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The Mentoring Programme “Balu und Du”: Compensation for Lacking Early Competencies and Development of Basic Soft Skills by Informal Learning

Main Description

During the past twenty years, the number of pupils without sufficient school-leaving qualifications has increased significantly in Germany. These children suffer from a lack of basic soft skills and early competencies. Children who participate in the mentoring programme “Balu und Du” live in particular circumstances that offer scarce primary experience. Mentors, therefore, are primarily challenged with the task to offer them a broader scope of child-adequate experience.

The Mentoring programme may be briefly described as a personal, friendly relationship between a child and a (young) adult. The project is conceived for the duration of one year (but usually will be continued later on in a form of private friendship). Both participants meet once a week in order to spend some hours of time with each other. Their activities may include conversation, homework support, exploring new possibilities of life and coping with various difficulties of every-day-life. In general mentors are younger persons who commit themselves voluntarily to work with children of primary school age. Best practice is to locate the programmes at universities where the mentor’s work is accompanied by a regular course.

What do children learn by their mentors? Excerpts from regular diaries – which the mentors send weekly by e-mail – showed that basic competencies improved during the course of the programme. These include the following: learning how to learn, coping with crises, media competencies, increased level of activity, widening the profile of interests, encourage decision making, take over responsibility, set up moral criteria and other basic abilities that facilitate the learning process at school and support the entrance into adult life. In addition, the results achieved by the end of this programme are compared with those of various psychotherapeutic programmes in terms of Effect size.

Short Description

The enormous significance of informal learning refers to the incidental, often unconscious, life-inherent learning in numerous unspectacular sites of every-day life. Basic competencies and soft skills are mostly acquired en passant.

Keywords

Informal Learning
Mentoring
Soft skills

Organisation as Subject

Mentoring Programme “Balu und Du” (Balu and You)

Informal Learning

This short contribution intends to underline the enormous significance of informal learning that occurs in form of incidental, often unconscious, life inherent processes at numerous unspectacular sites of every-day life. “Blurring the boundaries” of learning in this sense implies to extend the field of research to pre-school education and non-school education, as well as to learning processes that take place at other occasions not directly linked to educational organisations or the educational system. It is a well known fact that school has no monopoly of learning and education. Turning the view to informal learning will open up insights into the variety of outer-institutional learning opportunities and will reduce the overrating of formal educational institutions – schools, vocational training, universities etc.

Informal learning has an effect on personality development and forms the basis for formal kinds of learning processes. Usually this knowledge is implicitly passed on by the family, neighbourhood, friendship, literature etc. If, however, children grow up in unfavourable conditions, due to neglect, incompetent social environment, isolation etc. – children will lack the sufficient baseline required for learning effectively in educational institutions, thus show deficiencies and will miss the chance of acquiring those soft skills that are necessary to successfully apply the acquired knowledge to today’s challenges.

Therefore the central question of this research report is how to support children – who lack early competencies – in the first years of school. Our answer is a mentoring programme, by which maldeveloped and maladapted children are accompanied in a one-to-one relationship.

Acquiring lacking early basic competencies in the mentoring programme “Balu und Du”

The mentoring programme “Balu und Du” (Balu and You) may be briefly described as a personal, friendly relation between a child (6 – 10) and a young adult, mostly an university student. Both the mentor and the child join the programme voluntarily. The duration is conceived for one year, but often will be continued later on in form of a private friendship. Both participants will meet once a week in order to spend some hours of time with each other. These meetings are not pre-structured by any schedule – it is left up to both partners to decide on how they wish to spend their time together in a sensible and pleasant manner. Their activities may include conversations, indoor and outdoor activities, exploring new

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possibilities of life, help with everyday- or school problems and the entire scope of leisure time activities. The partners share the decision of what they wish to do: The child by stating his/her interests and preferences, the mentor by proposing ideas from a world so far unknown to the child and beyond his/her possibly narrow borders of experience. The mentoring programme will help the child in its process of growing up, especially if he or she comes from a family environment that offers little support and affection. Contrary to most educational institutions, such a relationship is a very close one 1 : 1. “Balu und Du” is accompanied by testing the children’s development; additionally mentors keep a diary with entries about their activities. Amongst other data collected, these entries are used later on as a basis for the evaluation study.

