

Considering the learners' perspectives on testing situations in literacy education from the standpoint of the subject

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Abstract

This article describes the core results of a qualitative study on the issue of 'assessment from the learners' perspective'. Before choosing any assessment method, especially in an educational context, it is important to understand what it might imply for the individual to take a certain test. Adults with skill needs in basic reading and/or writing, in particular, often describe bad experiences, anxiety, or resistance in connection with testing situations (cf. Egloff, 1997; Schladebach, 2007). The purpose of the study was to explore the coping strategies individuals employed in specific testing situations. Interviews were conducted with functionally illiterate adults. One result of the analysis was a wide-ranging definition of the concept 'testing situations' as expressed in the perspectives of the interviewees. In addition, seven distinct coping strategies could be identified. The findings from the study are outlined in this article, after an explanation of its methodical approach, which was based in Grounded Theory (cf. Corbin & Strauss, 2008), on the one hand, and the theoretical framework of Critical Psychology, on the other (cf. Holzkamp, 1995). Based on exemplary excerpts from the research data, the article shows how the study participants reasoned for their individual choices of specific coping strategies in specific situations. To conclude, recommendations are provided for designing and implementing assessments in literacy education.

Keywords

literacy education, assessment, testing situations, learners' perspectives

1. Considering individuals' perspectives on the assessment of literacy skills

The current debate in the field of adult education policy is dominated by a goal of measuring educational output through the assessment of individual skills. Consequently, the use of tests and assessment practices for policy and program evaluation, as well as for research purposes, has increased recently. Especially in North America and in the United Kingdom, several longitudinal studies measured adult learners' literacy and numeracy skills. For example, the 1970 British Cohort Study provides much longitudinal data from repeated assessments of basic skills (cf. Bynner & Parsons, 2011). Another prominent example is the Portland (Oregon) Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning (LSAL), which was designed to analyse the development of literacy across the adult life span of high school drop-outs. For this purpose, individual proficiency measures as well as literacy and numeracy practices were examined (cf. Reder, 2011). Longitudinal program studies in adult basic education, in particular, give participants repeated standardized reading tests as well as writing and numeracy assessments, generally two or even three times. (For statistical analyses of these, see, for example, Alamprese, 2011; Condelli et al., 2011; Vorhaus et al., 2011.)

Given the apparent tendency in adult basic education to use ever more tests and assessments, it has become important to consider the learners' perspectives vis-à-vis these tests. It can be reasonably assumed that the test takers' perspectives on assessment or tests do not automatically correspond to the educationally intended or policy-driven goals. Hence, with the learner in mind, the use of tests and assessments in adult basic education means facing a dilemma. Assessments are essential for teachers to be able to differentiate instruction based on individual learners' needs. Furthermore, many educators assume that assessments motivate learners by making their learning progress visible. However, there is also good reason to expect that adults with basic skill needs fear or resist being tested, because they have repeatedly experienced stigmatization and sustained negative sanctions in connection with their so-called deficits (cf. Döbert-Nauert, 1985; Egloff, 1997). The learner study published by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) in England, examined, among other topics, the attitude of learners towards the national tests and the acquisition of a national qualification¹. The results show that learners' views differed depending on their situatedness

¹ England started the national Skills for Life (SfL) strategy in 2001. In this context “[n]ationally recognized multiple-choice tests were introduced to replace and simplify a plethora of existing qualifications and other ways of recognising achievement.” (Rhys Warner & Vorhaus, 2008, p. 9).

vis-à-vis their individual educational purposes and needs. Qualifications, for instance, were mainly important for learners who are looking for work or professional development. Most older learners did not see a personal benefit in taking tests; however, some learners reported that they were proud and motivated to continue their education, after they received their national certification (cf. Rhys Warner & Vorhaus, 2008, p. 28). These divergent statements highlight the tension between formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment serves to improve the individual learning process and close learning gaps. Summative assessment serves to select individuals by their skills and makes it possible to assign qualifications.

