerning self and security which is decisive at the first threshold. This may be a preference for a job that offers the possibility of developing one’s own ideas, one’s own experiences and learning process. This dominance of internal motives we call self-orientation. The other orientation is marked by a preference for a job that promises security and sufficient money. Such dominance of external motives we term security orientation. Studies of students indicate that students of art are more self-orientated, while students of teaching and
engineering are more interested in a secure job and a good salary (Heine et al., 2008). Our study shows the expected differences between the subsamples. A factor analysis of the responses to questions concerning the importance of different aspects for their decision yields the following most important factors: (a) self-orientation, (b) orientation towards profit and status and (c) orientation towards modest, but solid security. However, self-orientation is to some extent a requirement for all groups (see later).

A fourth subsample – which arises from the logic of our sample composition – comprises adolescents who are self-orientated but without a university entrance qualification. These were a group of young people trying their luck in such avenues as TV talent shows, but we did not include them in the quantitative research; they are considered in the qualitative research phase.

An overview of the sample is shown in Table 1.

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**Children’s wishes: Realism, constancy and sense of social structure**

‘I wanted to become…’

The majority of the respondents in our study, regardless of whether they were art students or vocational trainees, mention a job aspiration that they had as children – 65 percent of the respondents in our study give a concrete answer to this open question. To achieve a steady occupation is even the most important aspect to which children aspired with regard to their future. A representative study of children between 9 and 14 years in Germany showed that 81 percent of the children declared a ‘good job’ to be ‘very important’; no other life goal scored as high (LBS-Kinderbarometer, 2007: 175). From an adult perspective, the very evident interest of children in the world of work might appear to be just childish play. When children play occupational roles – bargaining as a sales person in their little shops, scanning, equipped with doctor’s overall and a stethoscope, the heart beat of their teddy or sibling, selling their parents a parking ticket – social scientists interpret this as basic role socialization, in a mode which Mead (1934) calls ‘play’ – and not a concrete and realistic interest in the world of work. And even the young people in our two studies sometimes tended to see their earlier aspirations as ‘dreams’. But, the *mis-en-scène* of different jobs by children is not merely imaginative play; rather, it constitutes part of their self-project, their imagined future. This is what our study shows very clearly by revealing three characteristics of children’s wishes: (1) the rarity of really ‘child-typical’ dreams; (2) the constancy of aspirations over time; and (3) the bland realism

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<tr>
<th>University entrance exam</th>
<th>Security orientation</th>
<th>Self-orientation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Students: teachers, engineers</td>
<td>Hairdressers, painters, lacquerers</td>
<td>e.g. Talent shows</td>
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*Table 1. Sample composition and patterns of self-projects*
of such wishes, i.e. a realigning of one’s self (in the sense we defined the self earlier) in the class structure which indicates a ‘knowledge of social structure’ developed early in life.

The data concerning these three characteristics are presented in the following sections. But before going into detail, it is important to highlight the fact that such prospective work on the self-project is not purely voluntary. Childhood is not a phase beyond society’s exigencies: the demand to work on one’s self-project early in life results (paradoxically) from the freedom of choice that young people enjoy and from an external and internal obligation to use this freedom for an individualized choice. In all three subsamples our respondents named the following three motives most often as important or even very important for their decision at the first threshold: ‘to do something I can be really positive about’, ‘to have a profession in which I can personally develop’ and ‘to choose a profession in which I am personally interested’; while on the other hand the motive ‘because this profession is not too hard’ was the least frequently mentioned as being important by all three groups. When asked about their parents’ recommendation concerning their occupational choice, only 42 percent said that there was a concrete parental recommendation, and some added that their parents just wanted them to choose what they really liked doing. In particular, the adolescents choosing an academic career were less frequently given concrete advice (37 percent) than the vocational trainees (50 percent). The downside of such freedom is the requirement to develop aspirations early in life.

