

## Article

# The Notion of Continuing Education in Local Education Reports in Germany—An Analysis of Regional Disparities in Topics, Data, and Governance Recommendations

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**Abstract:** In Germany, continuing education (CE) is, to a large extent, controlled by municipalities (“Kommunen”). Municipalities have published an increasing number of education reports in recent years. These are intended as steering instruments for local education policy. Given that municipalities and the districts they represent differ in their structures, different challenges and opportunities associated with CE emerge. So far, it remains unclear which aspects of CE are considered by different types of municipalities in their reports and which steering potentials are seen. Based on a content analysis, we present findings on reported topics of CE, the extent of data usage, and derived recommendations for local governance. We separated four district types, showing different degrees of the dimension urban–rural. Although cities published education reports more frequently, rural districts were more likely to address CE issues. However, they had less data available, resulting in a lower range of topics and narrow overall opportunities for addressing CE. Therefore, improvement of data and accessibility of data are important to enhance the monitoring and governance of CE in municipalities. Regarding the reviewed recommendations, clear differences between district types emerged. For instance, expanding offers of CE for immigrants was mainly an issue of large cities, whereas rural districts emphasized the spatial and digital accessibility of offerings.

**Keywords:** educational monitoring; continuing education; data-based local governance; document analysis



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## 1. Introduction

Continuing education (CE), i.e., learning in adulthood, is important both at the individual and societal level [1]. An aging and ethnically and culturally more diverse population and accelerated technological and socioeconomic change makes it even more relevant [2] (p. 1174). CE has strong links to various policy areas, such as economic development, labor market policy, strengthening of civic engagement, integration of immigrants, and supporting qualifications for educationally disadvantaged persons [1]. From a macroeconomic perspective, this affects the future viability and competitiveness of regions [3] (p. 84).

To date, there has been little research on what aspects of CE German municipalities, i.e., counties and independent cities (“Kreise”, “kreisfreie Städte”), consider relevant to local educational governance and whether there are differences due to the degree of urbanization represented by the municipalities. This study explored the presentation of CE and related recommendations for governance in local education reports.

The theoretical concept of governance refers to the formal and informal coordination of social actions of many actors that do not originate from the political context alone, but also include market and civil society actors [4,5]. Thus, the state assumes the role of an activating, coordinating, and supporting actor [6]. The structure of CE, like education as a whole, is changed and improved by interventions of these actors [7,8]. Evidence-based governance aims at improving structures, processes, and results of education through data. Regarding CE, this happens in a very heterogeneous and complex field. Following Schrader’s

reflections on a model of the multi-level system of CE [5], different actors—government, organizations, corporations, individuals—and constellations of actors operate in this field, with different institutional regulations and forms of coordination of their actions.

The CE sector in Germany has some characteristics that distinguish it from other German education sectors. It is highly heterogeneous, manifested in a great variety of providers differing in their institutional structures [9,10]. In addition, there are very complex financing and governance structures [11]. In Germany, CE is less regulated by the state than other educational sectors. The state only establishes framework conditions and regulations on ordering and funding [2] (p. 1175). The offerings vary greatly in programming, addressees, duration, and quality. Following neo-institutionalist research and theories of modernization, Schrader's model of reproduction contexts [9], see also [12], describes organizations of CE as follows: To ensure their existence, these organizations exchange goods and services based on agreements that either take the form of contract or order. Moreover, they follow either public or private interests. Along these axes, four contexts emerge, each comprising typical organizations of CE: state (e.g., adult education center), communities (e.g., environmental education initiative), firms (e.g., internal operation CE departments), and market (e.g., institution of management training). One advantage of the diversity in CE is the ability to respond flexibly and quickly to needs [13] (p.11).

Data on CE in Germany are less complete and transparent compared to other educational sectors. Few statistics include data at the municipal level. However, data are available for subareas of CE that are suitable for local monitoring [1] (pp. 20–28).

Educational monitoring is understood as the regular and systematic observation and recording of core areas of the education system with the aim to obtain information for evidence-based governance of developments in the education system [14,15]. It is important on an international and national level for planning and steering education policy [16,17]. In recent years, there have been increasing efforts to anchor educational governance, and thus monitoring, at the local level. One goal of local education monitoring is the data-based observation and analysis of the educational landscape of municipalities to gain information for evidence-based policy making. The aim is to optimize the provision of education and adapt it to the specific local conditions. In Germany, municipalities have placed increased emphasis on the importance of the design and governance of local education landscapes in recent years [18,19]; on the concept of educational landscape, see [20]. This has been strengthened by the federal funding programs “Lernen vor Ort” (2009 to 2014) and “Bildung integriert” (since 2015), as well as the initiative “Transferagenturen Kommunales Bildungsmanagement” (since 2014).