The present article emphasizes the learners' perspective on assessment in literacy education. It focusses on the research question, "*How do adults with basic skill needs handle testing situations?*" Test takers were regarded as experts, who are uniquely able to answer questions about experiencing and handling test situations. Consequently, research interviews were conducted with adults who lack basic reading and/or writing skills. The purpose of this study was to explore specific strategies individuals employ to cope with testing situations in literacy education. Before the results can be described, the theoretical framework as well as the applied method of collecting and analysing the data have to be described. To be sure, the coping strategies that emerged from the study data are not exclusive to adults with basic skill needs; however, their lack of reading and/or writing skills make the challenges of test situations particularly visible.

2. Theoretical framework

As the theoretical framework to address the research question, I chose parts of Klaus Holzkamp's approach of Critical Psychology. His theory of learning (1995) is particularly suitable to explaining the human learning process from the perspective of the individual. According to this approach, human action is understood and examined as reasonable, rather than as a reaction to a given stimulus, as it is, for instance, in behaviouristic learning theories. Holzkamp posits that reasonable considerations are part of every human action; however, this reasoning is not explicit or rational, but rather grounded in the conditions for subjective actions. By reconstructing possible individual reasons for specific actions, it seems achievable to understand the strategic intentions behind them. The precondition for reconstructing individual strategies is to assume that the person is not able to act against her/his interest *without* a reason (cf. Holzkamp, 1995, p. 26).

In Holzkamp's theory of learning, individual actions are understood as a central part of the dialectic between human beings and society, in which problems and dilemmas are inevitable and necessary parts. Provided the person recognizes a problem as such, there are always different possibilities of dealing with the problem. (Problems are understood in a positive way as challenges.) If the person is able to apply adequate strategies to handle the problem, she/he will not make any progress in learning, because there is no necessity for change. As Holzkamp puts it: people can solve the problems on a test without actually learning anything, because the test is considered an action problem. In this context, it is particularly important that the person decides by herself/himself (but not without regard to the community) what makes a problem meaningful. For example, in a test situation, the content of the test is important. However, beyond this, it is possible that, from the perspective of the individual, the relationship to the tester or the management of the testing situation also become important and meaningful. The person herself/himself chooses the meaningful components of the situation and interacts with them (cf. Holzkamp, 1995, pp. 218-219). However, that does not mean that the individual is always conscious about her/his strategies and reasons. The phenomenon of unaware actions appears as a possible resistance strategy vis-à-vis the learning situation. For example, one is supposed to memorize a poem, but cannot concentrate. One reason for this could be that the person is not aware of his personal benefit to learning this poem or that she/he is not aware of the possible negative consequences of failing the assignment.

The goal of this study was to systematize those individually reasonable actions that functionally illiterate learners report to be employing strategically to cope with testing situations. Since the individual is always part of communities, these strategies are also always part of the individual's reasons for specific actions. Other people can both support and limit the individual's options in a testing situation. Communities can be more or less explicit with regard to a test situation. In the study, their contributions to individual strategies emerged to the extent that they were part of the reasons the participants reported on. (For example, the strategy of *used support* depends on contributions by others.) However, the main focus of this study was on the description of individual experiences and strategies in testing situations.

3. Methodical approach

To answer the research question, I used the qualitative data from our research project on the issue of 'acceptance of assessment methods'². The interviews were conducted with adults who lack basic reading and/or writing skills. I conducted ten interviews myself; the analysis of the qualitative data also included eleven interviews that were conducted by a project partner with Germans who live in East Germany.

For our choice of interview partners and for my analytical approach, we followed the method of "theoretical sampling". Here, one aims to reach theoretical saturation for all arising substantial categories by searching for maximum variation. Theoretical sampling justifies the choice of interview partners in terms of content, by first searching for concepts in the data and then sampling according to the developed theoretical concepts. By following this procedure, theoretical sampling has an iterative and cumulative effect.

"Each event sampled builds upon previous data collection and analysis, and in turn contributes to the next data collection and analysis. Moreover, sampling becomes more specific as the researcher seeks to saturate categories." (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 146)

The purpose of theoretical sampling is to reach representative results not by frequency, but by explaining concepts completely (cf. Strübing, 2008). Applied to this study, this means that not one *person*, but one individual *description* of an experienced testing situation was considered a "case" for the interpretation.

