

Anchoring and Breaking Points - Biographies of Young People without School-Leaving Certificates

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Abstract

What anchoring and breaking points shape biographies of young adults without school-leaving certificates? Which persons or events have helped them in the past to cope with difficult life situations? What positive experiences have they had? How do institutions, the educational system or society influence them? This work presents first results of a participatory research project in Germany, which involves young people without school-leaving certificates as co-researchers examining their personal biographies. The group worked on a wide range of topics to gain a better understanding of the whole context of their lives. The data obtained within a creative process in the research group, in group discussions, and in individual interviews is evaluated applying the Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2015). The Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) does not only offer a theoretical basis for the formation of corresponding categories, but is also applied as a tool to work with the co-researchers to investigate multifactorial correlations for leaving school without a certificate.

Keywords

Early School Leaving, Social Inequality, Biographies, Participatory Research, Bioecological Development Model.

Introduction

'Dropout' (Ohlsson, 1994, quoted in CEDEFOP 2008), 'Early School Leaving' (European Commission, 2011), 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (OECD, 2018), or 'Refusal of Education' (Sturzenhecker, 2010): There are several terms and definitions for young people without a school-leaving certificate. These terms commonly refer to a person who no longer attends school in a negative way. These persons bear a negative image and experience stigmatisation (Sturzenhecker, 2010, 39; Clandinin et al., 2013, 16). Use and forms of language have an effect on perceptions and ideas (Hornscheidt, 2019a, 164). Therefore, it is advisable to consider the choice and use of terms as sensitively as possible. Due to the lack of a neutral notion, this paper uses the term 'young people without school-leaving certificate' as an attempt to provide an alternative neutral description.

Especially terms like 'Not in Education Employment or Training' and the corresponding definition indicate that young people do not engage in any ('valuable') activity and reject education. Terms such as 'early school leaving' further indicate that persons take an active role, while schools take on the passive role of the abandoned (Riepl, 2004, 6). However, the so-called 'education refusers' were previously systematically denied from education (Sturzenhecker, 2010). International comparative studies show that the risk of 'early school leaving' is unevenly distributed among social classes (Steiner, 2009, 146). Therefore, individual schools and especially the dominating educational system play – despite definitions in literature – an active role and are important factors influencing school attendance behaviour.

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In order to obtain a broader view in research on school careers, it is important to look at the entire life of a person. This research is thus expanded by a biographical perspective, because institutional and individual processes are mutually dependent (Kramer et al., 2013, 53). Adolescents experience not only biological, cognitive, and social-emotional changes, but also maturing relationships with primarily caregivers, a deepening of peer relationships, and often also transitions to new schools (Roeser et al., 2000, 443). All these aspects hold opportunities, but also major challenges.

The Bioecological Development Model

Lives have to be understood as “always in the midst, as unfolding over time, as lived in diverse places, and as always in relation with events, other people, and as situated within larger social, cultural, familial, and institutional narratives” (Clandinin et al., 2013, 3). The interaction of a variety of factors, such as social environment, abilities of a person, school institution, but also the education system itself (Steiner et al., 2016), can cause that a person does not have a school-leaving certificate. Not only are the reasons multi-causal, also effects can be identified in interdependent manner at different levels (European Commission, 2015). According to the bioecological model, human development is a joint product of properties and their correlation with each other. Characteristics of a developing person (e.g. gender, age, special needs) interact with aspects of the environment. The “ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 3). Those nested structures are called *micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-* and *chronosystem*, which are socially organized, interdependent subsystems (cf. Figure 1). While processes in the microsystem are depending on relationships between a developing person and its direct environment (e.g. peers, family, school), the relationships become increasingly distanced in the further systems and influence the individual rather indirectly. At the same time, also political decisions (macrosystem) taken without regard to the individual person can directly affect this individuals life situation and school attendance behaviour (Louis 2019).

