DO 'SCHOOL COACHES' MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION?
Results from a large focus group study

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SUMMARY

Background: *Mental disorders in children and adolescents are common and have serious consequences. Schools present a key opportunity to promote mental health and implement prevention measures. Four school coaches in five German schools were enlisted to engage students, teachers and parents in building a sustainably healthy school and classroom climate.*

Subjects and methods: *Altogether, 58 focus groups with students (N=244), parents (N=54) and teachers (N=62) were conducted longitudinally. Topics included: (1) the development of the school and classroom climate, (2) the role of mental health in the regular curriculum, and (3) the role of school coaches in influencing these aspects.*

Results: *Over time, school coaches became trusted reference persons for an increasing number of school system members. They were able to positively influence the school and classroom climate by increasing the awareness of students, teachers and parents of mental health in daily routines. Nevertheless, topics like bullying and student inclusion remained an issue at follow-up.*

Conclusions: *Overall, the school coach intervention is a good model for establishing the topic of mental health in everyday school life and increasing its importance. Future efforts will focus on building self-supporting structures and networks in order to make these efforts sustainable.*

Key words: *adolescent mental health - school coaches – evaluation - health promotion - mental health prevention*

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INTRODUCTION

Mental disorders are common and have serious consequences. Approximately 18% of children and adolescents in Germany show signs of emotional or behavioral disorders (Barkmann & Schulte-Markwort 2012), of which 5% are considered serious enough to require professional help (Hurrelmann et al. 2003). Further, mental disorders contribute to familial and peer group difficulties and to poor school performance (Fröjd et al. 2008, Howard & Underdown 2011, Mattejat et al. 2003). These facts illustrate the importance of preventive measures at young ages (Prince et al. 2007).

Schools represent a key setting for the prevention of mental disorders. Children and adolescents from a wide range of social backgrounds spend a substantial part of their day in school and are most accessible there (Klingman & Hochdorf 1993). Furthermore, the goals of formal school education and preventive programs are compatible (Klingman 1984). Besides conveying knowledge and abilities, school, as an institution, should be a protective developmental environment (Bilz 2008). This requires a healthy school climate, which "(...) is based on people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" (Zullig et al. 2014). A recent review found that school connectedness and teacher support can positively influence student emotional health (Kidger et al. 2012). This correlates with an increase in active

problem-solving, self-regulation and school related self-efficacy and encourages positive development in young people (Hopf 2004, Middlebrooks & Audage 2008). Therefore, a healthy school climate can strengthen resilience, moderate risk factors and reduce barriers in help-seeking (e.g. a negative attitude towards mentally ill persons) (Kuperminc et al. 2001, Loukas & Murphy 2007).

There is growing evidence for the efficacy of mental health promotion interventions in schools (Durlak et al. 2011, Hoagwood et al. 2007). These interventions can target either a particular group or can be universally applied; the approaches can also be combined (Neil & Christensen 2009, Haug et al. 2013). A recent review proved effectiveness for e.g. depression and anxiety, and identified a mix of approaches to be most promising (Corrieri et al. 2013).

In-school coaches are ideally a constant, yet external, presence. They can adapt actions based on their inside knowledge of a target group and its needs: "An outside school coach, properly prepared and sensitive to individual and whole-school concerns, can provide a balance of pressure and support to initiate and sustain meaningful school improvement" (Kostin & Haeger 2006). Examples for in-school coaching are the Great Schools Partnership (Great Schools Partnership 2014) and the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) (Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports 2014). Another innovative approach is the "school coach" concept, developed by the German

NGO, *Irrsinnig Menschlich e.V*. This pilot project was implemented in five schools in Saxony, Germany.

The objective of this study was to evaluate the influence of the school coaches on certain aspects of school life at the participating schools and on their members over two school years (2010-2012). Focus groups were conducted with students, teachers and parents at the beginning and the end of the project. The following questions were evaluated:

- In what ways did the school coaches have an influence on the development of the school and classroom climate, including the relationships between students, teachers and parents?
- Are mental health issues part of the regular curriculum and the school's daily routines?
- To what extent did the school coaches' role progress over time? What was required to work with the members of the school system? Were the new characters in everyday school life able to gain the trust of the school members? And if so, were they able to support help-seeking students, teachers and parents? What were the main demands?