The point of departure for the sampling was the assumption that the experience of test situations is especially unpleasant for a person who lacks basic reading and/or writing skills (cf. Egloff, 1997; Schladebach, 2007). Since formative assessment is preferred to summative assessment of adult educators in literacy education (Nienkemper & Bonna, 2011), the research question was based on the assumption that adults prefer formative assessments to summative assessments. Consequently, we started the study by interviewing participants in a reading and writing course at an adult education centre. Later, I interviewed adults with basic skill needs we met at the pretest of the leo.-Level-One Study (Grotlüschen & Riekman, 2011). Interviewees were chosen to represent

² The qualitative data were collected in the research project "Akzeptanzstudie im Hinblick auf eine erwachsenengerechte Diagnostik" [*A study regarding the acceptance of the kinds of assessment adequate for adults*], which is supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research with the support code: 01AB074204. It was carried out at the University of Hamburg under the direction of Prof. Dr. Anke Grotlüschen and assistance of Franziska Bonna and Barbara Nienkemper (2008-2011).

experiences with different testing situations, such as strictly formalized exams or assessments and tests in a learning context. The respondents were asked to give descriptions or narrations of their personal experiences with different testing situations. During the interviews, I did not give definitions of what might be a test situation of interest. Rather, I posed open-ended questions to elicit experiences with any type of test situations. We wanted to make sure that the test situation the interviewees talked about was chosen and defined by the individual. During the interview, I tried to trigger memories by asking questions about details of the situation. Through these methodical decisions, we collected a large variation of narratives about different testing situations across many areas of life.

For the interpretation, I applied the rules of Grounded Theory, as explained by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (cf. Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The authors relate Grounded Theory to the tradition of Pragmatism, as established mainly by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. This understanding of Grounded Theory is suitable for a research perspective that wants to reconstruct individual logic. Grounded Theory also gives technical tips for the search for relevant codes in interviews and explains how to build categories and search for coherences between different categories. By following the instructions of Grounded Theory, one can find the specific and relevant concepts and develop integrating categories that explain the situation from the perspective of the individual. The resulting categories are understood as theoretical generalisations.

In the analysis, I aimed to explain human actions in complex and varying test situations. Potential relationships between individual reasons and strategies were validated by investigating possible propositions and counter-propositions for the qualitative data. It was not feasible to include the interviewed adults themselves in the empirical analysis, but on several occasions tentative interpretations were validated in communication with research colleagues.

4. Results

In this section, two main findings of the data analysis are outlined. First, I will delineate which kinds of situations were reported as testing situations in the interviews. This inquiry into reported situations led to a definition of testing situations that is based on the participants' subjective perspectives. In the second part, I describe seven distinct coping strategies for testing situations that were employed by functionally illiterate adult learners.

4.1. Definition of testing situations from individual perspectives

As a result of my methodical decisions, I gathered an abundance of data that included varying narrative descriptions of testing and assessment situations. Since abstract theoretical classifications did not prove adequate, I concluded that a system for the individually logical understanding of testing situations by the participants had to be developed. The interviewees themselves made defining differentiations. For example, one situation is described as “*like a test*” (Mr Franke: 32)³, while another situation is explicitly *not* seen as such: “*That is like normal school. It is not an examination.*” (Mr André: 91). These defining comparisons became necessary in the dialogues, especially when testing situations were not clearly named as such.

Eventually, I coded the reported descriptions to develop a definition of testing situations that considers individual perspectives. As a result of the coding process, testing situations could be sorted into three categories:

1. Test situations in a learning context;
2. Psychological aptitude tests and medical diagnostics; and
3. Situations in everyday life, where literacy or numeracy skills are required.