CE institutions for which the municipalities are responsible can be directly influenced by them, e.g., by linking financial support to certain performance requirements. These include, above all, adult education centers, but also other public institutions with an educational mission, such as museums and libraries. In addition, municipalities can have an indirect steering effect, for example by creating favorable conditions for access to CE programs or by lowering barriers to participation (e.g., through counseling services). Municipalities are also key players in the expansion of CE networks. They can initiate opportunities for cooperation and thereby coordinate organizations with different goals and contexts [1].

A central product and tool of education monitoring at the local level is local education reports (LER). They are intended to enable and support educational governance, which means the coordination of the actions of stakeholders in the educational sector. LER are usually based on a political mandate. They are prepared by municipal actors who decide on content and modes of presentation. Ideally, they involve relevant education stakeholders in the decision-making process, like different providers of CE. Following the EU approach of lifelong learning, the LER deal with all educational areas [21,22]. These are usually addressed in separate sections. LER are intended to provide data-based knowledge, identify problematic situations, and highlight changes to provide impetus for the further development of the quality of the education system [23,24] (pp. 93, 412). At the same time,

they are mediums of communication. They represent the perception of education from the municipalities steering perspective. Recipients are political-administrative decision makers, local educational institutions, and the general public.

There are significant regional disparities in CE in Germany [25] (pp. 214–228). Municipalities differ in their infrastructural, socioeconomic, and political structures, having different preconditions for provision and participation in CE. Different CE landscapes result [26] (p. 72). In addition, urbanity level and population density are relevant factors. The typology of the German Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs, and Spatial Development (BBSR) represents a frequently used analytical framework for the observation of cities and counties, enabling analysis of regional disparities and developments [27,28]. Participation in CE is higher in large cities and highly urbanized districts than in rural areas. These differences are due to different framework conditions in which CE is embedded [29] (p. 5). As early as 1966, Strzelewicz et al. [30] pointed out the difference in participation in CE between urban and rural populations. The dependence of educational opportunities on environmental conditions was highlighted by Kuthe et al. [31] in their concept of sociotopes. Recent studies have also shown that the spatial distribution of educational institutions, and thus the availability of offerings and the opportunity structures, influences participation in CE, while socio-spatial factors also have an impact [32]. The German Continuing Education Atlas points out that provision of CE must meet the needs of potential participants and be accessible to them [26]. Thus, opportunities for mobility and accessibility of offerings influence the use of CE [33] (p. 130). It can be reasoned that the regional disparities result in different challenges and opportunities for CE and that these will show in educational monitoring.

The challenge for municipal education monitoring is to make reasonable use of the heterogeneous existing education data. The information obtained must be combined to form a picture of the local development of (continuing) education to enable its governance.

Though LER are presumed to serve as steering instruments, existing research has concluded that this is only realized with limitations. Brüggemann's [34] findings from a case study showed that LER were mainly used as a legitimization tool for the local government to present themselves as responsible and capable of acting. They did not have a direct impact on education policy. In another case study, Michel [35] was also unable to identify direct effects of LER on education policy. However, she concluded with the benefit that LER considerably expand the argumentation basis for political and professional discussions, improving cooperation between actors. The findings of Schemmann [36] were similar.

Based on these findings, it can be reasoned that LER can at least stimulate educational policy discussions and serve as basis for a discourse in which the possibilities and objectives of shaping local education are negotiated and developed.

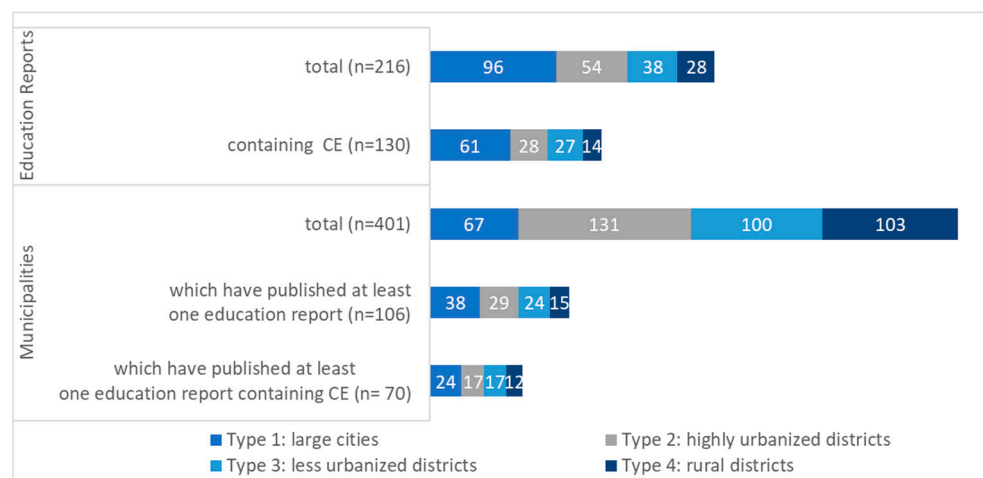
However, it is unclear in which areas of CE such an enrichment of discourse is generally feasible for little is known about the presentation of CE in LER. An analysis of LER published in "Lernen vor Ort" was carried out by Döbert et al. [37]. One finding was that few reports addressed CE, so they did not further evaluate reported topics and data sources on CE.

