PREVENTION OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

German National Report

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REPORT ON THE NATIONAL SITUATION

GERMANY

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Abstract

This review starts with an introduction to the situation regarding school absenteeism in Germany. In the first chapter, the German school system is presented. The second chapter contains statistical information: The current drop out rate is approximately 8% - every year, almost 80.000 pupils quit school without a degree. Dropping out of school is a creeping process, mostly starting with playing truant once in a while and developing to chronic truancy. Estimated ten percent of the 12 million students in Germany seem to skip school on a regular basis, and as many as 500,000 young people can presumably be defined as chronic truants. The reasons are manifold and mostly an interaction between individual variables, school conditions and family background (see chapter 3). Chapter 4 and 5 give an overview of the main national bodies in charge and policies implemented to reduce the drop out rate. Chapter 6 deals with selected strategies developed at national and local level to prevent early school leaving. In chapter 7 a few approaches are shown containing important aspects that have to be considered in case of the development of a training initiative. Experiences in theory and practice show that a successful prevention approach will have to focus on the interaction between three central areas: school, family, and external institutions. Summaries of case studies and interviews with a head master and two public officers are placed in the following chapter. The last chapter contains important recommendations for public education authorities, headmasters, teachers, and parents that have to be acknowledged in the designing of a training manual.

1. Introduction to the national situation

Children in Germany start school at the age of 6, and from grades 1 through 4 attend elementary school. After that they are separated according to their academic ability and the wishes of their families, and attend one of three different kinds of schools: *Hauptschule*, *Realschule* or *Gymnasium* (see Figure 1).

The *Hauptschule* (secondary modern school) (grades 5-9 in most German states) teaches the same subjects as the *Realschule* and *Gymnasium*, but at a slower pace and with some vocational-oriented courses. It leads to part-time enrolment in a vocational school combined with apprenticeship training until the age of 18.

The *Realschule* (middle school) (grades 5-10 in most states) leads to part-time vocational schools and higher vocational schools. It is now possible for students with high academic achievement at the *Realschule* to switch to a *Gymnasium* on graduation.

The *Gymnasium* (high school) (grades 5-13 in most states) leads to a degree called the *Abitur* and prepares students for university study or for a dual academic and vocational credential. The most common education tracks offered by the standard *Gymnasium* are classical language, modern language, and mathematics-natural science.

Grundschule teachers recommend their students to a particular school based on their academic achievement, learning motivation, self confidence and ability to work independently. However, in most states, parents can finally decide which school their child will attend following the fourth grade.

The *Gesamtschule*, or comprehensive school, is a more recent development and is only found in some of the states. It takes the place of both the *Hauptschule* and *Realschule* and arose out of the egalitarian movements in the 1960s. It enrols students of all ability levels in the 5th through the 10th grade. Students who satisfactorily complete the *Gesamtschule* through the 9th grade receive the *Hauptschule* certificate, while those who satisfactorily complete schooling through the 10th grade receive the *Realschule* certificate.

No matter what kind of school a student attends, he/she must complete at least nine years of education. A student dropping out of a *Gymnasium*, for example, must enrol in a *Realschule* or *Hauptschule* until nine years have been completed.

Beyond the *Hauptschule* and *Realschule* lies the *Berufsschule*, combining part-time academic study and apprenticeship. The successful completion of an apprenticeship program leads to certification in a particular trade or field of work. These schools differ from the others mentioned in that control rests not with the local and regional school authorities, but with the federal government, industry and the trade unions [1].
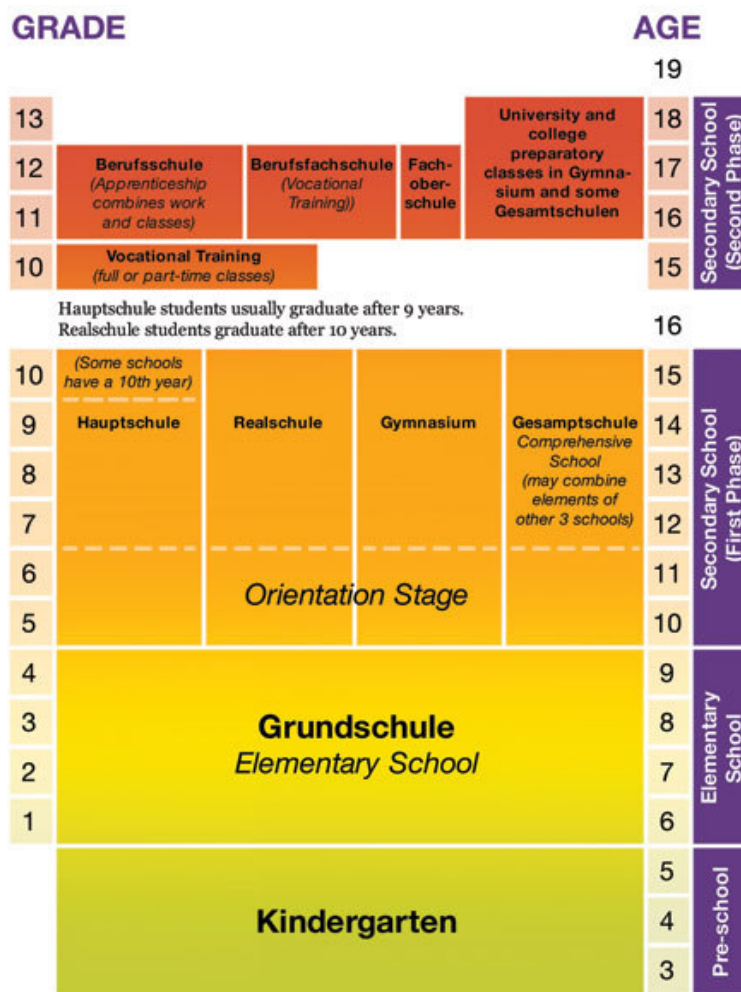

Figure 1: The German school system [1].

