



The School project “Crazy? So What!” Mental Health, Mental Health Promotion, Prevention and Antistigma Work in Schools

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Learn deficits, violence at schools, youth unemployment and lack of prospects! Almost every day we hear about it in media coverage, in our job or from our own children. There is no time for parents and teachers, psychologists and doctors, also not for politicians and entrepreneurs to be concerned about new approaches of future-oriented promotion of our in part overstrained children and adolescents. Important symptoms of overstress are for instance increased propensity for violence, drug usage and increased illness sensitivity. The results of the survey on children's and adolescent's health (KiGGS) published in May 2007 by the Robert-Koch-Institute show that 20 percent of all children and adolescents are considered to be mentally noticeable. More than 1.5 million children live together with parents, who suffer from severe mental illness. The KiGGS-survey could prove for the first time that children and adolescents in socially disadvantaged families are more often mentally noticeable and generally have a worse state of health.

The effects of such health impairments are often great losses on live quality, among others major difficulties in school. Last but not least, mental impairments in childhood and adolescence are often precursors for mental impairments in adulthood, which result in great economic burdens of the social health care system (1).

Children and Adolescents are our Future

This is simply spoken. And it is true. But how can we strengthen children and adolescents for live, for the future?

What are we doing that they

- are optimistic
- have a highly developed feeling of self-worth in opposition to the dominating zeitgeist
- develop clear and realistic objectives for their live
- can handle the fast changes and challenges of live and that they can recover from difficult times
- possess empathy and personal responsibility
- know the effects of their behaviour on others
- have the feeling to be really successful.

Protective Factors for Mental Health of Children and Adolescents

What keeps us healthy? Why are some people more capable than others to handle the challenges of live? For them, some kind of protective factors are obviously available, which prevent the appearance of illnesses, respectively impairments and furthermore have a health-preserving effect. Thus, not only tasks and challenges people are confronted with are decisive, but also which health preserving protective factors are available for a person. If a person has such protective factors, he or she obviously can handle the most difficult challenges without affecting his or her health.

Psychologists call this phenomenon mental resistibility or resilience.

International studies about health behaviour of children and adolescents show: independent of age, family climate and school climate have the biggest influence on life satisfaction (2). In the future, health will be one of the compulsory topics in schools to improve the educational work. Central tasks of good healthy schools will be to preserve and promote mental health as well as to prevent mental illnesses. Because in school it is all about what the core of mental health is: being able to deal with the challenges of reality, simultaneously participating, to evolve and develop the own personality, to constitute the self and to arrange oneself. A good school climate offers mental and physical security for pupils, teachers and other assistants of the school (3).

The School Project „Crazy? So What!“

The school project „Crazy? So What!“ of the registered association “Madly human” promotes and supports this innovative approach of school research. Also this project is based on results of modern stigma research: contact with people who experienced mental illness, as well as information and education soonest lead to the reduction of stereotypes, anxieties and distance (4).

The aim of the by “Madly human” in 2001 developed and accomplished school project is to sensitise adolescents for mental health, to promote prevention and openness, and to exercise understanding and tolerance in interpersonal relations. Pupils deal with their own life, get to know people who experienced mental illness and learn what can be done to preserve their own mental health. This can counter anxieties and prejudices and sharpen the view for their own life.

The school project uses the competences and experiences of people, who experienced mental crises. On the basis of their specific expert knowledge overcoming difficult crises and social exclusion, the act as “experienced experts” and role models especially towards pupils with special needs. They bring the experiences, motivations, and the dilemma of pupils mentally at risk and of affected pupils to light. Therewith, they bring important but difficult topics into school. They also communicate important messages, especially to pupils mentally at risk:

- Crises belong to life. They can only strengthen you.
- Look for at least one person you can trust. Can you find such a person in your school?
- Start to talk about your problems!
- It is good to get help as early as possible!
- Think about whether you can share your experiences of coping with difficult crises with other pupils in your school. Your knowledge is valuable and helps your classmates, who have similar problems.

“Crazy? So What!” addresses 15- to 20-years-old adolescents of all schools and emanates from the needs of each class / group, lasts at least one school day, takes place in the school and focuses on wholistic learning. In the school project, own experiences and adventures, curiosity, tension and fun have first priority.

The school project team consists of moderators (social workers, employees of psychiatry, and others) and experts in their own right (people, who experienced mental illness). The team works together at the same eye level.

“Crazy? So What!” precisely: At the beginning, the pupils are sensitised for the topic mental health / illness while they are discussing who or what is “crazy” for them, what makes them crazy, what images they have of mentally ill people and of psychiatry, from where they have those images, opinions and experiences, etc..

In a second step, the pupils work in small groups together, argue about their self-perception and their images of life. In this way they learn that mental health / illness is closely connected with their life and that they can actively do something for their own mental health. In the third part, the highlight of the project, the pupils meet with persons who experienced and overcame mental crises. While talking to those persons, the pupils have the possibility to check their attitudes and images, to talk about own concerns, to understand more about the effects of mental illnesses and learn about who can help during a mental crisis.

„Crazy? So What!“ - Evaluation

The *first evaluation* of the school project in the year 2001 by the University of Leipzig could confirm the effectiveness of the project. Attitudes of pupils (14 to 18 years) were examined regarding negative stereotypes and social distance using a case-control-study with three points of assessment. It could be proved that the school project reduces prejudices towards people with mental illness and positively influences attitudes.

Almost all participating pupils wished to learn more about mental health / illness in school. As particularly impressive, the pupils describe the encounter with “experts in their own right”. This encouraged them to speak about their own feelings and existential orientations, as well as to think about their own resources for preserving mental health (5).

Second Evaluation 2006 / 2007

The focus of the school project „Crazy? So What!“ meanwhile widened. That is why during a *second evaluation* – again using a case-control-study with three points of assessment – the health promoting effect of the project for pupils is examined, among others their self-efficacy. The question how far pupils are sensitised for the topic of mental illness and what help-seeking strategies could be mediated to them in case of an occurring crisis, forms another focal point. In addition, the wish for social distance towards mentally ill persons is recorded. The study also includes participating teachers and records their needs of continuing education about mental health / illness.

First results from the pilot study regarding the *second evaluation* of the school project also show that contact with a mentally ill person has positive effects on attitudes of pupils.

- The majority of respondents was surprised to find out that the person himself is affected. For 84.6 % it is true that the affected person reassured them for their own life.
- Three quarters of the interviewed girls and respectively boys indicated that such persons could be a role model for them.
- 73.7 % stated that they could handle mental crises better now. In case of an own mental illness, the interviewed pupils would turn at first to their peers, and only in a second or third steps to parents, teachers and professionals.
- Pupils, who experienced the school project, would more likely talk to a teacher they trust than the control group in case of mental crises.
- The majority of pupils wished to learn more about help-seeking possibilities in case mental crises (6).

Summary and Perspectives

From 2001 until 2007, 7000 pupils in took part in the project in Germany, as well as 700 pupils in Czech Republic and Slovakia. The school project grew from the basis and up till now was solely financed by donations. The very simple but effective strategy of the school project proved itself during practical experiences – not only in Germany, but also in Slovakia and Czech Republic. A package of concomitant materials was developed for pupils, teachers and project groups (internet platform, school handbook, exhibition for schools, programme of further education for teachers, crises-pocket-guide for adolescents, posters, flyers, etc.).

In 2006, the school project was accepted as best-practice model in Germany. The aim of the association “Madly human” is the establishment of regional school project groups, which use the basic concept of “Crazy? So What!” for their work. 16 of such school project groups we already established in 10 federal states.

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