How best to serve at-risk youths? A critical evaluation of Germany's socio-educational support abroad program

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Abstract

As a last resort for Germany's most at-risk youths, socio-educational support abroad has been practiced for more than 40 years. Far removed from Germany, difficult to educate youths receive social educational assistance in a variety of formats. The present article discusses this special social work concept that currently figures little in international child welfare discussions. It begins by introducing the concept of projects abroad, then moves on to present evidence of the program's effectiveness from the client's perspective. It will become apparent that a large gap exists between socio-educational goals and implementation, a background against which the discussion on appropriate child welfare interventions must be (re)visited.

Keywords: At-risk youths, children in care, socio-educational support abroad, professionalism, child endangerment

1. Introduction

Child welfare services consistently run up against limits with at-risk youths. Their seemingly normalized boundary-breaking behavior frequently disempowers social workers, leaving many workers feeling helpless. All traditional forms of help and social support fail with these clients. Foster families, educational authorities, group homes, and eventually adolescent mental health and juvenile justice are incapable of furnishing a supportive environment geared toward the needs of at-risk youth. The youths often spend years shuttling between child welfare services, street, jail and mental health treatment. But, what happens to them in

the "Bermuda Triangle" (Sonnen, 1994: 282) of the child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health systems remains a major concern. As the last resort, socio-educational support abroad for at-risk youths (German: *Erziehungshilfe im Ausland*) has been practiced in Germany for over 40 years. German at-risk youths are placed in different countries around the world, mostly in southern and eastern Europe and Scandinavia but also in Africa and Asia. For several months, even years, they are taken out of their familiar environment in Germany and supported far from home in unfamiliar socio-cultural conditions. The rationales for these measures include neutralizing inter-personal conflicts and working on individual and social deficits, no matter if this involves help in coping with a variety of life crises, providing developmental or maturational assistance, or re-socializing juvenile offenders.

The present article first discusses the concept of socio-educational assistance abroad. This is followed by accounts from clients on their experiences in the support abroad program. The problem of the professional framing of these projects is radicalized as the discussion's focus shifts to the perspectives of the children in care.

2. Socio-educational support abroad – what exactly is it?

In Germany, when adolescents are not reachable by traditional child welfare services and live in dangerous situations, intensive individual socio-pedagogical supervision is activated. This type of assistance is anchored in paragraph 35 of the Child and Youth Welfare Act (KJHG). Comprising Volume VIII of the Social Code, the latter defines the services young people (children, adolescents, adults) and families (legal guardians, primary caregivers, parents) are entitled to. Intensive individual socio-pedagogical supervision is a flexible offering not tied to traditional institutions. It differs from other services by its greater diversity of forms and open-ended content. However, its most characteristic feature is a distinctly more intensive support structure that is expressed both in how long the support lasts and in the caregiver's presence. Besides being provided in Germany itself, this type of care is also provided outside its borders. In many cases, these services are regarded as the "last resort" and frequently as the only alternative intervention short of confinement. The philosophy behind socio-educational support in a foreign country is that, opening up a physical distance from the dangerous environment but simultaneously providing a therapeutic foundation engenders new learning processes and prevents falling back into old behavioral and coping patterns. It means breaking the daily routine, which has its roots and reinforcers in harming self or others, to facilitate a resocialization process and reentry to society. The foundation of German child and

youth welfare – namely, that clients should be provided the necessary assistance as much as possible in close conjunction with family – is deliberately suspended for the duration of the support period spent abroad. Geographic distance and cultural embedding create the conditions for deconstructing previous patterns of thought and behavior, and organizing them anew over the duration of the support abroad program (Villányi, Witte, 2006). At the same time, these two preconditions generate a new form of support that must be seen as functionally equivalent to de facto sequestration. These functional equivalents are the cultural but also natural barriers endemic to living in another country. The foreign culture represents a barrier that keeps the youths from abandoning the placement. Projects can, therefore, even be viewed as a form of involuntary confinement that is camouflaged euphemistically behind labels of exotic, freedom, and adventure. Projects abroad come in a variety of different formats. They include an array of support arrangements (e.g., group schemes, individual supervision, German teachers or host country teachers), varied geographical and socio-structural settings (e.g., wilderness, countryside, urban industrialized, emerging, and developing countries), and a variety of structured daily activities (e.g., sports, school, crafts, and art). Next, three specific socio-educational project formats – sailing, traveling, relocation – are discussed.