The history of compulsory education is described by [2] and [3].

2. Main national trends

Every year, almost 80.000 pupils quit school previously, meaning before school completion and without a graduation, certificate, or degree. Currently, the drop out rate is approximately 8% and almost as high as 10 years ago (8,7% in 1996) [4], [5].

The number of drop-outs is higher in boys and in youth with migration background. Dropping out seems to be a bigger problem in secondary modern schools (Hauptschulen) than in middle schools (Realschulen) and high schools (Gymnasien). Furthermore, the federal drop out rate varies from 6,9% in North-Rhine Westphalia to 11,8% in Saxony Anhalt [6].

Young people who don't complete high school face many more problems in later life than pupils who graduate. Their chance of getting an apprenticeship training position is low, 26% will not get a job and live on welfare. The risk of unemployment in school drop-outs is more than seven times higher than in young grown-ups with a college degree. Social integration and participation in work life and society are highly endangered, there is a high risk for the development of problem behaviour [7], [8], [9].

Dreary is the situation in the secondary modern schools. Pupils are pessimistic about their future (62%) and many of them are tired of school and without motivation because even with a degree it will be difficult for them to get an apprenticeship place [10].

The Institute for German economy estimates that the drop-outs produce yearly costs of hundreds of million Euro [11].

School drop out is not an event that takes place all of a sudden, but rather a slow process that very often starts in elementary school and consolidates increasingly over the years. It mostly starts with the phenomenon of "school tiredness", an increasing alienation from school, accompanied by a variety of symptoms such as lack of motivation to learn, refusing attention, forgetting material and homework, disturbing lessons, provoking teachers, and playing truant. Further indicators are changes in achievement as well as in social behaviour and lack of integration in class. Because of the creeping development it is not easy to identify pupils at risk at an early stage [12].

The statistics are alarming: Estimated ten percent of the 12 million students in Germany seem to skip school on a regular basis, and as many as 500,000 young people can presumably be defined as chronic truants. However, exact figures regarding the extent of truancy in German schools are very difficult to get because there are no official statistics available. In studies carried out the definition of truancy differs and the population varies with regard to grade, region, and type of school. Therefore it is also not easy to decide when truancy starts to become a problem.

The best way to find out more about truancy is to ask the pupils themselves – but the challenge is to meet truant pupils to get the information! According to Wagner (2007) there is no gender difference in truancy. Girls seem to be absent from school excused more often than boys [13].

Unambiguous is the relation between truancy and the pupils' age resp. grade: From fifth grade on the frequency of truancy increases – not unlikely because of the increasing frequency of class repetition, one factor that is highly correlated with truancy.

Studies also show that pupils from the secondary modern school seem to be truant more often. A clear explanation for this phenomenon could not be found so far.Wagner (2007) also points out that it is not unequivocal if pupils with a migration background are more or less truant than German pupils [13]. According to Weißbrodt (2007) truancy is definitely more common in migrant pupils attending high schools [14].

3. Main reasons and causes for leaving education

The reasons for skipping school, chronically playing truant and finally dropping out are manifold. Thimm (1998) describes the following pivotal areas [15]:

- unpleasant experiences at school – be it with regard to the school performance (f.e., low marks, class repetition, change of schools or classes, too high or inappropriate demands), be it with regard to the social contacts at school (f.e., social exclusion, mobbing, dissatisfying interactions with pupils or teachers);
- life circumstances that make it difficult to organize everyday life at school or fit the school demands;
- difficult family background (marital problems, divorce, diseases, unemployment); lack of support by the family;
- stating an "act of liberation" against perceived restriction or excessive demands;
- unfortunate outcome of a chain reaction of events that could be prevented by an early intervention.

Ricking (2006) points out the relevance of the following variables [16]:
- individual variables: age, gender, school anxiety, failure at school, self concept, attributions, intelligence;
- school variables: organisation, sort of school, school and class climate, teacher behaviour, excused or not excused absence, parent-teacher-interaction;
- family variables: living conditions, parents´ attitudes;
- peer group;
- time frame of truancy.

Wagner (2007) also sees truancy as a manifold phenomenon in interaction between family, school and peers. It is not unlikely that various risk factors rise independently and lead to a cumulation of problem situations causing truancy and drop out [13].

In addition to the above mentioned variables, the Landeskommission Berlin gegen Gewalt (Commission „Berlin against violence") (2004) specifies the structure of learning, the interaction at school and the chance to participate at school as potential risk factors and adds the following risk factors in our society [17]:

- variety of values leading to disorientation;
- low chance of getting a(n attractive) job;

- increasing problem of the individual to integrate him-/herself;
- living in a "fun-society" with letting oneself go instead of straining oneself;
- relevance of education is not apparent enough in public;
- unreal image of life caused by media.

Protective factors are according to Thimm (o.J.) [18]:

- grown-ups who are encouraging;
- stability and continuity in the care of the child (at least one reliable interaction person);
- someone who supports and enduringly sets value on school achievement;
- friends who engage in school;
- constructive, satisfying, challenging leisure time activities;
- regular school attendance;
- writing and reading competences.

4. National bodies in charge of the prevention of the problem

The pivotal national bodies in charge of the prevention of school drop-out are the following:
   o German Association for Public and Private Care (http://www.deutscher-verein.de);
   o German Children and Youth Foundation (http://www.dkjs.de);
   o German Department of Education and Research (http://www.bmbf.de);
   o German Ministry for Family, Women, Seniors and Youth (http://www.bmfsfj.de);
   o German Youth Institute in Munich (http://www.dji.de);
   o Joint Board of the Federal Ministries of Education (http://www.kmk.org).

5. National policies implemented to combat early school leaving

Last year, the head of the German Department of Education as well as the Joint Board of the Federal Ministries of Education stated the political aim to cut the number of school dropouts in half by the year 2010 within a claimed "Offensive for the advancement of education". One important strategy is the extension of the project „Refusing school – The 2nd chance" (see chapter 6) [19].

