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Du seisch wo düre (DSWD)/It is your decision - a programme of health promotion and prevention at school for adolescents

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Abstract. Du seisch wo düre (DSWD means, "It is your decision" in Bernese German). This proven, scientifically sound and regularly evaluated component of health promotion and prevention has, for over 20 years, been appreciated by adolescents, aged 14-16 years. This resource-oriented programme at school ("Sekundarstufe I" in Switzerland) helps students answer current questions about vital issues and develop their own problemsolving strategies. The programme enhances life skills, independence and self-esteem in participating adolescents, and strengthens social cohesion within circles of peers. Improved social competence also improves the classroom interaction and the climate of the school. Specially-trained external facilitators assist participants. Faciliators can use proven instruments and methods to moderate the discussions. DSWD also contributes to secondary prevention (for example, preventing addiction and violence). Since 2009, the concept has been extended to target vulnerable adolescents, and programme evaluations have demonstrated good results. zWag!, a new programme based on the same concept as DSWD, addresses the needs of young adults in work preparatory schools and in work settings. For reasons of space, this article discusses only DSWD. (www.actabiomedica.it)

Key words: Health promotion, prevention, vulnerable adolescents in the schools, self-esteem, health education, social competences, resource-orientation, social inequality

1. Background and developments of the last years

Beginning in Sweden

It is your decision was conceived in the mid-1980s in Sweden, and was based on scientific findings that fear, appeals to responsibility, and simple information transfer are not effective methods to educate adolescents about health (1). The programme was developed in a participatory fashion, together with participating youth. In Sweden, in the 1990s, this concept and its practically-oriented instruments were also adopted to counsel adults. The programme was implemented in

Denmark as *Du bestemmer*, "You decide" (2) and, in the North German city of Flensburg, as *Es ist deine Entscheidung*, "It is your decision".

Developments in Switzerland

The programme *Du seisch wo düre (DSWD)*: The project *Du seisch wo düre (DSWD)* began in Bern (CH) in 1988, where the Swedish concept was adapted to local conditions. The adaptation was tested in a pilot project, and then the Health Service of the city of Bern offered the addiction prevention program in Bernese schools to eighth and ninth graders. Other munici-

8 M. Messerli, H. Bolliger-Salzmann

palities in the canton of Berne implemented the programme in 1996 and later. *DSWD* has been updated several times, and adapted to fit changing social conditions, including changes in the schools and the growing number of adolescents of migration background. For example, *DSWD* was adapted specifically for adolescents with special needs (3,4). The programme is regularly evaluated, and has positive results (see the Evaluation section, below).

zWäg!, a related programme: Since 2000 the Foundation Health Promotion Switzerland and the canton of Berne have supported another development of the DSWD concept called zWäg! The programme zWäg! is targeted at the group of young adults who have completed their compulsory education, and is particularly aimed at more vulnerable young people. This project was also successfully realised. zWäg! was expanded to reach young adults in the workplace, in vocational schools, and in the year of preparation for entry into a profession. The participation and the feedback of young participants during this stage of development confirmed that the basic elements of DSWD also worked in different settings, with minor adaptations, for this new target group (5,6).

Quality management: Several measures to protect quality were introduced over the years. For the facilitating staff, training seminars, supervision and exchange of views during the discussion cycle have been standard since the programme's inception. In 2004, other elements, including an ethical code, organizational support, handbooks and working materials were made accessible in manual form (7,8).

Since 2003, the non-profit organization *Du seisch* wo düre + zWäg! Netz has supported and promoted the DSWD and zWäg! programmes, disseminating them and keeping the quality high. Other duties include conducting training seminars for DSWD and zWäg! facilitators, coaching new programmes providers, networking among municipalities and institutions that offer the programmes, exchange of views and advanced training for facilitators, documenting the programme, supporting further development, fundraising, maintaining the web page, etc. (9).

Developments over the last years: In the city of Bern, dwindling financial resources have limited the *DSWD* and *zWäg!* programmes to vocational classes, integration classes, and classes for adolescents with special needs or those from neighbourhoods under stress, where youth are most likely to belong to the target group of vulnerable adolescents (4,10). In 2013, the feedback questionnaire for participants was adapted and simplified for this target group (9).

Use in other professional fields: Since the 1990s, the concept of *DSWD* and its instruments have been appropriately adapted and used in training programmes for, and consultations with adults, across settings that provide coaching and counselling, such as smoking cessation, counselling for family members of patients who suffer from chronic illness, and training sessions for the unemployed.

2. Theoretical basis

The *DSWD* programme is based on findings in psychology and education, and in the health behaviour sciences. The concept of empowerment in health promotion is of notable importance (11-15), as is the salutogenic model (16-18), the theory of self-efficacy expectancies (19-22) and the Social Learning Theory (23,24). Other concepts that underpin work with adolescents include theories of health literacy (25,26), the transtheoretical model of behaviour change (27,28), and sociological concepts that explain social inequality (29,30).