The Intervention: the School Coach Concept

The regular German curriculum barely involves any mental health topics, perhaps reflecting a lack of consciousness towards the importance of mental health on the members of the school system. In order to fill this gap, numerous non-profit organizations have implemented comprehensive preventive approaches (e.g. Mind Matters (Australian Government - Department of Health 2014) and LISA-T (Poessel et al. 2006). In contract to standardized interventions, the school coach project utilizes a systemic approach to identify school-specific issues and provides customized help. It is a further development of the prevention campaign, "Crazy? So what!" which focused on sensitizing students and teachers to mental health issues, as well as creating a network of multipliers (Conrad et al. 2009).

The pilot project took place in five project schools. Of an initial five school coaches, four remained at project start, so that one school coach worked in two neighboring schools. They were recruited by job advertisements on the Internet and local newspapers. The school coaches were employed as external counsellors with no ties to school staff. All school coaches had a professional background as qualified graduate social workers and were employed by regional project carriers. Their age ranged from 24-49.

The school coaches followed a solution-focused approach (Hicks & McCracken 2010). Their work was systemic, involving all members of the school system to achieve a comprehensive effect: "(...) school-based prevention and youth development interventions are most beneficial when they simultaneously enhance students' personal and social assets, as well as improve the quality of the environments in which students are educated" (Greenberg et al. 2003).

Their training was conducted by the German NGO, *Irrsinnig Menschlich e.V.*, and was comprised of seven modules. The first two modules took place at the start of the project in weekly blocks. Besides thematic and methodic basics, they addressed specific methods of school coach work. The remaining six modules took place in regular intervals of 3-6 months. Besides imparting further basics, their content was adapted to consider current evaluation results. Also, the school coaches shadowed and observed the work of exemplary facilities and were individually coached by training on the job (see Figure 1).

Compared to school social workers, the school coaches devote significant attention to the schools' macro-level. Their target group is comprised of all members of the school system: students, teachers, principals, parents, non-educational staff and external cooperators. Following the principle, "help to self-help", the school coaches aim to support all members of the school community as neutral reference mediators to use their own skills to find sustainable solutions. The objective is to enable schools to identify and solve problems independently and to continue the development process autonomously. Moreover, the school coaches should assist and motivate the school members to build up networks of internal (e.g. steering group) and external (e.g. local health care facilities) supporters. The steering group is the central, independent means for students, teachers and parents to sustainably participate in this process. It is expected to improve the school and class climate by allowing all members to participate and strengthen school connectedness.

A specific school coach task is to sensitize all members of the school system to mental health problems, to counteract stigma and to strengthen resilience. At all schools, the school coaches had a uniform approach: (1) establishing good relationships by being present in daily routines, (2) coaching all members of the school, (3) building a steering group and constantly conducting situation analyses and (4) organizing and supporting the conduct of specific programs (e.g. peer-to-peer-projects). Besides these guidelines, the school coaches flexibly orientated their tasks towards school specific issues.

The school coaches utilized a broad range of methods. At all schools, specifically developed educational materials (Corrieri et al. 2012) and exhibitions were employed. Film screenings (Winkler et al. 2006) and peer-to-peer workshops with "experts on their own behalf" were conducted (e.g. concerning eating disorders). "Experts on their own behalf" are persons affected by mental disorders who educate students as part of a project day about mental health. They animate the students to work self-reflectively (Conrad et al. 2009, Schulze et al. 2003). A positive effect of personal contact with affected persons on stigmatization is well researched (Angermeyer & Matschinger 1997, Meise et al. 2001, Lang et al. 2014). Further peer-to-peer-projects like the implementation of class councils and self-help-groups
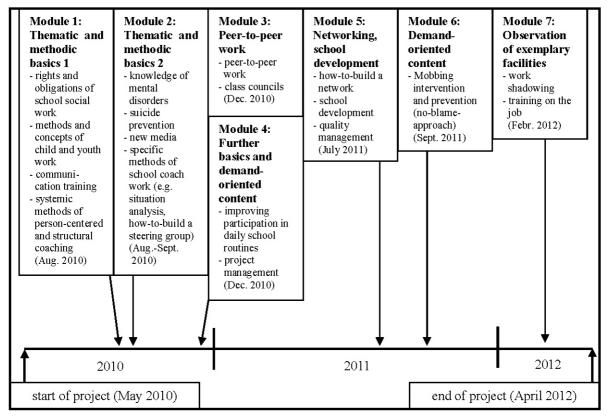
Figure 1. Modules of the School Coach Education