6. Strategies developed at national and local level to prevent early school leaving

6.1 Examples for national activities

The German Ministry for Family, Women, Seniors and Youth supported by the European Social Fund started the pilot project „Refusing school – The 2nd chance" in 2006 [20]. It gives young people who got into a dead end a second chance. Based on an intense and individual support they manage to return to school and graduate. At 74 sites in Germany, case managers are constant companions and help them to return to school on a regular basis. They provide a long term personal coaching and – if necessary – additional support for the reintegration.
The program turned out to be successful within the first year: Almost 1.800 girls and boys who had skipped school regularly took advantage of the project and got their secondary school degree.
The initiative will be extended. From September 2008 on, up to 200 projects will be promoted.

The major task of the project "Network School Tiredness and Truancy" carried out by the German Youth Institute in Munich was to collect information about programmes focussing on three different areas:

1. Supporting pupils with endangered graduation;
2. Education of pupils who dropped out of school in external institutions;
3. Preparing pupils playing truant for graduation.

Within each area a documentation was published. Additionally, an online database was created containing a description of each program [21].

The German Association for Public and Private Care and the German Bank Foundation supported by the German Children and Youth Foundation and the tv channel ProSieben Sat 1 funded the project "Cool School – Learning fun instead of frustration" pursuing strategies at three levels:

1. Development of educational concepts to promote motivation and achievement of pupils;
2. Design of social work and youth welfare activities to work on personal and social risk factors with the pupils and their social environment;
3. Creation of a local network "youth and education".

Based on these three strategies the interaction between all partners should be influenced positively leading to a decrease of truancy. In the first run, the project takes place at five locations. It is being evaluated [22].

The German Ministry for Education and Research carried out the project "Promoting competencies – vocational training for target groups with special educational needs" between 2001 and 2006 [23]. 136 projects were sponsored within four central areas:

- improvement of structures;
- further development of the work of educational institutions;
- improvement of educational training for migrants;
- initiatives of prevention.

The prevention initiatives focus on the improvement of educational training in schools by the following strategies:

- Further development of the cooperation between schools and companies to improve integration in education;
- Extension of job related school social work;
- Supporting models of practical experience in vocational preparatory schools;
- Expansion of the cooperation with youth welfare.

Subsequent to the pilot project phase a transfer phase started located at the Good Practice Centre at the National Institute of Vocational Education (sponsored by the European Social Fund). The primary objective is to transfer the outcomes and the experiences collected in the pilot project phase into the educational everyday life of the funded interventions.

The Ministry of the Interior supports the German part of the European competition INNOschool. 14 projects were awarded which offer innovative ways to promote integration and prevent early school leaving [24].

The most important research activities in Germany are carried out by the following experts who are also participants in the national work group:

1. Dr. Thomas von Freyberg (University of Frankfurt)
2. PD Dr. Christoph Gallschütz (University of Halle)
3. Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Mutzeck (University of Leipzig)
4. Dr. Anja Oehme (Special Education Centre Dresden)
5. Prof. Dr. Christian Pfeiffer (Criminological Research Institute Niedersachsen)
6. Prof. Dr. Kerstin Popp (University of Leipzig)
7. Dr. Kirsten Puhr (University of Halle)
8. Dr. Heinrich Ricking (University of Oldenburg)
9. Prof. Dr. Gisela C. Schulze (University of Oldenburg)
10. Prof. Dr. Michael Wagner (University of Cologne)
11. Prof. Dr. Manfred Wittrock (University of Oldenburg)

6.2 Examples for federal activities

The Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports Baden-Württemberg, in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs published the brochure "Activeley against Truancy" that was given to all schools, institutions of youth welfare, youth social work, police, counselling centres etc. in Baden-Württemberg [25].

The Department Intervention and Prevention of the Senator for Education and Science in Bremen has started an initiative against school avoidance based on four elements of activities: prevention panels, prevention projects, further education for teachers; counselling service against school avoidance. One main activity of the Counselling Service against School Avoidance so far was the development of detailed Guidelines for acting in case of school avoidance [26].

The Ministry for Social Affairs, Women, Family, and Health, the Ministry of Interior and Sports, the Ministry for Culture, and the Ministry for Justice in Lower Saxony have initiated the pilot project "ProgeSs" against truancy. Activities take place on three levels of activities: schools; cooperation between schools and youth welfare services; police. The evaluation outcomes indicate that the pivotal aims of the project ProgeSs could be reached [27].

The federal institution Kobra.net in Brandenburg focuses on the cooperation between schools and youth welfare and provides the following services: supporting analysis of situation and deducting acting possibilities; coaching project development and management of projects to prevent school drop out; coordinating and networking projects and institutions; publication of successful approaches (written material, presentations, conferences); providing practical support for teachers, parents and professionals [28].

The Senator for Education, Youth and Sports in Berlin in cooperation with the Commission "Berlin against violence" has established a working group "school distance" which developed guidelines for schools and youth welfare to cope with truancy and prevent drop-out [29].

In North Rhine Westfalia, the Ministry for School, Youth and Children carried out and documented "Projects against school tiredness" located within school and within other institutions [30].

6.3 Examples for local activities
Darmstadt

The CJD (Christliches Jugenddorfwerk Deutschlands e.V.) offers „KOMM – Beratung in Schule und Stadtteil" ("COME – counselling in school and district") in Darmstadt [31]. It aims at an early identification and prevention of problems leading to school tiredness, focussing on boys and girls from fourth to seventh grade. In cooperation with parents, teachers and other institutions individual solutions are developed and support is being arranged. The counselling centre is located in the district and there is also a room for counselling within the schools. The evaluation showed very positive outcomes.

Oberhausen

The project "Für die Schule, nicht für das Leben lernen wir! Oder???" („For school not for life we learn, don´t we?") is a preventive, low-threshold intervention for disadvantaged scholars with learning disabilities to force and qualify them for their professional career. One example is a project where young people repair broken go-karts (go-kart-project) [32].