2.1 Sailing projects

Sailing connotes freedom and discovery. It means dealing with the elements, experiencing natural forces and team-building we-adventures. Sailing connects us with dreams of independence, spontaneity and community, physical challenges and escape from the everyday world. Projects on sailing vessels, conceived under the heading of therapy for severely at-risk youths, were developed in the late 1970s as alternatives to traditional closed placements. However, only a few sailing projects survive today, which has nothing to do with their socio-educational potentials but with the high upkeep costs of sailing ships.

During the shared time on board, in unfamiliar surroundings, and in the midst of nautical and nature-based challenges, feelings can become accessible that previously were buried or deemed taboo. But, sailing also signifies the hardships of months at sea, the inescapability of the group, the sense of being at the mercy of the elements and nature, and the captain and the helmsman's orders. These structural conditions, the reality of life at sea, construct a setting of relying on each other, mutual dependence, and the impossibility of running away. They also offer many starting points for social learning. Underlying the sailing setting are goals such as

social bonding with a group and, in that connection, the more fundamental goal of learning social competencies. Furthermore, these projects are supposed to (re)awaken the inner motivation in youths that, due to their frequently having experienced their previous daily life as dead-end, was not at all or only slightly present. Developing self-reliance and a sense of responsibility in youths also counts among the goals of sailing projects. Constructive work habits and the ability for looking after oneself are behaviors that must be learned. In brief, eliminating social problems is the intended outcome of such projects.

Sailing requires high educational demands. Those who initiate sailing projects often start from the assumption that the environments and conditions naturally encountered in sailing can be used for social education and learning. However, reliance on intuitions about such environments is not sufficient to make purposeful socio-educational advances. It is only through a systematic, reflective and conceptually sound approach towards situational factors that educators can create a viable socio-educational setting. Otherwise, the prevailing structural conditions will counteract socio-educational goals. In that case, what happens on board the ship merely repeats what has always burdened the educator and at-risk youth: the youth's lack of motivation; the depressing, ineffective climate of mandated learning; absence of participatory opportunities; and harsh socio-educational practices that produce resistance. The pitfalls on board for counselors are numerous. Among them are the perception and stigmatizing of the youths as lazy, incompetent, disingenuous, undependable and unmotivated – self-fulfilling prophecies that daily life on board ship constantly confirm and solidify. From the reality of being sequestered on the ship soon evolves an inevitable situation – youth and counselors emulating the "bad model" of the institution at large (Sommerfeld, 1993).

2.2 Travel projects

There is nothing new about young people heading out to explore the world. An example that quickly comes to mind is the Grand Tour originally taken by European aristocrats. Even the itinerant young artisan, hippies hitching rides along the hippie trail, the Interrail ticket and the work-and-travel visa, each are contemporary expressions of the urge to "see the world."

However, travel projects as part of socio-education support abroad are no vacations. This is clear from their goal setting and the way they are structured. They orient themselves by strict socio-educational concepts and often are alternatives to traditional closed placements. Or they

are tied into other stationary settings, such as juvenile homes, for which travel projects are then resorted to as a form of crisis intervention.

Conceived as the socio-educational ideal, travel projects are vehicles for gaining individual self-knowledge. Here, in contrast to the sailing project, the focus is on individual experience. Central to the undertaking is not the group so much as it is the young person's development of self. An important aspect of travel projects is the fact that routinization is avoided. Thanks to geographical and socio-cultural variation, as well as constantly experiencing new phenomena, the ever present danger of placement disruption is mitigated. This reflects the project's intention of making the foreign travel diametrically different from the youth's everyday experience (i.e., something out of the ordinary). Hence, moving through and encountering unfamiliar natural and cultural landscapes is intended to ensure the intensity of the experience: for example, possibly heading out on a heavily-laden mountain bike from Agadir/Morocco through the Atlas Mountains, then through the northwest Sahara all the way to the Algerian border (Alberter, 1997). The shared exploration of the map, experiencing moments of happiness, but also jointly persevering and overcoming problems let the counselor reach the youth in a way that previously seemed out of the question. Travel projects are shared projects where the youth and the counselor tend to be on an equal footing because, for a time, both are on their own in confronting foreign customs and languages. Both are equally disconnected from their peer groups and supply lines.