The attachment theory stresses the importance of the influence of parent-child interactions for the development of the child’s personality: We try here to translate these findings on the mentor-child-relation. If the person of reference reacts to the needs of the child in a sensitive and supportive manner, the child is more likely to develop in a way that might be described as “mentally healthy” or “not deviant” according to our cultural criteria” (Zimmermann et al 2000:301f). During the early phase, education, learning and emotional stabilisation are very closely connected. Refusals of the parents or incompetence for adequately satisfying the needs of the child represent a considerable factor of risk for a normal development. Or – at least – one has to fear that children will not be able to develop their potentials to the full. If insecurity in forming relations persists and children also lack support and human resonance, difficult ways of development are predictable. Feeling secure in relations is indispensable for the child to build up early basic competencies, as curiosity and explorative behaviour.

Different studies reveal that children who grew up under stress factors of psycho-social risk from the date of their birth, showed signs of interference in their emotional development and achieved less cognitive performance when compared to a similar group who grew up in a positive environment (Laucht et al. 2000:236f). However, at the same time there was also a large variance in the development to be noted. Different courses of development may be explained by the interaction of risk and protective factors as pointed out by the resilience theory (Egeland 2002:305f; Grossmann K.F. et al 2003:1153f; Scheitauer et al 1999:3f). Above all, a persistence of unfavourable and stressful factors will show negative effects. If, however, there is **at least one person** in the child’s environment who helps to balance out the stress that may arise by lack of child care in the family, the consequences may be softened. Emmy Werner (1990:97f), authoress of one

of the best known longitudinal studies on the subject “Risk and Resilience” investigated into the behaviour of children from highly conflictive environments: She compared those who showed no or only little disturbance in their development with those who were deviant and problematic. A closer analysis of the protective factors showed that the less harmed children were able to compensate their strains by receiving support from the informal environment (e.g. mostly a significant person). She writes: “the life stories of resilient individuals have taught us that competence, confidence, and caring can flourish, even under adverse circumstances, if young children encounter persons who provide them with a secure basic development of trust, autonomy, and initiative” (Werner 1999:112; cf also: Werner et al 1971; Werner et al 1992). Similar results had been previously gained by the spectrum of psychiatric research (Kauffmann et al 1979:1398; Rutter et al 1985:598). And although in most cases the supporting persons – partly relatives, partly external but close persons – could not eliminate the stress factors from the children’s lives, they were able to help them to cope with the challenges and to strengthen their self-confidence. They gave warmth and care, maintained an adequate form of communication, showed them self-help strategies and – above all – represented a factor of reliability in the children’s lives. To a large extent the role-model consists of showing up alternative behaviour of problem solving strategies such as cooperation, persistence and optimism. The important role of a mentor in situations of risk in later years up to the age of adolescence is also emphasized (Petermann et al 1998:221). For mentoring programmes that often do not start before middle childhood or youth it is important to know that the experience of early childhood is not absolutely determining the further course of life, but that there are always possibilities to compensate for strain and dangerous situations.

WHY is the programme conceived for children from the age of 6 to 10?

During the past 15 years, the percentage of young adults who left school without having acquired a school leaving certificate increased significantly in Germany. Whilst in 1990 their percentage amounted to a mere 5 %, it rose to 9 % in the Western Regional German states and even to more than 12 % in the Eastern German regions. As research on the subject has shown that the success of school education is closely linked to early basic competencies, it is highly advisable – also under economic aspects - to offer compensational support to children who lack these competencies at the most possible early age.

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Entering school is the moment when deficiency symptoms and knowledge gaps – in short: lacking early basic competencies - become evident. As early as during the first months after school entry primary teachers will detect children who show deficiencies in their development and will be able to relate this phenomenon to their corresponding social background. When taking up contact with the parents they might realize for instance that the family environment was and is not likely to offer much motivation for early learning. It is now up to them to fulfil the not too easy task of up on the missed “lessons”. Within the formal education system, this is only possible to a certain extent. If, however, the main problem is for example to be found in lacking self-confidence, it will hardly be possible for school teachers (even at special schools) to fulfil the particular task of strengthening the child’s personality with its very personal needs in the same effective way than this can be done by an informal learning offer – personified by a friendly young person who offers a close combination of learning and emotional togetherness at a relatively early stage. If both persons grow fond of each other, they may catch up with a lot of things. Results of research in attachment theory show that there are scopes for making up neglected opportunities in early childhood later on (Zimmermann 1995:203f).