To gain insight into whether and where there is potential for CE to be governed via existing LER, our study analyzed which aspects of CE are considered by them. Following three sub-questions, we identified 1. how and with which topics CE is described, 2. which data are used for this purpose, and 3. which conclusions, in the form of recommendations, are derived.

## 2. Materials and Methods

We carried out a content analysis on LER published between 2006 and 2019. We chose 2006 as the starting point as the first national-level report was published then; its approach serves as a model for LER. In total, there were 216 reports from 106 municipalities (see Figure 1). This means that about a quarter of the existing 401 German municipalities

published at least one report. On average, there were two reports per municipality; the maximum was 14 reports. LER do not appear more often than annually.



**Figure 1.** Number of analyzed local education reports and municipalities by district types.

Given the research question on the representation of CE, the study was restricted to reports that explicitly referred to “continuing education” or “adult education”. This applied to 130 of the 216 reports, which came from 70 of the 401 municipalities. CE and other areas of non-formal education, which were not exclusively aimed at adults (such as music schools, libraries, museums, theaters), were partly treated in the same sections in the reports. Consequently, these areas cannot always be clearly distinguished from each other, so that they were included in the analysis.

The 130 related sections were analyzed using a document analysis. These sections covered between 1 and 55 pages of the reports, with an average of 11 pages. Looking at the proportion of CE sections in these reports, the average share of reports was close to 7% of pages (values range from 0.5 to 18%).

Using the method of content structuring by Mayring [38] (p. 93), a qualitative content analysis was carried out. All reports were available in PDF format and were analyzed via computer-aided analysis using MAXQDA 2018 software. In order to determine the units of the text to be studied in more detail, the first step was a deductive keyword search to delimit certain contents and aspects from the material according to previously defined sub-areas of CE. Next, the identified text passages, graphs, and tables were analyzed in detail and their contents were summarized. A weakness of the deductive approach is that it limits the analysis to known aspects of CE. New and surprising findings are largely excluded a priori. As a result of this, the categories were refined inductively. Finally, the previously delimited topics were partly quantified to compare their share in the reports.

As described above, preconditions for the field of CE differ between types of districts. For the analysis, we divided the data into four subgroups of district types differing in terms of population density and urbanization. These district types corresponded to the typology of the BBSR (“Siedlungsstrukturelle Kreistypen” [39]). This delineated large cities (type 1), highly urbanized districts (type 2), less urbanized districts (type 3), and rural districts (type 4).

There were 24 municipalities of district type 1 that published at least one report containing CE (see Figure 1). Taken together, these 24 municipalities published 61 reports containing CE between 2006 and 2019. In addition, 17 municipalities of type 2 and 17 of type 3 were identified as publishing at least on report containing CE, as well as 12 municipalities of type 4. Overall, these municipalities published 28, 27, and 14 reports containing CE, respectively.

### 3. Results

The results of the analyses are presented in three steps—according to the three sub-questions: (1) reported topics of CE, (2) central data, and (3) perspectives on the use of the reports as an instrument of governance for CE via recommendations given.

#### 3.1. Topics: Importance of Continuing Education for Individuals, Companies, and Regions

A first finding in connection with the abovementioned proportion of CE relative to other educational areas was that the reports were very heterogeneous in their structure and focus. Some only looked at selected areas of the education system, while others provided a broad view of all educational areas. More and more municipalities addressed CE in their reports over the years. Nevertheless, it remains a marginal topic, while the focus is on education during childhood and adolescence.

