

A question of perspective

For decades, school absenteeism was a taboo topic in Germany's educational landscape. Now views have changed and many schools are actively confronting the problem. Heinrich Ricking of the Department of Special Needs Education and Rehabilitation has played a key role in this process

Sports is on today's timetable for the pupils of the ninth grade. In the case of 14-year-old Laura and her classmate Pia that means football – not exactly their favourite form of exercise. Furtively, they sneak out and meet with friends at a café instead. This little exploit, which would provoke a furious reaction from most parents, leaves Prof. Dr. Heinrich Ricking of the Department of Special Needs Education and Rehabilitation completely unfazed: "We know that half of all lower secondary school pupils contemplate skipping classes for no good reason – and some of them will actually skip a couple of lessons. However, it's not these pupils who give us a headache but the three to five percent who are absent on a regular basis." Experts talk of routine, chronic and habitual forms of school absenteeism. "There is a serious danger of dropout here, of these young people ending up socially marginalised," Ricking explains. Studies show that the life prospects of chronic truants are pretty grim: how do they get ahead in life without so much as a school-leaving qualification? It becomes difficult to integrate them into working life, the probability of their turning to crime increases, as does that of drug use, their health suffers and their future opportunities are limited. "This is why we need to see school absenteeism not just in the context of school but in the context of a whole future life," Ricking stresses.

Three types of school absenteeism

At the international level scientists distinguish between three types of school absenteeism: chronic truancy, fear-driven class avoidance, and parents keeping their children at home. "The first two types are already well researched and truants make up the lion's share," says Ricking. However, the phenomenon of parents keeping their children at home was unexplored until

recently because hardly anyone could imagine how widespread it was. For a long time, scientists simply assumed that parents would necessarily have a strong interest in their children receiving an education. "But in our studies we have frequently talked to girls and boys who mentioned that their parents didn't allow them to go to school," Ricking explains. According to his research there can be many different reasons for this: some parents don't want their children to attend sex education classes, or religion education, or they are critical of the school system as a whole. Then there are those who claim they need their children's help at home, and others who simply don't care whether or not their children go to school. "A panoply of motives," Ricking concludes. He and his colleagues at the Department of Special Needs Education and Rehabilitation and the School of Educational Sciences have investigated these motives intensively over the past few years. The findings were published in 2018 in a book titled "School Absenteeism and Parents," a summary of the international research. It is the only book dedicated solely to this subject in Germany to date. Ricking published it together with Karsten Speck, Professor of Research Methods in Educational Science at the Department of Educational Sciences. "We weren't able to answer all the questions, but we provided the stimulus for a more intensive analysis of the role of parents," Ricking says. An example that shows that school absenteeism is a problem with multiple causes.

A new branch of research

The 53-year-old professor of special education has been interested in this topic for decades: in the 1990s, when he was still a student, he worked part-time at a school for children with behavioural problems. One day he came across a group of teenagers who were hiding out in the middle of a cornfield instead of attending classes. "I simply wanted

to understand what made them do it," says Ricking. To some extent this was the initial spark for a branch of research that had hitherto been neglected in Germany, because until the early 2000s the topic of truancy was more or less taboo. "Some schools claimed they didn't have the problem at all, others blamed the parents. Who in turn blamed the schools," Ricking recalls. Reason enough for Ricking, a teacher and researcher at the time, to take a closer look at the situation. Published in 2003, his international report "School absenteeism as a research topic" set the ball rolling in Germany's educational landscape. Since then the perspective in education policy has changed considerably. A key factor behind this change was the book "School Absenteeism and Drop-Out", written by Ricking and two colleagues at the Department of Educational Sciences, Prof. Dr. Gisela Schulze and Prof. Dr. Manfred Wittrock. "Schools are finally confronting the problem," Ricking says, adding that much has also changed at the institutional, legal and research levels. "Only once a problem has been named can it be tackled and resolved," he stresses.

Over the years, as this new openness has developed, the focus of Ricking's research has shifted. Whereas initially he concentrated on the different types of school absenteeism, nowadays he is more preoccupied with intervention and prevention: what can schools actively do to keep children and teenagers in class? "Quite a lot in fact – even if some schools paint a different picture," says Ricking. There are studies that look at the same type of schools in the same catchment areas – yet attendance rates vary considerably, he explains.

Recognising the warning signs

In the quest to determine the causes of absenteeism Ricking's team has been working since the middle of 2019 with six schools in socially disadvantaged areas of Hamburg in a project commis-

sioned by the Joachim Herz Foundation and the Alfred Toepfer Foundation. The aim is essentially to gain insights into the processes that prompt young people to skip school. "This aversion to school doesn't develop overnight but over the course of several years, sometimes beginning in primary school," Ricking explains. Many of these young people suffer from a lack of recognition and attention at home, among their friends and in school. At the same time according to Ricking the most powerful risk factor is poor academic performance: children who frequently get poor grades and don't get on with their teachers don't like going to school. "And when these children develop a certain amount of autonomy at 13 or 14, and perhaps have friends with similar tendencies, the willingness to skip school soon emerges." Instead of waiting until the problem becomes full-blown it is thus vital to recognise the warning signs at an early stage – and this is one of the goals of the Hamburg project. "We test measures, evaluate them and determine their impact – all in close coordination with the teachers," Ricking explains. He hopes that this

will produce positive examples that convince other schools to do more in terms of prevention and intervention in order to keep pupils from dropping out of school.

Digital class registers as an opportunity?

Ricking sees digital attendance registers as an opportunity – not just to lighten the teachers' workload and cut down on analogue work steps, but also to document absences at an early stage so action can be taken more promptly.

Ricking was able to observe the efficacy of this measure in a monitoring study conducted at a model school in the UK. The school employs a person on a part-time basis with the sole task of documenting absences from class and coordinating the school's reactions. Each member of the teaching staff must enter the names of pupils who fail to turn up for class in the digital class register. All the data is gathered on this member of staff's computer and then transferred to parents' smart phones. "This means that shortly after 9 a.m.

not only are the parents informed, but there is also an updated overview of the day's absences – for each pupil," Ricking explains. In Germany the situation is altogether different: "Many schools don't even have an annual overview," Ricking points out. He believes that in general too little is being done with the available data in Germany. "This is very unfortunate because this data is the prerequisite for building up a good prevention and intervention system."

Ricking is convinced that a lot needs to happen in the coming years to prevent absentee rates from rising – also in view of the fact that classes are becoming increasingly heterogeneous. "Only if all the involved parties work together effectively on site can pupils receive the best possible educational support." It often takes a while for the results of Oldenburg's special education research to have an effect on everyday life at schools. Nonetheless, Ricking's work has already had quite an impact. His vision: "A school that everyone enjoys going to – from pupils with learning disabilities to the highly gifted. And we want to help make it happen!" (kl)



Children skip school for many reasons: some are afraid of their teachers or fellow pupils, but sometimes it's because of the parents. Oldenburg researchers are studying this phenomenon.