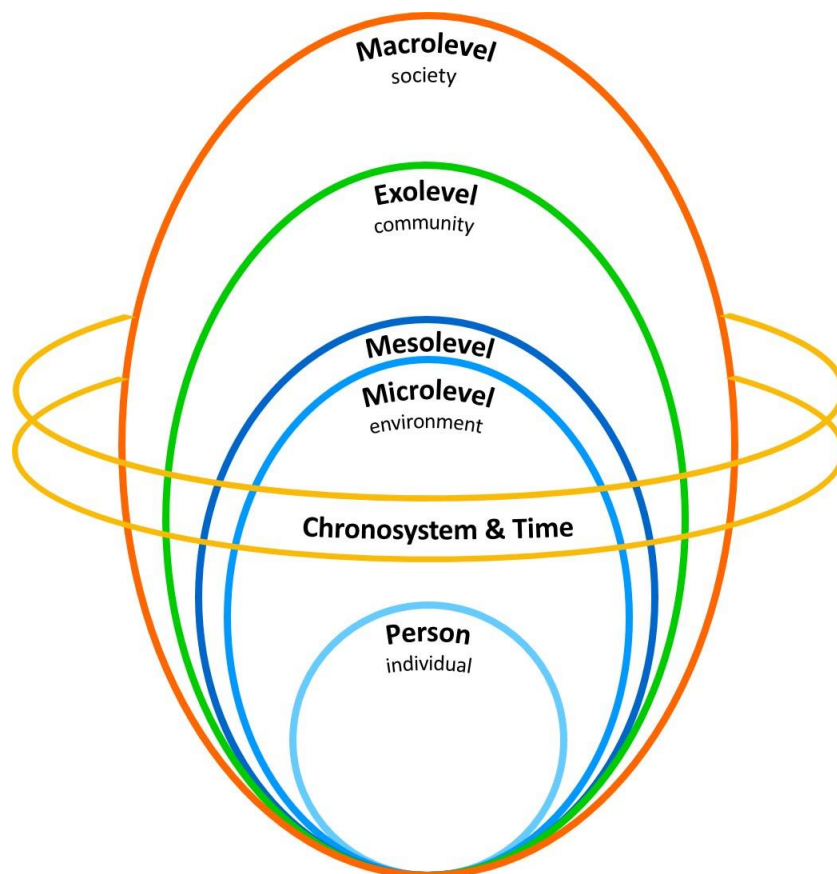


Figure 1: Bioecological Development Model.

The individual, for example a young person who does not attend to school anymore, is in the centre of the model, located in the *microsystem*. "A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 39). The individual person is in the midpoint of the microsystem. A person is equipped with psychological and physical resources, certain external characteristics, personality, and interests. Those are not to be regarded as constant, but result from continuous interactions with the environment. Characteristics of a person function as an indirect producer and as a product of development and can either act in a supportive or interfering way (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, 798). Reasons for leaving school without a certificate can include cognitive or health limitations of a person, socio-economic status of the family, alternative activities with peers, a bad social climate at the respective school, or if teachers do not provide good teaching.

The *mesosystem* includes relations and processes that take place between two or more settings of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 40). For example, schools have an effect on families and vice versa. Thus, school failures overlap with family interaction processes, whereas a negative domestic atmosphere influences school performance (Opp, 2011, 252). The *exosystem* includes connections and processes that do not directly include the developing person, but indirectly influence processes within its immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 40). For example, a student's school performance can be affected, if their parents have problems at their workplace or lose their job. The *macrosystem* consists overarching characteristics of a (sub-) culture, such as belief systems, knowledge, regulations, cultural norms, and political decisions (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 40). The educational system of a society and its neoliberal logics can include inequalities that affect school careers (Steiner et al., 2016). As an overarching level, the *chronosystem* includes change and/or stability over *time* not only in the characteristics of a person, but also of the surrounding environment and society a person lives in (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 40). It also involves the current time we are living in, viewed in a historical context and influenced by present and future conditions.

To investigate leaving school without a certificate from a multifactorial perspective and as a long-term process, the bioecological model is used as a theoretical basis, a methodological tool for data collection and analysis, as well as for the formation of corresponding categories in this research.