Trier

Within the project „RidZ – Reintegration in die Zukunft" („RidZ – reintegration towards the future") the staff members who are notified by the school contact the pupil and his/her parents. The pupil learns school contents and key competences within the project and is finally reintegrated into school. Additionally, the staff members work on problems within the families [33].

Salzgitter

The „Kompetenzagentur Salzgitter – KompAS" („Competence agency Salzgitter") carries out preventive work with children from 12 years on who have problems in secondary modern school. Pivotal elements are case management and cooperation with social institutions in order to support and place the young people individually [34].

Female Craftsman House Cologne – "Girls project Future"
Within this project, girls are supported intensively and individually by a team consisting of two carpenters, two social educators and one special education teacher (all females) [35].

The project part "**Pfiffigunde**" aims at the prevention of school drop-out of girls from 6th grade on. It takes place at the Female Craftsman House and in cooperation with secondary modern schools, special schools, and trouble area schools. Girls with failure experiences at school participate at courses in skilled manual work once a week. The practical experiences are intended to lead to personal development, increase learning motivation und promote a self-conscious planning of the future. There is an intense exchange with the contact persons at the regarding schools.

Within their intervention project "**Kneifzange**" ("**Nipper**") the Craftswoman House offers an extracurricular learning place for female 9th and 10th graders who were chronically truant for a longer time period. The daily schedule lasts from 8:15 am to 1:30 pm and combines instruction, handcraft and social educational attendance. Main goal is that the girls get engaged in daily routines with obligatory relations and rules, develop learning motivation and catch up with learning matters.

7. Identification of training initiatives in the area

Within the above mentioned project „KOMM – Beratung in Schule und Stadtteil" ("COME – counselling in school and district") a method for the early identification of pupils at risk was developed considering the following aspects [36]:
- Recording and systemizing truancy;
- Development of past school years;
- Family background / risk factors in the family;
- Psychological and physiological features / impairments;
- Previous attempts of support and help;
- Estimation of the teacher(s);
- Contact between teachers and parents;
- Goals and behaviour strategies regarding teacher, pupil, parents and other supporting agents.

Ricking (2006) points out that it is necessary for schools to have *guidelines* regarding the attitude of the headmaster, the cooperation between school and youth welfare services, a learning promoting, non-aggressive school climate, the prevention of mobbing, the relationship with the pupils, and the quality of didactics. Based on these guidelines he suggests the following *strategies* in case of truancy: register truancy, notice warning signals, create incentives for regular attendance, sanction absenteeism, react directly, arrange comeback situation positively, offer support, make school / teachers reachable, cooperate with parents [16], [37].

Plasse (2004) published a training manual with three main modules [38]:
Module 1: Diagnostics (When has to be acted?; warning signals; Who is responsible?; How can experts help?; truancy, school anxiety, separation anxiety; finding out the reasons for truancy)
Module 2: Conducting difficult conversations (listening actively, confrontation and its pitfalls, me-messages)
Module 3: Four steps of acting actively against truancy.

So far, an evaluation of a teacher training has not been published.

Key competencies teachers should have in order to reduce the risk of early school leaving seem to be the following [39]:
- Competence for an adequate individual case diagnosis;
- Differentiated repertoire of strategies;
- Competence to use of external support systems;
- Competence to provide emotional security by acceptance, appreciation and devotion;
- Social competences (being friendly, authentic, encouraging, setting boundaries);
- Competence to handle truant pupils reflected and positively.

Further key competences are communication skills – with regard to the staff, the pupils, the parents and external institutions.

8. Identification of best practices

The number of projects carried out for and with truant pupils and drop-outs is huge. The projects take place within regular schools, special schools or other external institutions.

A good overview of models of good practice give the following publications:

15

- Learning offers for truants and dropouts [40];
- Models of practice for the social and vocational integration of juveniles: The award winners of the competition "Fit for life and work" [41];
- Prevent dropout – Good examples of an early prevention [42];
- Chances for school tired pupils [43];
- Projects within the frame of the competition „INNOschool" (see above) [24].

The experiences from the national, federal, and local projects indicate that activities to reduce school drop-out rates will be most successful if an effective cooperation between school, pupils, parents, and local institutions can be reached. **School work** includes the identification of risk factors and pupils at risk, individual help and training, new ways of instruction and improvement of the atmosphere in class and the learning group climate. Essential is furthermore the efficient cooperation with the **parents** and **networking** with institutions of youth welfare, social work, police, counselling centres, recreational facilities, and companies.

Figure 2 gives an overview of the main agents to be regarded in school drop-out prevention work.
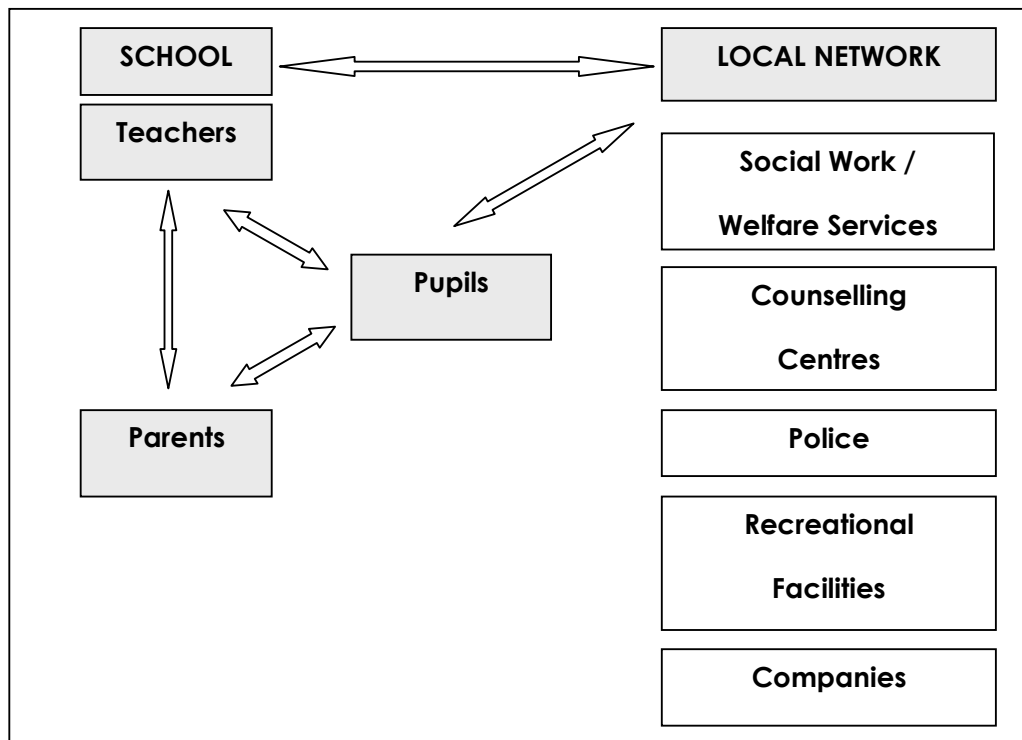