took place at all schools. Also for teachers, further training was provided, e.g. concerning teachers' health or behavioral disorders. Also, teachers were trained in the *no-blame-approach* to intervene in case of bullying (Blum & Beck 2010). Information events were also offered for parents (e.g. concerning rights and obligations of parenting, social media and computer addiction). The school coaches coordinated these actions.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Subjects

The participating schools were two secondary schools and three middle schools, representing both urban and rural environments. The schools fall into the average range concerning socioeconomic characteristics. All students of the 7th- and 9th- (middle school), and the 7th- and 10th-grade (secondary school) were invited to participate. Recruitment was conducted by a reference person in the respective school (guidance counselor/teacher) who was familiar with the background of the project. The participants were briefly introduced to the topic of the discussion beforehand. A signed parental consent was required for participation. Because the school coaches spent a main part of their work with 5th- and 6th-graders, the evaluation flexibly included these lower grades into the scheme. Due to organizational circumstances at a rural secondary school, the elder class taking part in the focus group

was 11th-grade at baseline and 12th-grade at follow-up. Altogether, 58 focus groups took place, consisting of 38 groups with students (N=244), 10 groups with teachers (N=62) and 10 groups with parents (N=54) (see Table 1).
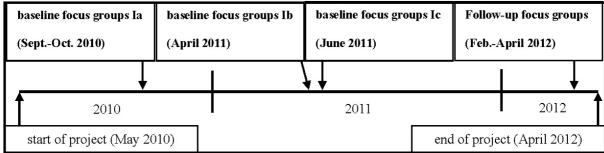
The study procedures were approved by the 'Sächsische Bildungsagentur' (education agency) as responsible ethics committee. The focus groups were conducted from September 2010 to April 2012 (see Figure 2).

Methods

Focus groups are flexible; participants develop ideas and opinions through interaction with other peers in the target group. The quality of the data is enhanced because, as the background of a statement is revealed, new aspects that the researchers had not previously thought of are revealed (Kitzinger 1995). Focus groups simulate "naturally occurring interactions", thereby involving group dynamics that resemble social representations inside public dialogues (Morgan 1993). The focus groups serve to qualitatively collect both school-specific and universal information about the project schools. To cover the school coaches' influence over time, in terms of the research questions, the schools' respective *status quo* as assessed at baseline and follow-up were compared. The main points of interest comprised three main aspects that arose from the program's strategic alignment (see Table 2).

Table 1. Number of participants of focus groups at baseline and follow-up investigation

		Urban secondary school (A)	Urban middle school (B)	Rural middle school (C)	Rural middle school II (D)	Rural secondary school (E)
Baseline (BL)	5th grade (5)	9	8	10	7	7
	6th grade (6)		6	10	5	6
	7th grade (7)	5	7	3	6	5
	9th or 10th grade (9/10)	8	6	3	6	3 (11th grade)
	Teachers (T)	8	4	7	7	9
	Parents (P)	9	6	7	5	4
Follow-Up (FU)	6th grade (6)	10	9	11	4	3
	7th grade (7)	11	9	6	5	6
	8th grade (8)	13	8	7	6	5
	10th or 11th grade (10/11)	5	3	-	4	5 (12th grade)
	Teachers (T)	5	5	3	7	7
	Parents (P)	5	4	5	3	6

Baseline focus groups Ia: four project schools;   Baseline focus groups Ib: delayed project school;
Baseline focus groups Ic: additional 5th- and 6th-grade students