School Career

A person goes through a *schooling pathway* in their life, which is characterised by events such as (not) attending kindergarten, enrolment, (non-) transfer to the next grade, (non-) achievement of school-leaving certificates, and (non-) entry into working life (Kramer et al., 2013, 52). Consequently, educational institutions are an important part of a person's life and experiences of success and failure in these institutions play a decisive role. Findings of the World Health Organization show a clear correlation between school culture as perceived by young people and their psychological and physical well-being (Hurrelmann et al., 2003). Schools in which students receive individual social support from teachers and experience a sense of belonging and participation show lower 'drop-out' rates. 'Early school leaving', occurrence of violence, and well-being of students are closely related to the quality of school (Opp, 2011, 252; Roeser et al., 2000). Especially if support at home is lacking, the influence of school culture and educational reference persons is significant (Opp, 2011, 252).

The term *school career* is a specification of the schooling pathway. It refers to the way in which students position themselves or are positioned, whether they fulfil certain expectations with regard to social behaviour and performance or not. The school system is responsible for the selection of careers by operating and sorting according to the coding of better/worse learning students in order to function properly (Kramer et al., 2013, 52). Careers can be positive or negative from a normative, exploitation logic, or a socio-emotional perspective. It is relevant whether a person fulfils the behavioural requirements applicable in school. If this is not the case, stigmatisation and labelling processes can occur. If people are continuously attributed negatively, their self-perception is directly and indirectly influenced. Appearance and actions are adapted to what others supposedly expect, self-fulfilling

prophecies can occur (Hornscheidt, 2019a, 25; Merton, 1968). This can further lead to the fact that discriminated persons have a negative self-image. They feel loud, stupid, and inappropriate – attributing the problem to themselves and not to society, which creates these ratings through structural violence. In this way, systemic problems are shifted into the private sphere. Individuals experience themselves as powerless and unable to influence change (Hornscheidt, 2019b, 24). People tend to fulfil their *social role* that is assigned by society according to aspects like age, gender, ethnicity, social status, or disability (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, 814). While a role functions as an element of the microsystem, it's rooted in the ideology and institutional structures of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 86). Bronfenbrenner's ideas can be linked to intersectional debates and also to Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*. Factors such as gender, social status, or ethnicity, which interact with each other, have an influence on the habitus. It is acquired in class-related socialisation processes and expresses specific basic orientations, world views, patterns of perception and evaluation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971).

School in Europe is based on a middle-class concept of education, with a focus on intellectual activities and bourgeois culture. This gives advantages to those children who have already come into contact with this type of education and culture before they enter school and are encouraged to do so at out-of-school places. These children have better starting conditions, while children socialized with other types of education and culture lack these advantages in school practice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971). These disadvantaged children are taught through school practices that they do not belong in this context. In addition, neoliberal logics also influence the educational sector. Education that serves the market appears to be valuable. Children from wealthy families are much more likely to achieve this education and, in turn, obtain the best-paid jobs (Crouch, 2017, 136). The term 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' clearly shows this connection. According to the OECD (2018), young people defined with the term are "inactive" and not economically exploitable. In this context, it is also necessary to take a critical look at the goals of institutions for young people without school-leaving qualifications. Often, the aim is to put these people back on the 'right' track and make them economically exploitable. This must be critically examined.

The risk of repeating a grade, leaving school without a certificate or attending a special needs school is much higher for those from 'lower' social classes (Hurrelmann & Dohmen, 2020). The current situation, where due to the COVID-19 pandemic home schooling is common, once again exposes how school success and social class are connected. If students can be supported by their parents with available capital, their chances of emerging from the crisis unscathed are much higher (Hurrelmann & Dohmen, 2020).

Participatory Biographical Research

The in this work described participatory research is conducted together with young people who investigate their (school) biography and current life situation. The co-researchers are students of an institution for young people who have no prospect of obtaining a school leaving certificate in their compulsory schooling or who have not or only irregularly attended compulsory school. Since the number of young people attending the institution varies from day to day, the number of participants in the workshops also fluctuates considerably. However, some of the young people comment that they rather attend on the workshop days because it gives them a variety to the lessons and allows them to make more decisions. Up to eleven young people are actively involved in the research project as co-researchers. In the following, the co-researchers are referred to by their self-chosen aliases, namely Fufu, Tupac, Kevka, Balou, Jessy, Juliet, Chriss, Lachi, Pablo and Michelle. The project is taking place in the school year 2019-2020 in a major German city.