Figure 2: Main agents in the prevention of school drop out.

9. Case studies

Case Study 1

The 16-year-old Jan lives with his mother and a younger sister in a rather rural area in North Rhine Westfalia (Germany). His parents got divorced when he went to kindergarden, he grew up with his mother and a stepfather. The mother has a diploma in educational science and works for the youth welfare office. Currently, Jan attends the ninth grade of a secondary modern school and is endangered to drop out without a graduation.

Jan's troubles started very early. His mother describes him as a toddler who used to be very agitated, quickly upset, enraged on one hand and very lazy on the other hand. He started speaking very late and at the first grade his problematic social behaviour and school achievement was so bad that he needed to repeat the first class of elementary school. His reading and writing competition have been very poor. Aged seven Jan was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and since then he has been in therapy and under medication.

After elementary school, Jan went on visiting secondary modern school. He always reached the next grade, although he continued making trouble. At the eighth grade he was temporarily disqualified from school because of his maladjusted social behaviour.

Jan actively avoids school only once in a while. His passive avoidance finds its expression in low participation in class, infrequent homework and opposition to rules and agreements with his teacher. He frequently disturbs class and refuses cooperation.

Right from the beginning of the first class Jan had additional lessons with a private tutor until he refused even this a half year ago.

At present his school performance is so weak that he will probably leave school without any graduation. He intends to move to the place where his biological father lives to continue his education at a vocational school. An internship he made not long ago made clear to him that he prefers working instead of going to school. The importance of a good graduation, though, motivates him to continue going to school to get a middle school degree.

His mother states that Jan has always judged his own achievements wrong and isn't sure he will make it. She emphasizes how glad she will be when Jan will have finished school.

Causes

According to the teacher and the mother, Jan's trouble can to a great part be attributed to his diagnosed ADHD and disturbing social behaviour. It is difficult for him to follow rules, accept problem solving suggestions and listening to the explanation of reasons. Also his deficient insight ability and far from reality self-assessment of his own performance are contributing to Jan's problems at school. Despite medication and therapeutic assistance Jan is not able to concentrate and participate in class. As a result he's continuously experiencing failure and there are frequent conflicts with teachers.

Approach

Jan's mother admits that it is difficult for teachers to deal with class and additionally handle a child like him. Likewise his current class teacher states Jan would need one-to-one care and alternative ways of learning to achieve good results. Throughout the years a close co-operation of Jan's mother and the school has been established. Frequent dialogues have taken place into which Jan was integrated. In case Jan is absent at school, the mother is always informed immediately. She describes the contact with Jan's teachers as positive, although not all of her suggestions are carried through. For example, she made good experiences with a reward system using Smilies or red and yellow cards as known from soccer.

Since it is difficult for him to take in information by reading, his mother tries to visualize facts, write down rules and include physical activity, e.g. press-ups, into the learning process. She thinks school was not able to give proper attention to Jan and his special needs.

Case Study 2

The 17-year-old Sven lives in a rural area in North Rhine Westfalia (Germany) with his parents and a twin brother.

Sven is currently visiting secondary modern school at 9th grade. At the moment it is not foreseeable if he will drop out without graduation or get his degree and start practical training.

Sven skipped school at 217 days this year, 211 are excused. As a reason for the school avoidance he names stomach ache caused by ongoing conflicts with his class teacher. With other teachers, classmates and parents he has no problems.

His parents did not know that Sven played truant until the teacher called them. He left home and came back as if he went to school. He also went to the doctor on his own. His mother says that nobody could imagine Sven skipping school.

The class teacher does not really believe in Sven's stomach ache are caused by stress with him. He thinks Sven had problems before he became his class teacher but he does not know the previous history. Sven himself does not report previous problems. He is convinced that he would have attended school regularly if he had had a better relationship with his class teacher.

According to the class teacher other teachers also complain that Sven is disturbing and boycotting instruction. His mother describes him as nice and polite, the girl sitting next to him told her he is the most quiet pupil in class.

Sven thinks his class teacher will be glad to get rid of him and would not support an application to continue school attendance up to 10th grade. He wants to start a workmanship training and his parents support this ambition.

Causes

Sven and his parents see the school avoidance caused by the conflicts with the class teacher. Sven thinks that the class teacher is not fair to him and disciplines him without any reason. This leads to the stomach ache that makes it impossible for him to go to school. For most of the skipped days he got a medical certificate. His mother is convinced that the only reason why her son is not good at school is his absenteeism.

Approach

Many conversations are carried out between school and parents. The class teacher attests a good relationship with the mother.

Because of the presumably psychosomatic stomach ache Sven has started to see the school psychologist on on ce a week (due to his father's suggestion). Sven experiences this contact positively and can talk openly to this person. He promotes Sven in persevering at school and avoiding conflicts with the class teacher. Once a month, his father meets the psychologist and they talk about Sven.