Although the categories are not mutually exclusive, it is possible to draw some conclusions based on individual perspectives on testing situations:

a) Test situations in a learning context (summative and formative assessments):

As expected, test situations during school time (e.g. reading texts aloud, reciting poems, taking dictations, writing final exams, etc.) were mentioned. Older interviewees also experienced test situations in a pre-vocational training year, in vocational training, or in an advanced vocational training. One person even told about coping with test situations in her college studies. Other reported test situations in a learning context are, for example: giving a concert in music school, taking the driving test, completing a citizenship test, taking internal exams for promotion in the German Armed forces, and taking a test to finish paramedics training. Some test situations specific to the context of adult basic education were also mentioned in the interviews, for example, diagnostic tests that are used in counselling for placement into the appropriate literacy course, as well as the e-assessment on www.ich-will-lernen.de which is used for blended learning offers. Even the task of reading aloud to the group was experienced as a test situation in some cases. In addition, participation in the reading and writing assessment as part of the leo. - Level One Study (Grotlüschen & Riekmann,

³ The names of the interview partners are anonymized.

2011) pretest was reported as a testing situation (despite the motto “assess the assessment” that is used in this pretest).

b) Psychological aptitude tests and medical diagnostics:

Another category of testing situations could be formed around aptitude tests and medical diagnostic tests, which are used by institutions to decide about an individual’s course of education or employment. These assessments consist of cognitive or physical ability tests.

The interviewees reported about such testing situations, which they experienced during their school years, either in the context of a psychological or medical examination. Such tests were also used at the counselling centre. To give some examples, these tests included an aptitude test for school enrolment, intelligence and performance tests for assessing special education needs, diagnostics for dyslexia, and an aptitude test for the transition from school to work. Older interviewees reported on testing experiences with the psychological services that works on behalf of the German governmental employment office. In that context, they had to take, for example, psychological aptitude tests to enter the job market for the first time. Aptitude tests were also reported at the start of a practical training on the job, or for retraining or reorientation into new fields of employment. Some of the interviewees reported on their experiences with psychological aptitude tests in centres for vocational training [“Berufsbildungs- oder Berufsförderungswerk”].

c) Situations of everyday life where literacy or numeracy skills are required:

Surprisingly, some situations of everyday life were also reported as test situations. These situations are comparable to a formal test, because they involved a standardized way of data collection. Examples include an anamnesis sheet at the doctor’s office, an application form, a survey for market research, or a questionnaire that had to be completed as part of a job interview. The requirement to write an informal application was also described as a testing situation. A job interview and the first days in a new job--and even the participation in the research interview itself--were also mentioned as test situations. These types of everyday situations are likely regarded as tests because of the test takers’ low literacy or numeracy skills.

According to these categories, the participants define as a test any situation where adequate skills have to be demonstrated by the individual. The person expects that her/his individual proficiencies are being observed and/or evaluated. The required competencies may include reading and writing, but also extend to other skills. Any situation can be called a test situation, when it is defined as such

by the individual itself. To demonstrate a specific competency can be essential in an explicit exam situation as much as in everyday situations.

This opening up of the concept of a 'test' based on the individual's perspective is consistent with research approaches that emphasize the relevance of everyday social practices (c.f. Barton & Hamilton 2012; Lave, 1988).

4.2. Strategies to cope with testing situations in cases of functional illiteracy

The purpose of the study was to explore various strategies adult learners employed to cope with testing situations. As a result of the analysis, seven strategies could be identified:

1. Applied Competence
2. Used Support
3. Partial Outing
4. Ambitious Openness
5. Deliberate Deception
6. Quiet Resignation
7. Resistant Refusal

These strategies describe individually logical actions in coping with different conditions in various testing situations. Consequently, not every strategy appears subjectively appropriate for every situation. The choice of strategy is always the result of a subjective process of considering one's reasons. Following are descriptions of the seven categories:

Applied competence

Applied Competence

People use their skills to pass the test. They prepare for it by studying, or they put their skills to the test in the assessment situation. Another version of applied competence plays out when individuals use their innate skills to control their thoughts in sometimes frightening testing situations.