3. What does the DSWD programme include?

DSWD is a tested and evaluated programme designed to strengthen the life competences of young people in secondary school. It has a low-threshold, does not stigmatise, and works well with stressed teenagers. This resource-oriented health promotion programme assists adolescents in resolving current life questions or problems. During the discussions, participants reflect on their positions, values and their own behaviour. They learn to know and use their own resources, and

to devise their own strategies for problem-solving. The desired result is to strengthen their self-esteem, which is an essential factor in promoting health in general, and in preventing drug addiction, in particular. The programme thus decreases social and health inequality.

Important characteristics

The method comprises three individual sessions (Figure 1) and three group discussions (Figure 2) of three to seven peers, which young people attend alternately. The sessions are arranged with the teaching staff and take place during school hours (Figure 3). The session cycle lasts two to three months. The external facilitators, who guide the young people through these talks, offer them practical methods for working through their problems. Within a particular structured conversation session, adolescents themselves decide on



Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

the subjects they will discuss. During the conversation, the participants reflect on their current life situations and choose to pursue concrete topics. They voluntarily set goals to meet the demands of everyday life, such as managing conflict or making the transition into professional life. Narrower health questions, such as alcohol consumption or eating habits, may also be discussed, as may more serious matters.

The job of the educational, social and health professionals who were specially trained as facilitators for this programme is to guide young people through the discussion sessions, and to listen actively without judging or assessing. Facilitators follow the principles of social learning when they lead group discussions on subjects selected by young people. Their process- and resource-oriented approach is central to the programme (9). The curriculum of the individual and group sessions allows them to squire adolescents through their individual process, so that adolescents can work on their personal goals and successfully achieve them. At the same time, the group process must be carefully guided. The role of the facilitator has become more demanding over the years, and requires continuous reflection, regular supervision, and advanced training (4).

Working well together with the teaching staff and embedding the programme in the school setting are indispensable components. Obviously, sessions with the participants are confidential. For many years, voluntary participation by adolescents was an important criterion. But to make it easier to embed 10 M. Messerli, H. Bolliger-Salzmann

the programme into the teaching activities of the staff, some years ago it was agreed that the teachers would decide after the preliminary talk whether the participation of young people would be voluntary or compulsory. The individual and group sessions alternate on three whole, or six half-days of teaching. Despite this change, adolescents give consistently positive feedback (31).

Growing diversity in school and occupations:

Growing social diversity, in terms of social groups, biographies, life destinies, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, languages, lifestyle, traditions, and religions, all affect *DSWD*- and *zWäg!* sessions. A well-prepared facilitator can help adolescents see diversity as opportunity.

Overview: Curriculum and possible content (3,9)

- Work together with the teacher: Preliminary talk, presenting the approach
- Present the programme in class, forming groups
- 1. Group session: The facilitator helps clarify the concept of general health. Begin to support the process. What is good for me?
- 1. Individual sessions: Reflect on the student's personal life situation, formulation of personal goals. The first concrete steps to achieve personal goals.
- 2. Group session: Line up current subjects important to the group, and that develop the responsibilities of adolescents, based on the principles of social learning, e.g., identity, friendship, conflicts, disengagement from parents.
- 2. Individual session: More work on personal goals.
- 3. Group session: The group continues discussing important subjects, learning together and from each other.
- 3. Individual session: More steps towards personal goals, or towards achieving their objectives/intermediate goals. Successes are elaborated. Participants reflect on the process since the first group session, and draw conclusions. Evaluation by questionnaire.
- Working together with the teacher: Evaluate the discussion sessions and organisational issues in conversation.

Chosen topics

Within the structure and methodology of *DSWD*, participants are very free to choose topics. This is why the programme remains on topic in youth cultures, despite their ever-changing trends.

Examples of goals that participating adolescents have themselves set include finding an apprenticeship, using their spare time, maintaining a friendship, resolving a family conflict, gaining self-confidence, and smoking cessation. Other subjects might include alcohol or drug use, love and sexuality, consumer buying habits (also media consumption), stress and life domain balance, and anxiety about the future. Current trends are also taken up, like alcopops, crystal meth, Yaba, botéllon, tattoos, self-representation on the internet, sexting, cybermobbing, etc. Participants also want to discuss traditional health goals, like getting enough sleep, eating a well-balanced diet, and getting enough exercise. Serious personal subjects, like addiction problems and sexual exploitation, may also be raised. In those situations, the affected person is offered continuing support.

4. Benefits to the adolescents

Participant adolescents benefit personally from these structured small group and individual lessons, and also gain social and educational benefits. Measures of outcomes among the participants show that their resources have increased impressively. For example, they now have greater freedom of action, increased competence (personal, social, and health), and the ability to deal with challenges by using problem-solving strategies oriented to daily life and by reorienting their own attitudes in socially and politically desirable directions (e.g., becoming aware of their problems, being less aggressive, reflecting on social consequences, applying problem-solving skills, etc.). In particular, the low-threshold and non-stigmatizing nature of DSWD fosters self-empowerment in target groups of vulnerable adolescents. In group discussions, friendships can arise out of common experience. The programme also improves classroom interaction and the school climate. By the end of the discussion cycle, joy at their own success in working towards their personal goals is written on the faces of many participants.