WHAT kind of learning is offered in the mentoring programme?

Mentoring represents a mix of different forms of learning offers, mostly those of the informal type that occurs during implicit or incidental learning.

Incidental learning implies learning en passant, often not consciously noted by the persons involved. During these occasions, such as a conversation when doing shopping or answering questions of a child about the professional aims of the mentor, much information is exchanged. Situations of incidental learning are anchored in the precise situation, related to the focus of interest of that particular moment and may also be stored there. But if there is enough time and peace of mind and the mentor seizes his chance, the question about the professional aim may be turned into a conversation about professional training, school and the sense of learning in general. And although the intention of the conversation might remain hidden to the child, the mentor turns the implicit process of casual chatting into a process of informal learning by his/her speedy pedagogical reflection (“How can I make his/her conviction that school is no use at all begin to sway?”). Still, this does not give room for making any prediction about their effect on behaviour, yet. A lot of what is learnt incidentally (and is sometimes neither consciously noted by the learner nor the “educator”)

transgresses into attitudes, habits, prejudices and/or judgements. This *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi 1967; cf Neuweg 2002; Perrig 1996) represents an extensive store of knowledge stock, hard to be grasped (tacit), but being used by unconscious access, for instance during the process of forming an opinion. Potentials lie dormant here, which may be used for building up new competencies. In Semiotics this is called “conjectural knowledge”. Here, this source of knowledge is regarded as a particularly wealthy and differentiated one, compared to any knowledge that might be acquired (consciously) by written information. Conjectural knowledge is acquired by listening in, observing and individual trying out. It is born from experience of the individual case (Ginzberg 1985:153f). This feature points to the strength and weakness of tacit knowledge. The container of knowledge leaves no room for abstraction or systemization, even an adequate verbalisation is often not possible. But it is good material for further work – best done in childhood together with sensitive and benevolent adults, parents, nursery teachers, school teachers. Mentors, too, will take recourse to children’s precise experience and daily events in order to systemize their knowledge, revive their memories and make the available knowledge accessible to reflection.

Those children, however, who should participate in mentoring programmes, live in particular circumstances that offer very scarce primary experience. They are sometimes limited to their own four walls, flooded with sequences of television pictures (often cut too rapidly and therefore impossible to be coped with mentally) that are thematically reduced to a minimum. Mentors, therefore, are primarily challenged with the task to offer them a broader scope of child-adequate experience.

Social attitudes with the corresponding sensitivity for interpersonal events are gained by interactions; which holds also true for cases in which the norms are very rough: If children grow up in an environment that is characterised by violence, the corresponding engrams are stored in the knowledge stock of the tacit knowledge. The child learnt subconsciously: interpersonal behaviour is (normally) a violent one! In those cases, mentors have the chance to initiate learning processes by opposing this with their direct and personal relation. Such an opportunity is hardly available in other situations. It will be difficult to achieve social learning solely by instructive teaching. Social learning is classically a “by-product” (Elster 1987:141f). Such a process of learning cannot be initiated by an intentional effort of will; it can only be achieved by directing the view towards a point that lies outside the person itself. The interest and attention is put on somebody else (or a group, or a subject). If for example the work of building a dam in a brook implied successful cooperation, social learning would happen

The Mentoring Programme “Balu und Du”: Compensation for Lacking Early Competencies and Development of Basic Soft Skills by Informal Learning unnoticed by the participants. Already Pestalozzi explained in his “Stanser Brief” that the learning of rules is not suitable for laying the foundations of social behaviour. He does not expect a change of behaviour of the children by schoolmasterly talks “but by a universal care for the child and by the feelings and strength that will arise for the child by such universal care” (Pestalozzi 1799). Neither Pestalozzi nor the mentors deal with infants; they continue on, when the period of early mothering is concluded.