Considering the four types of districts, we found that education reporting was more prevalent in large cities. Whereas more than half of the municipalities of this type (38 of 67, see Figure 1) published at least one report, the share for type 2 and 3 was just under a quarter, and for type 4 only 15%. CE was covered by one third of all districts of type 1 (24 of 67). For all others, the percentages were lower—between 12 and 17%. Looking only at the districts that have published at least one report ( $n = 106$ ), a contrary picture emerged. Of type 1 and 2, about 60% dealt with CE in their reports (24 of 38 resp. 17 of 29); for type 3, it was just over 70%, and for type 4, it was 80%. Thus, the few reports from rural districts more often included information on CE.

The sections on CE in the reports usually contained an introductory part that referred to the importance of CE. These passages pointed out objectives, contexts, and fields of activity relevant to the municipality. They were subjected to a qualitative analysis regarding the topics mentioned.

The analysis showed that three main levels of objectives were named, which could be further subdivided:

- (1) Relevance for individuals:
  - a. Vocational: CE serves to maintain individual competitiveness and performance, as well as to create and increase opportunities on the labor market.
  - b. In private everyday life: CE contributes to self-realization, personality development, and social participation
- (2) Relevance for employers/companies:
  - a. Human resources development
  - b. Solution to higher skill shortages
- (3) Relevance for society as a whole/for municipalities:
  - a. Economic: CE contributes to the economic development, innovation, and competitiveness of a region and to the management of demographic change
  - b. Social: CE strengthens social integration:

Furthermore, general CE (political, linguistic, cultural, artistic, health-related), vocational CE, and school-based CE (catching up on general education school-leaving qualifications) were used often as umbrella terms to distinguish types of CE. This was also reflected in the presentation of data, as shown in the following section. Differentiating the analysis according to the four types of districts revealed that certain topics were mentioned more frequently than others, depending on the degree of urbanization. For example, the topics of basic education and literacy were only addressed in large cities. Integration courses for immigrants were also mentioned almost exclusively by districts of type 1, and to a lesser extent by type 2. In contrast, the qualitative analysis showed that in the two rural district types, more reference was made to an evolved, vibrant association culture in the districts, which was considered relevant for CE. In addition, analysis of the reports showed that there were large disparities within the districts. CE opportunities were often concentrated in the centers, so residents must travel further distances to reach them. Moreover, type 2

reports also emphasized that CE can be a location factor that makes the district attractive for the population.

### 3.2. Central Data: Focus on General Continuing Education, Vocational Training, and School-Leaving Qualifications

To answer the second research question, regarding the data presented in the reports, all tables and graphs were subjected to a content analysis. Most reports (86%) used data on CE for at least one sub-area. Only 15 of the 130 reports with sections on CE did not contain any data on CE and presented it only in text form.

The ways in which CE was presented in the reports was very heterogeneous. The 130 reports examined contained a total of 292 different data presentations on CE. Thus, on average, each report presented data on 2.2 different topics in the form of tables or graphs. Over a third of the reports (36%) contained only one topic presented using data; the maximum was 14 topics in one report. Large cities used slightly more diverse data (2.7 topics on average) compared to the other district types. It was noticeable that the focus was mostly on presenting data from the individual municipality. Comparisons with other municipalities or with the state level were rarely presented.

As Table 1 shows, adult education centers were most frequently reported—85% of the reports contained data on them. A comparison of the types of districts showed that the large cities were more strongly represented here. The situation was similar with data from the Federal Employment Agency, which, with 32%, was in second place among the most frequently used data. Evening schools/secondary schools were in third place with 19%. In 17% of the reports, own surveys were utilized. These were not examined in greater depth here, but they generally included more specific information about offerings and/or participation in CE. There were further areas of CE beyond those listed in the table, which were reported sporadically, including CE in science and education for elderly people.

**Table 1.** Data-based topics on continuing education in local education reports (number and percentage of all reports).