In travel projects, being on the road is the goal, and the present matters more than the future. The special key to this type of project is physical movement. Being in motion implies making and responding to change without delay. Travel inherently has a decidedly stimulative effect. To start with, the physical activity makes demands on every traveler. Add to this that traveling involves cognitive efforts to absorb the permanently changing scenery and the accompanying experiences. The external change evokes self-awareness and reflection.

That said, travel does not always live up to the ideal. For example, a youth can embark on a trip without actually actively taking part in it. How is participation possible if the youth finds the prescribed travel disagreeable or they get satisfaction out of disappointing others' expectations and disrupting proceedings? Moreover, the thought that all travelers are equal is, strictly speaking, a mere fiction. There really is no mutually relying on one another, because the adult, in a pinch, will manage on his own, while the youth depends enormously on the

assistance of the adult. Expressed in this is a power differential in favor of the educator so that the youth, in an open argument, generally has no hope of succeeding. Frustration and crisis situations can quickly arise from the compulsory context of the trip. In that case, instead of wanderlust, the travel project experience becomes "wanderbust".

2.3 Relocation projects

Traditional staples of longer sojourns abroad by young people include spontaneously arranged language study travel, student exchanges, work camps, au pair situations or volunteer service. Concepts like these are meant to equip youths to fend for themselves far from home, learn the language, form new relationships, deal with the geographical separation from all that is familiar and get over being homesick, while learning what it means to have one's own social and cultural roots. Coupled with the stay abroad is the hope of gaining worldly experience, developing an appreciation for other countries and cultures, and acquiring skills for learning in a globally connected world of education and work.

Youths that are referred to relocation projects have a different prior history than youth who are referred to sailing or travel projects. They bring with them a "youth services record" that now has landed them in a supervised placement abroad as a "last resort". For them, staying abroad is not linked per se to the sense of adventure and being on their own away from the parental home. A foreign country is often just another stage in being placed and supervised somewhere.

Relocation projects are caregiving contexts realized in remote locations abroad. A youth is frequently assisted in an educator's private domain. Caregivers can be both Germans who have settled abroad or locals of the country in question. They are familiar with the lay of the land, fluent in the local language and knowledgeable about the country's laws. Relocation projects are "pedagogical provinces" that are designed to keep out undesirable external influences that might impinge on educating the youths. Distinct from sailing and travel projects, the importance of relocation projects lies in their potential for building and cementing new structures of daily life. The youths follow an externally regulated and controlled daily schedule in situ. They are actively involved in agricultural, manual work and housekeeping while going to school. If we concede that youths in sailing projects, upon finishing, will not go to sea, and others in travel projects also will not spend a lifetime traveling, then the relocation projects are uniquely suited for teaching the youth explicit

patterns they can easily put to use upon their return to Germany. In practice, there are nevertheless cases in which the daily socio-educational design leaves much to be desired (e.g., Riemann et al., 2015; Wendelin, 2011; Witte, 2009). For example, some youths spend many hours sitting alone in front of the TV or else playing games on their smartphones. It is doubtful if such routines lead to achieving the ambitious goal of behavioral change.

Many placement sites are located in remote regions far from well-developed urban infrastructures. This "seclusion" assumes key importance because the remoteness is hailed as a supervisory and socio-educational ideal for shielding the youths against the dangers of their 'old' environment. However, that these projects can prove dangerous and risky has so far received insufficient attention (Fischer, Ziegenspeck 2009; Witte, 2009). As it were, the remoteness, in fact, exacerbates a characteristic paradox of projects abroad: On the one hand, these institutions are subject to minimal external control; on the other, their isolation permits total control over the youths. While the caregiving staff wields absolute control, the child welfare authorities have very limited ways of intervening. Hence, the caregiving settings abroad enjoy a high degree of autonomy and insulation from possibly disruptive outside influences. This allows projects abroad to cultivate their own behavioral norms and mores, as well as internal "un-cultures" that are marginally subject to outside evaluation. Absent outside contacts and the youths lacking any means of avoidance or escape, dangerous and dysfunctional developments are unlikely to be identified. The totally dependent youths are at the mercy of their counselors or placement families with no choice but to go along. If a placement was to result in threatening a youth's well-being, the responsible agencies are hardly in a position even to investigate the situation.