The strategy of *applied competence* can be used before, during, and after a testing situation. One version manifests as preparing for the test by choosing a learning strategy. Interviewees tell about memorizing words by repeatedly reading and writing them, for example. Applying one's own competence during a testing situation can also mean working on tasks "at your personal best". Interviewee Mrs Christoff describes using this strategy during the intake assessment at an adult education centre:

'[...] but, I simply did the best I could and well..., if I would have refused somehow, said that I didn't want to do it, then it won't be evaluated. So, I did the best I could. That's why I am here, at least I thought, to show my weaknesses, and so, well ...' (Translated from interviewee Mrs Christoff: 165)

This strategy actually involves putting one's own competencies to the test, which, in turn, leads to another strategy, namely that of 'partial outing' (see below). After one applies one's competence, one's weaknesses are revealed, not only to oneself, but also to the teacher.

Controlling own thoughts is not a stand-alone strategy, rather, it belongs to the applying of competences. It can be employed before a testing situation by engaging in distracting activities or by concentrating on positive thoughts like "come on, you will make it" (Mr Michaelis: 106) or "come on, it is easy" (Mr Heinrich: 218). Similarly, negative thoughts and emotions are compensated by imagining possibilities in case of failure (Mr Franke: 48) or by using humour (Mr Thomas: 238ff, Mrs Albrecht: 314ff). During the situation, it is necessary to concentrate on the task and take one's time to work on it (Mr Franke: 102). For this purpose, Mr Heinrich conducts exercises of memorizing and concentrating and takes short breaks (Mr Heinrich: 95, 99, 181f). In addition, he describes consuming sugar as helpful (53). After a testing situation, it is helpful to release tension by a cry of joy (Mr Heinrich: 67) or relaxing with music (Mr Heinrich: 161).

Used support

Used Support

People use the support of other persons or educational institutions to increase their chances for success. This strategy can be used prior to the test situation or during the assessment by asking for help.

The strategy of *using support* can be combined with that of *applied competences*. In the interviews, participants report that family members, partners, and members of the peer group offer their support for practicing or studying together. In addition, the interviewed adults *use the support* of professional educators or educational institutions. Mrs Albrecht takes private lessons from her former teacher to prepare for her French exams (178). Mr Heinrich and Mr Martin receive support from the personnel at their driving school (Mr Heinrich: 45, Mr Martin: 348). Mrs Friedrich prepares for an aptitude test by repeating relevant content in school (Mrs Friedrich: 117). Mrs Ernst reports that she benefits from

informal support opportunities that an institutional learning context provides. She was enrolled in a reading and writing course and attended a course in paramedic training that required a final exam on weekends.

'[...] and I shifted my weekend class a little bit. [...] so sometimes I walked around with my book and memorized. One time someone took my book and read something out of it: 'What is it?' __ Well, they were testing me.'
(Translated from interviewee Mrs Ernst: 93)

Support by others includes tentatively testing possibly relevant content, dictating of words and sentences, explaining how to drive a car, or a joint discussion about the exam topic, for example a literary text. But the support is not always limited to the testing content. Emotional support such as encouragement can also be helpful (Mrs Christoff: 18).

Aside from the option of *using support* from others for test preparation, it is possible to pass the test by modifying a task in a way that seems more feasible for the individual. For example, Mr Veith reports passing final exams in his apprenticeship as an oral examination. He received this option because of his writing deficits (18). Instead of passing a dictation in the usual format, another interviewee could choose a special kind of dictation, where she copied a text located on the windowsill step by step ["Laufdiktat"] (Mrs Friedrich: 174). With this strategy, the accommodation of the assessment procedure is always offered by the institution, rather than demanded by the tested person herself/himself, which is the case with the strategy *ambitious openness*.

The interviewees also reported that they sometimes asked for help even during the testing situation, but this strategy is not allowed or successful in every case. Interestingly, the strategy of a *partial outing* precedes the strategy of *using support*.

Partial outing

Partial Outing

People reveal their strengths and weaknesses prior to the assessment. Their intention is either to illustrate their own learning status or to demand support for passing the test.

According to my analysis, *partial outing* takes place prior to the test in dialogue with the teacher or the person who administers the test. During such a dialogue, the testee points out either her/his learning needs or her/his learning achievements. Mrs Friedrich, for example, reports that she shows her school records during the counselling session, before entering a course at the adult

education centre (331ff). Mr Heinrich describes his participation in a psychological aptitude test in the interview. The test results are used to prompt a decision about his participation in vocational retraining. Mr Heinrich does not prepare for the test. In a preliminary talk, he says that he has problems with solving some mathematical tasks.