Relearning and unlearning do not happen without disruptions and denials. For a while, children practise disparate forms of behaviour that may change quickly and surprisingly from one style to another. They seem to be living in parallel worlds and slip from one into another and vice versa. Sometimes, mentors may feel disappointed when they observe that children fall back into their old patterns. Still, it becomes evident that children dispose of alternative ways of behaviour.

WHICH early basic competencies are to be acquired?

The following list of early basic competencies to be acquired in the mentoring programme “Balu und Du” contains a collection of actual learning processes found in the mentors’ diaries and gained by induction. They were extracted in a systematic manner, additionally compared and complemented by a list of educational targets in day nurseries (Kita) as set by AGJ (2002:12); (for further details see Müller-Kohlenberg 2004).

Widening the profiles of interests

Encourage decision making

Learning how to learn

Development of basic motor competencies

Coping with crisis

Differentiation of verbal and communicative competencies

Visual perception

Mathematical operations

Media competencies

Reducing the fear of “strangers”: Expanding the area of communication

Level of activity

Creativity

Set up norms and moral values

Take over responsibility

The Mentors

In general, mentors are younger persons who commit themselves voluntarily to work in a mentoring programme together with children of primary school age. This is a favourable starting point for forming a relation with the children. Young persons whose age varies from 17 to end-twenty years are closer to the children in their life style than older ones. Due to the fact that they share the same youth culture and similar expectations, the concept of learning from a model which proves to be very successful in implicit learning processes will fully come into effect.

The mentors, too, will gain by their voluntary work positive experience for their own development. Those who intend to take up a profession in the educational sector are given the opportunity to check on their career decision under realistic circumstances. Nearly all of them gain positive effects for the development of their own personality. The retroactive force of the helper is a phenomenon that is well proved by empirics (Müller-Kohlenberg 1990a, 1990b) (“helper-therapy” principle sensu Riessman (1969)). It will occur nearly in all cases without being noticed – implicit learning, also for the mentors!

Most mentoring programmes are located at universities or higher institutions for teacher education. Students, who volunteer for participating in a mentoring programme, show an above-average commitment. If the mentorial work is accompanied by following a regular course, during which the relation of mentors is subject of discussion and additional information from the area of development psychology and pre-school pedagogy is offered, this work finds its expression in extra credit points or a corresponding certificate. Regular joint meetings are an important instrument of reflection on the course of the mentorial relationship: in case of blockages, reflecting together about questions, problems and alternatives may be of great help. Above all, talking about small or unexpectedly big

The Mentoring Programme “Balu und Du”: Compensation for Lacking Early Competencies and Development of Basic Soft Skills by Informal Learning success will lead to an overall enthusiastic atmosphere in the group, a feeling that will help to carry on in more difficult times.

Limits of Learning within Mentoring Programmes

There are several limits set to mentoring programmes under the following aspects:

The organisational frame: Sometimes, the schedule of meeting once a week (interrupted by holidays, illness etc) will not allow enough time for developing intensive contacts. Often, the duration of the programme (of one year) proves to be unfavourable. Some persons do not warm to each other until a few months have gone by; in these cases, a longer duration of the mentorial relationship would be more favourable. Fortunately most persons involved in mentorial relationships do not break off their relationship once the one-year-period of duration is over so that one may still hope for further positive developments once the official part has ended.

The limited scope of learning by experience: Informal learning needs to be complemented by systematic education in formal and non-formal educational systems. It needs to be presented within a larger context and must be detached from the specific situation. If implicit learning does not transgress the situation, it will remain diffuse and will be related merely to superficial individual situations. Thus it bears the risk of being limited without being reflected. Mentors should always bear in mind to make reference to learning at school or other formal educational institutions with a systematic approach.

Mentors’ individual personalities correspond in different ways to the different tasks required. There is no such thing as a list of general qualities a successful mentor should dispose of. The success of the relation between the mentor and the child rather depends on the way in which they interact. Many mentors develop their personal competencies during the course of the programme and will learn how to correspond to the child’s needs. Still there are examples of dull relationships during which neither of both benefited from the situation.