3. Projects abroad by the numbers

Neither the Federal Association for Experiential and Individual Education, the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, nor the Federal Foreign Office are in a position to furnish data on currently active projects abroad. No single agency pulls together demographic information on clients (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), on their institutional record, on the project's foreign location, the length of the stay abroad, the specifics of the program (project forms), the qualification of the caregivers and, lastly, on any unusual occurrences in the foreign country.

Estimates of how many youths are in care outside Germany are vague, fluctuating between 600 and 1,000 cases. Data on their ages is rather speculative. The guess is that they tend to be

traditional or older adolescents (Klawe, 2007). As concerns gender, clearly boys predominate (ibid.). Their family background is, for the most part, captioned as coming from a "broken home". The bulk of these youths have already migrated through all the child welfare institutions prior to the project abroad (Klein, Arnold, Macsenaere, 2011). Most of the foreign programs go into neighboring European countries. Duration of projects depends on the form of caregiving. Sailing and travel projects can extend over a period of up to a half year. Relocation projects, by contrast, which make up the overwhelming share of projects abroad (Klaw, Bräuer, 2001), average two years or longer. Educational and psychological qualifications are compulsory for caregivers active abroad. Since 2005, this qualification profile has been codified into law.

4. Professional practice and child endangerment: client perspectives of support abroad programs

The following discussion deals with three priority problem areas. The remarks result from a research project on "Relocation projects from the client perspective". It examined a) the biographically grounded transformation of how the clients interpreted themselves and the world, and b) how each care project abroad was configured. To this end, a total of 12 case studies were examined spread over the countries of Russia, Poland, Portugal and France. The empirical client data was gathered on-site in ongoing care projects abroad over seven to ten days of observation. Biographical-narrative interviews and photo interviews with the youths were analyzed using the narrative structural evaluation methodology (Schütze, 1983). In addition, 12 interviews with the caregivers were conducted; results to caregiver interviews are also included below.

4.1 Participation vs. paternalism

The Child and Youth Welfare Law emphasizes the subject status of clients and simultaneously solidifies their position as partners with equal rights. Participation and involvement are maxims in working with those affected in the caregiving process. That includes their involvement in all decision-making phases of care planning. However, the empirical results identify a discrepancy between the aspiration for client participation and what happens in practice: Writing it into the law does not inevitably result in putting clients and negotiation processes on a level playing field with the professionals. In decision- making, the youths play little, if any, role. Youths already experience the start of socio-educational support abroad as a random, capricious occurrence immune to their influence: "I have no idea

what the exact reason is. So, I guess, it was supposed to help me" (Gregor, age 16, cared for in Russia). The decision for placement abroad is viewed as the outcome of an institutional process that cannot be changed. The clients may themselves be present during the discussions between the agencies and their primary caregivers but, ultimately, their participation is strictly circumscribed. The youths only receive very short notice of being sent abroad for care. In rare instances, they are given a choice: "They let me choose where I wanted to go. Italy, Spain, Portugal, Namibia, France and so on" (Markus, age 16, supported in France). The clients get another chance for "participating" when they are confronted with the alternatives of foreign country vs. being locked up in an institution: "At some point they put the question to me: France or jail" (Sebastian, age 21, under care in France). The youths typically are merely informed once the decision has already been made, so that from the start they experience the situation as mandatory: "They told me, 'yes, next week you're off to France. Someone will come to get you'" (Markus). The client is left powerless in the face of the authorities' will and reacts with rejection and refusal: "Then the woman said, 'Yes, on Tuesday some people will come for you, and then you'll be on your way to France.' Then I thought to myself, 'sure, that's what you think, no way am I going with them'" (Lucas, age 17). In the official parlance, the youths are categorized as "incorrigible" and as "intolerable". This labeling does not focus on their individuality; instead, it diagnostically designates a social category in a deviance framework: "And then they all said, after we talked, that I was 'unacceptable'" (Heike, age 21, placed in Portugal). The stigmatizing becomes a self-fulfilling diagnosis in the form of rejection by the youth. "First off, I said no way, I'm never going there, forget about it" (Gregor). In the end, the youths are not given any acceptable alternative to going abroad, leaving them no choice but to agree: "If I'd said, 'I don't want to go to Russia' I would have been locked up in a youth facility. And that was my alternative" (Gregor). In spite of their reluctance, the youths agree to the offer of support abroad, which shows that they recognize the inevitability of it. For these reasons, any conversation about initiating support abroad tends to be an action determined by third parties, in which the child welfare office clearly has the upper hand in setting out the caregiving options.