Since Sven sees the psychologist he has also been more open towards his parents.

Solution

The solution for Sven seems to be leaving school and starting a practical training.

Results

Results are not foreseeable at the moment because it is not clear if Sven will be able to graduate after this school year. However, he is convinced of leaving school and getting rid of the conflicts with his class teacher. He already had an admission interview in his new school where he talked openly about his problems and the teachers told him they wanted him to make better experiences than with his current teacher.

Case Study 3

The 20-year-old Antonio was born in Ecuador and lives close to Darmstadt (Germany) with his mother, his step-father and his sister.

Antonio's problems began when he came to Germany with his mother and sister in 1999. He was 11 years old and could not speak any German. It took 1 ½ years to find an appropriate school for him. Because of his language problems he started two classes lower at 5th grade in a secondary modern school. From the beginning on he had problems at school. Since he had to visit an additional German course, he missed regular

school quite often, could not keep up with his classmates and increasingly lost interest in school and stopped engaging for it. He also had problems with his school mates, was afraid to do something wrong and did not integrate himself in class. His mother reports that school was the most unpleasant location for him, and the language was a barrier he could not overcome. Antonio remembers how hard it was when he had to read something because he was ashamed for his pronunciation.

Due to the continuous failures, Antonio played truant more often. It became better when he got a new class teacher who gave him support and appreciation. But his grades were so low that he could not graduate at that school and had to look for an alternative.

His previous class teacher cherishes that Antonio became active in planning his future and prove his motivation and willingness to proceed in a practical training as mechanic.

Meanwhile, Antonio graduated from a school focussing on electronics. At the moment, he is completing an apprenticeship as metal worker and is planning to get a middle school graduation afterwards.

Causes

According to the mother, the previous class teacher and Antonio himself, the main cause for his school problems was his problem with the German language leading to steady difficulties and failures. Antonio says he was overstrained. He could not keep up with his class mates form the very beginning and was not able to catch up despite of private lessons and efforts from school and his mother. To avoid failure he started playing truant. His mother admits that she worsened the situation by additionally pressuring him.

Approach

Different approaches were tried to cope with Antonio's school problems. The family got psychological support form the family help service. Antonio perceived this contact very positively, could speak openly and felt supported.

Furthermore, there was a close contact between the class teacher and Antonio's mother trying to find solutions.

They tried to help him by private lessons and special education at school but he could not compensate his deficits any more.

Finally, the school offered information about potential perspectives and ways to get his secondary modern school degree what he already did. For Antonio it was helpful to understand what would happen if he did not get a school degree and what he could do to act in his situation.

At his new school it was helpful for him that lessons were less difficult und there were less pupils in class. Teacher repeated a lot and paid attention that every pupil could keep up and understand subject matters. He got along well with the teachers and felt supported and understood by them.

Additional support came from the KOMM-service for school tired kids in Darmstadt.

Results

Changing school after 9th grade was successful for Antonio. He went to a Berufsschule (vocational education) where he graduated. Since then he feels better at school and with his family. His mother is glad that Antonio has taken responsibility for his education.

Case Study 4

The 20-year-old Barbara lives on her own in Northern Germany.

Barbara is currently participating at the reintegration program "Jump plus", a national program to combat youth unemployment.

She started playing truant at 7th grade. Until then, she had rather good marks (except for German). But then she lost interest in achievement and school. Her peers also skipped school, and they did not see how important it is to get a school degree at this point in time. Because of the truancy and concomitant bad performance in school she had to repeat 7th grade three times. In the beginning, she gave in medical certificates, but stopped doing that because she felt that nobody was really interested in her school attendance. She changed school once because of friends but did not feel comfortable in the new school. Because she had no graduation, she became unemployed and homeless. She did not know enough about her qualifications and failed to get an

apprenticeship position. Her parents were disappointed and sad and could not support her any longer because her mother was very sick.

Youth and social service helped her to get a residence, unemployment benefit and a job as a social worker. Her own social worker arranged for her to participate at "Jump plus". Instruction is better than school there. She is very proud of herself, and so are her parents and brother, too. She is convinced that she will be able to graduate and get an apprenticeship position as a mechanic or as a social worker.

Causes

Main causes why Barbara dropped out of school were the peers who played truant themselves and the lack of reaction by the school. She was not interested in school any more and was not aware how important it is to get a school degree. The parents could not support her enough because of her mother's illness.

Approach

Youth and social welfare supported Barbara to get on her feet again. Her social worker pushed her into the program "Jump plus" that helps Barbara to get her school degree after all. For Barbara the alternative ways of learning outside of regular school are helpful. Lessons start between nine and ten, the atmosphere in class and one-to-one explanations promote learning, the pupils are having fun.

Solutions

The solution for Barbara is getting a secondary modern school degree, maybe even a middle school degree if she successfully stays in the program for one more year.

Results

Barbara's case shows a successful reintegration. It is very likely that she will graduate and get an apprenticeship position first and a job as a mechanic or a social worker afterwards.

Case Study 5

The 23-year-old Norbert lives together with his girlfriend and their two year old child in Northern Germany.

After Norbert changed school at the age of 13, he was the only one who did not know his classmates. However, he did not have problems with the classmates but with the teachers because he always felt discriminated. Teachers often complained about him at the director. Then he had to change classes again – and again he was the only new pupil. He started playing truant until he had to leave school at 7th grade. He started going to another school but after three months he decided not to go to school any more. He stayed out of school for two years, hanging around, doing nothing, waiting for his friends coming home from school. His parents didn't know what to do and even had to pay school fines because of his absenteeism. They tried everything – also in cooperation with the youth help service – but without success. Finally they gave up trying.