The research project aims to gain a new and deeper understanding for people without school-leaving certificates. One goal is to take them seriously and support them (if they wish so) in making their voice heard. The following questions are investigated:

- 1) Which anchoring and breaking points can be found in biographies of young people without school-leaving certificates?
- 2) What interests and activities do these young people pursue?
- 3) What interests in research do these young people have?

As a result of working on the last research question, a further project initiated by the co-researchers was created within the overarching project. This project investigates the question “Why do people take drugs?”. Additionally, at a meta-level, the question of what requirements are needed for participatory research with these young people is also examined. In view of the scope both points cannot be further elaborated in this article.

Biographical work can provide opportunities to identify difficulties in the educational process and face them productively (Epp, 2020, 252). It is a conscious examination of the personal path of life, which includes main stations, detours, breaks and barriers as well as new beginnings, prospects, and goals in order to show perspectives for the future (Epp, 2020, 259). By embedding the individual life story in the social and historical context, new perspectives are opened and potential for action is expanded (Miethe, 2014, 24). In participatory biographical research, constant self-reflection is indispensable. Before examining the biographies of others, a person should reflect on their own biography, their own attitudes and patterns of thought, their habitus. One's own biography always influences pedagogical and scientific work with others – especially during biographical work it has a great influence on process and results (Miethe, 2014, 154). Biographical work can take place in groups or individually – both forms are used in this project. By working together with others, participants can find out that they share common experiences and are not alone with their stories (Miethe, 2014, 128). However, since individual stories cannot be deepened in group work, additional one-on-one conversations are used. The interests of research are combined with those of self-knowledge and personal development which can lead to empowerment.

The research project is based on the methodology of participatory research, which originates from action research. Action research was founded by Kurt Lewin, whose ideas are also a base for the development of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, 39). Important for Bronfenbrenner is research in real-life settings instead of out of context studies that can help to provide change (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, 795). This paper presents new considerations of the bioecological model in the context of a participatory research design, carried out in the everyday living environment of the young people involved. In participatory research, the aim is to explore and change social realities in a cooperative process. It is often a concern to give socially marginalized groups a voice and the opportunity to participate. Methods must not only correspond to the research subject and lead to answer research questions, but must also be adapted to skills, interests and capacities of the co-researchers (Unger, von, 2014, 56). Together appropriate methods are considered. The research project presented uses a variety of qualitative methods. The core of the project is executed during regular workshops. Additionally, the senior researcher is present in the institution before and after the workshops, having informal conversations with the young people and adults and accompanying them through their everyday life. During the workshops, topic-specific group discussions and creative works (using as little written language as necessary and as many pictures, emoji and symbols as possible) are conducted with the young people. Furthermore, research interests and questions are collected, methods are agreed upon and subsequently trained, joint research is prepared, carried out, and evaluated. The bioecological model is used as a guideline, with which the co-researchers examine different levels and thereby broaden their view on the causes of processes in their own (educational) biographies. For this purpose, participatory analysis processes in groups are used (Jackson, 2008). While the senior researcher is responsible for the documentation process and organisational tasks, the co-researchers provide input on the content. Subsequently, the data is evaluated by the senior researcher using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015).

To allow the co-researchers to focus on the whole of their life experiences, the entire biography is examined instead of focusing only on individual aspects that went 'wrong' (Clandinin et al., 2013, 48). The young people are given the opportunity to recognise that they already possess a biography and are 'someone' – in contrast to what they have often been told in the past: "You are a nobody, you'll never make it!". In dealing with their past, present and future, they have an opportunity to develop perspectives and dreams.

First Results

This article focuses on research question 1) "Which anchoring and breaking points can be found in biographies of young people without school-leaving certificates?". In this research, *anchoring points* represent events, characteristics, persons, living beings, or things that provide a person with support in a life situation, whereas *breaking points* provide a disruption. The analysed anchoring and breaking points are the young people's subjective perception, but are at the same time influenced by role models and societal expectations. Anchoring and breaking points are not contrary life events and not distinctively positive and/or negative. For instance, an interruption due to moving to a new city can have positive effects on the development of a person. At the same time, socially negatively associated activities, such as consuming marijuana with friends to get a time-out from problems can be a saviour for a while. Anchoring and breaking points are assigned to the different levels of the bioecological model (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystem) in order to illustrate multiperspectivity. Results developed together with the co-researchers are shown below.