	Total Number and Percentage of Reports		Number and Percentage of Reports from ...								
			Type 1: Large Cities		Type 2: Highly Urbanised Districts		Type 3: Less Urbanised Districts		Type 4: Rural Districts		
	130	100.0%	61	100.0%	28	100.0%	27	100.0%	14	100.0%	
Data on	Adult Education Centres (VHS)	110	84.6%	55	90.2%	23	82.1%	21	77.8%	11	78.6%
...	Federal Employment Agency	41	31.5%	23	37.7%	9	32.1%	5	18.5%	4	28.6%
	Evening School/Second-Chance Colleges	25	19.2%	17	27.9%	4	14.3%	3	11.1%	1	7.1%
	Chamber of Crafts	14	10.8%	12	19.7%	2	7.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Chamber of Industry and Commerce	14	10.8%	9	14.8%	5	17.9%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
	Educational Counselling	14	10.8%	10	16.4%	1	3.6%	2	7.4%	1	7.1%
	Integration Courses. Federal Office for Migration and Refugees	12	9.2%	8	13.1%	0	0.0%	3	11.1%	1	7.1%
	Family Education Centres	11	8.5%	3	4.9%	5	17.9%	3	11.1%	0	0.0%
	Technical Schools/Academies	8	6.2%	7	11.5%	0	0.0%	1	3.7%	0	0.0%
	Education Vouchers/Education Bonus/Educational Leave	8	6.2%	3	4.9%	3	10.7%	2	7.4%	0	0.0%
	Catholic Education Centers	7	5.4%	3	4.9%	3	10.7%	0	0.0%	1	7.1%
	Protestant Education Centers	6	4.6%	3	4.9%	2	7.1%	0	0.0%	1	7.1%
	Own surveys	22	16.9%	11	18.0%	5	17.9%	2	7.4%	4	28.6%
	No data used	15	11.5%	4	6.6%	3	10.7%	5	18.5%	3	21.4%

One reason for the selection of the data could have been that only these were available in the municipalities, whereas data from other providers were not or were only available to a lesser extent. The ranking thus reflects the relevance of the available data, not necessarily those that would in general be of particular importance for the municipalities.

Rarely reported areas of CE were company and private-commercial offerings. This is remarkable because they account for a large proportion of CE in Germany [11]. The low

appearance in the reports was partly due to a lack of data, but it can also be explained by the fact that municipalities have no influence in these areas and corresponding offerings are only indirectly relevant from their perspective.

The three most common data sources of CE presented in the reports were subjected to a more detailed analysis (shown below) to gain insight into the definition of the subject that prevails in municipalities.

Data on adult education centers were used most frequently, with 110 reports containing corresponding information. They usually represented general CE. Taking the above-described typification of the districts according to their urbanization as a basis, larger cities reported data on adult education centers more often than rural district types. However, data on adult education centers were also the most frequently reported data in the other county types as well. This is partly because other CE providers (like chambers, technical schools) are often concentrated in larger cities. In contrast, adult education centers are the only providers with a large network of facilities located close to residents. In rural regions, they are often the only accessible CE provider [40], which lends weight to their importance there. For the municipalities, information on the number of participants seems to be of special interest. The data on adult education statistics used in the reports were divided into seven subject areas: participants (included in 97% of reports), courses (73%) and hours taught (52%), funding (17%), staff (17%), and degrees/exams (13%). Some reports also included information on the number of facilities in the district (6%). A closer look showed that data on participation, courses, and teaching hours over time were of particular interest, as well as the differentiation according to the program areas of the adult education centers, age, and gender. The CE rate (number of participants per 1000 inhabitants) and the CE density (number of teaching hours per 1000 inhabitants) were also frequently used.

Data from the Federal Employment Agency also played an important role in a larger part of the reports analyzed. Usually continuing vocational training is represented by these data. A total of 41 local reports presented data from the Federal Employment Agency. The data included information on the number of participants in continuing vocational training measures and participation rates for selected groups of people in continuing vocational training measures (included in 97% of the reports). In addition, rates of integration into the labor market after completion of measures were reported (34%), as well as general exits (24%), i.e., numbers of graduates from measures. The data were often presented over time and by gender. An examination of the four types of districts showed that districts of type 1 reported corresponding data most frequently, followed by type 2 and type 4, while type 3 was the least represented.

In total, 25 of the 130 reports focused on the acquisition of school-leaving qualifications in adulthood. To describe school-based educational programs referring to this, the term second-chance education (“Zweiter Bildungsweg”) is used. An examination of the four types of districts showed that particularly districts of type 1 presented data on this part of CE. It is unclear whether this was due to a higher provision or a higher participation in these offerings. As with the data on general and vocational CE, information on participants in school-based CE was of particular interest in the reports. The number and type of degrees were frequently reported, and the data were usually presented over time. Differentiation was often made according to gender, age, types of school, and migrational background. Information on the institutions themselves was rarely included. Most of the data were retrieved from the official school statistics and some from the statistics on adult education centers.

It was noted that the reported topics became more diverse over time. This could be related to the fact that new data sources could be accessed in later reports. However, the focus on the three areas mentioned above remained over time.