[...], I said to the psychologist: 'I didn't have this kind of math at school'. 'That's fine; we'll take it out for you.' 'Ok.' But, then it was still part of the test. And that's where I got stuck.' (Translated from interviewee Mr Heinrich: 256)

Although the strategy of *partial outing* seemed successful before the test, in the end, Mr Heinrich failed because the agreement was ignored.

As a variation of Mr Heinrich's approach, *partial outing* can be employed to prepare for *ambitious openness*. Mrs Albrecht reports on a *partial outing* where she was allowed to read a paper, instead of taking a written exam in a course of her study (222).

Ambitious openness

Ambitious Openness

People find unexpected ways of doing something. Their intention is to show that they can arrive at the same result by using other methods. They do this by consciously choosing legitimate resources. They suggest alternative assessment methods or present an unexpected and different, but nonetheless legitimate, solution.

The strategy of *ambitious openness* is an exceptional one, because it manifested itself only in one interview of the sample (Mrs Albrecht). Mrs Albrecht reported mainly about her high school certificate ["Abiturprüfung"]. *Ambitious openness* can be used with a greater or lesser degree of confrontation. A non-verbal variation is, for example, to solve a task intentionally in a manner that is assumed to be unexpected by the examiner. Mrs Albrecht intentionally chooses a text interpretation as a solution in her German exam that she assumed to be opposite to the one intended by the teacher (48). Using *ambitious openness* in an oral exam situation means verbal exposure to the examiner. Mrs Albrecht had varied experiences with it. While, according to Mrs Albrecht, her math teacher is impressed by her presentation of an alternative calculation method (60), this is not automatically or always the case. The examiners in her oral exam in Physics were not convinced by her alternative solution in the first examination attempt, where she suggested calculating the movement of a missile by using differential

equation rather than an ellipse (134). During the re-examination, she pushed her solution through, according to her narration in the interview (140).

In addition to suggesting an alternative solution, it is possible to insist on a modification of the test procedure to be successful. Mrs Albrecht has to pass a written paper in one course of German studies. While she feels able to analyse a short story by Kafka, she simultaneously assumes not to be able to do it in written form. Consequently, she decided to invite her professor to an art exhibition, in which she expressed her interpretation of Kafka creatively.

'That's how I got a credit in my German Studies course. He gave it to me. He accepted it as a different form of dealing with a text. And that it is exactly the same as writing an academic paper. This was my academic paper. But, of course, it differs from professor to professor whether they accept it or not.' (Translated from interviewee Mrs Albrecht: 262)

The goal of using *ambitious openness* is to force a success. The testee assumes that she or he does have skills required for solving the task, but that they are different from the skills that are required to successfully participate in the testing procedure. Therefore, it is subjectively reasonable to negotiate the conditions of the testing situation. A completely contrary strategy is *deliberate deception*.

Deliberate deception

Deliberate Deception

In the face of the required testing, some people opt to use a little white lie or unethical means. This strategy is used to avoid having to openly admit functional illiteracy.

The strategy of *deliberate deception* refers to a conscious decision to act in an unethical manner. The goal of deceptions is not to reveal one's weaknesses. It is used because the person assumes that her/his skills are not adequate for the requirements of the tested tasks. Based on my empirical data, two kinds of *deliberate deception* can be differentiated. The first version is to pretend to be ill. Mr Werner escaped from a testing situation by such a white lie.

'I had to go to the German Armed Forces. There, we also had to take tests. And then, of course, there were empty sheets of paper Well, and then I stood there, of course. ___ I had to come up with something. I said: 'I am not able to, I am ill, I feel nauseous.' or something. So I didn't take the test.' (Translated from interviewee Mr Werner: 68)

Surely, simulating an illness is not an exclusive strategy of adults with basic skill needs⁴. However, it is notable that, in this example, Mr Werner fears writing on empty sheets of paper and subsequently being exposed as a functionally illiterate⁵.