4.2 Relationship building vs. relationship breakdown

From the beginning of the support experience, there is the gap between the right of participation and the actual third-party decision-making: The youth denied equal rights as a person instead becomes an object of the decision-making process. How do we build a relationship against this background of mandatory participation? Development of a trusting

relationship figures importantly as an instrument of successful socio-educational processes. Through reliable, stable relationships with adult caregivers, the youths can gain compensatory and corrective experiences. Occasionally, the relationship with the counselor is in total contrast to the traumatizing relationship experienced in the family and the many relationships broken off in the course of the "child welfare services career". It offers a chance to liberate the self from past entanglements and constraints.

This positive perspective has a negative counterpoint that criticizes the arrangement of youth placement in a foreign country. It says instead that, particularly for youths who developed "relationship disorders" due to traumatizing relationships, a setting with even more of the same could be counterproductive, ultimately retraumatizing the youth. It would be profoundly wrong to present a highly-stressed youth with a close relationship offer involving just one adult attachment figure. Instead, the youth should be given the option of establishing relationships with several adult caregivers and be free to decide for themselves when and how close or distant they want to be to a person. This multi-optional arrangement avoids having to let only one specific person in.

The enormous importance of relationships between youth and caregiver places high demands on the child welfare professionals. My empirical study revealed various strategies for dealing with this daunting task. Presenting the following cases will allow me not only to juxtapose the reaction of the caregivers to (un)successful attempts at forming ties, but also expose that the support arrangements on the relationship level can develop in highly diverse directions – from stable, trusting relationships, all the way to violent situations involving child endangerment.

"Julia"
Julia's case tells us that trusting relationships are possible even under constraints. The 16-year old, in the past, had developed a maladaptive way of reacting to conflict situations: she would run away. Both the parents and professionals were helpless in the face of her behavior so that support in Portugal was the last possibility for cutting down on her escape options. She might have been able to escape the placement in Portugal, but a return to Germany seemed out of the question.

After her stressful family and institutional experiences, the project abroad gave Julia a chance for a new orientation in another social and relationship context. She experienced the support

setting as a contrastive milieu. It was a communicative space that was characterized by dealing with her sympathetically. Here, she was respected by her female caregiver and taken seriously as an individual with specific idiosyncrasies and needs. During our interview, caregiver Kerstin underlined the point: "These are all unusual personalities (…). You must adjust to them individually." The educator's thoughtfulness benefited the relationship with Julia. Julia experienced caring and had autonomy in deciding which subject matters she wanted to pursue. In a foreign country, for the first time, she found a social place in which she was accepted as an important person with all of her individual characteristics and traits. Through her contacts with the caregiver, Julia could, at least partially, make up for the childhood and adolescent experiences she missed out on. Through the relationship, she could compensate for past deficits in her personal history. The caregiver was there physically and emotionally but without dominating Julia. Experiencing care and devotion made her feel secure, sustained and bonded, all of it supportive of Julia's sense of self-worth and self-esteem.

"Martin"

This case, by contrast, shows that even closeness in space and time does not guarantee a long-term, stable relationship between client and caregiver. When a relationship breaks down abroad, it reintroduces past traumatic relationship experiences. The constraining context in a foreign country means there is no avoiding conflicts. After an initial conflict-free period, rejection, disappointment and excessive demands mutually reinforce each other to escalate into a permanent state of crisis.