Figure 2. Data Collection

Table 2. Guidelines of the Focus Groups

Structure	Purpose
Introduction	
acquisition of number, sex and age of participants; location and length; overview on topic, presentation of the course of the discussion	acquisition of demographic information; warm-up phase, becoming familiar to the topic of discussion
Part 1 – school and class climate	
questions about the overall impression of the school; urgent issues; student-student-, student-teacher- and teacher-teacher-relationships; involvement of parents	impression on overall and specific situation in school and class; target groups express their view on topics that should become part of the school coaches' work
Part 2 – mental health in everyday school life	
questions about role of mental health in regular curriculum; mental issues in students and teachers; parental opinion of preventive work in school	understanding of the importance of role of mental health in everyday school life; insight on state of knowledge and engagement in this topic; specific aspects of mental health in respective school
Part 3 – actual work of the school coaches	
questions about the perceived field of functions; requirements for the school coach to become a reference person; impression of the school coach so far; concrete events in which the school coach became active; participation possibilities in school matters; improvement of the school coaches' work; meaningfulness of the project	insight on knowledge about and desires for the role of the school coaches; feedback on universal and specific progress made; statements from target groups on issues to be addressed; general point of view on the school coach project
Documentation of the focus group	
atmosphere; flow of discussion; problems that might have occurred	acquisition of background information not recordable on tape

The first key issue was the development of the school and classroom climate. At baseline, the *status quo* of the respective schools was outlined to develop a school-specific working plan. At follow-up, the participants provided information on how the school and classroom climates were influenced by the school coaches' work. In *part two*, questions concerning the role of mental health in the regular school curriculum were posed to examine if this topic was present in everyday school life. In conclusion, the *third key aspect* was about the actual work of the school coaches. At baseline, the participants mostly formulated expectations and hopes for new classroom qualities. Areas of need and possible strategies toward reaching solutions were worked out. At follow-up, the school coaches' work and influence were evaluated. Also, at follow-up, emphasis was placed on student inclusion.

The focus groups were conducted by an experienced facilitator and an assistant, who recorded all aspects not audiotaped (e.g. the number of participants or the place and length of the group). Even though the discussion followed main points of interest which arose from the program's strategic alignment and were manifested in the guideline's structure, the participants were given the freedom to expand on aspects not covered.

Statistical analysis

All 58 focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The two persons processing the recordings allocated single statements to the three key points of interest mentioned above. These main aspects can be considered as deductively given categories. The allocation was checked for reliability by the second person. Afterwards, four members of the research team read through the transcripts independently and identified additional categories of interest. Each topic was then discussed until agreement to minimize researcher bias. Based on the principles of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000, Patton 2002), these subcategories were inductively built and complemented the deductively given categories that arose from the guideline structure. The categorized answers of the participants were then further divided to fit these subsections. This way, the transcribed material was structured and summarized analytically by content to conserve essential aspects, while providing a clearer form by means of abstraction into categories (Patton 2002). Finally, noteworthy quotes were translated into English by a bilingual team member and translated back by a second bilingual speaker.

RESULTS

The results of the focus groups document developments in the school and classroom climate, the role of mental health in everyday school life and the actual work of the school coaches at the project schools.

However, some aspects of the evaluated issues seem to require more long-term work to generate measurable effects.

School and Class Climate

Baseline and follow-up

In general, the *impression of the overall school climate* was positive by all questioned groups at baseline and follow-up. Conduct was reported as generally fair and respectful and programs such as child-care and special facilities like media centers and cafeterias were especially emphasized. Particularly, the *student-student relationship* was viewed as normal to positive by the majority of the participants.

Nevertheless, the majority of issues mentioned at baseline were still relevant at follow-up. One reason could be the complexity of the topic, including many persons and fields of interests. Second, the school coaches only had a short amount of time to conduct their work. Therefore, several issues were still in need of attention.

The formation of groups and bullying remain *urgent issues* in all project schools. The majority of exclusion events were of single students being excluded from the classroom community without violent acts. But, in individual cases, more severe incidents were reported: "Just recently, a classmate was hit without reason and threw up. From then on, she did not attend class anymore" (C 9 BL).

Main reasons for bullying were unusual appearance and deviant behavior. Another wide spread issue was disturbance of class lessons by individual students at the expense of the community.

At both points in time, students wished that teachers would intervene more rigorously and permanently: "When the teachers settle the situation, it remains calm for a while, but starts over again later" (A 5/6 BL).