He started hanging out with peers who took drugs and stole. He got in trouble with the police and was arrested for burglary – even though he was out of town and could not be guilty. He was convicted for 20 working hours. This was the starting point for visiting a second chance school where he graduated. After graduation he started a practical training as a cemetery gardener which he did not finish because he had difficulties learning the Latin names of plants. Then he worked for a security agency and for a demolition company. After this he got the chance to participate at a course to increase job reintegration and is in an apprenticeship position for becoming a carpenter at the moment. He has always been interested in working with wood. He is not very fond of school (traditional learning, old teachers, too little individual support), but the additional remedial training at the apprenticeship placement is very good for him.

Causes

Main cause why Norbert dropped out of school was his history of changing schools and classes leading to feelings of being a disturbing factor in class and discriminated by the teachers

Approach

Norbert has recognized that graduation and education are important for getting a job, earning money and improve life quality – even more if you have a family. For Norbert getting a second chance outside of the regular school system was the starting point for changes. Since he has always wanted to work with wood, he is eager to successfully finish his practical training as a carpenter.

Solutions

The solution for Norbert is finishing the apprenticeship and getting a job as a carpenter. Since he has a family, he is very interested in getting a job close-by.

Results

Norbert's case shows a successful reintegration. It is very likely that he will finish his practical training and get a job as a carpenter.

Case Study 6

Clarissa is 17 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Clarissa dropped out of school because she was hit, mobbed and segregated. Furthermore, she was not interested in learning.

It took her 3 years for the decision to drop out.

She got along well with only a few teachers and not at all with her classmates. They did not care about her dropping out. Neither school nor experts outside of school did something to prevent her dropping out. But she thinks nothing would have been successful at that time.

The relationship to her parents is very good. They found it "shitty" when they noticed her dropping out.

She thinks it was okay to leave school without graduation. Now she visits another school and is working on getting her degree. With the staff at school she has a very good relationship.

She went back to school because she realized that she needs a degree for her future.

She would like to become an elderly care nurse and feels well prepared for that job by the school.

She is convinced that her chances to get a good job increase when she attends school regularly and feels acknowledged and supported by the staff at school.

Case Study 7

Katharina is 15 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Katharina played truant because school was boring for her, she was lazy, ignored and did not like her classmates, more important than school were her friends. After skipping school a few days she could not keep up with learning material.

She had no good relationship with most teachers and ignored her classmates except for her best girl friend.

First, the teachers talked to her, then they were not interested any more. The classmates did not understand her.

Neither school nor experts outside of school did something to prevent her dropping out. She thinks that the teachers should have paid more attention to the relation within class, should not have ignored her or been unfair to her. But she is not sure if that had changed something at that time.

The relationship to her mother has become good since she has returned to school. She helped her to look for alternatives.

She thinks it was not okay to leave school without graduation. Now she visits another school and is working on getting her degree. With the staff at school she has a pretty good relationship.

She went back to school because her aunt supported her and she wanted to get a degree.

She would like to become a cabinet maker and feels well prepared for that job by the school.

Case Study 8

Isabella is 16 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Isabella had to leave two schools because she did not integrate herself, was not interested in learning and didn´t get along with her teachers from the first school and with teachers and classmates from the second school.

When it became clear that she would have to leave the first school she started playing truant. To the second school she went only twice and then never again.

Her teachers and classmates did not react to her dropping out. She thinks they did not even know that she exists. After half a year a letter came stating that she got late to class repeatedly although she went there only two times.

The school social educator talked to her but this was not very useful. One year after leaving school a youth welfare worker supported her.

The relationship to her parents was pretty bad at the time of her dropping out. Her father did not care, but her mother was disappointed and helped her to find a new school. They did not realized her dropping out before nine or ten months. Meanwhile, her parents got divorced. With her mother she has become best friends.

She thinks it was not okay to have her leave the first school. To drop out of the second school was okay for her.

Now she visits another school and is working on getting her degree. With the staff at school she has a very good relationship (even though sometimes they get on her nerves).

She went back to school because it was boring to do nothing what made her getting aggressive towards her parents and friends and because she wanted to get a degree.

She feels well prepared for a future job by the school.

She is convinced that her chances to get a good job increase when she attends school regularly and feels acknowledged and supported by the staff at school.

Case Study 9
Dolores is 16 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Dolores dropped out of school because she was not interested in learning and did not get along with the teachers and class mates. Since 6th grade she went so school only three times a week, had to repeat one class and went to school only twice a week afterwards.

According to her, the teachers and classmates did not care about her dropping out. The headmaster initiated a conversation with her and her mother but this did not lead to any changes. Also a youth welfare service worker talked to her.

The relationship to her parents was not good at the time of dropping out. Her mother told her that she had to go to another school.

She thinks that neither the school nor her parents had a chance to persuade her to go back on a regular base and get her school degree.

She thinks it was okay to leave school without graduation. Now she visits another school and is working on getting her degree. With the staff at school she has a good relationship.

She went back to school because she realized that cannot do anything without a degree.

She would like to become a cook or confectioner and feels well prepared for that job by the school.

She is convinced that her chances to get a good job increase when she attends school regularly and feels acknowledged and supported by the staff at school.

Case Study 10
Larissa is 15 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Larissa dropped out of school because she was not interested in school and had stress with the teachers.

The teachers told her it was "shitty" not to get a degree but she had her own view and decided according to it. Otherwise, school did not do anything to prevent her dropping out. Her parents, siblings and brother-in-law tried

to convince her. They all told her it was "shitty" not to get a degree because of her future but they could not force her to go on with school.

The relationship to her parents is good ("perfect").

She thinks that the school did not have a chance to persuade her to go back on a regular base ("hating once = hating always"), neither had the parents.

She thinks it was okay to leave school without graduation. Now she visits another school and is working on getting her degree and hopes to get a good work later.

With the staff at school she has a good relationship.

She went back to school because her parents and siblings informed her.

She does not know which job to choose yet.

She thinks she is acknowledged and supported by the staff at school.

Case Study 11

Miriam is 15 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Miriam dropped out of school because of problems at home and at school.