This 16-year old client described his past with one global assessment: "I have been beaten up all my life." Due to the father's abuse, brawls became Martin's communication form of choice. Violent acts were the norm for him. This youth unloaded his aggressions on fellow students, teachers, siblings, neighborhood kids and, later, also on his stepfather in out-of-control eruptions of rage. As a violent offender, he was regarded as marginally reachable. Initiating the project abroad represented a kind of intervention of "last resort". At first, Martin's day to day existence in the new country was marked by his adaptive behavior strategy. Of special importance for the conflict-free early time was that Martin found an attachment person he could closely relate to in the person of Jerry, the female caregiver's life partner. He became Martin's substitute father figure. The significance of this relationship experience was derived from the traumatic early childhood experiences with the biological

father. Because Martin had no other way of communicating than 'the language of force', Jerry tried to get through to the youth by having him work with his hands alongside him at his construction sites. Through the 'unfamiliar' language and participation of manual labor, Martin discovered a new sense of self. This potential progress toward self-awareness, however, was radically interrupted four months into the project. For reasons that were totally unknown to Martin, Jerry dissolved their work alliance. With this 'pushing away' and alienation, he replicated Martin's father's interaction and caused a re-traumatization based on early childhood traumas. In the foreign country, too, Martin remained subjugated by the destructive attachment and relationship behaviors from his childhood. Following this incident, Martin distanced himself from his hosts and assumed a defiant stance toward them. As a rebellious client, he was expelled in a very deliberate way from the daily communal activities of the placement family without consideration: "He also on his own withdrew more and more from activities" (Ilona). The interactivity between the individuals appeared irreparably damaged and became increasingly a no-win situation. Martin, Ilona and Jerry may have lived under one roof but they were separated as expressed through communicative withdrawal and aggressive encounters. Even meals together no longer functioned as convivial fixed points in daily life. The result was a total cessation of interactions between the individuals. "Since I've been here, it has become extreme because that Ilona always just gets under my skin" (Martin). Instead of a healthy close relationship, the caregivers created a distance that illustrated the power differential between the caregivers and the youth.

"*Heike*" and *"Conny"*

These two cases illustrate that projects abroad can also develop into violent contexts where verbal, symbolic and physical violence occur as a matter of course in everyday communication. First, Heike and, then, Conny, are placed in the care of the same female caregiver, Birgit. She subjects both clients to a disastrous practice that sees them neglected, stigmatized, mistrusted, manipulated and physically harmed. In both cases, it is quite clearly a matter of child endangerment *within* a socio-educational project.

Heike's past is imprinted by years of sexual and physical abuse by her heroin-addicted mother's violent domestic partner. Because of the sustained maltreatment in the family milieu, hers was a crisis-ridden childhood. At age nine, she was abandoned by her mother. A period of time as a runaway on the street ensued until she was put into a home for juveniles.

She then passed through various child welfare institutions as a client, running away repeatedly from all of them.

The peer group that satisfied her need for social connections became her relationship anchor. However, the emotional ties to the clique became problematical when she committed crimes, which put her on the radar of the state supervisory authorities. As Heike turned 13, the child services social worker ordered her placement in a project abroad, and she was taken to Portugal in a 'cloak and dagger operation'. She would spend the next two months in organizational limbo while waiting to be placed in a more permanent support setting: "I spent two months on a campground. With some foreign people" (Heike). Heike felt both deported and detained.

Heike's negative assessment of the caregiver stemmed from the latter's poor engagement and indifference toward Heike. There was no socio-educational casework, only more of a 'sham support process'. Heike saw herself instrumentalized solely as a financial prop for the caregiver's personal living expenses. Subsequently, Heike's living situation abroad became more fraught: To compensate for the perceived inadequate support context, she hooked up with youths in the drug scene. Here, she found trustworthy people and the support that her counselor was incapable of providing. "None of the people that I got to know these days that were into drugs ever really messed with me or abused my trust. When I needed them, they were always there. The people that I was supposed to trust, they were never there for me when I needed them" (Heike). She now began doing heroin. The drug increasingly consumed her way of life. She financed her drug habit life by stealing, break-ins and prostitution. Initially, her youth services social worker back in Germany has no idea whatsoever of the client's downward spiral – until, at last, the health and physical consequences of the drug abuse could no longer be ignored.