The second established version of *deliberate deception* is deception by copying from the person sitting next to the test taker. This strategy provides an opportunity for success, but is not a guarantee of success. Mr Martin, for instance, tells that he copied wrong mathematical results from his neighbour (196). The self-assessed expectation of being incompetent in the face of a required task can refer either to reading and writing competence or to another competence that is important to pass the test.

Quiet resignation

Quiet Resignation

People expect that they will fail the test and accept it without trying to avoid failure.

When an adult person resigns in the face of a testing situation, she/he typically experiences herself/himself as powerless. The expected failure seems to be certain and inevitable. Consequently, failure is to be accepted, even if negative sanctions may follow. Disadvantages of *quiet resignation* are experiencing the failure in the first place; in addition, sometimes persons are also punished for the failure. Mr Moritz, for example, tells in his interview that during his time in the National People's Armees of the former German Democratic Republic ["Nationale Volksarmee der DDR"], the officers wanted to teach him writing. But he felt incapable to pass required writing tasks. So, he accepted the punishment.

Interviewer: Oh, was it a kind of class in political education, or what was it?

Mr Moritz: Yes, every time. Once or twice a month, or so. __ Well, there was an officer, he had, well, he read passages out of his novels and __ everybody was ordered to write it down, his novels. Well, then you didn't do it. As punishment, you lose your permission for leave, but, it wasn't that bad. It was alright, __ because we knew what it was about.

Interviewer: And what was it like, that they knew __ You didn't have any problems with them because of reading and writing?

Mr Moritz: You can't change it, anyway. __ You were locked up in the barrack, so you couldn't defend yourself. And you couldn't leave anyway.

⁴ This is true for all seven strategies.

⁵ I outlined this thought in my paper for ESREA conference in Linköping, 2010.

There was no way out, except during vacation. __ So you just tried to make the best of it.' (Translated from interviewee Mr Moritz: 307 ff)

It is noticeable that Mr Moritz does not speak of himself in the first person in this quote. Rather, he switches to an impersonal “you” [in the original German, the indefinite pronoun “*man*”]. In this way, he emphasizes his feeling of helplessness even more. Mr Moritz, in fact, refuses the required performance, but--unlike the strategy *resistant refusal*--he accepts the task itself through his behaviour. He simply has come to terms with the situation, which he interprets as static and unchangeable. He reveals his incompetence and quietly accepts the negative consequences.

Resistant refusal

Resistant Refusal

Persons escape the assessment situation by means of unexcused absences or by expressing that they cannot be forced to take part.

The strategy of *resistant refusal* becomes visible in the testing situation, because the person refuses to be assessed. In contrast to the other six strategies, in the case of *resistant refusal*, the task is not being attempted. This can happen in a more or less confrontational manner. The strategy serves as a means of resisting to use one's own competences in the testing situation. The person may miss a testing appointment unexcused. Mr Franke tells, for example, that he skipped school on examination days (42). Mr Michaelis completely terminates his participation in educational training to avoid any testing situation. Mr Martin escapes at the last minute from his written driving test.

Mr Martin: I was, I stood in front of the test room where people were already sitting. __ And, all I'd had to do was just go inside the room. I stood in front of the door and people were inside already. I said to myself, don't go inside. If you fail now, all of them will laugh at you, and all of them have passed, and you're the only loser and [...]

Interviewer: Yes, but if you would have failed, what would have been so bad about it? What did you fear?

Mr Martin: Yes, they correct the tests there. __ And they, the students, go outside and wait in the corridor. And then, one after another is called up and has to go inside the room. __ So, and then everyone else is waiting outside [...] and when you come out, they ask: 'Did you pass the test or did you fail?'. And that's the reason why I wanted to avoid the situation. Every one of them comes out, saying: 'I have passed' and you come out of the room and they ask: 'Did you pass?'. And then you say: 'No, I failed.' and

every one goes: 'He he, he he, you failed!' So I said 'no' to myself and went home.' (Translated from interviewee Mr Martin: 356 ff).