Microlevel

Within the *individual person* a lot of factors that can serve as anchoring or breaking points are found by the co-researchers. Interests and activities that are chosen by themselves are named as anchors. For example, Lachi, who says "No music - no life", describes among others how music helps him through difficult times. Many co-researchers report that they experience stigmatisation and describe particular low-points in their lives, which are marked by depression and also suicidal thoughts. Special abilities, in contrast, offer a compensation to failure experiences (e.g. in school). These can be computer knowledge for Tupac, creative talent for Juliet, or skills in first language for Fufu, Chriss, Jessy, Juliet, Pablo, and Michelle. At the same time, a lack of skills is responsible for breaks. This is for instance apparent in certain school subjects. The youths in the project have a variety of interests, which they partly actively pursue and partly passively enjoy. These range from several sports to music, video streaming, use and technical understanding of various devices, digital and analogue games, youth fire brigade, writing poems, drawing, taking care of pets, as well as fooling around and chilling with friends.

The *family of origin* represents an anchor point in the lives of many young people and at the same time causes breaks. Many name other reference persons (e.g. grandmother) who helped them when their parents were not able to. Additionally, they were and are responsible for themselves and family members as young carers. Therefore, housing in care facilities causes a clear break, but also offers chances. Most co-researchers have experienced separation, relocation, or death of family. Broken relationships also occur if the expectations of parents are not met; Juliet reports that she has no contact with her father because he is ashamed of her.

Alternative families of choice and *peer groups* play a significant role. For example, Balou receives strong recognition from his social community, despite the group's ethically very questionable perspective. He assigns himself to the extreme right-wing scene and has contact with them via internet. As a substitute for her family of origin, Jessy has started her own family. She became pregnant at the age of 15 and is by now a proud and loving mother. Currently she is housed in a residential group for teenage parents and receives institutionalized support. Contacts to friends are mentioned by all teenagers as relevant aspect. They are constantly renegotiated. At worst, friends can become enemies. Some have broken off contact with groups of friends because they reject their bad influence and want to start over. Peer contacts also play an important role in the transition to a new school. Whether the start there is positive or not often has to do with who a person gets into contact with.

An *individual school* can provide many opportunities for positive or negative experiences, with regard to the quality of teaching, the atmosphere, but also in relation to fellow students. When personal interests are integrated into a school context, this often represents a positive experience. The co-researchers particularly criticise that schools have not reacted to problems, especially with regard to bullying and violence. The change to a new school can also be a chance, for example if it offers a more suitable concept or if teachers value good relations. Individual persons such as class teachers or social workers have assumed anchor functions in the school biography. It is problematic if structural conditions lead to breaks with these persons, for example through external performance differentiation in course systems or the transition to another institution.

Mesolevel

Successful communication between different groups (e.g. peers, school, family, doctors, and companies) is relevant for a young person's positive development. If a student is absent from school, joint arrangements are helpful. The contacts between family and peers can be both helpful and disturbing. Parents may offer support in case of bullying problems, or they forbid contact with certain friends. This can lead to meeting them secretly. Individual schools can create better conditions for their students in the long term, for example by cooperating with companies and arranging internships integrated into everyday school life. This can enable young people to establish contacts with a company so that they do not have to rely on the capital of social contacts that is usually provided by family members.

Exolevel

The co-researchers *neighbourhood* and *community* is dominated by violence, unemployment, and drug abuse, which contributes to a variety of disadvantages. Also, the *parents working conditions* are often described as unstable which influences the atmosphere at home. This seems to be passed on the next generation, as the *local industry* offers little perspective for young people without school-leaving certificates. Though there are some possibilities due to personal connections. The co-researchers do not notice any efforts of the cities politicians regarding their interests. *Local politics* could take better care of youth's concerns (e.g. by installing a legal graffiti wall).