Helplessness regarding problematic students would lead to a lack of respect toward the teachers' authority: "The teachers must stop being afraid of certain students. They should adopt more drastic measures instead of just warning to do so" (C 9 BL).

The *teachers* themselves assessed the occurrence of bullying at their schools as constantly below-average. Teachers felt that the term bullying is sometimes abused and used to manipulate: "Much is only portrayed as bullying, along the lines of 'I do not want to go to school today, because I'm bullied'. The term is misused as an explanation and excuse" (B T BL).

An example showed the school coach defusing a situation as a *reference person* at a rural project school, where students complained about misbehavior in the schoolyard and in front of the school (e.g. smoking, alcohol). The school coach helped settle the situation: "It has become better. Some time ago, we were offered cigarettes or threatened to be beaten up, but now it has calmed down" (C 7 FU).

In general, the vast majority evaluated the *relationship between students and teachers* as basically positive and respectful at both measurement times. A large number of students showed satisfaction with the teachers' performance. Still, others complained about prejudices and impatience towards weaker students. A lack of social competence and concern was formulated: "The teachers should give more consideration. They cannot just say: 'I do not care if you understand or not'" (A 7 BL).

Also, an aggravated form of teacher-student contact, as well as an unfair systematic rating of individuals or groups of students was reported. Another aspect was the lack of extracurricular engagement among the school staff, e.g. in excursions or projects like school magazines. Even for the questioned *parents*, this remained a point of criticism: "It is a matter of attitude: some teachers only do their job, which is not enough. Being a teacher is rather a calling than an occupation" (A P BL).

Teachers were expected to show more commitment and to make everyday school life less unilaterally curriculum-orientated by using experiments, trips or group work.

On behalf of the *teachers*, a lack of time outside of class led to a lack of involvement when dealing with the students' problems. Also, teachers identified problems connected with lower social and economic backgrounds: "What I noticed is the relatively high proportion of students from economically weak families" (A T BL).

Here, the school coaches played a supporting role: "I already sent children from my class, of whom I know that there are problems at home. I think it was okay for all sides and everybody got help" (D T FU).

Reflecting the teachers' own situation, two key issues were mentioned: their high average age and the rising pressure due to increasing duties: "When I look at the percentage distribution now of my job, it has become 70% upbringing and 30% education. This was not my aspiration" (B T FU).

The *relationship among teachers* was generally evaluated as positive. Frictions mainly existed where staff had recently merged or leadership frequently changed: "A portion of us come from a secondary school that was closed down. We got along very well and had excellent cooperation there. With regards to the teaching staff, I enjoyed going to work then more than I do today" (E T BL).

These impressions were also confirmed by *parents*: "It is insinuated that the teaching staff has large problems coming together" (C P BL).

The establishment of a teacher's café by the school coach at one school had a positive influence by providing a meeting point to discuss matters in a more casual and relaxed atmosphere. The internal communications and social interaction were improved.

The questioned *parents* were mainly satisfied with their opportunity to *participate in everyday school life*. A point of complaint at both points in time was the lack of interest among many parents to get involved: "The people who have the time to get more involved remain inactive" (A P BL).

Unappreciated initiatives led to frustration and retreat among the motivated parents.

Mental Health in Everyday School Life

Baseline

Divergent views were expressed about the role of mental health issues in everyday school life. While the regular curriculum was considered insufficient in this aspect, classroom lessons were the most likely setting for these topics to be mentioned: "Every two weeks, we have a class lesson where we talk about bullying and such" (B 6 BL). Additionally, parents reported occasional project days for certain topics: "My son's class discussed violence. When drugs were sold nearby, this was also discussed intensively" (D P BL). As a limiting factor, these institutions depend on students to announce issues to the whole class, causing caution due to fears of stigmatization.

While some participants expressed no cases of *mental health problems in their school*, a majority observed a large variety of issues, including self-mutilation, suicidality and depression. Also, topics like substance abuse, bullying and cyber-bullying were reported, which may interact with mental health difficulties. Especially older *students* complained about pressure to obtain higher marks, and insufficient reactions of teachers: "I would say that problems like bullying or depression exist, even seriously mentally ill children. This is mostly handled by closing the eyes. That is what I mean with lack of engagement by the teachers, who do not move toward someone and offer help" (A 10 BL).