5. Case studies

In the first individual session, **Dafina*** haltingly explains her current family situation. There are many difficult burdens to bear (separation, disruption of the family). The young woman seems to take on a lot of responsibility, and has suffered years of misery, and emotional coldness. It is clear that she is not used to talking about herself and has trouble doing so. She hardly makes eye contact with the facilitator.

By the second individual session, Dafina is more open. Despite her limited linguistic skills, she shows she has many strengths. She is happy to talk about working on her goals (choice of profession). Above all, she successfully expresses her different ideas. Her maturity and independence can be made visible.

In the 3rd individual session, Dafina again works intensely on the steps she must take to attain her professional goal. But another topic is the classroom climate. Dafina now speaks and makes eye contact more easily. She is obviously grateful to be encouraged by the facilitator.

Dafina's strengths were identified and her selfesteem was supported. The self-reflective discussions were a positive experience and gave her the courage to take the next steps.

Andrej* calls himself shy. His goal is to learn to present his opinion in a group. In several steps, we together determine the situations in which this is easier for him (in his family, in a small group of close peers) and which situations are more difficult for him (in the whole class, with certain peers, etc.). Andrej consciously plans to practice his new behaviour in these situations. He reflects on his role in the group discussions and this encourages him. The 15-year-old becomes aware of his several successes and that he has achieved his goal.

At the moment, **Linda*** is unsettled, because her parents are considering a move to another town. She feels threatened by the move. In the *DSWD* sessions

she considers talking to her parents and her brother about it. At the same time, she considers developing more self-confidence, and trusting herself to be able to meet new people in a new place. We discuss possible actions and steps she could take, supporting factors and difficulties. She reaches both the goals that she has formulated. Her parents consider their daughter's feelings about the move and factor them into their decision. Linda also makes new acquaintances during these weeks and learns to trust her ability to master new situations. Now she is confident that she will really be able to find new peers in a new place.

"You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself." Galileo Galilei

6. Evaluations

Both the *DSWD* and *zWäg!* Programmes are known to be effective, well-evaluated, and are, in every regard, well-founded choices for developing the social competencies of adolescents. An impressive list of evaluations has been performed:

- For DSWD: Bolliger-Salzmann (32); Bisegger
 & Bolliger-Salzmann (33); Bischof & Bolliger-Salzmann (34); Bucher & Bolliger-Salzmann (35); Habermann-Horstmeier (31).
- For *zWäg!*: Bisegger, Rösselet & Laupper (5); Bolliger-Salzmann (36); Bolliger-Salzmann (37); Bolliger-Salzmann & Liem (38); Bolliger-Salzmann & Giezendanger (39).

These evaluations show that an impressive majority of adolescents judge their participation in the programme to have been positive and helpful. The great majority focused on personal aims and were able to achieve them "rather well" or "very well" during the discussion cycle. About a third of participants also changed something else in their lives, so that they feel better.

Lotte Habermann-Horstmeier's Masters thesis (31) also confirms, impressively, that the reports of adolescents whose socio-demographic backgrounds make them more vulnerable (adolescents from neighbourhoods under stress; young women; those of immigrant background) show they have profited more than other adolescents. For example, 93% of young women

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12 M. Messerli, H. Bolliger-Salzmann

from neighbourhoods under stress, who were not native German speakers, reported that they discovered specific strengths during the course of *DSWD*. And 97% of young men from the same districts (also not native speakers) believed that *DSWD* better enabled them to understand how they could achieve their goals. This study also makes it clear that girls, adolescents for whom German is not a first language, and adolescents from neighbourhoods under stress gain increased competency in social behaviour (in relation to social learning), and do so to a greater degree than other subgroups.

Habermann-Horstmeier (31) concluded that DSWD is "an effective approach, particularly for supporting underprivileged adolescents in autonomously shaping their future and independently solving problems".

7. News and perspectives

Despite drastic budget cuts from public authorities over the last decade, four Bernese municipalities still offer *DSWD* and *zWäg!* in secondary classes, work preparatory classes, and integration classes. Several hundred adolescents profit each year by participating in the programmes.

In 2014, the governing committee for *DSWD* + *zWäg! Netz* began a fundraising project. In 2015, they will begin a project that promotes the mature programmes and invites other municipalities to implement *DSWD* and *zWäg!* in their secondary school (Sekundarstufe 1), vocational and integration classes.

In autumn of 2014, the first European network meeting will take place in Flensburg. Participants will include those responsible for the programmes in Flensburg (*It is your decision*), Denmark (*Du bestemmer*) and Bern (*Du seisch wo düre*).

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