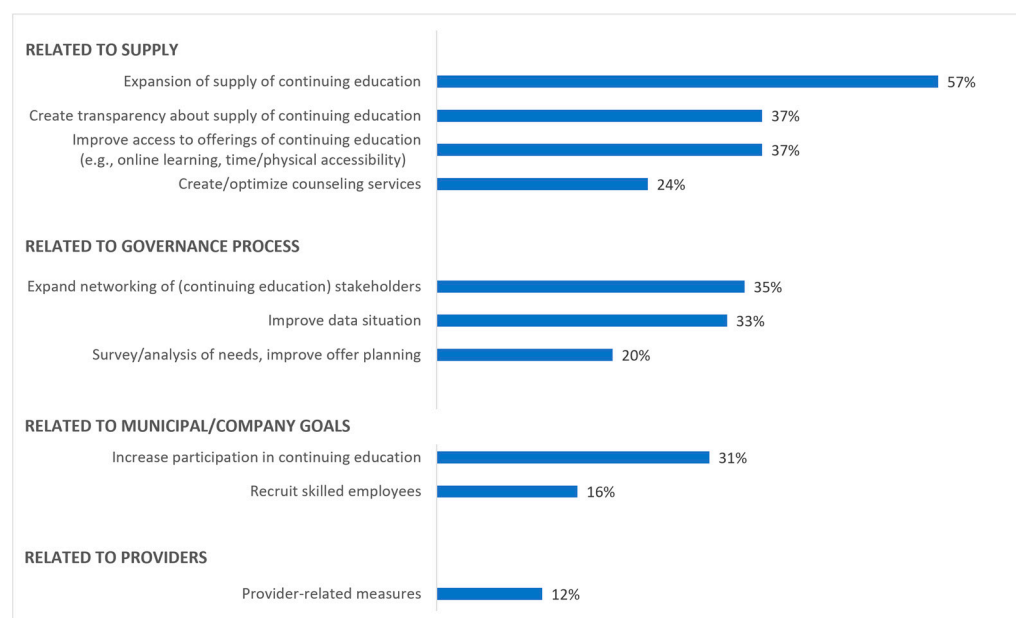
### 3.3. Recommendations in Local Education Reports

In a further step, the reports were reviewed to see whether any conclusions or recommendations were drawn from the data presented. These could serve as indications of where steering potentials of CE for municipality governance was seen.

The analysis showed that most reports were seen as instruments that provide an initial basis for discussion and steering for municipal decision-makers and education stakeholders. However, there was no uniform approach to formulating recommendations based on the data. Many reports explicitly refrained from detailed interpretation of the results and derivation of recommendations. Instead, they saw their task as compiling basic educational data and findings on local education. The intention was to interpret these findings with relevant stakeholders after publication to, subsequently, develop concrete measures together. For example, the county of Osnabrück stated: “The report is intended to stimulate intensive discussion among the actors in the various educational sectors to identify needs for action based on the analyzed data and presented results and to jointly shape educational policy, offerings, and practice.” [41] (p. 22, translation P.G.)

However, there were also reports that presented a contrary view. For example, the county of Ostalbkreis stated: “Among the advantages of a data-based analysis of the education system is the possibility to formulate recommendations and to be able to monitor the measures introduced over a longer period of time.” [42] (p. 9, translation P.G.) Here, education reporting was seen as a key tool for developing strategies to optimize local education.

Some of the reports provided recommendations, including about CE. This was the case in more than one third of the examined reports (49 of the 130). These recommendations covered a wide range of topics, which could be subsumed in four broader categories, comprising different measures. In Figure 2, the share of these recommended measures in relation to the overall number of reports featuring recommendations on CE are shown. The findings for each category are explained below.



**Figure 2.** Recommendations on continuing education in local education reports ( $n = 49$ ).

#### 3.3.1. Recommendations Related to Supply

Measures related to the supply of CE were most frequently recommended, in particular expansion of, creating transparency about, and improvement of access to these offerings.

The recommendation to expand CE supply was mentioned most frequently in all types of districts. For target groups that have so far participated less in CE or have specific



CE needs, optimization was considered especially important. These were, for example, low-skilled, older people and women. It was noted that appropriate personnel are required. The expansion of offerings for the acquisition of school leaving certificates in adulthood appears to be central, as well as in literacy and basic education. In addition, more offerings for people with disabilities were seen as important. Moreover, especially in type 1 districts, the expansion of offerings for people with a migrational background was mentioned very frequently. In contrast, type 1 districts did not mention the need for digitalization, while types 2 and 3 did. It is possible that more digital offerings were already available in large cities, so that there was less need there. In type 4 districts, improving the spatial accessibility of services was more important than in the other types. A central issue mentioned across all types of districts was to improve transparency and awareness of existing CE offerings among the citizens. To this end, it was suggested to develop suitable mediation strategies. In many cases, an online platform or database was suggested for this purpose. Here, for example, the profiles and focal points of the providers of CE in the district could be presented. This would make it easier for people interested in CE to find suitable offerings.