Some *teachers* expressed that in their opinion a number of parents, perhaps searching for excuses for their own mistakes, were looking for diagnoses to explain deficits of their children: "Many children with problems have parents with problems" (D T BL).

The growing influence of the school coaches and their network was expected to further manifest this topic in everyday school life. Concerning *the teachers' own mental health*, only a few participants made comments on issues concerning their colleagues. If they did, the main aspects were burn-out, more precisely feelings of helplessness and senselessness as related to their work and feeling that the responsibility was being carried by teachers alone: "When you have to push the same button every day, you are the only one that demands something from the students and when they leave school, there is nobody left that demands something from them. No wonder a teacher starts to ask why he is doing this at all" (D T BL).

Follow-up

According to the focus groups, an increasing number of teachers gave the school coaches time to address mental health topics in their classes. Also, more teachers showed their growing trust by sending students in need to the school coaches' offices. But while the teachers had burdens removed and were further educated to deal with mental health issues, the daily curriculum as a whole still presented an opportunity for expansion. One of the project schools conducted a school unit entitled, "Growing Up" which focused on psychosocial issues of puberty and coming of age. The school coach regularly participated, thereby gaining influence and establishing trusting relationships: "He (the school coach) regularly joins the lessons of the younger classes, e.g. in "Growing Up", and so they know him better. And I think they will address him there and he can help them more" (A 8 FU).

The *parents* were mostly satisfied with the *preventive work in school*, especially praising the importance of educational events and hoping for their further establishment. The most important issues were eating disorders, anxiety disorders and self-harming behavior.

Duties and Responsibilities of the School Coaches

Baseline

At baseline, the majority of participants had no clear perception of the school coaches' field of functions. The coaches were generally perceived as helpful when problems arose, for example mediating between students, teachers and parents. They were expected to improve the school and classroom climate. Establishing a trusting relationship was considered an essential element towards becoming a reference person.

The *students* were looking for a confidential external person who could represent their interests to teachers and parents. While friends and parents constitute their main persons of trust, teachers, as rating authorities, were not perceived as an alternative: "My teacher is not my friend. He is just my teacher" (D 9 BL).

Being accessible at all times and providing anonymous contact potential was *required for the school coaches to become reference persons*. They should be present in everyday school life: "The school coach should come to us and not the other way round, because most students won't dare to do that" (B 9 BL).

The *teachers* expected the school coaches to relieve stressful situations while showing consideration for the teachers' timetables and duties. Also, the teachers wanted to have additional information on educational and mental health subjects from outside the curriculum: "Teachers are only human and have many questions. They are not omniscient, especially in such topics (mental health)" (A T BL). Concern was expressed that an external person could reduce the teachers' professional and social authority.

From the *parents'* point of view, presence and accessibility for the students were the main requirements.

Follow-up

After the school coaches made a first impression by introducing themselves to the classes and by being present in the corridors and the school yard, their name, duties and tasks, and contact information, were provided. At follow-up, they had managed to convey a broad picture of their field of functions. Their presence in everyday school life had become natural.

Most *students* stated that the school coach was then established as a reference person. They had become a desired alternative to share problems with: "Mr. B. (school coach) has to exercise discretion; you can trust him with almost everything" (A 6 FU).

For some students, the school coach had become even more than a reference person: "To me, Mr. B. (school coach) is something like a big brother, I can entrust him with anything, every single problem I have. I think Mr. B. is even better than a big brother, because I have one and he's rather stupid" (A 6 FU).

This trust was based on good experiences, made in *concrete events in which the school coach became active* over the course of the project. These were mainly broadcasted by word of mouth by peers. The most cited incidents were one-to-one talks or victim-offender mediations resulting from bullying instances, which were supervised by the school coaches or trained school staff: "The school coach has helped us a lot, for example: when bullying occurs, the class room becomes colder, and the victims freeze in ice. When Mr. B. (school coach) appeared, he helped to melt the ice. Since then, the class room is getting warmer again" (A 5/6 BL).