Heike's life in the drug scene completely eluded control by the authorities. A quick crisis intervention followed. After the first failed relationship, Heike was assigned to a new female caretaker, Birgit. With her, Heike could satisfy her need for a trusting relationship and, to some extent, compensate for earlier relationship failures. She felt that Birgit was like a 'second' mother to her. However, after just three months, this trusted relationship was subjected to a massive shock when Birgit's disrespectful treatment in public of Heike's private affairs undermined the relationship: "Birgit has gossiped everything in the whole L-

village and the surrounding area, everyone I know is aware of my life story. In the worst light and way" (Heike). Heike experienced the breach of trust as a major crisis. It became clear that this act induced a traumatizing injury to which Heike reacted with innate repugnance: "When I heard from people…things, where I really have to say, my God, she can't possibly do that" (Heike). The young girl, in her personal history, once more experienced a betrayal. The violation of Heike's privacy irreparably destroyed the interaction between Birgit and her. Heike's second placement abroad was also terminated.

Conny, considered an aggressive 16 year old girl, came to caregiver Birgit after nothing else had worked for her. During her childhood, Conny was confronted daily by her biological family's communication medium of violence. Alcoholism and physical abuse were part of everyday family life. The violence done to her led to Conny's general propensity for violence. Her father's violent acts offered her an action guide that brought her notoriety in the neighborhood, in schools, and finally in residential child care. Abroad, Conny's problem of never having positive, sound relationship experiences continued. In Portugal, too, dependable attachment figures were absent. She was unable to build a connection with her caregiver. She felt isolated and lonely. There were not any everyday shared activities, nor were there communal meals. The caregiver approached her with suspicion and stigmatization. "Those are ticking time bombs," was her euphemism for at-risk youths. Instead of the relationship building and security the project was supposed to provide, Conny once again experienced hurt and humiliation. While Conny was preparing a meal, Birgit gibed, "the monster is eating me out of house and home." When Conny was supposed to take care of a new dog in Birgit's pet boarding facility, it became, "we found something to keep the anti-social kid busy again". Birgit's undignified way of treating Conny was instigated by her fear of the violence-prone youth. For protection against the "ticking time bomb" (Birgit), she hid a pistol in the shed. Pepper spray was at hand in the bedroom, just in case. Behind this defensive scenario, Birgit camouflaged that she herself was guilty of inflicting bodily harm – she secretly slipped Conny sedatives for curbing her aggressive impulses. These actions were undoubtedly child endangerment and criminal acts, without, however, registering on the radar of the responsible child welfare authorities.

4.3 Design for daily life vs. doing time

In the ideal socio-educational setting, rapport is established with the client through shared activities. Particularly when just starting the project abroad, it may happen that youths are not

ready for intensive, direct talks with the (unfamiliar) caregiver. As I observed in the field, indirect forms of communication between caregiver and client frequently prove to be especially productive in creating trust. Activities, such as farm work, working with your hands, and caring for animals provide particularly effective channels for indirect communications. The continual back and forth between client and caregiver with and through these media begins to create an interpersonal closeness that is noncommittal at first but lays the foundation for a trusted relationship. Nevertheless, as the empirical results show, some caregivers do not manage to build such a rapport. Either it is basically impossible to create from the start or, perhaps, it is destroyed later by some type of interpersonal transgression or disappointment.

Organizing a shared daily life without a feeling of closeness becomes meaningless. Why bother to do things together if you have nothing to say to each other, when nothing connects the youth to the caregiver? A directive, non-negotiated daily routine set by the caregiver frequently results in forced learning and mandated behavior. These forms of communication are well familiar to the youths from their personal histories, and they also have well-developed defense mechanisms and resistance strategies for dealing with them. In Martin's case, for instance, the relationship breakdown led to isolation and loneliness. He diverted himself with excessive media use: "I always just sat in front of the PlayStation or the TV. I just hang out in my room." The project time is thus passed in solitude and by "playing PlayStation" and "TV watching." He is well aware that in a year he will return to his family. "Doing the time" is his strategy. The wish to get out from under the omnipresent supervision is very strong. The problem is "getting out" of France. Were he placed in Germany, Martin would run away from the compulsory placement. Here, abroad, by contrast, he simply waits it out.