In the case of Mr Martins written driving test, the expected social consequences of a failure provide the reasoning for his fear and, consequently, for his decision to escape the assessment situation.

A more confrontational way to refuse being assessed is to speak up (Mr Wilhelm: 142). Mrs Arnold expressed her decision to resist all requirements of the reading and writing course she attends by mandate, rather than voluntarily. She is concerned about financial sanctions by the employment office if she drops out (Mrs Arnold: 3-12). Thus, she experiences learning or testing demands always as an imposition. At 48, Mrs Arnold says she feels that she is too old to be coerced like a school child (22). In this example, it becomes obvious that--as described by Michel Foucault (1977) and Klaus Holzkamp (1995)--a test can be used as an instrument of power and punishment by institutions (like the school), which, in turn, triggers individual actions of resistance.

5. Conclusions: Considering the learners' Perspectives on testing situations in literacy education

The analysis of the interview data showed a discrepancy between individual and professional understandings of testing situations. In this paper, I focused on the explanation of individual perspectives. From the perspective of adults with basic skill needs, a testing situation is defined as any situation, wherein a person has to demonstrate adequate skills. In addition, the person expects that her/his individual proficiencies are being observed and/or evaluated.

According to Holzkamp's theoretical approach, these two main characteristics of testing situations are part of a framework he terms the individual's "space of possibilities" ["Möglichkeitsraum"] (Holzkamp, 1985, p. 372). From the individual's perspective, both situational characteristics can become more or less meaningful for a reasonable choice of strategy. However, the requirements of a testing situation are more binding than the informal and practical requirements of everyday life. Therefore, adults with basic skill needs can only make limited use of known coping strategies for everyday life. An unexcused non-participation attracts attention, is documented and interpreted as refusal. Hence, it is not possible to simply avoid a testing situation. Sometimes an absence is even followed by a punishment. Moreover, the testing tasks cannot be delegated to a familiar person and the use of technical aids that are helpful in everyday life, for example a dictionary, usually conflicts with the intentions of a

testing situation. Nevertheless, the findings show that the conditions of testing situations can trigger reasoning for an impressively great variety of strategies.

The individual's choice of strategy always results from subjective considerations, which are also always part of certain communities. Even though individual difficulties in reading and/or writing were not relevant for reasoning the strategy in every narration, the interview data document that they became relevant in some cases. If a person with low literacy skills opts for *applying their own competence* to pass a test, she/he has to consider the consequences of a *partial outing* because at least the assessing person or institution will know the individual's weaknesses afterwards (except in the case of self- or online-assessments). Although the strategy of *deliberate deception* provides the option of avoiding a failed assessment, it is accompanied with the risk of negative sanctions.

According to the research findings presented here, the conditions for conducting assessments in literacy education have to be considered carefully. Due to the methodological decision not to determine the types of tests to be considered in this study in advance, many kinds of tests were represented in the analysis. Consequently, my recommendations for learner-oriented conditions for conducting assessments in literacy education are formulated more generally. One important insight in the face of an ever-increasing use of assessments and tests in the field of adult literacy and numeracy is that adult education has to consider the learners' perspectives on assessment. The ongoing professionalization process in German Literacy Education has always emphasized the need for formative assessments, but the use of assessment in Literacy Education had not been extensively established at the time of this study (cf. Nienkemper & Bonna, 2011). Since then, the topic has become part of the major in "literacy and basic education" (Kley & Schick-Marquart, 2009). In addition, appropriate instruments have been developed and additional training concepts for assessment in adult basic education have been established (cf. Grotlüschen et al., 2011; Jütten & Mania, 2011). Moreover, in 2013, the main player in Literacy Education, the German Adult Education Association ["Deutscher Volkshochschulverband e.V."] developed a curriculum, the introduction and use of which is currently being tested⁶. A curriculum is a precondition for a certificate, for which learners have to pass a standardized test. Therefore, the setup of certification practices accompanies the development of summative assessment methods.

Considering the presented results, the goal of introducing certificates of learning achievements as a right, rather than an obligation, deserves support.

⁶ <http://grundbildung.de/projekte/rahmencurriculum-transfer/> (access on 27th October 2017)

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