Additionally, the improvement of access to offerings was mentioned frequently. The demand for low-threshold offerings was frequently named. The aim is to remove barriers that make it difficult for people, especially those with a low level of education, to take advantage of the offerings. Accessibility also plays a major role, e.g., for people with limited mobility or disabilities. In addition, the development of innovative digital offerings was also encouraged. This should make it possible to reach people in rural areas through CE that can be used on a flexible basis in terms of time and location. In type 4 districts, it was also pointed out that services should be available close to the residents' homes, and that access needs to be improved in this way. Mobility is an important criterion for being able to take advantage of offerings. As a result, alternatives in public transport were also suggested, for example pick-up and drop-off services or adapted timetables.

The creation and expansion of counseling services also played an important role in the recommendations for all types of districts. The reports mentioned that personnel are needed at the interfaces between employment agencies, job centers, youth welfare offices, and secondary schools to provide support from a single source. This would require the establishment or expansion of suitable contact points. The intensification of offerings of orientation, counseling, and placement could increase participation rates and ensure the need for skilled workers. In some cases, it was also recommended that counseling services actively approach groups of people to motivate them to pursue CE, e.g., to obtain a school leaving certificate.

### 3.3.2. Recommendations Related to the Governance Process

Recommendations were given regarding the networking of actors in CE as well as in the field of education in general. Often, the contact points established for municipal education management, such as education offices, represent central networking points that promote exchange between the actors. According to the reports, events and conferences should be organized for different actors from the education sector, business, and politics. In addition, it was reported that it would be useful to establish advisory councils made up of these partners. Together, these could pursue the goal of coordinating CE offerings, making them more efficient.

The lack of data on CE was frequently pointed out, especially regarding participant characteristics. To be able to clarify in what areas political action is needed, it was considered necessary to expand the database on CE. This was problematized in districts of all types. In addition to the development of further statistical data, the implementation of the districts' own surveys was recommended in several cases.

Some reports recommended districts use their own surveys and interviews to obtain information on what the needs of CE are in the population. This was seen as a prerequisite for being able to develop learning opportunities tailored to the needs of the people. Type 1

districts appear to have a greater need in this regard. However, this may also have been related to the resources available for conducting such surveys.

### 3.3.3. Recommendations Related to Goals of the Municipality

A goal frequently mentioned in reports was to increase participation in CE by making it more attractive, especially for population groups who have no intrinsic motivation to participate. According to the reports, this applies to people who are less well educated and disadvantaged. Senior citizens, women, and immigrants were also named as target groups. A stronger intercultural opening of the offerings was named as a necessity. Such recommendations were more strongly mentioned by type 1 and 2 districts.

In some reports, a key objective raised was that CE should make a greater contribution to securing the demand for skilled workers. Except for type 4, this was mentioned by all types of districts. In particular, low-skilled workers should be more strongly qualified, and women should be increasingly recruited as skilled workers. Among other things, this should help to make the region attractive for employees and companies. CE was seen as a core area for implementing such strategies.

### 3.3.4. Recommendations Related to Providers

It was recommended to improve the staffing situation of public providers and make it sustainable. Across all types of districts, strengthening public funding was suggested; the focus should be on small providers. It was also seen as important to provide the staff with CE to familiarize them with the opportunities offered by digitalization and its implementation.

## 4. Discussion

The study aimed to analyze which aspects of CE are considered in German local education reports and which steering potentials are seen by different types of districts. From this, insights can be derived on where there is potential for governance of CE via LER so far.

Regarding the topics, a division in three target levels of CE emerged: At the individual level, vocational and private advantages comprise the focus. At the company level, the contribution of CE to human resources and coping with the shortage of skilled workers was frequently highlighted. At the societal or municipal level, emphasis was on the economic and social relevance for the region.

There were great differences in the presentation of CE in the reports, especially regarding the inclusion of data. There was no uniform understanding of indicators; each municipality approached the data-based presentation of CE in a slightly different way.

In terms of both topics and data, the analyses showed that CE in the reports was usually presented based on the differentiation between general, vocational, and school-based CE. General CE was presented via statistics on adult education centers, which play a major role as municipal institutions. According to Schrader's model of reproduction contexts [9], they are assigned to the context state. Vocational CE referred to statistics of the Federal Employment Agency, which represent labor-market-related, state-subsidized CE and training. These services cannot be clearly assigned to one of Schrader's reproduction contexts, since the Federal Employment Agency helps to place individuals in officially recognized CE services and grants funding for participation. The providers of the training measures themselves come from all four contexts mentioned in Schrader's model. However, there is no information about them in the data used—the data providers in this case are not the institutions providing CE. To represent school-based CE, use was made of various data sources on second-chance education, through which general school-leaving qualifications can be acquired (school statistics, corresponding data from the statistics on adult education centers). According to Schrader's model, these are also to be assigned to the context of state.

