

Poverty of competences within youth and young adults in Austria

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This paper addresses the phenomenon “poverty of competences” in the area of reading and focuses especially on youth and young adults. So far, it was possible to assess “poverty of competences” in Austria only in the group of pupils till the end of compulsory education by using PISA. Now, PIAAC opens that field of research for other population groups. This paper provides this assessment for youth and young adults aged 16 to 29 years. The term “poverty of competences” refers to people, who achieve a maximum of 225 points in the area of reading literacy in PIAAC and thereby reach the competency level 1. Focusing the issue of reading literacy follows the assumption that reading literacy can be regarded as premise for acquiring further competences.

The objective of the paper is the clarification of the following research questions:

- How many people are affected by “poverty of competences” in the group of young adults (at the age of 16 to 29 years)?
- Who in the group of young adults is especially hit by competence poverty?
- What are the reasons for competence poverty?
- What are the consequences of competence poverty?
- What could be done to reduce competence poverty?

Analyses show, that in Austria approximately 153.400 youth and young adults are affected by “poverty of competences” in the area of reading, which is about 10.7% of the total population. In an international comparison Austria ranks in the middle range. Although in absolute numbers most of the competence poor adolescents and young adults are from families with an intermediate educational level, social origin and migration background turn out to be essential factors for the probability to be affected by competence poverty. While for instance 28.3% of the adolescents from educationally disadvantaged families are affected by competence poverty, only 9.3% respectively 5.6% of adolescents and young adults from mid- respectively upper educational levels are affected. Analyses also illustrate that Early School Leaver are most affected by poor reading literacy and thereby Early School Leaving constitutes the major cause. Thus, 46.1% of all Early School Leavers are affected by competence poverty. The risk of falling into the group of Early School Leavers depends again on the educational level of the parents, the migration background and the attendance of the secondary school “Allgemein bildende Schule (AHS)”. The consequences of competence poverty are clearly measurable regarding individual occupational/ economic aspects as well as regarding social aspects and become manifest especially in a decrease of labour market chances and an increase of educational disadvantages for the people concerned. The results reveal - particularly due to the correlation of Early School Leaving and subsequent competence poverty and also due to the risks of being affected according to social and national/ linguistic origin- that the demand for a minimum of education can only be achieved by an interrelation between different policy areas, mainly educational policy, labor market policy and social policy.

Keywords: competence poverty, adolescents, Early School Leaver, educational inequality