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In this issue we would like to start a series on research projects in Europe connecting several countries. From time to time the readers will find a report on the start or progress of scientific projects that support research cooperation in the EU and elucidate common problems. We hope that this will contribute to and intensify further collaboration.

Working in Europe to Stop Truancy Among Youth (WE-STAY) Project: Preventing truancy and promoting mental health of adolescents in different European countries

Christoph Lenzen · Romuald Brunner

Truancy is a serious public health problem that affects adolescents from all countries around the world. However, little is known about the short- and long- term outcomes of potential underlying psychological and mental ill-health for those adolescents who truant.

“Working in Europe to Stop Truancy Among Youth (WE-STAY): Preventing truancy and promoting mental health of adolescents in different European countries” is a project, which is developed as a randomized controlled trial (RCT) in order to (1) examine truancy and its subsequent association with psychological distress and mental ill-health and (2) to examine the effectiveness of different types of school-based interventions.

The WE-STAY Consortium comprises 9 European countries (Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden) and Israel.

WE-STAY is one of the studies that are supported by the European Union in the context of the 7th Framework Health Programme. Under the direction of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, this study started in 01/05/2010 and recruited about 10.000 pupils aged between 14 and 18 from 5 different European countries (Germany, Estonia, Italy, Spain, Romania) and Israel. Slovenia, Hungary and France act as consultants.

One of the objectives is to evaluate the efficacy of different preventive programmes to reduce truancy among adolescents. In order to collect the necessary information about school absenteeism among pupils before and after the preventive programmes, about 10.000 pupils aged 14–18 from randomly selected schools of the 6 countries mentioned above have been asked to participate in the questionnaire study. The Baseline-evaluation was conducted in 2011.

Next to questions about the kind and frequency of school absenteeism a broad range of psychological and behavioural problems (e.g. anxiety, depression, social behaviour, self-harm and suicidal tendencies) were assessed. In addition, parents and teachers were also interviewed in a baseline evaluation.

Along with the self-report concerning school absenteeism, objective data which the schools officially registered in form of absentee rates were collected.

After the baseline evaluation the pupils were randomised into four different prevention conditions. The interventions comprised reports on the absentee rates (control group), awareness trainings, professional screenings of at-risk pupils and referrals, as well as a combination of both intervention conditions (screening and awareness approach). In order to evaluate the efficacy of the different prevention programmes a 3- and 12-month follow-up were performed after the baseline evaluation.

Thus, the project pursues the following objectives

- (a) Gather information on truancy among European adolescents
- (b) Perform school-based interventions for adolescents, aiming to reduce truancy rates and improve the mental health of pupils
- (c) Evaluate the efficacy of the three tested intervention programmes
- (d) Promote effective, culturally adjusted models for preventing truancy

Currently the 12-month follow-up is going to be completed in the different countries. The project will be completed at the end of March 2013, so that results can be expected after the middle of 2013. In Germany 2.744 pupils of the 8th and 9th grade participated in the baseline evaluation.

In Germany the study takes place in and around Heidelberg and is conducted by the Clinic for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Centre for Psychosocial Medicine of the University of Heidelberg.

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