'I dreamt of becoming a police officer': Child-typical dreams

Children play at being police officer, fire fighter, clown, doctor and nurse, icecream vendor, digger operator. And as a matter of fact such aspirations were also mentioned by the young people in our study, although in all subsamples quite rarely:

- Among the 463 teaching/engineering students (267 mentioned a concrete job aspiration), the wish to become a fire fighter appears only four times, the wish to become a miner or train driver once each, an actor four times, a professional footballer four times;
- Among the 450 vocational trainees (313 mentioned a concrete job aspiration), seven wanted to be a fire fighter, one a digger operator, two a bus driver and three a train driver; eight wanted to be actors and 13 professional football players;
- Among the 194 art students (128 mentioned a concrete job aspiration), one said he had wanted to take care of apes (zoo-keeper) while still a child, two wanted to become clowns, two farmers, one a bank director, eight actors and three dreamt of being circus performers. This collection of children’s aspirations also included lion tamer, thief and astronaut.

One aspiration emerging relatively often in all three subsamples is police officer: 5.7 percent of the teaching/engineering students as well as 8.2 percent of the vocational trainees and 3.9 percent of the art students had dreamt about being in the police force when they were still children.

In sum, job aspirations corresponding to stereotypes of the child are relative rare, and they are not class-specific, as the distribution in the subsamples shows.
'I always wanted to become an artist': Constancy of aspirations over time

Asked what was the most frequent occupational aspiration they had as children, respondents in all three subsamples mention the profession they have now decided on (in choosing their study direction or vocational training) as having been their aspiration as children more often than any other:

- Among the teaching/engineering students, 22.5 percent already pictured themselves in this profession when they were children;
- Among the art students, 25 percent had always wanted to do something in art;
- Among the vocational trainees, 22 percent saw themselves in a salon (as a hairdresser or beautician) or in a paint/lacquer workshop.

To test whether there is a systematic connection between such biographical constancy and a specific field of occupation, we used a contingency analysis. The $\chi^2$ test indicates that the amount of biographical constancy is the same for all subsamples ($n = 708$; Pearson’s $\chi^2 = .469$; d.f. = 2; $p = .791$; Cramer’s $V = .026$).

However, we found a noticeable difference within our subsample of vocational trainees: while nearly 30 percent of the hairdressers have realized the wish they had as a child, fewer than 10 percent of the painters/lacquerers have done so. They more frequently mentioned wanting to be a car mechanic – the most popular ambition of the Hauptschule pupils – when they were children. It can be assumed that for some painters/lacquerers their job field is a second choice, after an unsuccessful search for an apprenticeship in a car workshop. The follow-up studies may show whether this higher biographical constancy of the hairdresser is a meaningful form of capital for them.

Almost 50 percent of the vocational trainees had tried to pursue career plans in the preceding two years other than the ones they subsequently realized. As many as 80 percent of them had aimed at a higher level of qualifications. Despite the considerable biographical constancy which was found for this group, it is also evident that placing one’s self at a low level in the social hierarchy implies abandoning ambitions, and the young people acknowledge this.

‘I wanted to become a nurse …’: Placing one’s self in the social structure between self-limitation and unrestricted choice

The occupational wishes that the young people had as children mark clearly different aspiration levels among the three subsamples. For a statistical analysis we built a variable ‘aspiration level’ with three categories: (1) ‘unlearned jobs/simple trade’, (2) ‘professions requiring qualified apprenticeships/university of applied science’ and (3) ‘academic professions’. The categories consider the formal education level which the professions require. Careers for which the professional formation is unclear (for example ‘writers’, ‘something with languages’) are categorized as ‘not attributable’.

Figures 1a, 1b and 1c show the distribution of this variable in the three subsamples.
The differences between the subsamples is impressive. Most evident are the ‘little dreams’ of ‘little people’: more than 40 percent of the vocational trainees aspired only to the lowest level. Another 28.4 percent aspired to a medium level. In such cases they imagined themselves in a commercial job, as a trained retail salesperson, perhaps selling fitness equipment or working with cars. They also wanted to become a nurse, a kindergarten teacher or a medical assistant. But even these modest aspirations already require higher school qualifications than their actual apprenticeships do, and exceed the school
qualification they actually accomplished. A statistical test of the differences between vocational trainees and students shows a significant connection between actual occupational decision and aspiration level as a child \((n = 708; \text{Pearson's } \chi^2 = 243,484; \text{d.f.} = 6; p = .000; \text{Cramer's } V = .415)\).