Intercultural differences may be enrichment for the relationship – but may also cause complications. If, for example, families from non-Christian cultures begin to fear that their children become too western-oriented or infiltrated by unacceptable norms, they may react with too rigid controls, mistrust or disrupting the relationship.

Recruiting mentors: Recruiting and supporting young persons who wish to act as a mentor is not an easy task. It proved to be a good idea for mentors to join in a group in order to exchange their experience, receive additional information on informal learning and to get stabilized in difficult situations. Mentors as individual fighters would be charged with a burden too hard to bear.

Despite all these difficulties, mentoring programmes have usually proved to be helpful for those children who participated in these programmes.

Evaluation results (Effect size)

Effect size (ES) is an index that measures the magnitude of a treatment effect. Unlike significance tests, these indices are independent of sample size. Effect size is a quantitative method used for comparison of outcomes across different studies (Cohen's $d = M_1 - M_2/\sigma$).

After having determined the goal of external criterium orientated validity, teachers were asked to assess the children's behaviour within a five-step-rating-scale (n = 49) by means of a list of items (not identical with the list above). The list shown *above* – gained by induction – is not suitable for registering the changes of behaviour in this special case: Teachers focus their observations on every-day-school-life.

So they were asked about more visible indicators that may predict success at school as well as deviant behaviour in later youth age. Four items asked about children's behaviour, one about parents' behaviour (as a control; the programme doesn't work with parents):

- He/she is well integrated when playing games in the breaks
- He/she is able to cope well and appropriately in situations of conflict amongst pupils
- He/she maintains many contacts outside the family
- He/she enjoys verbal communication
- His/her parents are prepared to cooperate at school

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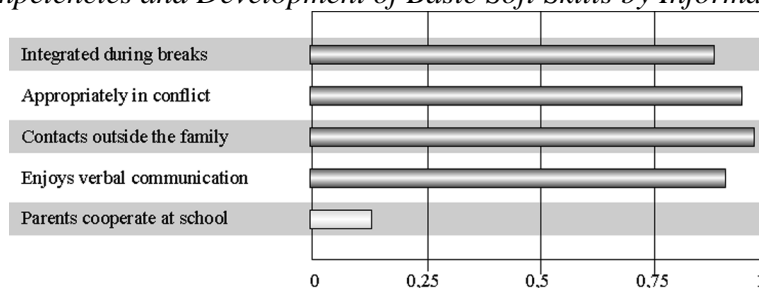


Fig. 1 shows the impact of the programme “Balu und Du” after 1 year (Effect size).

As one can see the main effects of the programme are in the first place the improvement of integration of formerly desintegrated children into the class membership and class community, and in the second place the improvement of social competencies (cf. Fig. 1). These factors – if rated low – are two of the most negative predictors of deviant behavior (cf. Gasteiger Klicpera 2004; Hurrelmann 1995: 75-85). On the other hand cooperation, the abilities to come into contact, to work in a team or to communicate well belong to the tableau of soft skills that has become more meaningful to vocational training and performance. Under the aspect of preventing children’s deviant behavior the mentoring programme “Balu und Du” thus proved to be an effective one.

When comparing the results of the volunteer programme „Balu und Du“ with those achieved by professional treatment it becomes evident that there are no meaningful differences in their effects to be noted.

The average effect size of different kinds of therapies (such as Client-centered therapy, Behavior modification, Gestalt therapy, Systematic desensitization, Cognitive-behavioral therapy, Transactional analysis etc.) is: ES = **0.85** until **1.11**

The average Effect size of “Balu und Du” (except the control-item) is: ES = **0.93**

An effect size of 0.2 is regarded as a “small” one; 0.5 as a “medium”, and 0,8 as a “large” one. The box shows a comparison of treatment effect sizes (cf. Grawe, Donati & Bernauer 1994³, p. 48 and 676).

Due to the large diversity of professional treatment programmes, it is not possible to directly compare the costs incurred in the programme “Balu und Du” with those that might incur in programmes of professional treatment. The costs that incur in the programme “Balu und Du” amount to 33 Euro per month.

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