Fake conformity is another behavioral strategy I observed with a few clients. This form of problem-solving is difficult for outsiders to recognize. Knowing that there is a time limit to being educated abroad, a youth will change his comportment for the duration of the project but not his attitude. The youth acts as if he has adapted to the project, but he continues to cling to his old value and belief systems. The question simply becomes: how can I do my time as comfortably as possible? The youth already focuses on the time when he is liberated from the socio-educational support program measures. In that respect, his behavior can be read as "theatrical staging".

A similar strategy became apparent in the basic stance Markus assumed vis-a-vis the relocation project. Since care outside the country was offered to him as an alternative to jail, the project from the start struck him as the functional equivalent of "doing time". He was not serving time in the "slammer" for the punishment "slapped" on him; instead, he was pseudo-incarcerated in France: "And so the judge said, it's my choice, if I want to spend a year in the clink. Or, I'd come here for a year and a half. And so, I thought about it, bah, a year and a half in jail I could do without. Better have a look at how it is in France. Well, and so here I was…now I'm doing my time here." For any socio-educational intervention to be successful with Markus, it would have to contend with the bitter aftertaste of its forcible nature. With his "grit your teeth and get on with it" attitude he demonstrates the much-practiced defensive strategy with which he withdraws from compulsory situations.

5. Discussion

Projects abroad that are customized support mechanisms tailored to the needs of the young people can have high chances of success (Klein, Arnold, Macsenere, 2011; Klein, Macsenaere, 2015). Far from the home front with all its endangering circumstances, the foreign country alternative offers the possibility for seeing, fostering, and caring for the youths as subjects with developmental potential in an intensive caregiving process. That said, socio-educational support abroad is also a form of assistance that operates with mandates and sequestration as instruments. Something that otherwise might evoke adventure, the vast world, and discovering different cultures, may be perceived by clients as a measure that curtails their freedom.

Although child welfare services is obligated to consider the child's welfare above all in rendering assistance abroad, dangers do now and again emerge undetected. Social education abroad may be responsible for seeing to it that the client has the living conditions needed to support his or her personal development. However, in reality, there are still cases in which serious professional malpractice endangers a client's well-being.

How can we prevent socio-educational program impropriety and ineffectiveness before it happens and disclose it when it does? This problem can only be cautiously answered here. For the caregiver, to date, practice in foreign projects is primarily determined by previous experience. This approach relies on a simple principle: "trial and error". It implies that it is not

possible to make well-informed statements regarding the effectiveness of specific socio-educational processes. Performance in support abroad programs must switch from a "trial and error" mentality to one predicated on evidence-based practice norms and values (Villányi, Witte, 2006). It is only with empirical knowledge that program administrators and managers can count on systematic – not haphazard – successes.

Self-reflectivity is also a hallmark of professional socio-pedagogical action – the latter can only be practiced as reflexive action (i.e., self-critically), with the will to audit its own actions while cognizant of unintended consequences. This self-reflection can and must be initiated systematically by a mediator. Mediation can assist in identifying potential overloads in the demanding and intensive work of social educators.

The relevant authorities must also step up to the task of quality assurance and failure prevention. Extant mechanisms for auditing caregiving abroad are far from adequate. There is no regular vetting of whether the initial educative assumptions were sound and how effective the implemented form of assistance is. Program administrators often only pick up on the "external influences" of the caregiving system and not its "internal influences". The caseworkers are very much challenged by the ramifications of geographical distance. A start must be made here by improving the communication between caregivers, management, providers, and child welfare services because information is *the* essential foundation for the work. Beyond that is the urgent need for aggressively discussing uncovered errors and aberrations. Personnel and structural shortcomings, incompetence, overloading – and arbitrary actions – must be openly addressed. Only a discussion of mistakes on the one hand and standards on the other can assure quality. Projects abroad require a "culture of awareness" that constantly reflects on its own performance, while focused on the well-being of clients and their current quality of life. Such an attentive culture is still not sufficiently developed in the field of socio-educational assistance abroad – even after its more than 40-year existence.

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