The focus on these state data types can have several reasons. One is the better availability and accessibility. Another reason may be the content of the data or the fact that

municipalities have direct steering opportunities in these areas. The frequent depiction of second-chance education is particularly interesting in that this topic has hardly appeared in national education reporting in Germany to date [17] (pp. 215–216).

In this paper, we looked at the differences between four different types of districts that differ in the dimension urban–rural. The differences that emerge can be partly attributed to different preconditions for CE, for example regarding local providers [see 26]. Overall, education reporting was more prevalent in urban districts, so the topic of CE was also present to a greater extent here. Rural districts published reports less frequently, but when they did, CE was usually included as a topic. However, urban districts exhibited a more diversified data presentation, while in rural districts, CE data mainly comprised adult education centers.

In all municipalities, regardless of type, most information was on data on adult education centers. In the two rural district types, data beyond this were rarely reported, which may also be related to the lack of offerings from other organizations. In both types of districts, there was also a higher proportion of reports in which no data were presented. Rural districts also had a higher rate of conducting their own surveys, which may be due to the lack of process-generated data. At the same time, it shows that the importance of CE is also perceived in rural districts, due to their high level of engagement and interest in relevant data. CE of private providers and companies hardly appeared in the reports. This is probably due to a lack of corresponding data, but also to the lack of regulatory power in this area by municipalities.

There were also differences in the reports regarding the naming of problems and challenges specific to the municipalities. These were accompanied by different recommendations as to what should be developed regarding CE. Four different levels emerged at which local educational governance can have an impact: CE offerings and their fit for (potential) participants, the providers of CE themselves, the municipalities and companies pursuing specific goals with CE, and the support of the governance process as such. The main challenges identified were the adjustment and accessibility of CE offerings for target groups that have so far participated less frequently in CE or have specific CE needs. Another important scope was supporting governance of CE by strengthening networks of stakeholders and improving data-based knowledge about CE. A comparison of the district types showed that the strengthening of offerings of CE for the integration of immigrants played a role, particularly in large cities. In reports of district types 2 and 3, a demand for stronger digital orientation of offerings was more strongly represented. In rural districts, spatial and digital accessibility of offerings and mobility were more strongly present as prerequisites for the use of CE.

Previous research has shown that local education reports serve as a basis for policy discussions in municipalities. Based on the findings of the present analysis, it can be concluded that the different treatment of CE in the reports could lead to variations in the relative importance of this area in local education governance. The study shows that the heterogeneity of CE in Germany and the fragmented data situation are particularly evident at the local level. The possibilities for data-based local governance are limited, first and foremost in rural districts. This leads to the fact that only parts of CE can be included in governance processes if it is perceived exclusively via data. Thus, the extent to which CE can be governed by educational monitoring and LER as its product is limited. It essentially applies to areas that can be assigned to the reproduction context state according Schrader's model of reproduction contexts. There are several "blind spots" that prevent an integrated view of local CE. However, this can be countered better in municipalities than at other levels of educational policy, because here it is possible to promote networks and cooperation in a targeted manner that can take regional and local characteristics and needs into account.

Due to the lack of data or a too strong focus on other areas of education in the reports, new regional disparities regarding CE could arise, or existing ones could be reinforced. This could lead to further disadvantages, especially for rural municipalities. To prevent this, it is necessary to promote the inclusion of CE in the reports of municipalities. An expansion

of the data situation was seen as beneficial in many reviewed recommendations. Mindful of the growing significance of CE for individuals and society, municipalities should place a stronger focus on the CE, even irrespective of the data.

In our view, it is also important to strengthen the connection of CE with other areas of education, at the level of actors and at the thematic level. In this way, individual educational trajectories could be looked at systematically and regional (policy) development could be supported in a more targeted and cohesive way.

From the data examined here, it is not clear for what reasons the reports have their respective forms and content. The analysis was done independently of the preceding and subsequent political and administrative practice, and without including other educational topics relevant to the municipality besides CE. Further analyses would be necessary to ascertain the reasons why municipalities addressed or did not address CE and whether spatial or regional determinants were decisive in this. Moreover, the effects of the reports, and thus actual governance of the CE landscape, could not be determined without further investigations. Related findings would be significant for the further development of local education policy instruments.

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