It took her two days to notice that she did not fit into the new class. After that she did not got to school anymore. School did not react to her dropping out.

She is in contact with a youth welfare service worker.

The relationship to her parents was bad at the time she was dropping out but has become very good again. They found it "shitty" that she did not got to school any more.

She thinks that neither the school nor her parents had a chance to persuade her to go back on a regular base and get her school degree.

She does not know if it was the right decision to leave school without graduation.

With the staff at school her relationship is superb.

She went back to school mostly because of her mother.

She would like to become a cabinet maker and feels well prepared for that job by the school.

She is convinced that her chances to get a good job increase when she attends school regularly and feels acknowledged and supported by the staff at school.

Case Study 12

Nadine is 16 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Nadine dropped out of school because she had stress with teachers and pupils, disturbed lessons, did not pay attention, played truant, had no interest in school.

It took her 4 years for the decision to drop out.

At some schools, she got along well with teachers and classmates, at others she did not.

The teachers were stressful when they noticed her dropping out (called in continuously). School did not really do something to prevent her dropping out.

The relationship to her parents is good again (after having no contact for some time).

She thinks it was not okay to leave school without graduation because one does not have a future then.

Now she visits another school and is working on getting her degree.

She goes to school regularly, in time, and has fun at school.

With the staff at school she has a good relationship.

She would like to do something with cosmetics in her future job.

She is convinced that her chances to get a good job increase when she attends school regularly and feels acknowledged and supported by the staff at school.

Case Study 13

Nabila is 15 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Nabila dropped out of school because she hated school and had no interest in school anymore.

It took her approximately half a year until she decided to leave school without graduation.

She got along well with her classmates, but not with her teachers.

The teachers did not react to her dropping out.

Neither school nor experts outside of school did something to prevent her dropping out.

The relationship to her parents is good although they were disappointed.

She might have stayed at school when teachers would have done more to let the pupils have fun with learning.

She thinks it was not okay to leave school without graduation.

Now she visits another school and is working on getting her degree.

With the staff at school she has a good relationship.

She would like to become a hair cutter in her future job and feels pretty well prepared for that job by the school.

She is convinced that her chances to get a good job increase when she attends school regularly and feels acknowledged and supported by the staff at school.

Case Study 14

Angelik is 15 years old, lives in Cologne and participates at the "Girls Project Future" in the Female Craftsman House Cologne.

Angelik dropped out of school because she had no interest in school anymore and felt being dealt with in an unfair manner.

It took her approximately three to four years until she decided to leave school without graduation.

She got along well with her classmates, but only with some of her teachers.

From her point of view the teachers especially provoked her to get rid of her even sooner.

Her classmates wanted her to stay and told her to back off. Also the living group attendants tried to motivate her and were disappointed in the end.

She does not know what school could have done to prevent her dropping out. Her parents could have done nothing – when she has come to a decision she will push it trough.

She thinks it was okay to leave secondary modern school but it was not okay to leave middle school.

Now she visits another school and is working on getting her secondary modern school degree and is planning on getting the middle school degree one year later.

With the staff at school she has a very good relationship and fees supported 100%. The support by teachers and class mates is motivating her to get a degree.

She would like to do something in retail in her future job and feels very well prepared for that job by the school.

She is convinced that her chances to get a good job increase when she attends school regularly and feels acknowledged and supported by the staff at school.

10. Conclusions

The interviews underline the fact that school drop-out is a very individual process that has to be dealt with sensitively in cooperation between the pupil, schools, parents and external institutions. Very important for a successful reintegration seem to be the appreciation of the pupil, forcing his/her strengths, good peer, family and teacher relations, practical experiences and personal and vocational perspectives.

11. Recommendations

11.1 Recommendations for public education authorities

- Support the establishment of absenteeism prevention and intervention programs;
- Develop standard forms for the documentation of school absenteeism;
- Develop a standard registration strategy for school absenteeism;
- Develop a standard strategy for sanctioning school absenteeism;
- Support the development of guidelines and materials for schools in order to prevent truancy and drop out;
- Promote the subject in education and further education of teachers;
- Create conditions to reduce the drop out rates (f.e. special education, low numbers of pupils in classes, involvement of school social workers);
- Develop guidelines for networking with other institutions (youth welfare, social work, police, project partners);

- Develop guidelines for the interaction with pupils at risk;
- Develop guidelines for the interaction with the parents of pupils at risk.

11.2 Recommendations for head masters
- Recognize the (potential) problem;
- Get information about the problem;
- Develop guidelines to handle absenteeism within the school quality management;
- Talk about the problem openly and regularly with the staff;
- Support exchange about the problem within staff;
- State rules handling school absenteeism for teachers;
- State rules handling school absenteeism for pupils;
- State rules handling school absenteeism for parents;
- Get and disseminate information about further education activities for teachers;
- Support participation of teachers at further education regarding school absenteeism prevention.

11.3 Recommendations for teachers
- Recognize the (potential) problem;
- Get information about the problem;
- React to truancy immediately;
- React consciously, consequently, and sensitively;
- Create a positive learning climate including social learning;
- Enhance social learning amongst the pupils;
- Support every pupil individually, especially in case of problems;
- Design instruction practically and life-centered;
- Identify and promote strengths of any individual pupil;
- Seek interaction with parents;
- Work closely together with school psychologist(s) and social worker(s);
- Work closely together with companies;
- Build up a network with external institutions.

11.4 Recommendations for parents
- Recognize the (potential) problem;
- Get information about the problem;
- React to truancy immediately;
- React consciously, consequently, and sensitively;
- Talk to the child - find out the reasons for truancy;
- Support school learning and social learning;
- Be interested in the child and support it emotionally and practically, especially in case of problems;
- Create a positive family climate;
- Seek interaction with school;
- Develop a common strategy to prevent truancy – with the active involvement of the child and the school;
- Look for support from external institutions or other persons if necessary.

For further recommendations see [39], [44], [45], [46].

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