Bullying, among other topics like mental health or pregnancy, was also part of specific monothematic lessons conducted by the school coaches. More long-term installations to strengthen social cohesion at the class level included a class council and class contracts. Another example is the class lesson "Life Champion", in which "difficult" students share their unique experiences to help others and strengthen their own self-confidence. The school coaches participated in class trips, organized sporting events and helped to publish school magazines. Still, a number of students only contacted the school coach as a last resort, when they were unable to see a way through themselves: "We want to try to solve our problems ourselves and when that really did not work; we would go to Mr. R. (school coach)" (C 6 FU).

Others did not consider help by the school coach at all. The main reasons were a lack of contact, and therefore trust, and fear of stigmatization. A number of students wished for more authority for the school coaches: "Sometimes, I have the impression that he is not really taken seriously by the teachers" (C 8 FU).

After initial skepticism, the school coaches had also gained trust by proving their abilities to a large part of the *teachers*: "At the beginning, teachers had thoughts like, 'What does he want now?'. He takes away my teaching time and wants to do a project. But now it all looks totally different. One knows what he has in mind and that it will turn out positively. One does not only see additional work in it, but rather what comes out in the end, that after all, one can reduce his amount of work" (C T FU).

A positive development in cooperation was visible: "There was a lack of awareness in the beginning, which has been cleared up. Humans are creatures of habit. You have to learn to deal with certain things first. It has to grow and become something. And it grew well" (C T FU).

Concerning their own problems, many teachers consider the age difference and their wish to keep a professional distance as obstacles in contacting the school coach.

Parents mainly expressed relief about the help for their children: "I think everything has calmed down a bit. It's not as chaotic as it used to be" (C P FU).

Strengthening the social cohesion among parents themselves, one school coach successfully established a meeting point (at a hair salon), where parents had an opportunity to discuss both private and school specific issues.

Regarding the school community as a whole, the initiation of steering groups and involvement of representatives of all groups was essential progress in creating sustainable structures. Also, the work in bringing teachers and parents closer together was acknowledged from both sides at follow-up: "I know that problems with parents occur concerning their children, where the school coach acts as a mediator between parents and teachers. Having somebody with you, who conciliates from a neutral basis, is positive" (A T FU).

An increasing number of participants affirm the *meaningfulness of the project*.

Future prospects

Each of the groups questioned made further suggestions for improving the school coaches' work. First, students who are new to the school should be introduced to the school coach and given information about his activities and contact opportunities. Second, the school coaches' work must be self-sustaining. Third, the students wanted the school coaches to strengthen their position among the school staff and to increase their participation in school matters: "When a student formulates a problem, it is not really taken seriously. When it is communicated by Mr. R. (school coach), it shines through that it was a student's opinion. He should just have a higher ranking and have a say" (C 8 FU).

Teachers primarily desired a closer connection with the school coaches, especially when it came to help-seeking individuals. Second, the school coaches should continue to promote intact social structures. Third, the teachers were concerned about the organization and the content of parental participation. Motivating parents to participate in school life was considered challenging, yet essential: "More has to happen in working with parents, where we have already made some steps with the school coach project. I think that parents with less education have to be linked to school in some form or the other" (B T FU).

Parents identified group dynamics and cooperation among teachers as areas for improvement. They also expressed the mediation of social competence as an important aim, e.g. regarding the challenge of inclusion.

The decisive aspect in the final assessment of all groups was the project's sustainability. Establishing a comprehensive trusting relationship with all members of the school system and developing solutions for the wide field of issues that were present in the schools was assumed to be a long-term task: "A person needs time to create confidence in his/her environment. If this time is not granted, a lot of negative things happen, impeding the work, instead of taking the time and performing great on a good and solidly grown foundation. To not always be under pressure to achieve objectives quickly" (A T FU).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of the school coaches' work on the participating schools via focus groups. The pilot project introduced school coaches who utilized a systematic approach involving all members of the school system and focusing on issues of mental health. The evaluation of the school members during the first two years of the project revealed interesting insights on the examined issues.