Macrolevel

Social inequalities, structural violence and *discrimination* are recognised by the co-researchers. They live in 'underprivileged' districts and face *social exclusion*. For example, some have experienced themselves, that people migrating to Germany are often exposed to structural power and discrimination. Due to a multitude of negative experiences with the police, mainly caused by structural violence, there is a general scepticism towards the *legal system*. At the same time, illegal activities give young people opportunities that they would otherwise be denied. Fufu, for example, reports that he earned a lot of money through 'business' and was therefore able to enjoy life with friends.

Roles given by society are adopted by the co-researchers and are also expected to be fulfilled by others. Therefore, they perceive themselves as lazy, stupid or disabled. Especially gender roles have a major influence. Several male-socialised co-researchers report that they feel alone with their problems and cannot talk to anyone about them, because otherwise they would be called a 'faggot'. Tupac, for example, wants his future wife to cook and take care of the children, because that's not his job. Certain social roles are incompatible to each other. Juliet could not fulfil both expected roles, that of the good student and the drinking buddy, and finally chose the social role that she considered most appealing at that moment and stopped going to school.

The *neoliberal social order* is criticised by the co-researchers. No matter how much they try, they have little chance on the labour market and see themselves as losers of society. Increasing demands and the need for higher educational qualifications are criticised. The young people tend to classify themselves as belonging to the lower or lower-middle social class, but would like to have a better life in the middle class.

For the co-researchers, the *German school system* is challenging in many ways and provides limited opportunities. They had to repeat classes, transit to different schools, felt repeatedly abandoned and passed on. The transitions to different educational institutions cause increasingly greater ruptures and disappointments. In general, they have internalised that they do not fit into the educational system and fail to meet expectations regarding the required habitus. Problems at school are considered as normality, teachers who belong to the hostile system are often seen as enemies. However, the possibility to receive inclusive schooling in Germany offers big opportunities, for example when learning German as a second language.

Regarding to *politics*, the co-researchers feel powerless and not seen. They have hardly ever experienced democracy in everyday life and would like to be able to make more decisions. The participative approach of the research project, with joint decisions making and voting on issues, is new to them and requires further practise. However, all consider it positive that they are able to determine content and process themselves.

Chronosystem & Time

Meritocracy, hecticness, stress, and the increasing differences between poor and rich are criticised by the co-researchers. They also see more massive problems at schools (e.g. bullying). In the *current situation*, which is determined by a pandemic, they were forbidden to go to school. At home they had no possibility and no motivation to do school tasks. At the same time, they were able to create their “corona-holidays” self-determined, what they experience as a positive aspect.

Conclusion & Implications for Research and Practice

Using the ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as a theoretical framework and a methodological research tool, it is possible to gain insights into life courses and current life situations of young people. It becomes apparent that correlations between different levels (micro- to chronolevel) exist, which must be taken into account when working with young people in practise and research. The experiences made by the young people confirm processes described in theory. In many ways the co-researchers are affected by social exclusion, stigmatisation and structural violence; the school system in Germany offers them unequal opportunities. At this point it should be noted that only a part of a broad spectrum of young people without school-leaving certificates is shown here. In this project young people are involved who have received little support from families and society.

All young people need to be taken serious. They must be involved in discussions about their lives, and school and societal development. Researchers and educators must self-reflect about (unconscious) judgement according to a student’s habitus and rethink their own actions and thoughts. In general there must be a shift of the responsibility for performance in the educational process away from the individual person to the educational system. Participatory research can help to merge knowledge, not only between science and practice, but also between youth and adults. The approach presented here can be applied in a similar way in the fields of educational practice and research. Using the bioecological model as a structure-giving basis, multi-factorial correlations can be explored. It helps to identify anchoring and breaking points, but is also adaptable to other research and practise questions.

The results obtained represent the circumstances from the young people's point of view. Yet this serves as a supplement to already gained findings in research, which are often collected from the perspective of adults. The study is based on individual subjective impressions, from which no conclusions can be drawn regarding the general situation. However, these individual impressions can point to problematic topics in the system and provide information about potential for improvement.

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