Of course, there are some vocational trainees who imagined themselves in more prestigious jobs, but compared to the students they tended to dream more modest dreams: there were 6 aspiring doctors but 13 thought rather about working in medical support services, e.g. as nurses, caretakers and medical secretaries; 13 veterinaries and 10 zookeepers; 8 pilots and 6 stewardesses. The picture is quite different for the art students: we find in this group many who aspired to be doctors but no nurses, caretakers or medical secretaries; pilots take to the skies but no stewardesses. Out of the everyday fields that are very visible to all children, they select a position suited to them in relation to their class origin.

**Table 2.** Socioeconomic background of the three subsamples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SES father (mean ISEI)</th>
<th>SES mother (mean ISEI)</th>
<th>Occupational prestige father (mean MPS)</th>
<th>Occupational prestige mother (mean MPS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocational trainees</td>
<td>35.64</td>
<td>36.48</td>
<td>56.63</td>
<td>61.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students: teaching/</td>
<td>49.87</td>
<td>45.37</td>
<td>88.68</td>
<td>79.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engineering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students: art</td>
<td>56.65</td>
<td>52.50</td>
<td>105.25</td>
<td>97.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(p = .000\) for all differences.

\(a\) ISEI = International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status.

\(b\) MPS = Magnitude-Prestige Scale.
What remained too high an aspiration for the vocational trainees is hardly even thinkable for the art students: middle-level professions were not among the interesting future careers that the art students dreamt of as children. They did not dream the dreams of the future vocational trainees. They mostly placed themselves in an academic field; and while about one-quarter of this group had imagined themselves in some rather romanticized profession like farmer, clown or gardener, they certainly rarely thought about a future job in a commercial field. Meanwhile the engineers and teachers are realistically oriented towards social status, and only 8 percent of them wanted more simple jobs while they were children. This is the second important difference between our subsamples: the future engineers and teachers are already oriented towards social position when they are children, while this is not so clearly the case for the future artists – already little bohemians while still children. The statistical test of the difference between the two student subsamples yields a Cramer’s V of .413 ($n = 395; \chi^2 = 67,468; \text{d.f. } = 3; p = .000$).

The different aspiration levels between the vocational trainees and the students correspond to their social origin, and in this sense children’s wishes reproduce the social structure. Table 2 shows the means of parental socioeconomic status and occupational prestige for the three subsamples. The differences are highly significant. The art students have the highest socioeconomic background – evidently this allows them a certain nonchalance concerning their future social status and a stronger self-orientation. A methodological note may be added: this difference between the subsamples conveys further validity to the aspirations remembered from childhood. The distortion of a retrospective design may be suspected to be a motive to reduce dissonance, but this would not be able to explain such differences.

Are the ‘little dreams’ of ‘little people’ and the higher aspirations of more favoured young people – as we found in our study – mainly a retrospective construction of making childhood aspirations compatible with actual adulthood; an invention of young adults ex post facto? A study by Rahel Jünger (2008) validates our findings that children’s desires are already structured by their social origins. In Jünger’s study, group discussions with 10- to 12-year-old children concerning their job aspirations were conducted in schools in privileged and less privileged communities. For all the children, getting a job proves to be an important goal for the future, but while the children in the privileged areas assume that they have the world at their feet and want a job promising money and fun, the less privileged children just hope for a job which ensures that their basic living needs are met (Jünger, 2008: 239). The children from the less privileged community pursue in this way a ‘strategy of the feasible’:

Even if one is good in maths it seems presumptuous to strive for a goal like becoming a mathematician. But it might be possible to work as cashier in the supermarket or to work at the counter of the railway company or to become a dental assistant. (Jünger, 2008: 239; our translation)

Their modest aims are marked by concern about social decline or even exclusion – a fear only too present in the thinking of these children:

One is scared of one day living on the street, becoming homeless, looking for food in the garbage can, selling baskets or sharpening scissors or even stealing. (Jünger, 2008: 379; our translation)
The moderation of aspirations is a strategy that promises some security vis-a-vis an uncertain future. The process of the group discussion itself provides some insight into the process of self-limitation. If one of the pupils in the less privileged community expresses a more ambitious job aspiration, the other participants cut such an aspiration down, arguing that ‘it is firstly not appropriate, secondly dangerous and thirdly impossible to reach such a position’ (Jünger, 2008: 380; our translation). The pressure towards conformity within the lower class supports the self-elimination, the modesty and realism of aspirations, as described by Bourdieu and substantiated by the data in Jünger’s and our own study. To what extent such articulated wishes become realized afterwards cannot be answered by Jünger’s study design.

Although the incorporation of social structure early in life was a key argument in Bourdieu (1980; see also Fuchs-Heinritz and König, 2005: 113–15), he never analysed the processes of early incorporation empirically – Bourdieu even admits this by speaking of a ‘black box’ (Bourdieu, 1997 [1983]: 93). Our study opens up the black box and shows how children’s expectations are already conscious of class structure. But the study also shows (in contradiction to Bourdieu) that (1) the less privileged all have the same modest desire to climb the social ladder, as the ambitions of upward mobility among the vocational trainees show, and (2) the process of reproduction is also an individualized one, children and adolescents develop their own self-project – even within limited possibilities.

**Conclusions**

While figuring out an occupational future, children develop aspirations concerning their future jobs. Childhood is a laboratory in which elements of fantasy, play but also a bland realism concerning social structure and one’s own social position within it are mixed in order to draft possible future selves. This is an important form of labour. Not only because young people are forced to make important decisions concerning their occupational future already early in life, but also because there is internal and external pressure to do this in an individualized way, that is, to do it by oneself and to identify with this decision; in other words: to make it a relevant part of one’s personal identity. And, according to authors like Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) or Pongratz and Voß (2003), such pressures of identification are growing not lessening, and the prospective and tentative working out of a self-project is therefore gaining importance.

Self-projects take shape in unequal societies; in other words, they are not unlimited but clearly also a mode of structural reproduction. While children work out their aspirations, they are mindful of class structures and therefore lower-class children limit their ambitions and are modest in their expectations of upward mobility – in the sense of Bourdieu’s self-elimination of the lower classes – while middle-class children have clearly higher ambitions and the children of the parents with high educational status – in our sample these were especially the future art students – even enjoy the luxury of a slight indifference towards questions of social class in favour of a kind of pure self-project.

While children’s acting in their self-project may be a limitation, even to such an extent that we may call it a form of ‘self-elimination’, it can also be a resource. We showed that such early plans and aspirations may be activated later on in life – even in the cases of typical lower-class aspirations and lower-class careers. The two young people that were
presented as examples in the introduction had developed their plans when they were still children: plans in which there was nothing at all spectacular, and their later occupational decisions were also unremarkable. But the strong anchorage of their decision in earlier life made this decision part of their identity and therefore unique, and this helped them to avoid failure in their apprenticeship. It is therefore not possible to make another assessment of children’s agency concerning their biographical project other than to say that it is clearly socially structured – in the interconnection of age and class – but that as such it may act as both a self-limitation and an empowering resource at the same time.

Children must therefore develop their ambitions carefully, not pitched too high in order to keep them realizable, and not too low in order to make identification possible. To juggle with these exigencies requires some skill and it requires a ‘sense of social structure’, including knowledge about one’s own actual and possible position within it. The majority of children seem to be able to manage these difficulties; they develop plans more or less according to what they prove able to realize later on. Such a bland realism is somewhat disappointing or even frightening, at least as far as the lower-class children are concerned, but it shows nevertheless that childhood is not a phase beyond society’s rules of allocation and its exigencies. And we can even say that children seem to prepare for the exigencies of the new labour market: they develop aspirations according to their required self-project and they are – more so if they are of lower-class origin – wary about the dangers and rapid social decline if they make the wrong decisions.