The school and classroom climates were considered to be good at all points in time and were considered to have a positive influence on aspects like student self-efficacy, school performance and mental health (Weibel & Bessoth 2003). Nevertheless, several topics remained problematic over the course of the project including bullying, disturbances in class and the lack of effectiveness in the consequences taken by the teachers. The teachers' behavior, in particular, has been found to be highly connected with the students' conduct (Mayr 2006). The school coaches were able to influence these aspects by mediating in case of bullying, arbitrating between students and teachers and strengthening class community structures. Also, teachers and parents were better qualified to deal with help-seeking students as well as their own needs. But overall, a sustained improvement of the complex matter, involving a large number of internal and external persons, relationship structures and social and economic backgrounds, demands more time and specific, targeted group oriented project work to develop.

As the development of the importance of mental health issues in the schools' daily routine showed, the school coaches' work made a difference. They started gaining the trust of a growing number of teachers, who then gave more lesson-time for this purpose. They sent more students in need of help to the school coaches and increasingly got in contact themselves. Moreover, the quality of the educational level was raised by organizing specific interventions for teachers and parents (e.g. against bullying) as advertised in the health promoting concept of the "Good and Healthy School" (Paulus 2004). Hence, the topic of mental health was increasingly put on the agenda.

Overall, a rising number of participants identified benefits of the school coaches' work. In two years, the common sentiment was that school coaches increasingly turned a rather skeptical attitude toward themselves into trusting relationships. Approaching the members of the school system with case-specific measures and confidentiality was essential. Over the course of the project, the stigma associated with contacting school coaches was reduced; rather contact with a school coach was considered increasingly normal based on good experiences. The main topics for students were bullying and issues concerning inclusion. Teachers were happy to have support in caring for problematic students. Parents commended the educational information events on mental health issues, which were organized by the school coaches. By involving more members of the school system and external supporters, the school coaches' work might result in a network in which synergy effects empower the school members to feel self-efficacy and create a self-supporting school environment (Paulus 2002).

The need for sustainability was emphasized by most of the evaluated groups. To profit from the work of the school coaches beyond the actual duration of the project, structures have to grow that support the schools to help themselves. Rather than focusing on selective individual measures, recurring collective situations at micro-and macro-levels have to be solved in a reproducible way, which has to be compatible with the schools' daily routines (Paulus 2002). The effectiveness of networks to professionalize cooperation between all persons involved has been proven (Berkemeyer et al. 2009). The first steps in this direction were made by founding steering groups and involving representatives of all groups of the school system, as well as external supporters, to analyze and solve emerging problems. The challenge now is to enable the members of the school system to negotiate their subjective perceptions to reach collective solutions (Conradt-Mach 2009) and to organize a functional infrastructure for the occupational innovation process (Holtappels 2007).

Several aspects have to be considered when interpreting the data. The final composition of the focus groups was determined by the recruiting reference person. As the evaluation had no influence on the recruitment, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, it remains unclear if the same participants took part at baseline and follow-up. Also, it cannot be ruled out that the selection itself may have biased the outcome. The reference persons may have recruited successful and well-integrated students, rather than those with difficulties. Also, it appears likely that the participating teachers were supporting the school coach project, while staff without interest did not take part. The same limitation is valid for the participating parents. Even though the moderator tried to involve all participants into each discussion, more dominant individuals may have stifled others from expressing their point of view (Lehoux et al. 2006). Further, our findings may not be generalizable to other environments or populations: individual characteristics and group dynamics of each project school, school coach, class and peer groups have to be considered when interpreting the results. Also, because the school coaches' actions depended on occurrences and needs in everyday school life, the intervention fidelity could not be monitored, as not every school received the exact same actions.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the school coach intervention is a good model for establishing the topic of mental health in everyday school life and increasing its importance. Teachers and parents were better qualified to deal with help-seeking students as well as their own needs. Furthermore, the school coaches managed to raise the identification with the school community. The established networks, including external institutions, anchored the project schools in their communities, empowering the school members to feel self-efficacy and create a self-supporting school environment. While good experiences created a solid, trusting relationship between the participants, a number of issues require further work. Future efforts will focus on the support of structures and networks to create and maintain a resilient sustainability after the end of the project.

Therefore, the school coaches not only need enough time to qualify and involve committed students, teachers and parents. They also rely on the support of principals and local authorities to open the schools for external support, in order to establish a strong, independent network and achieve the desired sustainability.

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