Our study and its results shed a new light on childhood and social inequality. Beyond the unequal amount of different sorts of capitals that may be accumulated during childhood, social inequality becomes here actively reproduced by children in the way they work on their self-project. And while some children develop high ambitions and unique plans, following their zest for action, others seem rather to be reacting, anxious to avoid social decline and conscious about the structural barriers that exist for people in their social position. Inequality is therefore also translated by children’s agency, their sense of social structure – and this is what we have to add as insight to the question of agency in the interconnection of class and generational categories. Children are social actors, in a double sense: they know how to contribute to an orderly social world and their action is clearly socially structured – to a disappointing extent.

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**Notes**

1. Secondary school in Germany is divided into three tracks, with the *Hauptschule* being the lowest one.
2. Shortly before leaving school 73 percent of *Hauptschule* pupils seek an apprenticeship after school (BiBB, 2009b: 73). This kind of apprenticeship is a typical German kind of vocational training, the so-called ‘dual system’, which is a combination of on-the-job training and school. The dual system becomes problematic if enterprises do not offer enough positions for applicants. It is especially pupils from the *Hauptschule* who are excluded from the dual system when there is this imbalance between supply and demand. In 2008, only 38 percent of the pupils from *Hauptschule* seeking an apprenticeship contract with an enterprise were successful immediately after completing school (BiBB, 2009b: 79).
3. Fifty-three percent of the school-leavers from *Hauptschule* start an apprenticeship in a trade (BiBB, 2009b: 133); painter/lacquerer is one of the 10 most frequently chosen apprenticeships by young men (Uhly et al., 2008: 42).

4. In her ethnographic study of children and parent–child interactions in different social classes, Lareau (2003) gives insight into this process of transmitting skills of self-presentation. Her observations show how middle-class children are instructed by their mothers to look into the eyes of adults; for example, if they are unwell they should to describe their symptoms carefully to a doctor and make him/her interested in the problem; while lower-class children are, instead, admonished not to disturb adults and to be modest.

5. These factors have an Eigenvalue > 1. A one-factorial ANOVA (tamhane) shows that there are some significant differences on the mean scores between the subsamples with regard to the factors. For example, the difference between the mean scores with regard to the factor ‘self-orientation’ is significant (*p* < .05) between art students and (a) teacher/engineering students (difference of means: .481) and (b) trainees (difference of means: .436), and with regard to the factor ‘orientation to status and profit’ between art students and (a) teacher/engineering students (difference of means: −.337) and (b) trainees (difference of means: −.814).

6. For the statistical analysis we built a variable ‘biographical constancy’. ‘Biographical constancy’ is defined as congruence between the chosen field of occupation at the first threshold and the wish while still a child (No, only other fields of occupation are mentioned; Yes, only this one mentioned; Yes, this one mentioned in addition to others – not categorizable). For hairdressers we also define the aspiration ‘beautician’ to be biographical constancy, but not ‘make-up artist’; for engineers ‘astronaut’ as well; for artists ‘painter’, ‘illustrator’ as well. Only the cases in which concrete occupations were mentioned as child aspirations are included in the following analysis.

7. That is, apprenticeships normally requiring a higher school certificate/university entrance exam.

8. Such professions were especially mentioned by the students of art, like author, painter, etc.

9. For example, two of three medical assistant trainees have a *Realschule* degree or higher (BiBB, 2009a).

10. These had been until recently typical jobs done by vagrants in Switzerland, where Jünger conducted her study.

11. In Bourdieu’s terminology: practical sense.

References
BiBB. (2009a) *Datenblätter Auszubildende*. Available at: www.biib.de/de/5490.htm.